

8. CONVERSION OF AGRICULTURAL BUILDINGS

- 8.1 The nature of the rural economy is changing and this is leading increasingly to rural buildings, in particular but not exclusively farm buildings becoming redundant for their present use. Not all buildings are worthy of retention. Those built of temporary, less substantial or non-traditional materials and which are unattractive or in very bad condition should normally be removed, if they become redundant. In Dacorum this often includes portal frame buildings. However some, which are modern and in good condition, could be retained, particularly in parts of the Rural Area (beyond the Green Belt). Many buildings do make a positive contribution to the countryside, especially substantial old buildings constructed in traditional materials such as brick and timber, with slate or clay tile roofs. In some cases there may be opportunities to secure improvements to the external appearance of buildings without substantial reconstruction. Conversion of these buildings to other uses can ensure their retention, and give them a new lease of economic life.
- 8.2 These guidelines supplement the provisions of Policy 110 and apply to the conversion of both listed and unlisted buildings.

Redundancy of the Building

- 8.3 Under Planning Policy Guidance Note 7: 'The Countryside - Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development' the main criterion for assessing the reuse and adaptation of rural buildings is the acceptability in nature and extent of the proposed new use.
- 8.4 However, where a new farm building, with the benefit of permitted development rights, erected under agricultural permitted development is involved further information will be sought on whether it was ever used for agricultural purposes.

Acceptable Uses

- 8.5 Acceptable uses for the conversion of agricultural buildings will be those which:
- (a) are appropriate to the area where the building is located; and
 - (b) preserve the integrity of the building.
- 8.6 Agricultural buildings are principally in the Green Belt and the Rural Area where there is a presumption against development except for a limited range of uses connected with agriculture, forestry and leisure.
- 8.7 In general terms leisure and community uses are preferred followed by commercial uses and lastly residential. In the first category, visitor accommodation such as holiday lets/bunkhouses may be appropriate,

as these do not tend to need the layout and facilities of permanent residences: meeting halls and small scale indoor sports facilities which require large open plan spaces may also be appropriate. Appropriate commercial uses might include rural based industries and craft workshops, which again can be open plan, or offices. Residential conversions generally involve most change to buildings and new residential use in the countryside is usually only allowed in a very limited number of cases. Conversion of several barns around a farmyard effectively creates a "mini-hamlet" in the middle of the countryside and is normally unacceptable. Small one or two-storey barns which are separate from previously converted barns, are more suitable for residential conversions.

- 8.8 The activity and traffic associated with each use will be material considerations. In particular, significant traffic movement which would damage the environment of narrow and/or peaceful country lanes must be avoided.

Preserving the Integrity of the Building

- 8.9 Traditional agricultural buildings have a number of essential features which should be retained in any conversion scheme:
- (a) the original permanent fabric of the walls;
 - (b) an exterior characterised by extensive blank walls and roofs with unbroken lines and few openings;
 - (c) an unpartitioned interior of impressive proportions and long sightlines, with structural elements exposed; and
 - (d) an agricultural setting, often as part of a group of farmstead buildings.
- 8.10 The building should be demonstrated to be structurally sound, so that the proposal can be carried out without substantial rebuilding or alterations.
- 8.11 To preserve the appearance of the building, openings such as windows and doors should be kept to a minimum and reflect those already in place in terms of size, design, etc. There is generally a presumption against the addition of dormers, rooflights, chimneys, etc, however exceptions may be allowed, for example when there is a requirement for natural light. Porches or other extensions will not be acceptable. It is likely that permitted development rights in respect of any extensions will be removed.
- 8.12 Inside the building, roof trusses should remain unaltered and visible if possible. Design of the interior should be in open plan leaving the impression of unconverted space.

- 8.13 The curtilage of the building, should remain open and uncluttered so the addition of any new fences, hedges, sheds, greenhouses and other 'urban' or atypical features should be avoided. Modern ground surface materials such as tarmac or concrete are not normally suitable, and stone setts, cobbles, etc, should be (re)used. Cars also detract from the setting of buildings. Garaging should be as discreet as possible, and it may be possible to use cart sheds or other buildings. No new structures will be permitted as it is very difficult to integrate modern garages in the rural setting.
- 8.14 Where building conversion is proposed, particularly for listed barns, every precaution must be taken to prevent disturbance to protected species which may be present. Appropriate advice and licences must be obtained from English Nature before work is undertaken.