

Stratford-on-Avon District Planning for Farm Diversification



Guidance Note August 2005

Planning for Farm Diversification:

Advice to farmers on how the planning system works

“If you have a good idea for diversification, act on it – don’t hang around and watch someone else make a success of it” advised Kent farmer Doug Wanstall at the Oxford Farming Conference in January 2005.

You know from first-hand experience that agriculture has changed in many ways over recent decades; in the expectations that society places on farmers and the extent to which you can make a living out of farming.

It is now common practice for farmers to consider practical and effective ways of supplementing their income, through new crops and livestock, by adding value to their produce or using buildings for other business uses.

By diversification we mean on-farm development and activities that remain under the same management as the main farm enterprise. This advice assumes a continuing connection between any new business activity and the farm itself.

Contrary to popular belief, successful farm diversification does not require a relaxation in the planning system; in fact, although most schemes usually need planning permission, around 90% of applications relating to farm holdings are approved.

Of greater importance to the success of a particular venture is the need for sound business decisions and an awareness of local circumstances.

Government has made it clear that local planning authorities should be positive towards well-conceived farm diversification schemes that are consistent in scale with their rural location.

For its part, the District Council encourages the diversification of farm-based operations. What we do prefer, however, is the continuation of the basic farm business and the retention, rather than disposal, of its assets. This will help to sustain agriculture in the longer term rather than be just a quick fix.

The Stratford-on-Avon District Local Plan Review supports this approach through a wide range of policies. Policy CTY.4, in particular, sets the scene for considering proposals for farm diversification. You can see the plan on the District Council's website (www.stratford.gov.uk), at our various offices and in libraries.

Relevant policies in the Plan are referred to throughout this publication in square brackets.

You will find it helpful to have thought about your circumstances thoroughly before contacting the Council's planning service. Planning issues should be considered right at the beginning of the process and incorporated into your 'plan of action', rather than be treated as a separate hurdle to be negotiated at a later stage.

Seeking the advice of a planning consultant should be money well spent as they know from experience what is likely to be acceptable and how to work up your proposals into a planning application.

You should also bear in mind that a planning officer is not in a position to advise you on what might be acceptable without something on the table. It is far better to write to or contact us with a scheme clearly in mind that we can respond to in a helpful manner.

Is planning permission needed?

Generally speaking, planning permission is not required for the use of land and existing buildings for agricultural operations, although a notification to the Council is usually necessary for new farm buildings and other structures. But planning permission will be needed for projects to diversify the use of farmland and buildings for non-agricultural activities.

You can check, on an informal basis, whether your proposal needs planning permission by writing to the District Council.

Please ring, write or email if you would like a set of planning application forms. It comes with a set of guidance notes to help you.

Who can apply?

Anyone can submit a planning application, whether or not they own the property or land involved. If you are not the owner, or only have part ownership, you have to inform the owner or those who share ownership with you.

If the land or buildings are rented from you, it is necessary to inform any leaseholder whose lease still has seven or more years to run, or any agricultural tenant. If you are the tenant, you must inform your landlord and you are strongly recommended to seek professional advice in such cases.

Types of application

There are two different types of planning application. If your scheme only involves the erection of a new building, and is not within a conservation area or near a listed building, you can apply for outline planning permission to see if the principle is acceptable. Although there is no need to produce detailed plans, the more information you provide will help our understanding of what you propose. If granted, you will then need to submit a detailed scheme for further approval.

Alternatively, you can apply for full planning permission and submit the necessary details of the scheme, including scale drawings of all proposed buildings. All cases that involve the change of use of land or existing buildings require full planning permission at the outset.

A fee is required with most types of application. The rates are set nationally and details are provided with the application forms.

If your scheme involves a listed building then a separate Listed Building Consent may be required. Conservation Area Consent may also be required if a building is to be demolished or a tree felled within a conservation area. The removal of an historic hedgerow may also need approval.

Preparing an application

It is important that you consider the effects your proposal could have on such issues as impact on neighbours and local amenities, historic buildings and conservation areas, landscape and wildlife, noise and other forms of pollution, services and traffic. Identifying and addressing any difficulties will be crucial in getting planning permission.

You are advised to talk to or write to us at an early stage about your proposals. We can offer you guidance on what the planning policies say, the issues that will need to be taken into account and the likelihood of getting planning permission.

It may be worthwhile seeking help from planning or agricultural consultants, particularly if you are proposing a large-scale or potentially contentious development.

Talk to those who are likely to be affected by your proposals, including the Parish Council, before you submit a planning application so that they are aware of the situation; they may even have some useful comments to make and it will help to have the support of the local community.

Content of the application

It is important that your submission is complete, accurate and clearly explains what you propose to implement. It is better not have to alter your plans once the application has been submitted as this could delay the process.

In many cases, you will find it helpful to contact various bodies in preparing your application to find out what their views are. Examples include:

- Environment Agency - water supply, drainage and flooding
- County Highway Authority - access, traffic and road safety
- County Museum – ecology, archaeology

Their contact telephone numbers are provided at the back of this publication.

