

Rural & Settlement Edge

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8.1 Introduction

This section primarily focuses on rural development. However, it also provides guidance for development at the edge of settlements, where there is a need to respond sensitively to both the settlement and rural character.

Guidance for rural development relates to development proposals in the following areas:

- Green Belt (which is also designated as Countryside);
- designated Countryside; and
- sites on the edges of settlements, particularly where they extend the settlement edge into the countryside.

The Countryside and Green Belt designations aim to protect the environment. National and local planning policy protects the openness of land designated as Green Belt.

Local planning policy, in Core Strategy Policy CP11 aims to protect the separate identity of settlements and maintain the quality of environment outside settlement boundaries, generally by restricting development, except for:

- sustainable rural enterprise or countryside recreation;
- residential extensions;
- replacement dwellings;
- essential community facilities; and
- affordable housing on exception sites.

The criteria for assessing development proposals include:

- not excessively encroaching upon countryside or expanding development;
- not resulting in inappropriate increases in the scale, form or footprint of the original building; or
- bringing about environmental improvement; and
- being contained within suitably located buildings that are appropriate for conversion.

Land in these areas may also be covered by other environmental policy designations, such as Ramsar sites, Special Protection Areas (SPA), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Local Nature Reserves, Areas of Special Landscape Importance and, for the built environment, Conservation Areas. In these areas, reference will need to be made to the relevant national and local policy and guidance.

Identifying appropriate locations for development is, in the first place, a matter of policy.

This design guidance applies to locations where development complies with the policy requirements, and it supplements guidance found in other sections of this guide.

It is also intended to inform future policy and guidance, as it may need to evolve over time.

Villages or hamlets referred to in this section include settlements where the Core Strategy does not envisage development taking place and which do not have defined Development Limits.



Figure 8.1: Village inn in Arborfield



Figure 8.2: View out from Barkham village

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8.2 General principles

RD1: New development and associated landscape should retain, incorporate and enhance features that contribute towards the landscape character and biodiversity of the area.

This includes elements such as:

- field patterns and lanes;
- landscape features, such as trees and hedgerows;
- wetlands and watercourses;
- typical species of vegetation; and
- characteristic local habitats.

Historically, settlements were shaped by the landscape character that existed before development took place. Traces of that character may still be found in places, providing local distinctiveness and a link to its history. In Wokingham Borough, this can be seen in areas that are forested, or formerly forested, particularly in the south-east of the area.

The rural areas defined here lie within a number of different character areas as defined in the Wokingham Borough Landscape Character Assessment, including:

- river landscapes;
- clay landscapes;
- chalk landscapes; and
- sand landscapes.

See also Section 3B.3 Countryside.

RD2: New development associated with existing villages or hamlets should retain, enhance and incorporate some of the existing features and characteristics of the settlement pattern, wherever possible.

Development in or on the edge of the Countryside must respond to the unique character and setting of each site, taking into consideration a thorough understanding of the local pattern of settlement and its setting in the landscape.

Village Design Statements are a detailed statement of local character and should be referred to wherever relevant to a site.

The character of a place as a whole comes from all of its parts, although often the pre-twentieth century development is considered to contribute most to its character and identity. It is the parts of a settlement with a positive character that should be a reference for the design of new development, which in many cases, will be the historic character.

Where new development is directly related or linked to the historic core of a village, then it should relate to the characteristics of the historic part of the village.

This may include the typical patterns of:

- The streets - how wide and how straight, do they cross contours or follow them?
- The shape of building plots - whether they are characteristically wide fronted or narrow and whether all are of the same type and size;

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Figure 8.3: The historic pattern of development over time is an important characteristic of the village of Sonning



Figure 8.4: Sonning, seen from across the Thames

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- The positioning of buildings within a plot - how far they are set back from the street frontage and how consistent is the positioning;
- The orientation of buildings on the plot - do they face the street or sit at an angle to it?
- The proportion of the plot and the plot frontage that is built up; and
- The grouping of buildings on plots.

The character of a village or hamlet is the result of much more than just the appearance of its buildings.

As within the defined settlement boundaries, much of the character is set by the pattern of settlement - the pattern of streets and/ or plots and how the buildings occupy plots. However, the pattern of settlement in the countryside also tends to be influenced by the landform and landscape.

It is also typically, although not always, more informal, varied and dispersed in settlement pattern than urban areas. Streets may reflect the line of former field boundaries rather than the most direct route from A to B; plots may be all the same size or may vary; buildings may be positioned so there is no clear building line; and they may be grouped in a variety of ways other than in consistent groups. All of these factors may influence the character of a specific village or hamlet.

