

# Conversion of Rural Buildings

## I INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This Note is one of a series of Supplementary Planning Guidance Notes (SPGs), amplifying the development plan policies and other issues in a clear and concise format with the aim of improving the design and quality of new development. The Notes are intended to offer broad guidance which will assist members of the public and officers in discussions prior to the submission of planning applications and assist officers in handling and members in determining planning applications.

## 2 STATUS AND STAGES IN PREPARATION

- 2.1 The Council's SPG Notes are not part of the adopted plan. However, they have been the subject of both a formal Council resolution and public consultation. The Welsh Assembly Government (The Assembly) has confirmed that following public consultation and subsequent Local Planning Authority (LPAs) approval, SPG can be treated as a material planning consideration when LPAs, Planning Inspectors and the Assembly determine planning applications and appeals. This Note was approved by Full Council on June 3rd 2003 for use in development control. A statement of the consultation undertaken, the representations received and the Council's response to these representations is available on request.

## 3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Rural buildings are an integral part of Denbighshire's attractive countryside and are also important to its rural heritage. However, changes in the rural economy, particularly to farming, have resulted in many of these buildings becoming economically redundant and it is vital to preserve them and find suitable new uses.
- 3.2 Residential conversions are the most common and financially attractive option but they can be difficult to achieve sympathetically without harming the character of the building and do not make a positive contribution towards sustainable rural diversification and the local economy. Employment uses both contribute to the local economy and help retain the character of the building.
- 3.3 Where conversion for commercial uses is not feasible, residential conversions will be considered only where the character and features of the building are retained. This can be difficult to achieve successfully and will require a sympathetic approach combined with considerable design skills, often necessitating the services of a qualified architect. Furthermore, due to the design, construction methods and materials of such buildings, specialist craftsmen may be required.
- 3.4 Much of the guidance, set out in this note, is aimed at rural buildings lying outside development boundaries. However, many of the considerations relating to design, materials, features etc., will be equally applicable to rural buildings within settlement boundaries.

## 4 PLANNING POLICY

- 4.1 The broad thrust of national planning (in particular, Planning Policy Wales 2002) and UDP policy (in particular, UDP Policy HSG 9) is as follows:
- conversion of rural buildings to a business re-use will be encouraged, provided that they are suitable for the specific re-use;
  - residential re-use will, in general, not be allowed unless the applicant has made every reasonable attempt to secure a suitable business re-use (or where the residential use is a subordinate part of a scheme for business use);
  - if the building is in open countryside, it must be capable of conversion without major or complete reconstruction;
  - conversion should not result in unacceptable impacts upon the structure, form, character or setting where the building is of historic and/or architectural interest;
  - the form, bulk and general design of the conversion scheme is in keeping with their surroundings;
  - the proposal does not create traffic or access problems nor require the provision of public services at unacceptable cost.

**4.2 Conversion of Rural Buildings to Employment Uses:**

4.3 The conversion of rural buildings to business or commercial uses will make a positive contribution to the local economy and to rural diversification. Employment uses include B1, B2, B8, as well tourism or other employment generating uses, including farm diversification plans. This type of development will both retain and/or create local employment opportunities in rural areas – where it is normally difficult to secure planning permission for ‘new build’ development. Denbighshire County Council will adopt a positive approach to the conversion of rural buildings for business re-use and this will be the favoured use of rural buildings, provided that;

- In the open countryside they are capable of conversion without major or complete reconstruction (refer to section 3.4, above);
- They are suitable for the specific re-use;
- Conversion does not lead to a dispersal of activity on such a scale as to prejudice town and village vitality;
- Their form, bulk and general design are in keeping with their surroundings;
- Any external requirements such as parking, servicing or storage can be accommodated without detracting from the building group or its rural setting;
- Imposing conditions on a planning permission overcomes any planning objections, for example on environmental or traffic grounds, which would otherwise outweigh the advantage of the re-use;
- Conversion does not result in unacceptable impacts upon the structure, form, character or setting where the building is of historic and/or architectural interest.

