

Supplementary Planning Guidance No. 2

Rural Buildings Conversion Guidance

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INTRODUCTION

During the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, farms within the Borough enjoyed a peak of prosperity brought about by the Enclosure Acts, the Industrial Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Consequently, many brick farmhouses, barns and other out buildings date from this era. The buildings were either newly built or were replacements for earlier timber-framed buildings. In some cases, the replacement buildings incorporated some of the timber framing components from the original house or barn.

Many farmhouses in Solihull are statutorily listed buildings - that is, they are included on a list prepared by the Secretary of State for Culture, the Media and Sport, which records those buildings throughout the country that have special architectural or historic interest. Their out buildings, by virtue of being within the curtilage or attached physically to the main building, are often effectively listed, too. Some individual out buildings or barns are listed in their own right. It is an offence to undertake any works to listed buildings, including their conversion, without first obtaining the consent of the local planning authority (Solihull Council).

However, there are many good examples of traditional rural buildings that are just as significant in their own way but which are not given the same level of protection. The Council wants to see these buildings retained as working farm buildings wherever possible. If this is no longer an option, given the changes in agricultural practices over the past century, the Council will consider schemes for their conversion to alternative uses. Farmers are being encouraged to supplement agricultural incomes through diversification of the rural economic base, and the Council will consider schemes that reflect this in a sensitive way.

The Council operates strict Green Belt policies on the use of buildings in the rural area, and this may have some bearing on the sort of new uses for old buildings that will be looked at most favourably. The Council will expect anyone putting forward a scheme for the conversion of old farm buildings to be able to justify the reuse of the buildings in terms of their potential impact on the Green Belt.

Conversions to residential use will be considered carefully, although that may not be the most appropriate use, as with other proposed uses (conversion to offices or workshop units, for example). Each proposal for the conversion of a rural building will be assessed on its individual merits but there can be no guarantee of a planning consent for a conversion. There are critical planning considerations, in particular the extremely sensitive nature of the Green Belt, where many of these buildings are situated.

It is necessary to ensure that the original building keeps as much as possible of its original character after conversion. The form of the building springs from its original use in agriculture and is normally expressed in large expanses of uninterrupted tiled roof pitches and timber framing, or mass brickwork that has mellowed over time. These elements give such buildings their character and should be retained as far as possible for future generations, regardless of any change of use.

The Council's Guidelines relate specifically to the conversion of old barns, stables, cart hovels, granaries and other unused farm buildings to residential and/or small-scale business use. Advice on other possible uses for rural buildings such as for industry, local crafts or leisure can be obtained from the Development Control Section of the Environmental Services Department.

Before plans are drawn up for a proposed conversion, applicants are urged to discuss their proposals with the Council's Planning Officers and Conservation Architect. An accurate survey drawing of the existing building, to a scale of at least 1:50, will be required by the Council before any permission will be granted. Having it available at the initial stage will aid constructive discussions and it is essential before detailed design work commences.

ARDEN LANDSCAPE GUIDELINES

The Arden Landscape Guidelines were the result of collaboration between Warwickshire County Council and the Countryside Commission and were published in 1993. They provide guidelines for the management of the landscape resource and offer advice to farmers, landowners, planners and developers among others, whose activities and decisions may have an impact on the countryside.

The Guidelines provide a detailed assessment of the landscape around the Warwickshire area including the rural parts of Solihull. Areas of different character are identified and recorded on a plan. In broad terms, the Arden landscape is identified as a historic region of former wood, pasture and heath characterised by a dispersed settlement pattern, ancient woodlands and mature hedgerow oaks. Brick and timber are the predominant building materials in the area and there are many farmsteads and hamlets throughout Arden which blend with them.

In Solihull, the rural landscape conforms to three distinct Arden types:-

Arden Parklands

This type can be found to the east of Solihull's urban area, from north of Hampton-in-Arden to Packwood. It stretches to the outskirts of Balsall Common in the east and to the edge of the urban area in the west. The overall character of Arden Parklands is that of an enclosed, gently rolling landscape with woodland edges, parkland and tree belts. It will contain large country houses set in mature parkland and will have thick roadside hedges and ancient pillared oaks.

Arden Pastures

This type of landscape is apparent around Knowle and Dorridge and in Hockley Heath parish. It is generally a small scale, enclosed landscape with definite suburban influences, and contains small field systems, typically bordered by mature hedgerow trees, specially oaks. There will be a network of minor lanes; with ribbons of development along them, and many place names will end with "Heath".