Where new development follows the principles of the settlement pattern of a particular place, it will help to fit into that place. Each place is

different and it is important to understand its specific characteristics rather than to apply generic village design principles.

RD3: The location and design of new development must respond to and should not harm the setting of the village in the landscape.

Designers should make sure that development:

- Retains the features that contribute to the landscape character;
- Maintains gaps in the settlement pattern, which separate different groups of dwellings, or which provide the setting for significant buildings or places, for instance the local church or public house;
- Retains characteristic soft vegetation, for instance soft verges, hedgerows, trees in the public realm and on-plot;
- Maintains and enhance open spaces to provide good local facilities, for instance childrens' play, whilst being appropriately rural in character; and
- Where possible, contributes new features that enhance the setting of the village in the landscape.

The relationship between the village and its landscape setting contributes to its character, particularly where the landscape comes right into the heart of the village. This may be recognised open space, but farmland or woodland may also help to make up the character of a village.

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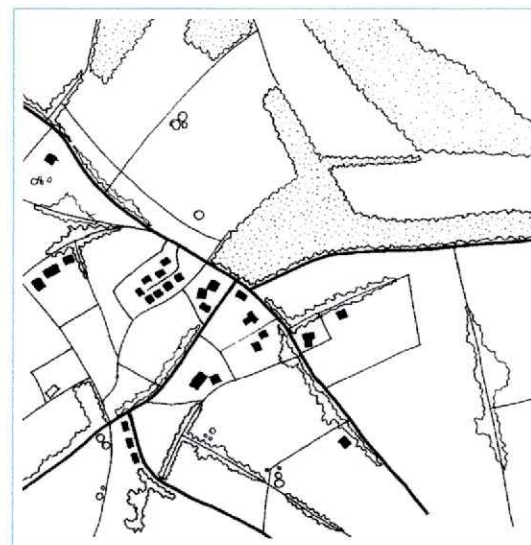


Figure 8.5: Field patterns and woodland areas that form the setting for the built development contribute to the local character of Swallowfield



Figure 8.6: Traditional building at the entrance to Swallowfield village

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RD4: New development must be carefully composed in relation to important views into or out of a village, so that the setting of the village in the landscape is maintained or enhanced.

This should include:

- Existing views into the village from beyond its boundaries, which may include the road network, places accessible to the public, and other settlements;
- Existing views of the wider landscape from the village itself; and
- New views into and out of the village that might be created through development.

The characteristics of views which are likely to be important to the setting of the village in the landscape are:

- The skyline of the village and its most significant buildings, or features - are they landmarks in key views?
- The balance between vegetation and buildings in long views - for instance, are there layers of trees with buildings visible between them?
- The nature of the edges of the village - is it less densely developed towards the edges or does it contrast strongly with the landscape around it?

In a village, key views that contribute to the setting of the village in the landscape are likely to include:

- Views along key routes, streets or paths, into the wider landscape beyond;
- Views across open spaces or gaps in the settlement pattern;
- Views from the setting of important buildings such as the church; and
- In these views, the ability to see into the landscape is likely to be as important as the openness of such views.

8.3 Built form

RD5: New development in the rural area should respond to the typical forms of buildings in the village or locality.

In doing so, designers should generally take into account and respond to:

- The pattern of building forms that helps create the character of a settlement, for instance whether there is a consistency or variety;
- The ways in which buildings address the street;
- The heights of buildings;
- Roof forms and slopes, for instance whether there are gables or eaves facing the street;
- The ways that buildings are grouped together either on a single plot or on several plots, for instance whether larger buildings are made up of several smaller scale elements;

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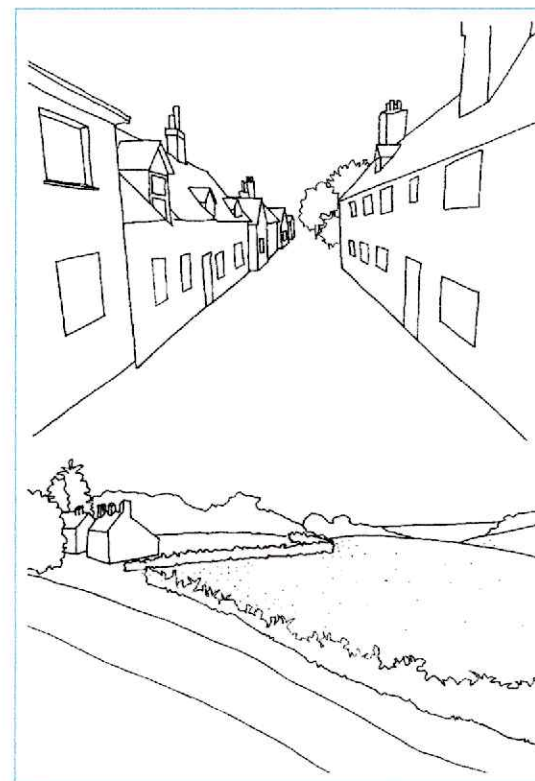


