



AGRICULTURAL APPRAISAL AND PLANNING STATEMENT TO ACCOMPANY AN APPLICATION TO RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

FOR :

PROPOSED AGRICULTURAL WORKERS DWELLING

AT :

LOWER EDGE FARM, TINKLERS LANE, SLAIDBURN

FOR : MR R. ROBINSON

DATE : MARCH 2021.

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report accompanies a planning application made to Ribble Valley Borough Council in support of a proposed development for an agricultural workers dwelling at the application site.
- 1.2 The report provides an appraisal of an existing egg production unit operated at the site by Robinsons Food Ltd.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. The application site has been the subject of a recent application for a new agricultural workers dwelling in 2017. The Council's reference number for that application is 3/2017/0313 and approved in outline in December 2017. A reserved matters application for that agricultural workers dwelling was approved in June 2018, application reference 3/2018/0291. That dwelling is now substantially complete but not as yet ready for occupation.
- 2.2. There are relevant documents from those previous approved application that are also referred as supporting information in this report. These are:
 - The agricultural appraisal by Ian Pick Associates dated April 2017 and;
 - The ADAS assessment of planning application 3/2017/0313 dated 23 June 2017.

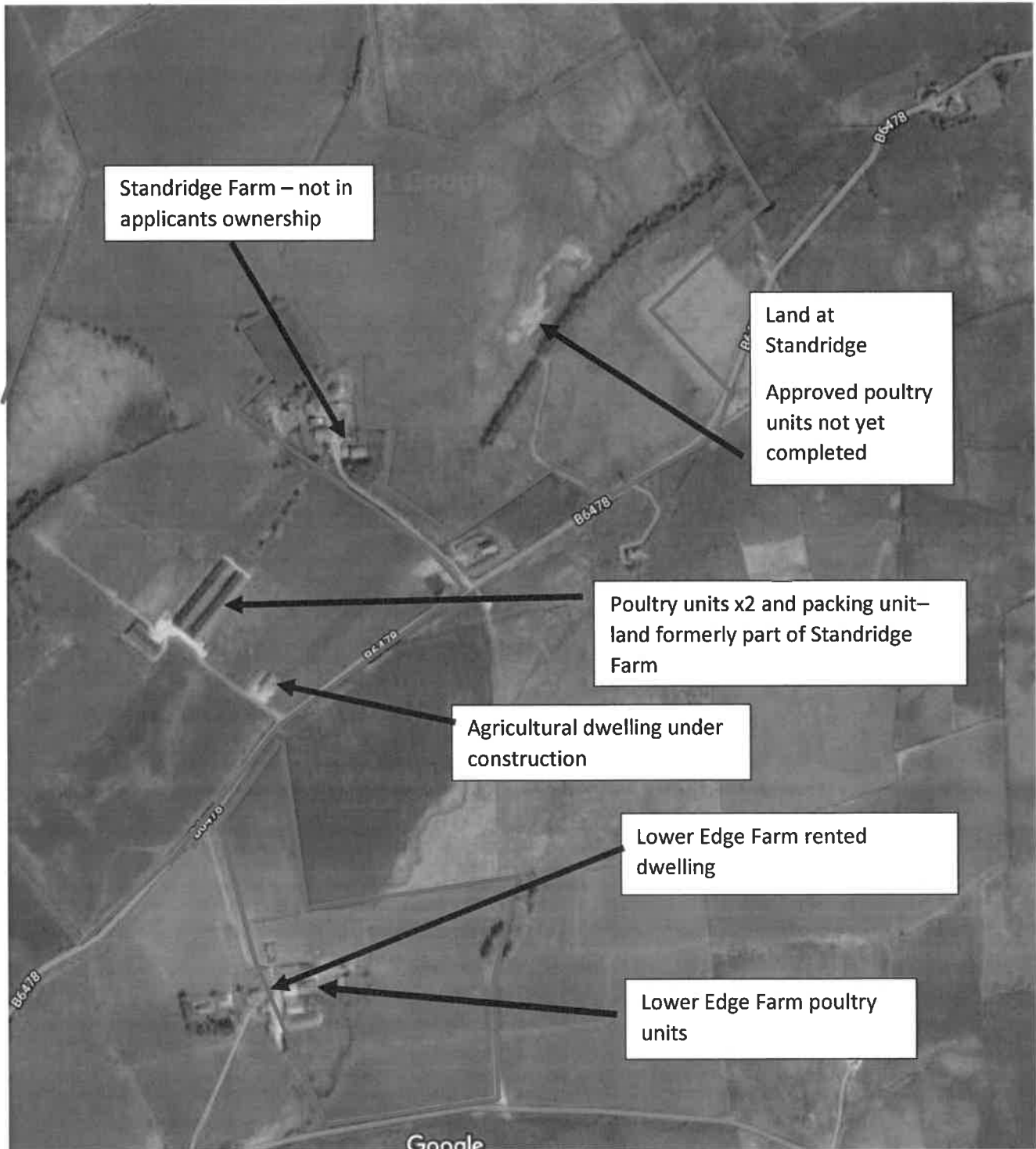
These documents are available to view on the Council's website under application ref : 3/2017/0313.