Ancient Arden

The eastern edge of the Borough is characterised by this type of landscape, apparent in Meriden, Balsall Common and as far west as Chadwick End. It is a small scale, farmed landscape, with a varied and undulating topography and is characterised by an irregular pattern of fields and narrow winding lanes with associated tall hedgebanks. There will be field ponds associated with permanent pastures many place names will end in "Green" or "End".

Any proposed conversion within the rural part of Solihull will be expected to have regard to the nature of the landscape within which it resides, and should respect that landscape and its characteristics. Proposals that damage the landscape character will be resisted.

PLANNING POLICIES

1. The Council would look to the relevant criteria set out in Planning Policy Guidance Note no.2 on Green Belts on the general suitability of schemes within the Green Belt. Planning Policy Guidance (PPG), Note no.2 relate to Green Belts. Approximately 70% of Solihull's area lies within the confirmed Green Belt and this is also the location of the vast majority of its out buildings that might be candidates for conversion. PPG 2 states that the reuse of buildings inside a Green Belt is not inappropriate providing:-

- It does not have a material effect on the openness of the Green Belt.
- Strict control is exercised over extensions and any associated use of land surrounding the building.
- The buildings are of permanent and substantial construction.
- The form, bulk and general design of buildings is in keeping with their surroundings.

If a proposal for the re-use of a Green Belt building does not meet the criteria, or if there are other specific and convincing reasons for refusal, the local planning authority should not reject the application without considering whether the imposition of appropriate conditions could overcome the reasons of refusal. Buildings do not have to be redundant to be converted.

2. The merits of a particular rural building, its location in the landscape, its current condition, the potential for reuse and the quality of the proposed conversion are some of the considerations when a planning application is being decided. Every case will be treated on its merits, but the case for conversion will be assisted if it can be shown that the building falls within the criteria set out in PPG 7. This relates to the countryside, its environmental quality and economic and social development.

The re-use of existing rural buildings for commercial and industrial development, as well as for tourism, sport and recreation, play an important part in maintaining the vitality and viability of rural areas. It applies similar criteria to PPG 2 in determining whether such conversions are appropriate. It also states that residential conversions can have a minimal impact on the economy in rural areas, whilst business conversions may have a more positive one.

Residential conversions, however, can have a part to play in meeting housing needs. It goes on to suggest that local planning authorities consider allowing residential conversion only as a subordinate part of a business use. The PPG sets out in more detail guidance on the re-use and conversion of rural buildings. In Solihull in particular conversion of farm buildings to residential properties seems to be the most popular reuse of old farm buildings, although other types of reuse have become more popular in recent times, especially conversion to offices. The Council would encourage applicants to consider firstly retaining old farm buildings in agricultural or related uses.

3. In accordance with current Government advice, the Council would support the principle of conversion of a listed outbuilding or barn to prevent it falling into total disrepair. Whilst there will still be Green Belt considerations and policy issues to consider, they will not necessarily preclude a sympathetic and appropriate conversion.
4. Policies relating to the Green Belt are also set out in the Solihull Unitary Development Plan (UDP). There is a general presumption against inappropriate development in the Green Belt, except where certain broad criteria apply. Control of development and changes of use are generally more tightly applied in the Green Belt than in other areas. Policy GB2(a) allows for the reuse of existing buildings in the Green Belt for the purposes of agriculture, forestry or cemeteries. Policy GB2(e) allows for the reuse of existing buildings under the following circumstances:-
 - the new use does not conflict with the purpose and openness of the Green Belt;
 - the design and size of the buildings are in keeping with their setting;
 - the buildings are of permanent and substantial construction and could be converted without major rebuilding.
5. It will be a priority for the Council to safeguard buildings of special architectural or historic interest, together with other non-listed buildings of similar character or interest. Where buildings have no discernible character or interest, residential conversion is unlikely to be considered and other types of use, such as that for small businesses, should first be discussed with the Council.
6. The Council will not entertain applications for the conversion of rural out buildings that have been the subject of recent substantial rebuilding. Where a building is in such a poor state of repair that it will have to be taken down to ground level or below before it can be repaired and re-used, the Council will not approve a conversion of those buildings for alternative uses in any subsequent application for change of use.