Figure 8.7: Views within a village and outwards to the countryside beyond are of importance in rural settlements

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- The ways that roof forms are grouped, for instance whether there are dormers and what form they typically take; and
- Opportunities that building form offers for environmental sustainability, including passive measures, such as solar gain or shelter, and active measures such as roof slopes suitable for solar panels, either now or in the future.

Environmental considerations have influenced the form of development throughout history and many of the typical building forms seen in villages today are a reflection of that past influence. Today environmental measures are once again important for our future. Where they need to influence the form of a building then they should do so provided that the development responds to the character of the village in some of the other ways identified in this section.

RD6: The elevations of new buildings must be well composed, well proportioned and well detailed.

New development should be sympathetic to the traditional character of a village. This does not necessarily mean that it must look the same as the other buildings. High quality contemporary design can be responsive to and enhance the character of a village, provided it follows the other principles outlined in this section.

If a design approach replicates a historical style, it must be demonstrably based upon careful observation and replication of the prevailing styles, details and materials in the locality.

RD7: New buildings should respond to the materials, details and colours that may be distinctive to a locality.

Designers should aim to incorporate into their schemes some or all of the following:

- Materials that are distinctive to the locality, either to the rural area as a whole or to a particular village;
- Typical ways these materials may be used, for instance in decoration;
- Colour palettes that relate to or complement traditional materials or other local features; and
- Details similar to characteristic traditional details, for instance in relation to eaves, or gables or dormers.

New developments may use materials, colours or details in the same way as in existing traditional buildings. There is also scope to use these locally distinctive elements in different ways that reflect the nature of building today rather than the methods of the past. This approach is also a valid way to respond to local distinctiveness.

Using local materials, colours or details in themselves is not sufficient to make a development fit into local character.



Figure 8.8: New development can respond to existing rural development by using a similar massing and form, without being designed as a pastiche

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8.4 Spaces and landscape

RD8: The relationships between public and private space and the transition between them in new developments should relate to the existing character of the village.

Refer also to: Section 5.3 Public spaces.

The design of public streets and spaces in new developments should take into account:

- Existing landscape features such as hedgerows, trees and watercourses, retaining and incorporating these into proposals wherever possible;
- The types of roads and streets that are characteristic of the locality, retaining the character of those that exist already and creating new routes with similar characteristics;
- Rural routes do not generally correspond to standard highways practice, rarely being a standard width carriageway with two footways. When designing new routes, design solutions should be found that balance highway safety with creating and maintaining a rural character, using site-specific rather than standard solutions to any issues of forward visibility;
- Routes within rural settlements should be designed to keep vehicle speeds low, through appropriate design measures, avoiding urban traffic solutions such as mini roundabouts or speed cushions;
- Aim to remove all clutter of signage and highways controls so far as possible and make sure that any necessary signage and street furniture is appropriate in character; and

- Changes of level, particularly between development plots and the street, should be designed with care, adopting solutions that create a positive character, such as a raised footway with soft verge.

The design of the boundaries between public and private spaces and of private gardens themselves both contribute to local character. They should:

- reflect the nature, scale and material of boundary treatments typically found in the village;
- where they are a local characteristic, front gardens with soft landscape should be provided or retained; and
- maintain tree cover in private gardens (both front and rear), particularly where trees are mature as this can contribute significantly to the character of a village.

Where proposals for car parking in front of buildings require planning permission, then front gardens should retain some soft landscape and, where possible, parts of the front boundary treatment.

Areas of hard-standing should be kept to a minimum and should be appropriate to a rural setting, for instance gravel or strips of brick paving, rather than large areas of concrete block paving. Surfaces must allow surface water to percolate into the ground.

