Supplementary Planning Document – The Re-use of Rural Buildings

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West Devon Borough Council is committed to reflecting the full diversity of the community it serves, and to promoting equality of opportunity for everyone. This document can be made available in large print, Braille, tape format or in any other language on request.
1. Introduction

1.1 Traditional buildings in the countryside make a significant contribution to the quality of the landscape within West Devon. As well as dwellings, there are many different types of buildings for example barns, stables, mills, churches and schools that add to the character of the Borough.

1.2 However, changes in rural life and farming practices, have caused many buildings to become redundant and fall into disrepair.

1.3 It is not only derelict buildings, but also insensitive conversions, which can be eyesores in the landscape. This advice note explains general design principles to encourage owners of redundant rural buildings to bring them back into use by converting them (where appropriate) in a sensitive manner, retaining their traditional architectural character and enhancing their setting.

1.4 This SPD relates mainly to the re-use and conversion of traditional buildings in the countryside. The Council is generally supportive of the re-use of rural buildings for business uses; and may adopt less stringent criteria for the conversion of more modern buildings for these uses where they are in the right location. Where possible you should discuss your proposals with a planning officer before submitting a planning application.

Policy Background

1.5 The following national planning policy guidance is relevant to this type of planning proposal. Applicants should refer to the published documentation for further details. These are available on www.odpm.gov.uk.

1.6 Planning Policy Statement 7 – Sustainable Development in Rural Areas provides guidance in relation to the re-use and conversion of rural buildings. Paragraph 17 states that the Government’s policy is to support the re-use of appropriately located and suitably constructed existing buildings in the countryside where this would meet sustainable development objectives. Any building outside of development limits could be classed as a rural building. PPS7 details a number of criteria, which proposals for re-use or conversion should take into consideration.

1.7 These include:

- The potential impact on the countryside, landscape and wildlife;
- Specific local economic/social needs and opportunities;
- Settlement patterns and accessibility to service centres, markets and housing;
- The suitability of different types of buildings, and of different scales, for re-use;
- The need to preserve, or the desirability of preserving, buildings of historic or architectural importance or interest, or which otherwise contribute to local character.
1.8 PPS7 goes on to state that ‘Local planning authorities should be particularly supportive of the re-use of existing buildings that are adjacent or closely related to country towns and villages, for economic or community uses, or to provide housing in accordance with the policies in PPG3, and subject to the policies in paragraph 7 of this PPS in relation to the retention of local services.’ (Paragraph 18 PPS7)

1.9 Planning Policy Statement 9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation provides guidance in relation to the protection of species, this is relevant when proposing new uses for rural buildings. Paragraph 15 states that many individual species receive statutory protection under a range of legislative provisions and Part IV of ODPM Circular 06/2005 provides detailed guidance in relation to the Conservation of Species Protected by Law.

1.10 Paragraph 16 of PPS9 states that other species have been identified as requiring conservation action as species of principal importance for the conservation of biodiversity in England. Local Authorities should ensure that these species are protected from the adverse effects of development, where appropriate, by using planning conditions or obligations. Planning authorities should refuse permission where harm to a species or their habitats would result unless the need for, and benefits of, the development clearly outweigh that harm.

1.11 Planning Policy Guidance note 15 Planning and Historic Environment paragraphs 3.8 and 3.11 provide advice in relation to the use of historic buildings. PPG15 outlines the importance of keeping buildings in active use but also outlines that judging the best use is one of the most important and sensitive assessments that local planning authorities have to make, this Guidance particularly relates to listed buildings.

1.12 Planning Policy Guidance note 16 Archaeology and Planning is also of relevance as developments affecting historic building groups may also have above and below ground implications. It is important to consult with the County Archaeological Service and English Heritage for advice in these matters.

1.13 Applications for the change of use of a Listed Building or building identified as historic or having archaeological interest should be accompanied with full details of any alterations to the buildings and of proposed groundworks, so that the effect on its character and surroundings can be assessed. Where appropriate, proposals that would entail the loss of historic fabric, or of archaeological deposits or features, should be conditional upon a programme of building recording and/or archaeological recording.