OTHER RELEVANT CRITERIA

Apart from policy considerations, the Council will also consider a number of other matters. Applicants will be required to support their proposals by providing information to satisfy the following criteria:-

- **The new use must not have a materially greater impact than the present use on the openness of the Green Belt and the purposes of including land in it.**

- **Reuse for residential purposes will have to be considered carefully and is not necessarily an automatic or appropriate choice for a reuse.**

It may be more appropriate in some cases to consider a use for small business or storage purposes by which the integrity of the building can be retained without excessive alteration, rebuilding or extension. In all cases, the new use must be sympathetic to the rural surroundings.

- **The proposal should be compatible in land use terms with any nearby development and should meet reasonable highway safety requirements.**

Buildings must have adequate access and car parking and be capable of being serviced without detriment to the amenities of the area or to the interests of road safety.

- **The fabric of the building is broadly intact and the conversion can be carried out without extensive rebuilding.**

The barn should be of permanent and substantial construction and not in need of extensive rebuilding. Details of all the proposed works and the extreme of any limited demolition, will therefore be required, together with a full structural survey as necessary (this will always be needed for the conversion of listed barns). If minor repair is required, it should be carried out sympathetically, to retain the character of the building. Further demolition other than that specified in the original planning permission will not normally be allowed. A major factor in assessing proposals for conversion will be that the appearance and structure of the barn will remain as unaltered as possible, thus retaining its historic and architectural integrity. Avoidance of new external brickwork and being careful not to insert too many new window and door openings is important in retaining the character of the building.

- **The converted building can provide reasonable accommodation, including garaging, without the need for extension.**

The Council is concerned that conversion for domestic and other uses often leads to large or unsympathetic extensions. The essential accommodation would normally need to be formed within the structure. Proposals showing the conversion of existing out buildings to garages are preferred to the construction of new garages. Additional bedrooms or living rooms would not normally be permitted. Any existing unsympathetic modern extensions to the barn should be demolished.

- **The form, bulk and general design of the building should be in keeping with its surroundings, local building styles and materials should normally be respected.**

Further detailed drawings may be required before work starts on any conversion. In circumstances where the current building has an adverse effect on the visual amenity of the landscape, the Council may consider proposals to improve its external appearance.

- **The converted building is capable of functioning independently and is compatible with any adjacent uses.**

The Council will consider whether the building is appropriately sited for a conversion, and capable of independent occupation. It will consider such questions as access, overlooking, services and the compatibility of conversion with existing uses on the rest of the site. The private open space associated with the building should be adequate but not excessive; for example, it would not be appropriate to extend the curtilage of the converted building to include any adjacent field or paddock as a garden to it. Furthermore, any screening, planting or fencing needs to be considered carefully, as inappropriate materials and layout may adversely affect the setting of the building. The Council will also consider whether the proposed conversion would introduce a "suburban" element into an otherwise rural setting.

APPLYING FOR PLANNING PERMISSION

The conversion of a rural building to another use requires planning permission, whether or not any actual building works are involved. Below are listed the types of permission that you may need depending on the nature of the conversion.

- 1. Planning Applications** for the change of use of existing rural or agricultural buildings require detailed plans to be prepared and submitted. Applications should be the subject of discussions with the Council's Planning Officers and Conservation Architect before detailed design work is undertaken. An accurate survey drawing of the existing building, prepared to a scale of at least 1:50, will aid constructive discussions. Applicants are strongly advised to use qualified architects or designers to prepare their conversion schemes.

Detailed drawings prepared to a scale of at least 1:50 of proposed sections, elevations and plans incorporating door and window detailing etc, will be required and plans of the existing structure should indicate clearly any parts of the building to be rebuilt. Additionally, specific details of all new materials, brick courses and the treatment of external frames and openings will be required.

In order to satisfy the Council on those requirements that are set out in the previous section, the authority may require additional technical information, such as reports on the structural stability of the building and its ability to withstand conversion without an unacceptable loss of character or original fabric.

The Council will attach conditions to any permission, which may include time limits. Farm buildings can deteriorate rapidly over a short period and any permission may be subject to a relatively restricted time limit. This allows the Council to reassess the circumstances of the building if the permission is not implemented within a reasonable period of the permission being granted.

