



3

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Converting Rural Buildings

This guidance note explains the approach which the Council takes towards dealing with proposals to change the use of and convert rural buildings. It supports and amplifies the relevant policies (particularly **GDP1, H3, E5** and **CLF9**) contained in the Wrexham Unitary Development Plan.

The note will form a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

Background

There is a varied range of buildings in the countryside which are no longer suitable for their original purposes. The majority are likely to be agricultural buildings but there may also be churches, chapels, mills, schools, public houses, stables and others for which an alternative use is being sought.

Many of these buildings make a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the area. Provided they are structurally sound, conversion of these buildings, for example to employment or community use, visitor accommodation or housing can safeguard their future. By re-using existing resources, conversions can also meet the aims of sustainable built development.

However, there are some buildings which are not suitable for conversion, including those which are:-

- structurally unsound;
- roofless, missing substantial sections of wall, or so ruined that only vestiges remain of the original structure;
- of temporary construction;
- eyesores which should be removed in the interests of landscape conservation;
- unsuitable in terms of size and form of construction ;
- at risk of flooding.

In particular, planning permission will not normally be granted if:-

- there is insufficient floor area in the existing building to provide acceptable standards of accommodation (in the case of conversions to dwellings, this should be a minimum of 40m²);

- the proposals involve rebuilding more than 10% of the walls if the roof structure needs to be rebuilt; or 20% of the walls if the roof structure is to be retained.

Part 1 Development principles

With very few exceptions, it is essential that converted buildings should keep their original character and not have the appearance of being fundamentally new structures. The aim should therefore be to retain such key features as:-

- overall form and proportions;
- traditional materials (locally-sourced brick, tiles, stone, timber framing, etc);
- architectural detailing;
- existing wall openings;
- roof structures;
- floor levels;
- internal layout;
- principal fixtures and fittings as integral parts of the conversion scheme.

In circumstances where the building has no original or traditional features of merit, the Council will expect the design of any conversion to reflect the vernacular character and appearance of other buildings in the locality

Proposals should therefore have regard to the design and layout principles set out below.

Walls

- Re-use existing openings to retain a building's character and reduce the impact of any new works;
- Any new openings should be kept to a minimum and take account of the overall proportions of the building;

This guidance note deals with proposals to convert rural buildings to other uses.

● **Part 1** applies to all proposals and sets out the development principles to follow.

● **Part 2** applies only to agricultural buildings and contains specific points to consider when the proposed development involves conversion to residential use.

● **Part 3** lists the information which should be included with a planning application.

There are related guidance notes which cover:-

- 2** *Agricultural Appraisals*
- 7** *Landscape and Development*
- 13** *Housing in the Countryside*
- 14** *Garden Extensions*
- 16** *Parking*
- 17** *Trees and Development*
- 20** *House Extensions*
- 21** *Space around Dwellings*
- 22** *Sustainable Building*

- If an opening needs to be blocked up, consider creating a recessed panel to show where the original opening was located;
- Use materials and methods (including traditional pointing techniques) which are appropriate to the building and its setting;
- Unsuitable or inappropriate materials used in previous alterations should be removed and replaced by materials matching the original building.

Roofs

- Rooflines should not be raised nor the roof pitch altered. In exceptional cases where such alterations are necessary, these must be kept to the minimum in order to ensure that the overall character of the building is not changed;
- If the conversion involves restoring a missing or lowered section of roof to its original appearance, this will normally be acceptable;
- Where a roof needs to be rebuilt, traditional slates or tiles should be retained and re-used;
- The installation of dormer windows will be discouraged unless there is a clear precedent for their use on traditional buildings in the locality;
- Roof lights will be acceptable in principle provided their number is kept to a minimum; they are flush with the roof surface; and are not over-large in proportion to the roof as a whole;
- The position, number and size of any solar panels or photo-voltaic cells should not adversely affect the appearance of the building.

Windows and Doors

- Traditional or vernacular windows and doors should be retained, repaired and re-used;
- New or replacement windows and doors (including patio/french doors) should match the originals and/or reflect the character of the building. Standard designs

primarily intended for insertion in modern buildings will not be acceptable;

- Windows and doors should be painted or, in the case of sustainably - sourced hardwoods such as oak, left untreated - modern timber stains should be avoided;
- New window and door frames should be recessed at least 100 millimetres within an opening to give depth to the façade;
- Modern up-and-over style garage doors will be inappropriate.