**4.4 Conversion of Rural Buildings to Residential Uses:**

4.5 Residential conversion of rural buildings which have ceased to be used for industrial or commercial purposes, including agriculture may:

- have a minimal economic impact and therefore not be in the best long term economic interests of the farm and the locality; and
- be detrimental to the fabric and character of historic buildings.

**4.6 Employment Test**

Denbighshire County Council is committed to the creation of local employment and rural diversification. The Local Planning Authority, in accordance with policy HSG 9 of the UDP and national planning guidance, will not allow conversion of such buildings to residential uses, unless sufficient and reasonable attempts have been made to:

- (a) secure a business use for the building; or
- (b) secure a residential use where it is a subordinate part of a scheme for business use, and that these options are unfeasible, unsuitable and unacceptable.

4.7 Obviously, in instances where an employment use is proposed for the conversion scheme, no marketing exercise is required.

**4.8 ‘The Employment Test’ - Defining Sufficient and Reasonable Attempts to Secure a Business Use:**

4.9 Sufficient and reasonable attempts at securing a business use for a rural building will require a “marketing exercise”. It is difficult to be prescriptive about the definition of the marketing exercise as each case will be different. However the planning authority will expect a marketing exercise to comprise:

- bi-monthly advertisement in a regional newspaper
- advertising with a commercial property agent;
- notifying other organisations who may have an interest in promoting the site.

- 4.10 The marketing exercise should last a minimum of 6 months. The planning authority will determine at its own discretion what timescale is “sufficient and reasonable”, following an assessment of the merits of each individual case. The example cited below is an example of the general requirements that the planning authority would expect:
- The rural building must be actively advertised for employment uses for a continuous period of at least 6 months starting from the date of the first advert;
  - The rural building should be actively marketed through a recognised and independent commercial property agent and should cover the North Wales, Cheshire and Merseyside area.
  - The rural building should be advertised for employment uses in an advert in the Daily Post on a bi-monthly basis during the marketing period;
  - The applicant must, at the start of the marketing period, notify the availability of the land/buildings for employment uses to the following (please contact the planning authority for relevant contact names):
    - (a) Denbighshire County Council's Economic Regeneration Unit;
    - (b) Welsh Development Agency; and
    - (c) Any relevant local business associations or interest groups.
  - The Local Planning Authority will require evidence of the extent of the marketing including copies of all adverts (with dates), when and for how long the advert was in the agent's window, websites etc;
  - The relevant contact name at the commercial property agent must also be provided in order for the Local Planning Authority to discuss the extent of their marketing. Details of any queries received with regard to the property must be reported back to the planning authority.
  - At the end of the marketing period, the planning authority will require a report setting out the enquiries received, including any firm offers (conditional or unconditional) – with evidence where necessary - and the commercial property agent's view as to the commercial viability of the site.
- 4.11 The Local Planning Authority must be satisfied that genuine attempts have been made to both:
- Actively market the property;
  - Market the property at a reasonable price for employment uses.
- 4.12 The Local Planning Authority will require evidence of the marketing exercise to accompany the submission of any planning application for residential conversion.



**5. OTHER PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS**

- 5.1 In addition to the guidance set out above, there will be further criteria which must be taken into consideration when determining a planning application for conversion. Some of the criteria will relate to residential conversions only and others will refer to both residential and employment conversions.
- 5.2 In all instances the objective is to ensure that buildings to be converted are adapted sympathetically having regard to their surroundings. In the case of traditional buildings, the scheme of conversion should ensure that the original character of the building is retained.
- 5.3 **Redundancy**  
Where an agricultural building is proposed to be replaced through conversion, the proposal should not lead to the need for further agricultural buildings elsewhere, **unless there are some technical and commercial reasons to do so.**
- 5.4 **Quality/Condition of Building**  
In the open countryside, buildings should be of permanent and substantial construction and should not be so derelict that they could only be brought back into use by substantial rebuilding, tantamount to the erection of a new dwelling.