- 2. Listed Building Consent** is necessary if the building is contained within the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest, or it is within the curtilage of a listed building. Listed building consent is required for any works that affect the character or appearance of the listed building and is in addition to planning permission. There is no fee for a listed building consent.
- 3. Building Regulation Consent** is needed in addition to any planning consent. The Building Regulations are concerned with the proper construction and structural soundness of any building.
- 4. Grants** are available from some sources other than the Council for works to listed buildings, and the authority itself can provide small grants towards specialist repair, such as the thatching of a roof. Council grants are not available for work connected with a conversion.

5. In order to prevent subsequent alterations to the converted building that might have a harmful effect if not controlled carefully, the Council will generally only grant planning permission subject to a condition that removes the “permitted development rights” of the property. This effectively means that any further changes to the building will require planning permission, whereas under normal circumstances they may not.

DESIGN GUIDELINES

Remember – The scheme should fit the building, not the other way about!

External Materials

The original cladding materials must be retained and repaired. Care needs to be taken in pointing stonework unobtrusively and it is recommended that new timber retains a natural finish without stain or varnish. Tiles, slates or thatch should be repaired in authentic materials.

Doors and Windows

Most buildings within the Borough express a “public” side, perhaps to a road, and a “private” side, to a farmyard or field. The most successful conversions may have a “single aspect” solution, which retains the public side of the building as it originally was and makes minimum alterations to the private side, allowing only for essential doors and windows. Existing openings should be re-used and the new internal layout arranged to suit them.

New windows should only be inserted as a last resort and should be designed sensitively, with attention being given both to where they are placed and how they appear. In the case of a timber-framed building, for example, new windows should be inserted within the existing panels and under no circumstances should timber framing be cut away merely to accommodate a larger window. Window frames painted or stained in black or dark brown would help to retain the agricultural character of the building; metal frames would not normally be permitted.

If windows in the roof are absolutely unavoidable, then narrow roof lights flush with the profile of the existing roof are one solution, although these should be kept to a minimum and restricted to the private elevations of the building. Dormer windows are not a characteristic of rural buildings in this area and will destroy the original profile of the roof. Glazing inserted into the gable ends or into driftway doors can sometimes do the same job as dormers only much more discreetly.

All large threshing barns have a threshing floor served either side by a pair of full height doors, which originally provided access for fully laden horse-drawn wagons. When left open, they also allowed a through draft for the winnowing of the grain. In a conversion, these large doors and their opening pose the most significant architectural problem for the conversion. The principal entrance should reflect the original entry point where possible, since this will retain the architectural character of the building as it is. On the public side, they can be blocked internally and repaired as “false” but original doors. Should there be a need for an entrance, then it is a simple matter to provide a secondary door within one of the main doors. The doors to the private side, however, offer several architectural solutions. The alteration of solid wood to glass can often be a discreet way of increasing significantly the level of light internally, ranging from the insertion of small windows in parts of the openings on one hand to the complete glazing of the entire opening on the other. The alternatives depend on the relative need for light and will be assessed on their merit.

Internal Features

In many traditional rural buildings the real interest lies in the roof structure, which usually contains heavy trusses, purlins and bracing. The trusses themselves can often be left exposed as an architectural feature, of which much can be made. The full potential of the surplus space could be exploited by the provision of a dramatic two-storey hall or living room, with the exposed woodwork as a feature. The opportunity may then arise to install a circulation gallery at first floor level.

Any cutting into or truncating of roof trusses or ties must be avoided. It is always preferable that new floors are inserted on new internal structures and partitions are kept away from the main frame. This ensures that the original structure remains intact and that the work is reversible.

Airflights

Permanent ventilation to a traditional rural building was maintained by spaces left in the brickwork, called “airflights”, which are often found in geometric patterns. These can be glazed to provide valuable sources of light. If they are not required for this purpose, they are best blocked with a dark contrasting brick, for good effect or if not brick then material to complement existing external cladding.

Flues, Pipes and Gutters

Flues and vent pipes are an unfortunate necessity associated with conversions. However, their presence can be reduced to an absolute minimum, sufficient only to comply with health and safety requirements. Brick chimneystacks are not acceptable, as they are alien to barns, but cast iron or steel flues can be fitted inconspicuously.

It was often the case that traditional barns had no gutters or downpipes. The rainwater was merely thrown away from the building from the roof overhang. In other cases, roofs were served by cast-iron rainwater pipes. Cast-iron is more expensive than plastic guttering but it will help retain the character of the barn. Plastic gutters or downpipes are out of character and will not be approved by the Council. Where metal flues and rainwater goods are installed, they should be painted black.

