

Replacement Dwellings and Extensions to Dwellings in the Countryside

1. Introduction

1.1 This guidance has been prepared to assist prospective applicants and their agents considering replacing, extending or altering existing dwellings in the countryside and aid decisions on planning applications. It supplements specific policies within the West Berkshire District Local Plan and is consistent with national and regional planning policies. Following consultation and adoption by the Council it will be a material consideration in the determination of applications for planning permission.

2. Policy

2.1 The Government's policy is that building in the open countryside, away from existing settlements or from areas allocated for development in development plans, should be strictly controlled. Isolated new houses in the countryside require special justification—for example where it is essential to enable farm or forestry workers to live at or near their place of work. The fact that a new single house on a particular site would be unobtrusive is not by itself a good argument; it could be repeated too often. Extensions and replacement dwellings in the countryside are not specifically covered by the national guidance but local development plan policies reflect the national policy for protection of the countryside.

2.2 Policy C2 of the Berkshire Structure Plan 1991-2006 and Policy DP1 of the Deposit Draft Structure Plan 2001 - 2016 both state that development outside settlement boundaries will be strictly controlled. The West Berkshire District Local Plan 1991-2006 identifies settlements in Policy HSG.1 and these are shown on the Proposals Map. Policy HSG.2 defines the exceptional categories of housing development outside the settlement boundaries that could be permitted if they accord with all other policies of the development plan. These include the one for one replacement of a long established dwelling in accordance with policy ENV.23.

2.3 In addition to the policy on replacement dwellings in the countryside, the West Berkshire District Local Plan contains policy ENV.24 which covers extensions to dwellings in the countryside. Both policies are concerned to maintain the essential rural nature and qualities of the area by preventing the over development of sites and a material visual intrusion into the countryside. Some large extensions to relatively small dwellings have altered their character, and can have a detrimental urbanising effect upon the rural character of the surrounding area. There is also concern that large-scale modern replacement dwellings can lead to a reduction in the variety of housing available in the countryside.

2.4 The policies for control of development in the countryside therefore apply to all areas outside the defined settlement boundaries. Large areas of West Berkshire lie within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) where the conservation of the landscape, visual quality and amenity of the area is of paramount importance. The AONB is of national importance with a status equivalent to that of a National Park. The local planning authority has a duty to ensure that development does

not damage the character and amenity of this national asset. The Local Plan has also designated "Areas of Special Landscape Importance" and "Gaps between Settlements" where the visual and landscape qualities of the area are to be conserved. Policies ENV.2, ENV.3 and ENV.4 relate to these areas.

2.5 The West Berkshire District Local Plan is available in the Council Offices and in libraries and is available to view online at www.westberks.gov.uk.

3. Replacement Dwellings in the Countryside

3.1 Policy ENV 23 of the West Berkshire District Local Plan is set out below. The key consideration in assessing the acceptability of proposals for replacement dwellings is the impact on the character and appearance of the countryside.

POLICY ENV.23 The replacement of existing dwellings in the countryside which are or have been recently occupied will be permitted provided the following criteria are met:

- (a) the existing dwelling is long established and is not the result of a temporary or series of temporary permissions;**
- (b) the proposed dwelling is not disproportionate in size to the dwelling being replaced;**
- (c) the proposed design of the new dwelling is of a high standard and appropriate to the rural character of the area;**
- (d) the development where appropriate, incorporates or complements other existing buildings or features in the locality;**
- (e) the development is appropriate and sympathetic in scale, design, materials, layout and siting to the character and setting of adjoining buildings and spaces;**
- (f) the development includes an acceptable landscape scheme to retain and improve the rural nature of the locality.**

3.2 Why are disproportionate replacement dwellings inappropriate?

The primary purpose of this supplementary planning guidance is to amplify the requirements of criterion (b) which seeks to avoid dwellings which are disproportionate to the original dwelling; that is excessive in scale or massing and thereby physically and visually intrusive.

The replacement of small country dwellings with more grandiose houses can radically change the character of a site to one of a more suburban nature and also reduce the supply of the smaller rural dwellings. A replacement dwelling, when clearly disproportional to the original, can be tantamount in its impact to a new dwelling and can therefore undermine both national and local policies on restriction of new development in the countryside. Even where a site is well screened there is a wider concern to maintain the essential rural nature and qualities of the area.

3.3 What is disproportionate?

Policy ENV.23 is not prescriptive in setting precise limits on what is or is not disproportionate, as each proposal needs to be considered individually in terms of its actual impact on the site and the surrounding rural environment. A new dwelling should not have a materially larger impact than the dwelling it replaces and this impact will be assessed on a number of factors. The percentage increase in volume or floorspace is a useful indicator of what may be disproportionate, but is only one matter to be taken into account. Other factors which are likely to be key determinants are indicated in the supporting text to Policy ENV.23. and include: -

- (i) the overall size, scale and massing of the replacement dwelling compared to the original; and
- (ii) the site characteristics and visual prominence of the existing and proposed replacement dwellings. Visual prominence/ intrusion may be reduced or increased by design factors; and
- (iii) the impact on and relationship to adjoining buildings and uses in rural areas; and
- (iv) whether on balance the proposed development maintains/enhances or detracts from the inherent character and nature of the site and the surrounding rural environment (this is a judgement which can only be made on the merits or otherwise of each case).