3.0 THE AGRICULTURAL BUSINESS

The site

- 3.1. The site operates as a specialist purpose-built poultry unit for free range egg production. The trading name of the business is Robinsons Foods Ltd. This business was incorporated in 2012 and has operated profitably over that time and is continuing to do so. The land holding extends to some 174 acres in total. That acreage is essentially split into three parts: the buildings at Lower Edge Farm; the land that formerly formed part of Standridge Farm and land at Standridge, Wigglesworth Road. The land is shown on the Google plan below.

Google map showing land holding and location of applicant's buildings.



The land formerly part of Standridge Farm

3.2. This land, indicated on the above map, comprises two egg laying units with accommodation for 32,00 chickens and an egg handling and packing unit, the latest planning permission for

this group of buildings being granted in 2018 – planning application 3/2018/0345. In 2017, planning permission was also granted for an agricultural workers dwelling – planning application 3/2017/0313 refers. That dwelling is now mostly constructed but not yet completed.

Land at Standridge

- 3.3. This is a bare land site that lies to the north east of the land holding and granted planning permission in 2018 for a free range egg production unit for 27,000 birds – planning application 3/2018/0668 refers. That building is not constructed yet but the access has been installed.

Lower Edge Farm .

- 3.4. Lower Edge Farm is a long-standing agricultural unit and is where the applicant commenced the egg production unit in 2009, later becoming a Limited Company in 2012. There are 18,000 chickens at Lower Edge Farm in three buildings. The applicant currently resides in The Cottage, Lower Edge Farm house, which is rented and not in their ownership.

Business Summary

- 3.5. In summary the business has 50,000 chickens and in five poultry houses that are split between Lower Edge Farm and the land formerly part of Standridge Farm. The business packages some 120,000 eggs per day, although this is on a three day rotational basis. That is from eggs produced at the business and eggs that are brought in to be packed from other egg producers. That is because this business has built an up-to-date packing facility at the land formerly part of Standridge Farm. Planning permission for the packing unit was granted in 2018 – planning application 3/2018/0345 refers. It is cost efficient for other producers to bring eggs here to be packed rather than have their own facility or be subject to more expensive prices elsewhere. Of the eggs packed, some 50,000 derive from this business.
- 3.6. The operating model of the business is the same as that previously described in the Ian Pick report on the previous application 3/2017/0313. In this regard that report has this to say about the way the business operates :

This site is a specialist purpose-built poultry unit. The buildings are constructed from a clear span frame, are fully insulated, lined with steel and have a profiled external cladding. The building house an egg packing facility and control area, an egg store and the bird house area.

The unit is fitted with automated feeding, water, lighting and ventilation systems.

The building includes a bird housing area which includes a concrete scratch area, a raised slatted perching area and nest boxes.

The nest boxes are situated adjacent to the egg collection conveyor. The nest boxes have a sloped floor to enable the fresh egg to gently roll away from the bird safely onto the conveyor.

The egg conveyor takes the eggs to the handling area which is located at the southern end of the building. Within the handling area, the eggs are packed into trays using an automated egg packer, and loaded onto pallets for collection. The egg packing process is undertaken every day of the week.

The poultry unit houses 32000 hens per flock cycle. The flock cycle within the unit is 60 weeks plus a four week break for cleanout. The birds are purchased at point of lay (16 weeks), and housed for 60 weeks

At the end of the flock cycle, a 4 week period is allowed for cleaning of the unit and preparation for the incoming flock. The cleaning process involves dismantling the internal equipment within the bird area, removing the manure, power washing the building and equipment and reassembling the equipment.

The unit operates as a high health status poultry unit. Significant disease precautions are in place to prevent welfare problems with the hens.

- 3.7. These operating circumstances still apply. However, the unit overall, that now also includes egg packing operations, now employs 18 workers. These workers are split into the following jobs:

Stockman - x 4 no full time; 2 no part time

Drivers – x 2 no. full time; 2 no. part time

Graders - - x 4 no full time; x 4 no. part time;

Management – x 4 no full time.

