

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

Policy DM14

Assets of Archaeological Importance

Proposals for development affecting heritage assets of archaeological interest and their settings will be determined in accordance with policy SP9 and will be expected to clearly demonstrate:

- a. Why the proposed development and related works are desirable or necessary; and
- b. How the significance of the assets will be preserved

Development may not be permitted if applicants fail to provide adequate or accurate detailed information to show the impact on the nature, extent and significance of the assets. For known assets of archaeological interest, or on land where there is archaeological potential, an appropriate archaeological desk-based assessment will be required which should allow informed decisions to be made about options for mitigating or offsetting that impact.

Where appropriate, pre-determination field evaluation may be necessary as a further stage. This is a limited programme of fieldwork to determine the presence or absence of archaeological features, artefacts or ecofacts and their research potential, and to define their character, extent, quality and preservation to enable assessment of significance.

Archaeological evaluation may include:

- i. Non-destructive methods such as geophysical survey, earthwork survey, building survey;
- ii. Intrusive methods of varying destructive potential such as augering, test pits, trial trenches and fieldwalking; and
- iii. In the case of buildings, physical intervention such as the removal of modern materials to reveal older fabric.

Proposals will be permitted where the proposal accords with other relevant policies and includes:

- Provision to preserve the archaeological remains in situ, by sensitive layout and design. This is the preferred outcome for archaeological assets of the highest significance (Scheduled Monuments and those non-designated assets of equivalent significance); and/or
- Provision for the investigation and recording of any archaeological remains that cannot or are not required to be preserved, including at least the deposition of evidence with the West Berkshire Historic Environment Record and any archaeological archive with the appropriate depository, in accordance with a detailed Written Scheme of Investigation approved before the start of development.

Supporting Text

10.120 The purpose of this policy is to set out more detailed criteria for development proposals affecting Assets of Archaeological Interest.

10.121 There will be archaeological interest in a heritage asset, whether it is a building, monument, site, place, area of landscape, if it holds, or potentially holds, evidence of past human activity worthy of expert investigation at some point.

10.122 The survival into the present day of any given archaeological material depends on many factors. Below ground conditions are not always conducive to site formation, and natural processes or later human activity can erode or destroy archaeological evidence whether buried or upstanding. Heritage assets of archaeological interest can therefore be fragile and fragmentary. They form a finite resource which is irreplaceable.

10.123 The potential knowledge which may be unlocked by investigation of archaeological assets may be harmed even by minor disturbance, because the context in which evidence is found is crucial to furthering understanding. It is therefore generally desirable for archaeological assets to be preserved in situ.

10.124 Archaeological sites, monuments and buildings vary in type, scale and character as well as state of preservation, and they may be of national, regional or local significance and designated or non-designated. Only a very small percentage of archaeological sites are designated in any way, and many await discovery.

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10.125 The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 provides specific protection for archaeological monuments of national interest, including the maintaining of a Schedule of Monuments. The NPPF makes it clear that Scheduled Monuments are heritage assets of the highest significance and that substantial harm to or loss of them should be wholly exceptional. However, scheduling is discretionary, and non-designated heritage assets of archaeological interest may be demonstrably of equivalent significance to Scheduled Monuments, either because they have yet to be formally assessed, or because discretion has been exercised not to designate them. A third category of nationally important archaeological assets is those types of site which are not eligible for scheduling because their physical nature falls outside the scope of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. These non-designated heritage assets of archaeological interest of equivalent significance to Scheduled Monuments should be considered subject to the policies for designated heritage assets.

10.126 Prior written permission for works to a Scheduled Monument is required and undertaking works without consent is a criminal offence. Scheduled Monument Consent is administered by Historic England. An application for planning permission may also be necessary for work affecting a Scheduled Monument which constitutes 'development', and there is a requirement to consult Historic England for development likely to affect the site of a Scheduled Monument.

10.127 Where the partial or total loss of an archaeological asset is to be permitted due to public benefit, developers will be required to commission recording to offset this loss, generally through a programme of archaeological work or building recording, specified through an approved Written Scheme of Investigation. Archaeological excavation is controlled intrusive fieldwork which examines, records and interprets archaeological features, structures and deposits; artefacts are retrieved and environmental samples are collected where appropriate. As the archaeological site is removed through the process, it is essential that important evidence is not thoughtlessly destroyed. Those carrying out the work should seek to answer questions within a current research framework and to advance understanding. The records made and objects gathered from the archaeological archive should be studied in order to compile a report, and this evidence should be made publicly accessible. The explicit purpose of development-led archaeological work therefore is to make useful contributions to knowledge, for public benefit.