3.3.1 Increase in Size

The percentage increase in floorspace of the proposed compared to the “original” dwelling provides a useful indicator of potential impact for assessing both replacement dwellings and extensions to dwellings. Calculations of the increase should be submitted by the applicant or agent.

- **Under 50% increase** – unlikely to be considered disproportionate on size increase alone, but any detrimental impacts on the countryside or unneighbourly effects due to bulk, scale, massing or design could render the proposal unacceptable.
- **More than 50% increase** - would generally be regarded as disproportionate, although development could be acceptable depending on the site characteristics, scale and massing. Even where a site is well screened an extension of this size could harm the essential rural nature and qualities of the area and have a suburbanising effect. If repeated, the cumulative impact on the countryside could be considerable.
- **More than 100% increase** – Any proposal for a replacement dwelling which more than doubles the original dwelling would normally be regarded as disproportionate as it would be more visually dominant than the original and have a materially greater impact upon the countryside, contrary to the aims of national and local policy. It could not normally be considered a one for one replacement.

Definitions – to provide guidance in assessing the size increase: -

- (i) In assessing size, all measurements are to be external, and will include any areas covered by a permanent roof, i.e. porches or verandas (as these can be infilled without planning permission, unless this has already been excluded by a condition).
- (ii) The floorspace of the “original” dwelling will be taken to be the dwelling as it was originally built, and excludes any subsequent extensions or any outbuildings. Where the dwelling was built before 1 July 1948, the floorspace of the original dwelling will be taken as comprising the dwelling and any outbuildings or structures which existed on 1 July 1948 and which were situated within 5 metres of the dwelling.

3.3.2 Possible Exceptions to Size Guidelines

▪ Long-established extensions

Extensions built since 1948 are not classed as part of the original dwelling. However, in exceptional circumstances, where any previous extension is long established and clearly well-related to the original dwelling and its surroundings, a proposal for a modest further extension or replacement may be considered acceptable (even if the size guidelines are exceeded), where it would not have a harmful visual or otherwise detrimental effect on the character of the countryside.

• Small and large original buildings

Exceptions to the 50% guideline for size increase may be appropriate where the “original” dwelling is: -

- (i) Relatively small and where a larger percentage increase may be necessary, for example to bring the dwelling up to modern living standards.
- (ii) Relatively large, where a lesser percentage increase will normally be allowed. In these cases, because the existing dwelling is already large, even a proportionate increase would be substantially more likely to have a major impact on the surroundings.

• Outbuildings

Additional volume will not normally be allowed for the removal of existing outbuildings which are not part of the “original” dwelling.. However, each case will be considered on its own merits. Where a permanent and substantial outbuilding that forms part of the residential curtilage is proposed to be removed as a result of the development, the Council will carefully consider the potential effects on neighbouring properties and on the character of the countryside.

3.4 Other Considerations

3.4.1 Siting of dwelling

Any replacement dwelling will be expected to be located on the site of the existing dwelling it is to replace. However, there may be some limited circumstances where a positive environmental or road safety benefit may be achieved by relocation to an adjacent or nearby position within the established curtilage. Development should generally be located in the least conspicuous position within the curtilage subject to the new dwelling having a satisfactory relationship with any surrounding development. Each

case will be considered on its merits, weighing the enhanced environmental or road safety benefits against any detrimental impact arising from the new siting.

3.4.2 Design

The essential issue is the impact on the character and appearance of the countryside in comparison with that of the existing dwelling. The bulk, scale, height, massing and design will be critical in terms of its impact. Generally the height of the replacement building should not significantly exceed that of the existing. The assessment of impact should include views from a distance as well as from the immediate neighbourhood. This is particularly important where the dwelling is situated in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, or in an Area of Special Landscape Importance or Gap between Settlements defined in the Local Plan.

Proposals for replacement dwellings will be expected to be of a high quality. Proposals should take account of local and traditional elements of design, including advice in any relevant village design statement or supplementary planning guidance, including the draft SPG on Design and Sustainability. The countryside is characterised by a variety of dwelling designs and the aim should be to continue this variety, improve design quality and avoid standard dwelling types. A key factor is whether the appearance of the proposed dwelling would have an urbanising effect on the character and appearance of the countryside. A brief design statement will be expected with the planning application, explaining how the proposed dwelling will fit into its surroundings and how it complies with this SPG. For full applications, elevations of the existing building as well as the proposed dwelling or extension should be included to enable comparisons to be made.

3.4.3 Permitted Development Rights

The Council may impose a restrictive condition withdrawing future permitted development rights where a replacement dwelling is larger than the original building. This would prevent further increases, which would be disproportionate to the original dwelling and could impact on the surrounding area.