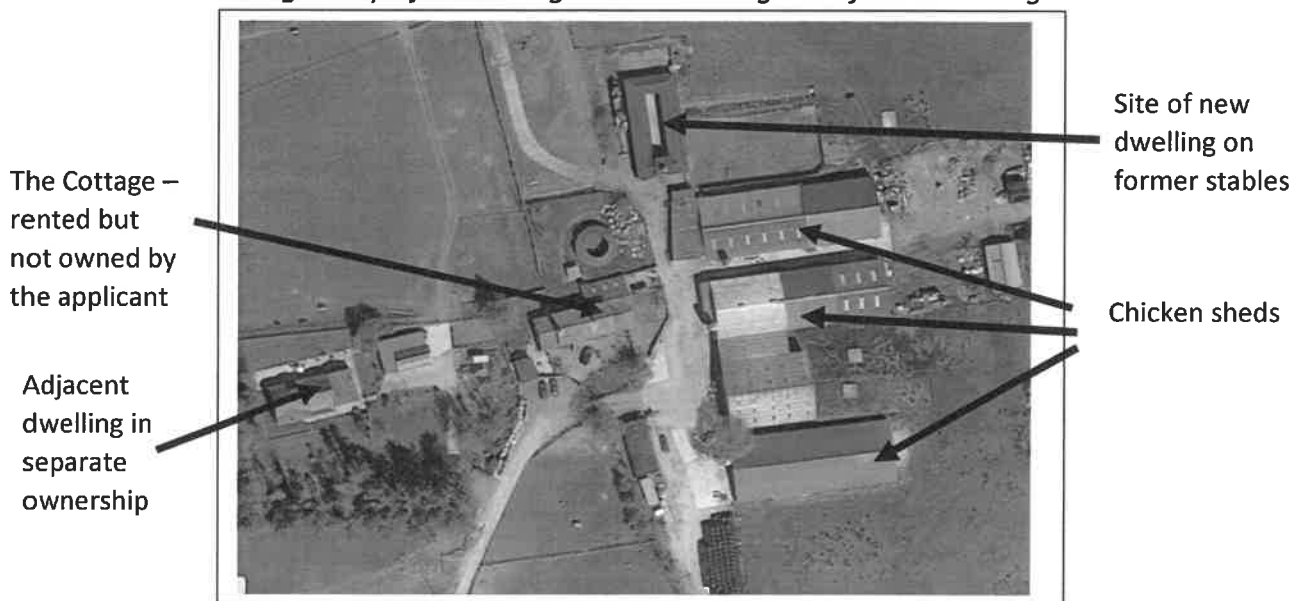
Total FT equivalent = 18.

- 3.8. The business has been operating since 2009, becoming a Limited Company in 2012. The business has expanded from its original 18,000 chickens at Lower Edge Farm to 50,000 chickens. This has required financial investment into the building to build and fit out the new poultry units and packing buildings established at Lower Edge Farm as it was able to be supervised by the availability of a rented dwelling at the farm. As the business has expanded significantly, a further workers dwelling was given planning permission at the land that was formerly part of Standridge Farm, as the existing dwelling at Lower Edge Farm could not perform the function of supervision give its isolation from that part of the unit, allowing the whole unit to operate with two dwellings, one of which is owned by the Company, the other of which is rented from a third party.

4. THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

- 4.1. What is proposed is that an agricultural workers dwelling is built at the site of Lower Edge Farm. The need has arisen because the applicant, who resides at the rented property, The Cottage, Lower Edge Farm, where he has lived since the business started in 2009, has been given notice to quit the property, as the owner is selling the property on. The property is advertised on the market at a price of £1.5m. This is well beyond the reach of an agricultural workers wage and so the purchase of The Cottage is not an option available to the applicant. The applicant does however need to be close to the poultry units at Lower Edge Farm and in those circumstances, a new dwelling is required. The construction costs of a modest sized dwelling would be around £100,000 which is fundable through the business and is within the means of the applicant. The proposed new dwelling will be sited on an area of old stable buildings, which will be demolished to make way for the new dwelling. This siting is some 20 m from the poultry sheds at Lower Edge Farm.

Google map of Lower Edge Farm showing site of new dwelling



5. POLICY ASSESSMENT

- 5.1. The relevant considerations of the National Planning Policy Framework (framework), were outlined in the ADAS response to application 3/2017/0313 in 2017. In brief, this centred around paragraph 55 of the then framework which aimed to avoid isolated new dwellings in the countryside unless special circumstances exist, one of which was the need for an agricultural worker dwelling. The framework was updated in February 2019 and in effect, the former paragraph 55 is now replaced by paragraph 77, which also seeks to avoid isolated new dwellings in the countryside subject to certain exceptions, one of which remains as an essential need for a rural worker to live at or near their permanent place of work in the countryside.
- 5.2. Development Plan policy follows this national guidance, being permissive of an essential rural worker dwelling where an essential need is shown.