1.14 The full policy on the re-use of rural buildings is contained in the Council's Local Plan Review, a copy of which can be seen in the Planning Department or on the web at www.westdevon.gov.uk. Any applicant intending to convert or re-use a rural building should look at this policy and other policies in the plan, which relate to rural development proposals. However the policy wording for RB1 and RB2 is shown below.
Adopted Local Plan Review Policy

Policy RB1 Conversion and re-use for business purposes

The re-use or conversion of a rural building (buildings in the countryside outside the defined limits of large and small settlements) for a business re-use will be permitted where:

(i) The building is structurally sound and capable of conversion without the need for significant extension, alteration or reconstruction and is suitable for the proposed use;

(ii) The form, bulk and general design are in keeping with its surroundings;

(iii) The use of the building or its curtilage would not be visually intrusive in the countryside;

(iv) The proposed use will not harm the local environment through the creation of noise, dust, smoke, fumes, grit, vibration or any other form of water, soil or air pollution;

(v) It will not lead to a dispersal of activity or uses on such a scale as to prejudice the vitality of a nearby town or village;

(vi) The traffic to be generated by the new use can be safely accommodated by the site access and the local road system;

(vii) It has been demonstrated following a survey that no harm will be caused to protected wildlife.

Where a future alteration, extension, ancillary building or development may have a detrimental effect on the character of the area, permitted development rights will be withdrawn for such development.

Where a proposal involves the re-use or conversion of agricultural buildings and the proliferation of such buildings would have a seriously detrimental effect on the landscape, permitted development rights may be withdrawn for new farm buildings on the relevant part of that particular agricultural unit or holding.

In determining proposals to convert an agricultural building under 10 years old account will be taken of the extent to which the building has been used for its original agricultural purpose.

Policy RB2 Conversion and re-use for residential purposes

The re-use or conversion of a rural building (buildings in the countryside outside the defined limits of large and small settlements) for residential use will be permitted where:

Every reasonable attempt has been made to secure suitable business re-use and the application is supported by evidence of reasonable effort made to secure suitable re-use;

Or
Residential conversion is a subordinate part of the scheme and should be implemented at the same time for business, industrial, tourism or recreation use;
Or

Residential conversion is required to meet a proven need for a dwelling for a full time agricultural, horticultural or forestry worker
Or

The building has been proven to be unsuitable for business use

The proposal meets the criteria set out in RB1

The residential conversion will not have a damaging effect on the original character of the building or its setting and the building itself continues to make a positive contribution to its surroundings.

Where permission is granted the Council may attach a condition withdrawing permitted development rights in order to safeguard the character of the building

1.15 The Council generally supports the re-use of rural buildings provided that the building is of quality and its character is not materially altered. A variety of uses may be appropriate depending on the location and accessibility of the building, however the policy outlines that business re-use should be looked at first before residential. Possible business uses could include outdoor recreation, light industry and workshops. Proposals for new uses will be assessed against the policies contained in the Local Plan Review. For example proposals for holiday uses should also be assessed against Local Plan Review Policy TLS1.

1.16 Where proposals are for the conversion or re-use of a rural building for residential uses an applicant should refer to the criteria set out in RB2. Paragraph 9 of PPS7 states that policies should ‘strictly control new house building (including single dwellings) in the countryside, away from established settlements or from areas allocated for housing in development plans’ (PPS7 Paragraph 9(ii)) and ‘Isolated new houses in the countryside will require special justification for planning permission to be granted. Where the special justification for an isolated new house relates to the essential need for a worker to live permanently at or near their place of work in the countryside, planning authorities should follow the advice in Annex A to this PPS’ (PPS7, Paragraph 9 (ii)).

1.17 Therefore the residential conversion or re-use of rural buildings is strictly controlled, and in most cases any applications for this type of use must include a statement and supporting evidence of the efforts that the applicant has made to secure business re-use during a 12 month period. All proposals for residential conversion should meet the criteria listed in both RB1 and RB2. Any building, which is proposed for residential use, should make a positive contribution to its surroundings; the building should have some architectural and historical merit and be suitable for conversion to permanent residential use.
Accessibility

1.18 Paragraph 1 (iii) of PPS7 states that ‘Accessibility should be a key consideration in all development decisions. Most developments which are likely to generate large numbers of trips should be located in or next to towns or other service centres that are accessible by public transport, walking and cycling, in line with the policies set out in PPG13, Transport. Decisions on the location of other developments in rural areas should, where possible, give people the greatest opportunity to access them by public transport, walking and cycling, consistent with achieving the primary purpose of the development’. Accessibility is one of the key messages in Government policy statements and links closely to Sustainable Development which is the core principal underpinning land use planning. The location and accessibility of a rural building will be taken into consideration when determining a planning application for change of use.