You are advised to provide a supporting statement with your application to explain your project, what it is intended to achieve and how its impact can be minimised.

Many diversification schemes can be advantageous to the local area. Identify what these might be in your proposal and make the most of them in the application. They could include opportunities for new jobs, planting and landscaping, building renovation or public access, for example. Gaining support of your Parish Council would be helpful.

It is important to stress that none of these would make an inappropriate scheme acceptable but they can help to make a broadly acceptable scheme better in terms of local reaction and offering wider benefits.

Farm Plans

The 'whole farm' approach is being encouraged by Government as a way of setting out your intentions for the future operation of the farm. The chances are that you will already have produced some form of business plan for other purposes. They can be used when seeking bank loans and payments through the Government's Rural Development Programme.

You may wish to include a farm plan with your planning application and one may be requested where large-scale diversification proposals are being put forward. It should comprise a profile of the farm, including existing activities, assets such as buildings, how it operates and other specific characteristics. In particular, you should explain the need to diversify and the way in which your proposals relate to the wider farm business and your future intentions.

This approach will benefit you and help us to understand your overall plans and how a particular scheme fits into them.

Issues that need to be considered

All forms of activity and development have an impact, for better or worse. The role of the planning process is to weigh all relevant issues in the balance in a reasonable way. Some of these issues relate to national policies, particularly where significant natural and historic resources are affected. Mostly, however, it is to do with impact on the character of the local area.

Scale of activity

The planning system is geared to making sure that the right type and scale of uses are in the right places. As a general rule, activities that attract a lot of people, be they employees or visitors, should be in or accessible from towns and cities. Diversification in the countryside should be geared to activities and businesses that go with the grain of the area.

Appropriate uses will tend to be small scale, providing job opportunities for local people, supporting local suppliers and services, and attracting a small but steady number of customers.

It would be helpful to us in considering your application if you provided information on these matters. This will be essential if you are proposing a large-scale use that will involve a substantial amount of development and activity.

Local people and communities are often concerned that what starts off as a small business can grow into something that has a much greater impact. We hope your business will be successful but, at the outset, we will need to consider if it is necessary to specify some forms of control over future expansion. Cramming or intensifying an activity on a site or building will not be acceptable if it would have an unreasonable impact on the area.

Traffic and access

We need to make sure that the amount and type of vehicle movements that would be created by the proposed use can be safely taken by the local roads and at the point of access into the site. A significant increase in vehicles on minor roads and through small villages can change the character of the area to an unacceptable extent. In particular, a use that attracts a large number of heavy lorries on a regular basis is unlikely to be appropriate unless the site is on or very close to a main road.

Your application should include information about the likely nature of vehicle movements. A full Traffic Assessment may be required for large-scale proposals.

Warwickshire County Council is the highway authority and you are advised to discuss your proposals with them.

[see Policy DEV.4]

Landscape

The character of our countryside has evolved over many centuries. The landscape we enjoy now is an asset that needs to be protected but it is also an opportunity for new businesses. Diversification schemes need to be absorbed into the landscape without causing undue harm and, ideally, should incorporate ways of improving their surroundings. Existing trees and hedges on the site should be retained and protected from damage.

It will be necessary to make sure that new buildings are sensitively positioned and that less attractive aspects of the proposed use are well screened. A detailed landscaping scheme should be included in your application (except in the case of minor schemes), comprising native species that are suitable to the location and ideally from a local source. Extensive mounding should be avoided as it creates an artificial feature in the landscape.

We would encourage you to use a chartered landscape architect to prepare a detailed landscape scheme for your proposals. This should help to make this part of the project acceptable at the outset and reduce the chance of subsequent delay.

You are also advised to contact the Council's Forestry and Landscape Officer, especially if existing trees are affected.

[see Policy DEV.2]

Much of the southern fringe of the District lies within the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This is a national designation that requires us to conserve and enhance the landscape. Consequently, it is necessary to ensure that development is sensitive towards the special quality of the area and protects the features that contribute to its distinctive character.

[see Policy EF.1]

Green Belt

This also is a national designation and most of the District north of Stratford-upon-Avon lies within the West Midlands Green Belt. Although this does not prevent farm buildings from being converted to other uses, it is likely to restrict the extension of existing buildings and the construction of new buildings in the countryside.

[see Policy PR.2]

Ecology

Many areas across the District are protected for their ecological value, eg. nationally important Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and local Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs). You are advised to check at an early stage whether your proposal is likely to affect any such site.

Rural diversification schemes can provide opportunities to manage, improve and create wildlife features as well as make a positive contribution to the Biodiversity Action Plan process. It is important to integrate such features at the outset, not treat them as an afterthought.

Existing buildings may provide habitats for bats and owls. Bats and their roosts are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act. Barn Owls are specially protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act. English Nature and DEFRA recommend that should these animals be affected by your proposals, as survey is carried out as early as possible. Other protected species you may need to consider are Great Crested Newts, badgers and nesting birds. Warwickshire Museum Ecology Unit can advise you further.

