

West Berkshire Local Plan Review 2023-2041 (adopted June 2025)

Landscape Character

Policy SP8

Landscape Character

Landscape led development which conserves and enhances the diversity and local distinctiveness of the landscape character of the District will be supported.

The natural, cultural, and perceptual components of the character of the landscape will be considered as a whole. Particular regard will be given to:

- a. Its valued features and qualities;
- b. The sensitivity and capacity of the area to change; and
- c. Ensuring that new development is appropriate in terms of location, scale and design in the context of the existing settlement form, pattern and character.

Development should be demonstrably informed by and respond positively to the evaluation of the distinctive landscape character areas set out in the West Berkshire Landscape Character Assessment (2019)⁽⁵⁹⁾ and other relevant landscape character assessments. These assessments provide an understanding of the valued characteristics, features and qualities of identified local landscape character areas across West Berkshire.

Proposals for development should be accompanied by an appropriate landscape assessment carried out in accordance with the current guidance from the Landscape Institute and Institute of Environmental Management & Assessment. The level of information provided should be proportionate to the scale and nature of the development proposed but should be sufficient to allow an informed assessment of the potential landscape and visual effects of the proposed development. The assessment should demonstrably inform the detailed design of the development, including its layout, form, scale and appearance in accordance with policy SP7.

Supporting Text

5.40 One of the key issues facing West Berkshire is the conservation and enhancement of the distinctive local character of both the natural, and built and historic environment. It helps local people in West Berkshire achieve sustainable development. The high quality diverse landscape character with its rich cultural and natural heritage contributes to the enjoyment and overall quality of life of everyone in the District. Having an understanding of this distinctive character and using this as a positive tool in accommodating necessary change will ensure that the inherent qualities and valued features of West Berkshire's landscape will continue to be appreciated.

5.41 Conserving and enhancing the distinctive landscape character of the District is given considerable weight in line with national policy which sets out that valued landscapes should be protected in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan.

5.42 74% of the District lies within the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, extending from Wiltshire in the west and Oxfordshire in the north, over the Berkshire Downs. At West Berkshire's eastern boundary, the River Thames, the North Wessex Downs National Landscape adjoins the Chilterns National Landscape above Purley-on-Thames and then curves back around the north of Newbury before returning south to cover part of the Hampshire Downs. The National Landscape is characterised by the quality of its chalk landscape which ranges from remote open downland, dramatic skyline escarpments, contrasting wooded downland, and the small scale intimate settled river valleys of the Lambourn and Pang. As a nationally valued and designated landscape, the North Wessex Downs National Landscape will be conserved and enhanced in accordance with its national status and this is set out in policy SP2.

5.43 A landscape does not have to have a designation to be valued locally. Outside the National Landscape, the River Kennet and the inter-connected Kennet & Avon Canal, from Newbury to Reading, lies within a distinctive broad corridor of an open lowland landscape characterised by a variety of wetland habitats including wet meadow, reed bed, and flooded gravel workings. Further to the south and east there are small areas of remnant heath with the Ministry of Defence owning large tracts of land at Aldermaston and Burghfield.

West Berkshire Local Plan Review 2023-2041 (adopted June 2025)

5.44 Value can apply to areas of landscape as a whole or to individual elements, features and aesthetic or perceptual dimensions which contribute to the character of the landscape. There are no locally designated landscapes in West Berkshire. All landscapes across the District have some degree of value and all development should therefore respond positively to the identified character and valued qualities inherent in that local landscape. The West Berkshire Landscape Character Assessment 2019 evaluates and provides an understanding of what is important and why, for each identified local landscape character area across the District. It provides a framework for informed decisions to be made as to whether different landscapes should evolve by:

- Conserving the existing and historic character;
- Enhancing existing character by introducing new features into the landscape;
- Strengthening or restoring a previous character; or
- Creating a new character when a sense of place and local distinctiveness have been eroded or lost.

5.45 Other relevant landscape character assessments include the North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment (2025), which was produced in order to manage and guide change across a designated area extending beyond West Berkshire. In addition, Historic Landscape Characterisation (2007)⁽⁶⁰⁾ and Historic Environment Character Zoning (2007)⁽⁶¹⁾, which provide a sound understanding of the historic environment context of West Berkshire, can also be used by the Council to inform and support planning decisions.

5.46 The character of the landscape in West Berkshire is defined by the historic processes that have shaped and formed the landscapes that exist today. Having an understanding of these processes and the way the historic environment of the District has influenced settlement patterns and the sense of place of particular areas is essential when accommodating future development. Settlements are a key component of the landscape, and in West Berkshire most settlements can trace their origins back over many hundreds of years. The separate and distinctive identity of these individual settlements helps to define communities and is an important feature of the local character of West Berkshire. A variety of rural settlement forms can be seen, from the nucleated patterns common on the chalk downs to the more dispersed patterns found in the southern part of the District. Much of the pressure for development is around the edges of settlements, which can physically lead to coalescence or introduce an increase in activity which has an urbanising effect. Despite this, a key feature of even the larger settlements is the way in which few have coalesced in recent times and so the blurring of the physical distinction between places has largely been avoided. The retention of these actual and perceived visual breaks remains important for the continued maintenance of the existing settlement form, pattern and character.

5.47 The policy makes clear that proposals for development should be accompanied by an appropriate landscape assessment carried out in accordance with the current guidance from the Landscape Institute and IEMA. Depending on the scale and nature of the proposals this will either be a formal Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) typically as part of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) or less formally as a Landscape and Visual Appraisal (LVA). Regardless of the scale of the assessment, it should address both the potential landscape effects and also the potential visual effects that may result from the development. Detailed development proposals will then be expected to respond positively to this assessment to ensure they conserve and enhance landscape character by strengthening a sense of place in accordance with policy SP7.

60 Historic Landscape Characterisation (2007): <https://westberks.gov.uk/historicenvironmentprojects>

61 Historic Environment Character Zoning (2007): <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/historicenvironmentprojects>