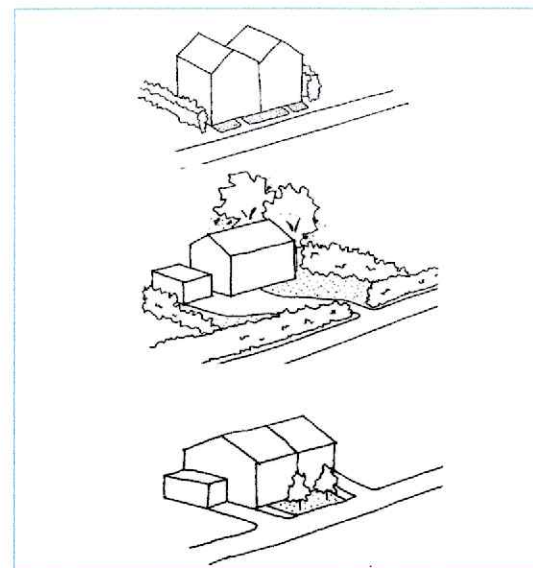


Figure 8.9: Different treatments between public and private space add to the character of streets and spaces

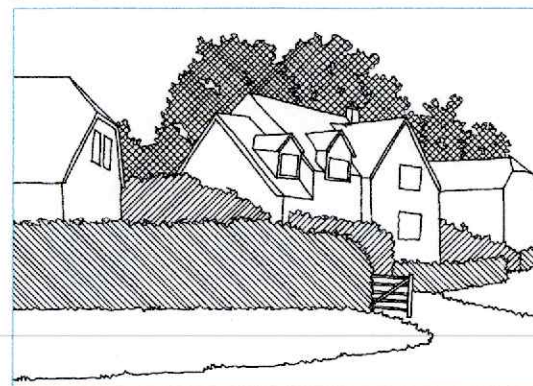


Figure 8.10: There are different 'layers' of landscape that all add to the character of rural development. Front gardens, boundaries and planting in back gardens are all important

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8.5 Specific guidance

General guidance in Sections 8.2 and 8.3 also applies where relevant to the situations below.

8.5.1 Development on settlement edges

New development for affordable housing or community facilities may be appropriate outside the development limits of a settlement. Other development proposals may be sited on the edge of the developed area.

RD9: The location, siting and design of new development on the edge of settlements must be carefully designed to:

- create an edge to the built up area with a character that relates to the local pattern; and
- incorporate soft landscape to soften the edge of settlements and to help integrate new housing into its rural setting.

New development located on the edges of settlements or important green spaces must demonstrate how the interrelationship between open countryside and development form is respected.

This may be achieved by incorporating soft landscape into the proposals. The aim should be for the development to recede and soften in relation to adjoining open countryside. 'Hard' urban edges or taller, landmark buildings are unlikely to be appropriate in most situations.



Figure 8.11: Development on the edge of settlements should incorporate soft landscaping to soften edges and help development integrate within the rural settlement



Figure 8.12: New housing that creates an open space and links into the wider landscape beyond

8.5.2 Conversions

The conversion of buildings outside development limits may be appropriate for sustainable rural enterprises or other activities that contribute to recreation or the enjoyment of the countryside. Such buildings should be:

- suitably located; and
- appropriate for conversion.

Suitable locations will depend upon the use and the number of people who will visit it. They will generally be close to other settlement and capable of access by walking, cycling and/ or public transport as well as car.

RD10: Proposals for conversions should be based on a detailed understanding of the building and its appropriateness for conversion, which will depend upon factors such as:

- its heritage significance, where relevant;
- the proposed use;
- the structure and construction of the building; and
- its condition.

The conversion of listed buildings should be discussed with the Conservation Officer at the outset of the project, to make sure the proposals have no impact on its heritage significance. See the Council's website for more information on their pre-application service.

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In many cases, non-residential uses have more flexible accommodation requirements than residential and so may be more suitable for converted agricultural buildings.

The aim of conversion works should be to retain the architectural character of the building and its original fabric where possible.

The condition of the building will affect the scope of works required for its re-use. Conversion works should not compromise the architectural character, the stability of the original structure or the retention of original fabric. Common design issues that may need to be addressed include:

- providing sufficient daylight without altering the characteristic features of farm buildings, for instance their unbroken roof slopes;
- the subdivision of large-scale, open barn spaces where double height spaces and long sight lines are a characteristic;
- retaining distinctive features such as ventilation openings and large cart doors without changing their character inappropriately;
- maintaining an appropriate setting for the building; and
- meeting today's requirements for services and energy efficiency.

In the Green Belt, it may be appropriate to re-use buildings, provided they are of permanent and substantial construction.

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Figure 8.13: In this example a variety of openings have been incorporated to bring light into the interior without being overly domestic in style



Figure 8.14: Retention of original features such as the stable joinery in this example is important to retain the character of the building



Figure 8.15: A good example of a barn conversion in Finchampstead



Figure 8.16: Converted farm buildings form the basis for this craft village development

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8.5.3 Replacement buildings

Replacement dwellings may be permissible within the Countryside, only where:

- there is no inappropriate increase in scale form or footprint; or
- they bring about environmental improvements.