Internal Features

- Internal features that form part the building's character (for example, exposed beams, rafters and purlins; floor joists; roof trusses; solid room partitions; floorboards; tiled or stone floors; and original fittings) should be retained and incorporated in the conversion;
- The subdivision of a large internal space will not be appropriate if the space forms an integral part of the character of the building (for example, the threshing bay of a barn or the loft of a granary).

Drainage and Waste

- Traditional cast iron rainwater gutters, downpipes and brackets should be retained and repaired or replaced to match the originals;
- Soil and ventpipes should be positioned internally and the number of vents kept to a minimum;
- Vents should preferably be sited on a rear roof slope and coloured matt black to reduce their visual impact;
- Sustainable treatment and disposal of waste water and other wastes should be incorporated in the conversion wherever practicable. The installation of septic tanks and cesspits may not always be appropriate in rural areas and other more environmentally acceptable methods of waste disposal should be considered.

Heating and Ventilation

- Heating system flues and extractors should have a minimal visual impact and galvanised materials are thus unlikely to be appropriate;
- The use of suitably designed vent tiles which complement existing walls and roofs is encouraged;
- Chimney stacks are not normally found on rural buildings and the inclusion of new stacks in a conversion scheme is therefore unlikely to be acceptable.

Extensions and Additions

- The emphasis in any conversion scheme must be upon demonstrating that the building in its present form is suitable for the proposed new use. There is thus a presumption against large extensions to the building itself and against the erection of new ancillary structures within and adjoining the curtilage.
- In the case of residential conversions, garaging and domestic storage requirements must be met within the original building (or buildings). Further guidance on the scale of residential extensions is available in *Local Planning Guidance Note 13*.
- The attachment of porches and other extraneous features (including conservatories) is likely to adversely affect the original appearance of the building and should be avoided.

Curtilage and Landscaping

- Curtilages (the land immediately surrounding a building and directly related to it) should be kept to the minimum area required for normal occupation of the premises and should not extend illogically into open fields;
- Curtilages should, wherever possible, follow established boundary walls and hedgerows;
- Hard surfaces should be avoided where none previously existed and permeable materials used to reduce surface water run-off.

- Soft landscaping will not normally be appropriate within courtyards;
- Vehicular access should normally be gained from an existing entrance. If a new entrance is needed, this should be as close to the building as possible. The construction of lengthy driveways across open fields will not be permitted;
- Any hedgerow removal needed to improve visibility at the point of access to the site should be kept to a minimum;
- Gateways should be in simple, traditional styles and ornate entrance features are unlikely to be acceptable;
- Septic tanks, oil tanks and other ancillary equipment should be unobtrusively sited and/or screened;
- External features of interest associated with the original use of the building should be retained and incorporated in the design and layout of the curtilage;
- Parking provision will need to comply with the Council's standards (see *Local Planning Guidance Note 16*).

Listed Buildings

- Some buildings which are the subject of conversion proposals are listed as being of architectural or historic interest. (The listing also applies to fixtures and other buildings within the same curtilage). A separate application for listed building consent must be made for any alterations or extensions which would affect the character of these buildings;
- Proposals for conversion will only be permitted where the special qualities of the building (both internal and external) and its overall setting are safeguarded;
- A special condition is likely to be imposed on any listed building consent requiring the development to be preceded by an agreed programme of recording and analysis.

Protected Wildlife

- Conversion works must be designed and undertaken without endangering legally protected species and their nesting or roosting sites;
- Buildings should be surveyed by a suitably qualified person and, where appropriate, proposals for wildlife mitigation measures should be included in the survey report.
- If European protected species are present in a building which is not already a dwelling, a licence to disturb them will need to be obtained from the Welsh Assembly Government.
- Where a nest or roost can be retained, developers will be required to incorporate features such as bird boxes, owl holes or an undisturbed loft space.
- If protected species are found after conversion has commenced, work must be stopped and the Countryside Council for Wales contacted for advice on how to proceed.
- Further advice regarding the effects of building conversion works upon protected wildlife can be obtained from the Council's ecologist.

Part 2

Converting agricultural buildings to dwellings

In the interests of maintaining the rural economy, the emphasis in national planning policy is upon maximising the re-use of redundant buildings for non-residential purposes. This approach is reflected in the Wrexham Unitary Development Plan.

Policy H3 in the Plan requires that, in the case of agricultural buildings, proposals for conversion to dwellings must demonstrate:-

- that there is no longer an agricultural need; and
- that alternative non-residential uses have proved inappropriate.

Planning applications will therefore need to be accompanied by a

supporting statement explaining why the building is no longer suitable; cannot be made suitable; or is now not required for agricultural purposes. The statement should also give the reasons why a conversion to a use other than housing is not practicable or desirable. The statement should therefore have regard to the material considerations listed in the shaded section below.