1.19 Applicants should refer to the transport policies within the adopted Local Plan particularly T5 and T9

Converting a rural building is rarely straightforward and we strongly recommend that you seek advice from the Planning Department and also professional design advice

2 Suitable Buildings

2.1 A building which is suitable for conversion should meet all of the following criteria:

- The buildings should be structurally sound and capable of conversion without major structural change, significant extension, alteration or reconstruction and is suitable for the proposed use. A structural report will normally be required.
- The form, bulk, and general design are in keeping with its surroundings;
- The use of the building or its curtilage would not be visually intrusive in the countryside;
- The building is located in an accessible location;
- The proposed use will not harm the local environment;
- It will not lead to a dispersal of activity or uses on such a scale as to prejudice the vitality of a nearby town or village;
- The traffic generated by the new use can be safely accommodated by the site access and the local road system;
- Capable of being serviced with water, drainage, electricity and vehicular access to the satisfaction of the relevant authority;
- Where appropriate the building should be visually worth retaining, with the potential to maintain or enhance its current contribution to the landscape;

2.2 Applications are considered according to the particulars of each case. Always discuss your proposals with a Planning Officer at an early stage before you formally submit your planning application.
2.3 In general proposals to re-use ruined buildings, which have no roof or are structurally unsound, are unlikely to be considered favourably by the Council. Exceptions may be made where the building is Listed or is of particular architectural or historic merit. Always discuss proposals with a Planning Officer and the Design and Conservation Officer.

2.4 It is also recommended that you discuss any proposals located in flood risk areas with the Environment Agency. Planning Policy Guidance Note 25 says that brownfield sites/redundant buildings can be re-used, provided that an appropriate standard of flood defence can be achieved. PPG25 requires a 100 year standard or protection for fluvial flood risk. In areas of flood risk, the design of the building will need to be changed to deal with flood risk eg raising floor levels, alter/raise door openings, using specific materials, which may prevent the building from being developed. Therefore early discussion with the Environment Agency is strongly recommended.

3 Design Guidelines

3.1 The majority of rural buildings for which planning permission is sought for conversion and re-use are farm buildings. Most of these are simple traditional structures with few openings and plain steeply pitched roofs, usually covered with slates, thatch or corrugated iron. While the following guidelines use farm buildings as examples, the same principles also apply to the conversion of other rural buildings.

General Principles

3.2 The design of any conversion should respect the basic shape and traditional design of the original building, and should not materially alter its character. Where possible the following design principles should be incorporated to create a sensitive conversion.

- Maintain the character of the roof by limiting the number and size of rooflights, solar panels etc;
- Where possible use any existing chimneys for central heating flues. If this is not possible, metal central heating flues should be sited on the ridge line or gable end in a short a length as possible, black/grey vitreous enamel is preferable to stainless steel;
- Make as few alterations as possible to the roof and external walls. If elevational changes are required locate them away from main elevations – for example, in an internal courtyard;
- Where possible plan accommodation from an internal hallway or lobby – external porches are not normally considered appropriate;
- Retain existing mature vegetation where possible;
- Use adjacent outbuildings for uses associated with the conversion eg storage, garaging etc
3.3 The following design elements will create an insensitive conversion and are generally not acceptable

- The inclusion of dormers on the roofline, large rooflights and solar panels;
- The removal of chimneys;
- Piercing the main elevations with overlarge window openings or rooflight;
- Changing the shape of original openings;
- The inclusion of porches and significant extensions;
- Removal of mature vegetation.

Creating more space

3.4 Some redundant buildings may not be capable of conversion without creating more floor area, either by building an extension or by converting the roof space in the existing structure.

3.5 If you want to create more space, discuss your proposals with a Planning Officer before you submit your application. The following guidelines should help you:

- Even tiny extensions can detract from the character of the rural building. Extensions are not normally permitted.
- Preserve the character of the original building.
- Do not change the character and form of the existing roof – roofs are often a dominant feature in the countryside and may be visible from some distance
- Keep the design and pitch of a new roof similar to that of the original building. It must not extend above the existing roof ridge.
- Retain architectural features such as haylofts, dovecots, gable details and bargeboards.
- Dormer windows are not traditional features in most farm buildings. However, where traditional dormers exist at present, additional dormers may be considered as long as they match in character and appearance and do not dominate the roofline.