Generally, replacement dwellings will be expected to be sited in the same location as the original building.

There may be circumstances where it is preferable to site a replacement dwelling in another location, for instance where:

- the visual or other impact of the replacement dwelling is more appropriate than the original building; or
- the proposed location is preferable in environmental terms, such as further from a watercourse in a flood risk zone.

The scale, or height, of a building has an influence on its relationship to the landform and landscape and also to its visual impact. Generally the aim will be to minimise the impact of buildings on the Countryside although there may be exceptions where a development proposal of particularly high quality has a positive rather than negative impact.

Figure 8.17 provides an illustration of guidance for assessing height.

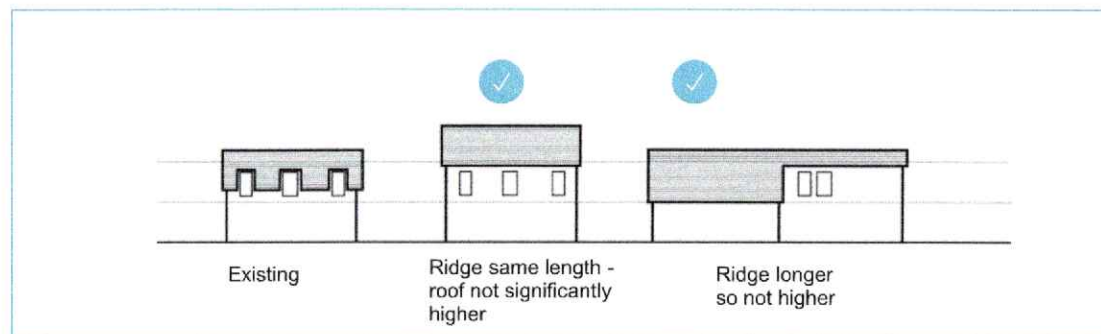


Figure 8.17: Guidance for the height of replacement dwellings. The height of new dwellings should not be significantly higher than the ridge line of the original building

In the Green Belt the aim is to retain openness.

Where the visual impact is likely to be different to that of the existing dwelling, then an assessment of views from key viewpoints will be required.

RD11: The form, or massing of a replacement dwelling should relate well to its context and to local character. The relationship between the form of the building, the topography and landscape, will be of particular importance.

It is often possible to relate a replacement dwelling to local character by adopting similar forms to the traditional patterns of development, rather than necessarily by copying the appearance or elevations of traditional buildings.

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Figure 8.18: The form and massing of the extension relates well to the original building

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The footprint of a building is an indication of its size. Generally the footprint of a replacement dwelling should not be significantly larger than that of the existing dwelling. In the Green Belt, any increase in footprint is likely to have an impact upon its openness.

Where there are substantial, permanent outbuildings, then it may be possible to replace them together with the existing dwelling, provided that the impact upon the countryside is more appropriate than the existing form of development.

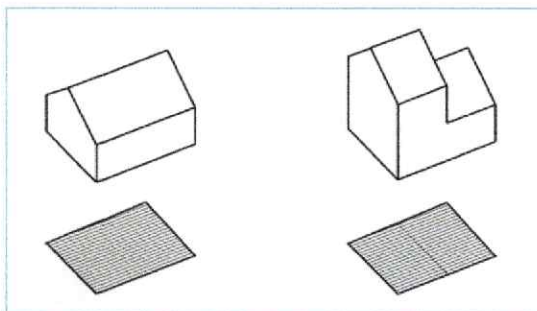


Figure 8.19: Guidance for the volume of replacement dwellings. A 50% increase in volume for a 1 storey development is acceptable when compared with the original building

8.5.4 Extensions and additions

Extensions may be permissible provided that the scale, form and footprint does not have an unacceptable impact upon the countryside.

The general guidance on extensions set out in Section 4.10 applies as does the guidance on replacement dwellings set out earlier in this section.

Where an existing building has been converted from another use already, then there is likely to be less scope for extension than on other buildings.

Conservatories may be appropriate forms of extension, provided they:

- are lightweight and unobtrusive structures;
- are relatively small in size compared to the footprint of the original building; and
- relate well to the character of the original building and the context.

Where a dwelling is proposed to be extended to create an integral garage, then it should be sited and designed so that it does not dominate the street frontage.



Figure 8.20: a) not good, the extension impacts on sense of openness as it elongates the building; b) extension is enclosed within existing development zone, therefore minimising impact on landscape



Figure 8.21: Well designed extensions can add to the character of existing rural buildings

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