- 5.5 In order to establish the condition and physical suitability of a building, an independent structural engineer's report will be required. This should clearly demonstrate the structural capability of the building to accommodate the scheme proposed and be submitted with the planning application. This will benefit both the Council and applicant since if a building collapses during alteration the planning permission may be rendered unimplementable.

5.6 **Quality of Conversion**

Once the suitability of a building for conversion is established, then the actual details of the scheme need to be assessed. The following considerations are put forward as generally reflecting good practice. There may be individual buildings wherein the guidance may not be appropriate depending on its unique character, design, materials and construction. In such cases advice should be sought from appropriate Council officers.

**(a) Extension/alteration**

Generally, the building should be capable of conversion without the need for extensions and alterations. The roof line should not be altered or raised and dormers will almost always be inappropriate, unless they are traditional to other buildings in the locality.

**(b) Internal sub-division**

By the nature of their intended purposes, many buildings are open plan internally. It is inevitable, particularly for residential uses, that internal sub-division is necessary e.g. to separate kitchen, bathroom and living space or to separate office space/storage. Internal sub-division should be kept to a minimum so as to respect the internal features, space or roof structures.

**(c) Elevational changes**

**(i) Windows and Doors:**

A difficulty experienced in conversion schemes is to enable sufficient natural light into a building, without the creation of a considerable amount of new openings (fenestration) which would seriously damage its existing character. Wherever possible, existing openings should be retained and new openings should be kept to a minimum. Where new windows and doors are unavoidable, they should be sympathetic in design, proportions and materials. The use of UPVC will generally be unacceptable and all external timber should be painted rather than stained. Additional light may be achieved by the glazing of ventilation slits and sparing use on less visible roof lines of flush fitting conservation rooflights.

**(ii) Details:**

Existing features such as fixed machinery, arches, lintels ventilation slits etc., should be retained and incorporated into the scheme. Where openings need to be blocked up a sympathetic material should be used and recessed to emphasise the original opening. The use of timber boarding or glass may be appropriate for large openings with glazing helping to ensure sufficient natural light is available. The introduction of chimney stacks and modern or over-ornate details should be avoided. External rainwater goods should be kept to a minimum and be black finished cast-iron or aluminium.

**(iii) External materials:**

Existing stone/brickwork should be repointed using traditional lime based mortars and methods, and roof slates/tiles should be repaired and re-used wherever possible. In instances where new materials are necessary, these should match the existing in terms of size, colour, texture etc. Only when the existing building features rendering and/or paint/whitewash will this form of treatment be appropriate.

5.7. **External Areas**

Notwithstanding the quality of the actual conversion scheme, considerable care must be taken with the external surroundings. The creation of a residential curtilage, boundary treatment and the introduction of residential and domestic features and materials can have a damaging effect on the character of the building and its surroundings.

**(a) Curtilages**

The curtilage of a rural building should generally remain open and uncluttered. Where there is scope for private areas in residential conversions but these should be screened with hedging and walls of old

brick or stone and should follow existing natural or manmade boundaries such as hedge lines or farmyard boundary walls. The treatment of boundaries should reflect the building's rural character with simple post and rail fences stone / brick walls and timber gates being acceptable. The planning application should include plans clearly defining the extent of the curtilage areas and showing detailed boundary treatments.

In residential conversions, conservatories, pools, sheds, interwoven fences and ornate entrances etc., may detract from the character of the building and its setting. The incorporation of agricultural land into a building's curtilage constitutes a change of use and will require planning permission but will normally be discouraged. **Please refer to policy HSG 16 of the UDP for further guidance.**

**(b) Surfaces**

Modern ground surface materials such as tarmac and concrete are sometimes out of keeping with the character of traditional rural buildings, **although there are instances when tarmac may be suitable.** Wherever possible, existing stone sets, cobbles or other suitable/sympathetic materials should be retained or re-used and supplemented where necessary.