3.4.4 Protected Species

Prior to any development (including demolition or alteration of buildings), appropriate steps should be taken to check for the likely presence of any species protected by law, for example by consulting the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre. Protected species include badgers, great crested newts, dormice, water voles, barn owls and all species of bat. The presence of a protected species is a material consideration in the planning process and must be disclosed to the planning authority. If the presence of a protected species is suspected, the applicant must arrange for a suitably qualified consultant to undertake a survey, which should be submitted with the planning application. Where a survey is not submitted, the planning authority may request one if it considers that protected species may be an issue (e.g. a bat survey will usually be required for any application involving the alteration of a wood framed barn). This may delay consideration of the application until the survey has been submitted. If protected species are found, then the consultant can advise about whether the development should proceed, whether the development can be re-designed to safeguard the species and/or whether suitable mitigation can be designed. They can also liaise with the planning authority over this issue. A list of environmental consultants can be found on the website of the Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management at www.ieem.org.uk. Further advice can be obtained from the Council's ecologist or

English Nature. In some situations where development affects European Protected species, then in addition to planning permission, a licence will be required.

4. Extensions to Dwellings in the Countryside

4.1 Policy ENV.24 of the West Berkshire District Local Plan is concerned with extensions to existing houses in the countryside and ancillary buildings within the site curtilage. It allows for this development in appropriate cases subject to a number of provisions. In particular, the policy seeks to prevent the over development of such sites and a material increase in visual intrusion into the countryside.

POLICY ENV.24 Extensions to existing dwellings in the countryside and the construction of ancillary buildings within the curtilage of such dwellings will be permitted provided the following criteria are met:

- (a) the dwelling is of permanent construction with a reasonable expectation of life;**
- (b) the extension or additional building is in keeping with the design of the existing dwelling and uses complementary materials;**
- (c) the impact of the proposed development when taken with the existing building or buildings would not be materially greater or more harmful than that of the existing building(s) on the rural character of the area;**
- (d) the proposed development would not result in an extended dwelling disproportionate in size to the original.**

The impact of residential extensions in the countryside is very similar to that of replacement dwellings. The same guidance will therefore apply on size, design and impact. Any extension should take account of guidance in the SPG on House Extensions and on any relevant Village Design Statement.

4.2 Increase in Size

It is important that proposed extensions are subordinate to the existing dwelling and not capable of being severed from it. The guidelines on size increase for replacement dwellings are equally applicable for extensions in the countryside. (See Section 3.3 above) Hence, an increase in floorspace of 50% or more over the 'original' dwelling would normally be regarded as disproportionate, although there may be material considerations that render the proposal acceptable. Any previous extensions or outbuildings within 5 metres of the dwelling will need to be taken into account in order to assess the cumulative impact. More than doubling the size of the existing building would result in an extended dwelling that would be clearly disproportionate to the original and therefore contrary to criterion (d) of Policy ENV.24. It would be similar in many respects to the creation of a new dwelling in the countryside, without any of the required justification.

4.3 Existing Barn and other Outbuilding Conversions

A more restrictive approach may be applied where the existing building is a former agricultural barn or other outbuilding, because of the sensitivity of the design to retain an agricultural use appearance appropriate to its countryside location. PPG7 and draft PPS7 contain advice on the re-use of buildings in the countryside – an extension could materially change the original principle of allowing such development as an exception to

the usual strict controls. Extensions should not give the impression of or involve major reconstruction of the original building or lead to greater intensification of use and must respect local building features, styles and materials.

5. Garages, Conservatories and Curtilages

5.1 Detached garages

Single or double detached garages of appropriate dimensions and height may be allowed if they are not intrusive upon the wider locality. They should be sited as unobtrusively as possible, to the side or rear of the dwelling where possible.

5.2 Integral garages

Proposed integral garages will be treated as extensions to the dwelling except where they are within the original built footprint of the house or the volume has been taken account of in past extensions..

5.3 Conservatories

A conservatory may be acceptable in the countryside but must be designed and sited so that it does not detract from the character of the dwelling and its countryside setting. It must accord with the rest of the guidance and is treated like any other extension. Where the dwelling is a former barn or other countryside outbuilding conversion, it is unlikely that such a structure could be designed and the building extended, without adversely affecting the character and integrity of the building.

5.4 New driveways and additional hardstandings

It is important that such features should not result in urbanising effects upon the character and appearance of the countryside. Surfacing needs to be appropriate to the building character and setting.

5.5 Boundary Treatments

Natural landscape features, such as native hedges, bushes and trees, which are in keeping with the countryside character, are strongly preferred. The District Wide Landscape Character Assessment and any relevant Village Design Statement should assist in identifying appropriate boundary treatments. Ornamental features of a more urban character should be avoided as they tend to be obtrusive and out of scale.References

Planning Policy Guidance Note 7: Countryside. Available to view at www.odpm.gov.uk/

Berkshire Structure Plan 1991 – 2006. Available to view at Council Offices and libraries.

West Berkshire District Local Plan 1991 – 2006. Adopted June 2002. Available to view at Council Offices and libraries and online at www.westberks.gov.uk

Supplementary Planning Guidance and Village Design Statements available to view at Council Offices and online at www.westberks.gov.uk

6. For Further Advice

If you would like further advice or application forms, please write to or telephone the Planning Control Section of the Planning and Transport Strategy Service. Our address is:

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