Television Aerials

External aerials, satellite dishes and similar equipment would spoil the appearance of the rural building and would compromise the success of the conversion. An internal aerial should therefore be used.

Fencing, Landscaping, Floorscapes etc

The setting of the conversion is all-important. Nothing will affect it more quickly and adversely than an intrusive setting. Fussy fencing, inappropriate planting or hard surfaces and ill thought out garaging will ruin an otherwise careful conversion. Where there are existing hedges, brick walls or cobbled yards, they should be retained to enhance the character of the barn. Simple wooden post-and-rail fencing or the planing of a suitable rural hedgerow (or suitable remedial works or maintenance to an existing hedge) are more appropriate boundary treatments. Trees adjacent to the barn should be kept where possible; further advice on suitable pieces for rural areas can be obtained from the Landscape Section of the authority.

Bat and Owl Protection

Bats can often be found roosting in the roofs of previously disused barns, and they will often die because of the treatment of old timbers with chemicals. Synthetic pyrethroids are an acceptable alternative to more harmful lindane-based chemicals commonly used. Owls also often use barns, and with care, they can be accommodated in barn conversions with little disturbance. Further guidance can be obtained on this subject from the Council's Ecologist, or from English Nature. The timing of approved conversion works must be attended to carefully, as nesting and breeding seasons could otherwise be adversely affected.

Decorative Paraphernalia

Rural buildings, by their nature, are often located in open fields or other comparatively undeveloped areas. To prevent a build-up of unnecessary paraphernalia, the Council will encourage occupiers of converted barns to keep a minimum evidence of residential or other occupation. Decorative features such as cartwheels, ornate ironwork, planters, garden furniture, play equipment and washing lines should either be located sensitively so as to not distract from the open setting of the conversion or be dispensed with.

CONCLUSION

In converting a barn, considerable sensitivity, restraint and a respect for tradition are key aspects in the process. The best result is often achieved by doing as little as possible – the barn should still appear to be a barn at the end of the conversion.

Further advice on listed buildings, conservation areas, trees and hedges, ecology, landscaping, building control and planning permission can be obtained from the Council

Planning

Planning Officers 0121 704 6378
(general planning advice) 0121 704 6374

Conservation Planner 0121 704 6370
(general advice, listed buildings, conservation areas)

Conservation Architect 0121 704 6449
(specialist advice on listed buildings, conversions)

Building Control

Advice on the Building Regulations 0121 704 6400

Environment and Ecology

Landscape 0121 704 6391
(advice on laying out, hard and soft landscaping)

Ecologist 0121 704 6589
(advice on the natural environment)

Trees & Woodland 0121 704 6390
(advice on trees and tree planting)

Other Advice & Guidance

English Heritage – general queries 01793 414910

Regional Office 0121 625 6820

Government's Adviser on historic matters
(responsible for recommendations for listing of buildings)

Department of National Heritage

Government Department responsible for Heritage issues 0207 211 2081

SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING GUIDANCE NO. 2

RURAL BUILDINGS CONVERSION GUIDANCE

Statement on Consultation

This Supplementary Planning Guidance document was the subject of wide-ranging consultation. The draft document was the subject of reports to the Planning Committee on the 19th March 2001, and to the Conservation Advisory Committee on the 17th May 2001.

The draft document was advertised in the Solihull Times on the 23rd February 2001, with interested parties being given until the 2nd April 2001 to comment on it.

The draft document was sent out to the following in February 2001:-

Residents' Associations	Town and Parish Councils	Amenity Societies
Balsall Common and Village	Balsall	Berkswell Society
Burton Green	Barston	Knowle Society
Dorridge & District	Berkswell	Hampton-in-Arden Society
Hockley Heath	Bickenhill	Council for the Protection of Rural England
Marston Green	Hampton in Arden	English Heritage
Tidbury Green	Hockley Heath	The Country Landowner's Association
	Meriden	The Countryside Agency
		Packington Estate Enterprises
		The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors
		MAFF
		The National Farmer's Union
		The Berkswell Estate

A total of fourteen responses were received which were reported to Planning Committee. Some amendments were made as a result of the consultation and the Supplementary Planning Guidance was formally adopted by Planning Committee on 25th June 2001.