- 5.3. The usual applied test to conclude whether there is an essential need or not are functional and financial viability. In this regard it is useful to follow the assessment followed by ADAS in the 2017 response.

There is a clearly established function need

- 5.4. This is an intensive poultry enterprise and it is well established that such enterprises have an essential need for supervision. This need is more than adequately described in the Ian Pick Associates statement in 2017 on application 3/2017/0313. The following extracts from that document sum up the essential need for an intensive poultry enterprise:

The essential needs associated with the operation of the barn egg laying units are two-fold with supervision required for monitoring of automatic ventilation, feed and lighting systems, and for bird welfare.

In a poultry unit of this type, the system is reliant upon automatic systems for ventilation, feed and lighting. When automated systems are in use, problems can occur, such as equipment failure or power failure. The consequences of a failure in the ventilation system are such that internal temperature can rise very rapidly. Rising temperatures initially cause heat stress to the birds and eventually suffocation and death, if not rectified quickly. Disruption to the lighting system, caused by power failure, can also cause a panic incident.

The monitoring of automated systems can be alarmed against and linked to a mobile phone. Even with alarm systems the response to an alarm should be relatively instant. As a high health status unit, the operators have a requirement to shower in and change clothes every time the unit is accessed by staff. This causing significant pressure on staff to be immediately available on the site to cut down on the timescale to gain access into the birds.

The more important issue of functional need is the behaviour of the birds themselves when panicked. Birds housed on the floor, as distinct from laying cages, are prone to panic and crowding, resulting in smothering, if disturbed by external factors. Factors which can result in panic amongst the birds range from aircraft noise, adverse weather, to mechanical problems. The unit includes automated machinery and equipment, and failure of the equipment can result in panic of the birds, for example, failure of the nest boxes to open can disturb the birds, power failing resulting in flickering lights while the back-up generator starts, disturbance from noise associated with the back-up generator starting up, mechanical faults with feed motors and auger breakage. The factors which can cause panic incidents are numerous.

In an incident of panic, the birds flock and crowd in a corner of the shed, which results in large numbers of birds climbing on top of each other. A panic incident can result in large scale losses of birds through smothering. The only way in which a smothering incident can be mitigated is from the manual intervention of a stockman.

Emergencies such as panic and a smothering incident amongst birds cannot be alarmed against, but are audible outside the building. The triggers of such an incident are also audible on the site. Therefore only a worker resident on the site would be alerted to such an incident.

The dwellings will provide for the out of hours supervision of a total of 32000 (18,000 for this site) hens and it is considered there is an essential need for a full-time worker to reside on the holding to provide for the vast supervision and monitoring requirements.

- 5.5. The document goes on to quote a number of planning appeal cases all of which reinforce the above comments and the point that it is essential for the needs of an intensive poultry enterprise that a full-time worker lives within sight and sound of the egg production unit.
- 5.6. The applicant has been able to operate the poultry unit at Lower Edge Farm because of the availability of The Cottage, albeit that property was rented and not in the control of the applicant. Without the availability of The Cottage, it would have been necessary to provide a new dwelling at this site from the beginning of the establishment of the 18,000 bird poultry unit at this site from 2009. Given that the site has been operating in this manner and the above references, it is clear that there is an essential functional need for a dwelling for the applicant at Lower Edge Farm.

Whether the functional need can be fulfilled by a nearby existing dwelling

- 5.7. The essential functional need for an intensive poultry unit requires the workers dwelling to be within sight and sound of the poultry units. What within sight and sound means in distance terms has been touched on in appeal decisions. In the appeal decision APP/C3240/A/05/2005531, the Inspector considered that the functional need for an intensive poultry unit workers dwelling could not be fulfilled by a worker living at an existing dwelling 1.8 km from the site. The appeal decision APP/R0660/A/10/2122115 the Inspector commented that a drive distance of less than 5 minutes would not fulfil the functional need.
- 5.8. In this case, an agricultural workers dwelling has been approved for this unit at the land that was formerly part of Standridge Farm. That was approved in approved in 2017 under application reference 3/2017/0313 and is referred to above. In this regard, the ADAS comments on that application pointed out that the family's main residence was 500 metres from that site, meaning the applicant's rented house at The Cottage. However, there is no direct access from the dwelling approved under application 3/2017/0313 to this site other than by road. That distance by road is 1855m or 1.85 km. This distance has been deemed at appeal for such units to be not close enough to the poultry units as it is not within sight or sound of them. Therefore, the functional need at Lower Edge Farm cannot be met by that approved dwelling. However, that approved dwelling remains essential for the 32,000 birds at the land formerly part of Standridge Farm, that case having been accepted on the approved application 3/2017/0313.
- 5.9. There is the applicants current rented dwelling that has been fulfilling the functional need