Surroundings and garden ground

3.6 Rural buildings are often sited in visually open locations; a basic visual impact assessment is sometimes required to judge the proposals impact on its surroundings. Careful treatment of boundaries, retention of landscape features and trees, and additional planting can sometimes reduce visual impact to an acceptable level.

3.7 If the proposed conversion means using adjoining land to provide car parking, greenhouses, storage sheds, or garden, respect the existing character and landscape setting of the building.
• Retain and extend existing traditional boundary treatments where appropriate (e.g. hedgebanks, hedges, post and wire fences etc. Suburban style fencing is inappropriate;
• Retain existing trees and planting;
• For new planting, use native trees and shrubs, which are in character with the rural setting. Ideally the native species should be of local provenance and of a suitable mix to provide food and shelter for wildlife. Planting plans should consider joining up existing habitats to create wildlife corridors. Planting for visual screening may be appropriate, and planting as a mitigation measure may apply. Fast growing conifers e.g. Leyland Cypress and exotic ornamental shrubs are not generally considered appropriate, because of their suburban appearance. Long term management of any new planting must also be considered.
• Retain traditional stone slabs, setts or gravel surfacing and avoid the use of extensive areas of tar-macadam;
• Creating individual gardens in a courtyard setting is unlikely to be acceptable.
• Building detached garages is unlikely to be acceptable. Use existing outbuildings where possible;
• Inappropriately located satellite dishes are unlikely to be acceptable.

3.8 Full details of proposed boundary treatments and landscaping planting will normally be required with any application. Please discuss your proposals with the Landscape Officer.

Using other outbuildings
3.9 Any associated outbuildings, which are not part of the main conversion, may be suitable for garaging, storage or workshops. It is important to preserve the character of these buildings, and the Council will expect them to be retained and re-used as an integral part of the proposals.

4 Protected Species

4.1 Rural Buildings provide important breeding and resting places for a variety of wildlife, including species protected by law. Within West Devon such buildings are of particular importance to birds such as barn owls and swallows, and to a number of bat species.

4.2 Historically the re-use of rural buildings has contributed to the population declines of barn owls and bats through the disturbance and loss of important breeding and resting places. However if properly planned and implemented the re-use of such buildings can retain and enhance resting and breeding opportunities for such species.

4.3 All species of wild bird (including their eggs and nests) are protected under the provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Barn owls are specially protected under Schedule One of the Act.
4.4 All species of bat and their roosts are protected under the provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Bats are further protected as ‘European protected species’ under Regulation 39 of the Conservation (Natural habitats and Conservation) Regulations 1994. These Regulations make it unlawful to deliberately kill, deliberately capture, deliberately disturb, or to damage or destroy a breeding site or resting place used by a European Protected species. For social or economic purposes of overriding public interest such activities can proceed under DEFRA licence. Such licenses may only be granted where there is no satisfactory alternative and where the action authorised would not be detrimental to maintaining the population of the species concerned at a favourable conservation status throughout its natural range.

4.5 All planning applications for the re-use of rural buildings must be accompanied by a full wildlife survey and details (where appropriate) of mitigation and compensation measures to avoid harm and enhance conditions of protected species. The Survey report will be required prior to the determination of the application. The survey should be carried out by a person holding an appropriate licence to disturb bats and their roosts and ideally should be conducted between 1 May and 30 September inclusive.

4.6 Developments that may affect a European protected species are likely to require a DEFRA licence.

4.7 Further advice and guidance can be obtained from English Nature, the Barn Owl Trust and Defra (in relation to European protected species licences only).

5 Permissions

5.1 The conversion and change of use of any rural building will require some or all of the following permissions:
   • Planning Permission
   • Listed Building Consent
   • Building Regulations

Permitted Development Rights

5.2 Where the future alteration, extension, ancillary building or development may have a detrimental effect on the character of the area, permitted development rights will be withdrawn for such development. Permitted development rights are certain types of changes which you can make to your property without needing to apply for planning permission. The Planning Department can provide further guidance on this matter.

5.3 Where a proposal involves the re-use or conversion of agricultural buildings and the proliferation of such buildings would have a seriously detrimental effect on the landscape, permitted development rights may be withdrawn for new farm buildings on the relevant part of that particular agricultural unit or holding.
Contact Addresses

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