

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

### Policy DM35

#### Sustaining a Prosperous Rural Economy

Development proposals that contribute to sustaining a prosperous rural economy will be encouraged.

To support the rural economy, proposals for economic development in the countryside will only be permitted where they satisfy the following criteria:

- a. The proposals demonstrate that the business can make a positive contribution to the rural economy;
- b. The use/development is suitable for a rural location;
- c. The proposals are compatible with uses in the surrounding area;
- d. Where new buildings are proposed the landowner has not disposed of, or converted, any buildings to a residential use in the previous 3 years which could have met the needs of the development proposed;
- e. Any proposals are of a high quality design, are appropriate in terms of siting, scale, form, massing, character and appearance having regard to the surrounding rural area and its setting in the wider rural landscape;
- f. New or replacement buildings are located within or adjoining an existing group of buildings and further expansion into the open countryside is avoided;
- g. It would not generate traffic of a type or amount inappropriate for the rural roads, byways or restricted byways affected by the proposal or require improvements to these roads, byways, or restricted byways which could be detrimental to their character and use by motorised and non-motorised traffic;
- h. It would not have a detrimental effect on the fabric, character and setting of historic buildings or other heritage assets; and
- i. Appropriate proposals which make more efficient use of previously developed land will be encouraged.

Insofar as a planning application is required, proposals resulting in the loss of existing business sites and premises in the countryside, will only be permitted where the applicant can demonstrate that no alternative economic use can be found, and that the proposal does not have a significant negative impact upon the vitality and viability of the local economy of the surrounding rural area.

### Supporting Text

**12.21** Rural West Berkshire plays an important role within the District's economy and therefore it is essential that the businesses within it and the communities that rely on them are supported through planning policies and decisions. Many rural areas host a large number of small and medium sized enterprises which are vital to providing local job opportunities and a diverse economy and so this policy seeks to foster sustainable economic growth in the countryside without detriment to the environment. Proposals for farm diversification will be considered in accordance with policy DM36 and proposals for equestrian and the horseracing industry in accordance with policy DM37.

**12.22** The NPPF includes a specific section on the rural economy and expects local planning policies and decisions to support the sustainable growth, and expansion of businesses in rural areas, through the conversion of existing buildings and well-designed new buildings. The focus of rural policy nationally and locally is on expanding the diversity of the rural economy while recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and this is recognised in the Council's Economic Development Strategy<sup>(137)</sup>.

**12.23** Appropriate proposals that contribute to strengthening the rural economy will be supported provided that all of the criteria in the policy are met. These are designed to safeguard against functionally, visually or environmentally inappropriate development in the countryside.

**12.24** The West Berkshire Landscape Character Area Assessment (2019)<sup>(138)</sup> outlines that rural areas are more at risk from piecemeal development, and thus it is especially important to consider the impact that developing or redeveloping a site will have on conserving and enhancing local distinctiveness and sense of place. A successful development in the countryside depends on having a clear understanding of the site's significance, its setting in the wider landscape and sensitivity to and capacity for change.

<sup>137</sup> Economic Development Strategy: <https://westberks.gov.uk/economic-development-strategy>

<sup>138</sup> West Berkshire Landscape Character Area Assessment (2019): <https://westberks.gov.uk/lca>

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

**12.25** New economic development, or proposals to expand existing premises in the countryside will be supported provided they are suited to a rural location, meet the requirements of this policy, and where relevant, other national and local policies on employment locations and protected environments e.g. SP2, SP17, etc. In demonstrating that the business can make a positive contribution to the rural economy supporting evidence will be provided with a planning application. Such evidence could include a business plan, whole estate plan or similar. For new businesses in particular, this can aid in illustrating the viability of the proposal. An assessment will be made as to whether planning conditions will be required to limit changes of use which would otherwise be permitted under the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 (as amended) in order to achieve the objectives of the policy, and to avoid pressure for non-economic uses in locations which may not be suitable (e.g. residential).

**12.26** The overarching spatial strategy for West Berkshire focuses development on previously developed land (PDL). Whilst developers are expected to make the best use of PDL within settlement boundaries, this policy provides some flexibility, to allow for some development on PDL in the countryside to enable the sustainable growth of rural businesses, as long as it meets the wider objectives of the Local Plan. However, all proposals will firstly be considered in a landscape led context because previously developed sites will not always be appropriate in terms of landscape character. Wider development needs and pressures will not be accepted as a reason to develop on any site outside of settlement boundaries.

**12.27** Where the re-use of buildings is proposed, re-use for business is the Council's strong preference, in order to safeguard the local economy. Notwithstanding this position, it is acknowledged that for some buildings a future economic use is not viable. Applicants will be expected to demonstrate that this is the case, and that any alternative proposal does not have a significant negative impact upon the vitality and viability of the local economy of the surrounding rural area.

**12.28** Permitted development rights exist for the conversion of certain buildings to residential use. Notwithstanding these rights, in cases where a planning application is required, the provisions regarding the loss of a business site or premise in this policy will apply.

**12.29** In applying the policy the Council considers it essential that both the integrity and setting of historic farm buildings are conserved and enhanced. Their appropriate conservation and re-use will ensure that the historical investment that has been made in their materials and energy will be sustained.

**12.30** The NPPF notes that, in rural areas, sites which meet local community and business needs may have to be found in locations that are not well served by public transport. It will therefore be important that the scale and density of development proposals are related to the site's accessibility, character and surroundings. In less accessible locations, positive weight will be given to proposals that demonstrably offset their accessibility by clearly delivering other environmental benefits.

**12.31** Assessment of the highway implications will be made on the basis of the proposal and what would be considered necessary in terms of improvements by the Highway Authority. The reference to 'rural roads' is a generic term and the Council would be concerned as to the effects of the proposed development on rural tracks, footpaths and bridleways. Relevant considerations would include past and existing levels of traffic generated from the site; the level, type and frequency of traffic likely to be generated by the proposed development; and traffic levels accepted under any existing planning permission attached to the land.