Where it appears that a building is suitable for non-residential use, applicants will be expected to advertise it for sale or lease for non-residential purposes prior to submitting a planning application. The results of the advertisement should be included in the supporting statement.

If no advertisement has been undertaken, the Council may request that this be done after submission of the application depending on the Chief Planning Officer's assessment of the case. However, if there is any doubt regarding the suitability of the building, advertisement will be essential. The minimum period for advertising a building as being potentially suitable for non-residential purposes will normally be six months unless otherwise specified by the Chief Planning Officer.

Whether before or after the application has been submitted, it is recommended that details of any marketing and advertisement procedures should be discussed and agreed with planning officers.

Material considerations when proposing to convert an agricultural building to a dwelling

General location

In many instances, buildings located in very remote areas will be unsuitable for non-residential uses. Delivery of goods may be difficult, distribution costs are likely to be high and sufficient staff may be unobtainable.

A location served by public transport may, however, be well suited to a range of uses.

Local road network

For road safety reasons, the intensive use of narrow, single-carriageway country lanes with few passing places is normally

undesirable. If a building is served by an unclassified road less than 4 metres wide (as defined on the 1:25,000 and 1:50,000 scale Ordnance Survey Maps), its use for business, commercial or tourism purposes may therefore be inappropriate.

Site access

Where the site access is narrow and/or shared with other premises; or where visibility is obstructed by buildings and boundary walls, its use by significant levels of additional traffic may be hazardous. In such circumstances, conversion of the building to residential use may be the only safe option, although in extreme cases, even this may be unacceptable.

Parking

In many cases there will be no on-road parking available in the vicinity of the building. Nor is there likely to be any nearby off-road provision. Accordingly, a building suitable for non-residential use must have sufficient parking space within the existing curtilage, preferably with at least one space large enough for a delivery vehicle.

External appearance

Conversions of agricultural buildings should seek to maintain the agricultural character and appearance of the existing structure. While this can normally be achieved by residential conversions, commercial uses may require the insertion of larger windows, delivery doors, air vents and the attachment of other external equipment. Only if the building could be adapted without needing major external alterations is it likely to be suitable for non-residential purposes.

Scale and form of construction

Some farm buildings (particularly those of comparatively recent construction) resemble industrial units and rarely lend themselves to sympathetic residential conversion. Such buildings are clearly more suited to a non-residential use.

Adjoining buildings

A group of farm buildings may together have significant business or tourism potential which could be compromised if one is converted to a dwelling. Even where the other buildings remain in agricultural use, conflicts may arise between residents and farming activities. In such circumstances, a non-residential use may be the most appropriate option.

Proximity to existing business sites and buildings

Where there is a significant number of sites and buildings already available for business purposes in the locality (for example, on an industrial estate), it is unlikely that the need to retain agricultural buildings for commercial purposes will be very strong.

Planning history

A previous planning permission for residential conversion of the same building may be sufficient to outweigh the need to prove that another use would be more appropriate. Where permission has been granted for residential conversion within the same group of buildings, this may establish a precedent for converting the other buildings to residential use.

Part 3 Information required

Applications for outline planning permission cannot be accepted for building conversions. All applications must be for **full permission** and include:-

- completed forms and certificates of ownership (including application forms for listed building consent where appropriate);
- site layout plans that clearly define the proposed curtilage;
- plans at a scale of not less than 1:100 showing the siting of the building, existing and proposed floor plans, elevations, detailed survey drawings, and cross and longitudinal sections. Plans should be clearly annotated and fully dimensioned and unusual or significant construction details should be identified;

- a survey report detailing the condition of the building. The report must be prepared by a structural engineer or other suitably qualified person and must demonstrate that the building is structurally sound and is capable of conversion without extensive rebuilding. The report should include scaled drawings highlighting areas that require replacement, repair or renewal. The report should aim to reassure both the Council and the intended developer that the building will not collapse during the course of conversion - in such an event any planning permission might no longer be valid.

Applicants **may** also need to submit:-

- a wildlife survey report relating to protected species;
- in the case of proposals to convert agricultural buildings into dwellings, a statement justifying why it is inappropriate to retain the building for a non-residential use; and
- in relation to proposals to convert listed buildings, a conservation method statement and drawings (normally at a scale of 1:20) showing precise details of any new or replacement windows, doors, rainwater goods and other key features.

Pre-application discussions are welcomed together with the submission of sketch proposals for informal comment.



For further information and application forms contact:

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