for a worker to be within sight and sound of the poultry units at Lower Edge Farm. However, that dwelling is not in the control of the applicant and is being sold on the open market. It is therefore not genuinely 'available' for the applicant. The applicant could of course compete in the open market to purchase that dwelling. However, the market price, at £1.5m is not within the means of an agricultural worker. Again, on that basis, The Cottage is not genuinely available to meet the identified need for an agricultural worker to be located at this site. There are no other dwellings available within sight and sound of these poultry units.

The need relates to a full-time worker.

- 5.10 The business has a labour requirement of 18 full time jobs. Of these, 2 jobs (full-time) and 1 job (part-time) equivalents are needed for these poultry units at Lower Edge Farm. There is therefore a full-time worker need established.

The unit and the agricultural activity has been established for at least three years, has been profitable for at least one of them, is currently financially sound and has a clear prospect of remaining so.

- 5.11 This agricultural unit has been established since 2009, becoming a Limited Company, Robinson Foods Ltd, in 2012. Financial returns are shown on the Companies House website from 2012 to date. The Company has expanded during that time and invested considerable monies in new poultry houses for a further 32,000 birds and packing shed, to enable in house egg packing and provide egg packing services to other poultry unit sites. The unit therefore is well established and has expanded and invested in its operations over the last 12 years. This shows that the Company is trading profitably and is able to service its finance costs. The Company has major delivery contracts for Chippendale Foods, which is a major supplier of British free-range eggs. Given the amount of investment in land, buildings and facilities at the unit and the established customer base, the unit is likely to remain trading and profitable for the future.

Other considerations

- 5.12 The proposed siting of the dwelling is within 20m of the poultry sheds at Lower Edge Farm and this fulfils the requirement for a worker to be within sight and sound of the poultry sheds. The siting of the proposed dwelling will replace existing large stable buildings and the new dwelling will not be any more visually intrusive than those existing buildings. Access similarly exists and is available. There is therefore no determinate to the landscape with the siting of the proposed workers dwelling.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS.

- 6.1. This is a long established and profitable agricultural business that has expanded and invested in land and buildings at the unit that has resulted in increased employment in this rural area and an expanded rural business.

- 6.2. The business has 50,000 birds split into two sites, one for 32,000 birds at land that was formerly part of Standridge Farm and 18,000 birds at Lower Edge Farm. This has operated successfully as accommodation has been available at Lower Edge Farm to the applicant in an existing rented property. However, that situation has changed as that rented property is no longer available to the applicant, as that property is being sold at a market price which is way beyond the capacity of an agricultural worker. Therefore the 18,000 birds at Lower Edge Farm will be left with no workers dwelling to service them. Those birds cannot be serviced from the approved workers dwelling at the 32,000 bird site at land that was formerly part of Standridge Farm, as that dwelling is not within sight and sound of the 18,000 birds at Lower Edge Farm. There is also the further issue of cross contamination of the flocks, which is why the two flocks are sited away from each other. The workers at Lower Edge Farm are specifically for that unit and vice versa for the 32,000 bird unit on the former Standridge Farm land.
- 6.3. There are no other available dwellings in the locality that can meet the need for a workers dwelling at Lower Edge Farm. The proposed siting of the workers dwelling is very close to the poultry unit buildings at Lower Edge Farm such that it could not be easily separated from them. It will also replace existing stable buildings thereby minimising any impact on the area.
- 6.4. It is quite clear that the poultry units at Lower Edge Farm cannot operate without an on hand workers dwelling. Due to the loss of an available rented dwelling that has been used to house such a worker since 2009, that has now meant that a new dwelling is needed. Such a new workers dwelling will enable this agricultural business to continue to be successful, which is a main aim and thrust of local and national planning policy.

**Lower Edge Farm, Tinklers Lane, Slaidburn
BB7 4TP**

£1,700,000



- **A beautiful six bedroomed stone built family home**
- **An additional 3 bedroomed self contained annexe**
- **36 Acres of land included in the sale**
- **Situated in a stunning location in the Ribble Valley**
- **Viewing highly advised to appreciate this fully**
- **Offered with NO ONWARD CHAIN**