**(c) Landscaping**

Generally, hard landscaping will be appropriate to courtyards and soft landscaping appropriate elsewhere. Existing landscape features should be retained where possible. Planning applications should be accompanied by a fully detailed landscaping scheme.

**(d) Parking**

Parking should be in accordance with the Local Planning Authority's guidelines. Careful consideration should be given to the sensitive siting and design of car parking, in both employment and residential schemes.

Wherever possible in a residential conversion scheme, garaged cars should be incorporated within the conversion scheme, especially in buildings with former loading bays and barn doors.

**(e) Services**

Particular care needs to be given to services which can have a damaging visual effect. LP gas tanks, septic tanks etc. should be sensitively sited and well screened so as to be unobtrusive whilst electricity control boxes, alarm boxes, satellite dishes and flues etc., should be positioned on less prominent elevations.

**(f) Storage**

Some employment conversion schemes may need space for the storage of goods and materials. As with car parking, careful consideration should be given to the siting and screening of any storage areas, ensuring that there is a minimal impact upon the building and its surroundings by utilising screening through existing or new walls or through landscaping measures.

**(g) Access for Disabled People**

An inclusive design approach is recommended to incorporate facilities for disabled people in compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, in particular Part III – adjustments in relations to physical features. Access should be in accordance with the Local Planning Authority's guidelines, Access Strategy and Approved document Part M of Building Regulations in conjunction with BSI 8300:2001.

**5.8 Amenity/Setting of Other Buildings**

The relationship of the conversion scheme to other buildings needs to be assessed. Often there will be dwellings nearby and both these and the conversion scheme must take account of privacy and overlooking issues. Agricultural or other operations, either on the site or nearby must not result in inadequate amenity standards.

**5.9 Wildlife**

Some buildings may contain roosts for bats and owls which are protected by the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981. In such cases, the applicant will need to undertake a pre-determination survey and the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) will be consulted on the results of the survey and mitigation required. Applicants

are advised to contact the County Ecologist and refer to the Note on "Nature Conservation and Species Protection". It is an offence to damage or destroy a bat breeding site or resting place and an offence can be committed even if the actions were unintentional. Steps can be taken in the detailed designs of roofs to provide suitable habitats and access for bats and owls and these will need to be incorporated within any scheme where the presence of these species is evident or likely.

**5.10 Listed Buildings and Conversion Areas**

Some buildings may be listed as being of special architectural or historic interest or may fall within the curtilage of a listed building. Others may fall within conservation areas. In both cases conversions will require very careful consideration to ensure that the character, appearance and features of the buildings are retained. A separate application for listed building consent will be required where works are proposed to a listed building or building within the curtilage of a listed building.

**5.11 Removal of Permitted Development Rights**

In granting planning permission for residential conversions permitted development rights will be removed by the imposition of a planning condition. All subsequent alterations i.e. garages, extensions, outbuildings, sheds, alterations to the roof etc., which would normally be permitted development, will require specific planning permission. This is to avoid the loss of the building's character through a series of small changes which cumulatively have an adverse effect.

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**6. MAKING AN APPLICATION**

6.1 Applicants are advised to consult with Planning Officers before submitting planning applications. For this particular SPG applicants should provide the following (specific) information:

Plans:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• elevational and plan drawings (existing and proposed);</li> <li>• cross sectional drawings where necessary (plans should clearly show what elements of the original building will remain and what elements of the scheme are new)</li> <li>• landscaping details showing existing and proposed hard and soft landscaping including boundary treatments;</li> </ul>
Structural Survey	Submission of a report prepared by a structural engineer/surveyor
Marketing Criteria: (for residential schemes only):	Submission of evidence that sufficient and reasonable attempts have been made to secure a business/commercial re-use for the building.

6.2 In all cases a Building Regulation application will be required and applicants are advised to contact the Building Control Section or an approved Inspector to obtain further information and the necessary application forms and fee guidance.



**Environment Directorate • Planning & Public Protection Services**

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