[see Policies EF.6, EF.7 and EF.7A]

Archaeology

Sites of archeological importance are protected from development and activities that would be harmful to them. It is important that you find out whether your scheme affects features such as Scheduled Ancient Monuments. If it does, you will need specialist advice to establish whether what you have in mind is likely to be acceptable. In such cases an archeological assessment will be expected to accompany a planning application.

[see Policy EF.11]

Existing buildings

Vacant buildings are an important asset and should be reused wherever possible. But they are not all suitable for conversion. Buildings need to be in keeping with their surroundings and capable of conversion without major reconstruction, alteration or extension. Some buildings may not be appropriate, due to their size or nature, or be sufficiently accessible, for the type and scale of activity proposed.

[see Policy CTY.2]

Finding new and viable uses for historic buildings is an effective way of preserving them. If your scheme involves such a building, you should discuss what you have in mind with the Council's Conservation Architect. The District Design Guide provides some helpful hints about the conversion of traditional agricultural buildings. It can be viewed at the District Council offices. As a general rule you should avoid or minimise the creation of new door and window openings in such buildings.

All works affecting a listed building (including interior alterations) require specific approval, known as Listed Building Consent.

[see Policy EF.14]

More recent buildings and structures, constructed of modern materials such as blocks and sheeting, can be suitable for certain uses but anything which requires major adaptation will usually be unacceptable. In some cases it will be preferable for such buildings to be removed as part of a comprehensive scheme.

New buildings

The design of new buildings should not detract from the character of the area. Ideally they should make a positive contribution and we encourage applicants to provide a design statement to show how this can be achieved.

It is better to place new buildings within a group of existing ones rather than in isolation and they should avoid skyline positions. Existing features can often be used to help blend buildings into the landscape.

It is important to use an architect or other appropriate professional person where new buildings are involved as scale drawings and elevations will be required and you will need to satisfy Building Regulations.

[see Policy DEV.1]

Amenity

Most forms of development and activity have some degree of impact on nearby properties. Before you submit an application, you may find it helpful to discuss your proposals with neighbours and the local community. This can help to overcome fears over traffic, noise, lighting and other impacts.

All these matters will be assessed in considering your planning application, including comments received from local people.

Disabled access

It is a requirement of the Disability Discrimination Act that all buildings and activities to be used by the public should provide safe and convenient access to people with disabilities.

The design of new buildings and the conversion of existing ones should incorporate the principle of 'access for all'. The advantage of this approach is that all users and visitors can benefit.

[see Policy DEV.9]

Services

Any proposal that increases the use of off-site services and infrastructure has to show that sufficient capacity exists or how additional capacity will be provided.

Early contact with water, drainage and power suppliers will help you to understand what is required.

Protecting the quality of surface and ground water is an important issue, especially where properties are not connected to mains sewerage systems. Where a non-mains disposal method is proposed, the applicant is required to submit a full drainage assessment to show there is no risk to the environment, amenity or public health.

The use of sustainable drainage systems is encouraged. These move away from piped systems to those that mimic natural drainage processes within the site. This approach can benefit nature conservation and have landscape and amenity value. Warwickshire Museum Ecology Unit can provide further advice.

[see Policies DEV.6 and DEV.7]

Flooding

This issue has become extremely important in recent years. If your scheme is in an area that is prone to flooding, you will have to carry out a flood risk assessment and submit it with your application. This will also be the case if the development could give rise to new flooding problems. The Environment Agency will advise you on this matter.

[see Policy PR.7]

Pollution

This can take many forms, including noise, dust, smell and lighting. We will need to consider whether the level of emissions or discharges from your proposals are likely to cause unacceptable levels of harm to other land uses, to people's health or the environment.

In some circumstances, it is possible to include measures or controls that reduce any such impact to an acceptable level.

[see Policy PR.8]

Signs and adverts

Most rural businesses need these but their position and size are controlled in the interests of amenity and public safety. It is illegal to display any advertisement on the roadside without the consent of the highway authority. Signs on private land and property usually need planning approval. Exceptions are those less than 0.3 square metres in size that are displayed on premises to identify the business or to inform the public.

[see Policy DEV.14]

Dwellings

It is national and local planning policy that strict controls should apply to new dwellings in the countryside. Consequently, farm diversification schemes are unlikely to justify the provision of a dwelling for someone who operates the business.

An exception to the rule could apply in circumstances where it is essential to the operation of an established enterprise to have a worker readily available on the site at most times. Even then, you will need to show that there are no existing dwellings available in the area.

[see Policy CTY.6]

We also acknowledge that the conversion of an existing building to residential use could be justified in certain specific circumstances. These include where a dwelling is needed to ensure the efficient and secure operation of a rural business and where a residential conversion is the only way of ensuring that a historic building is preserved.

[see Policy CTY.2A]

Building Regulations

These are separate from the planning system and ensure that appropriate standards of building work are achieved. This control relates primarily to structural soundness, specification of services and the health and safety of people in and around buildings.

You should not assume that any development permitted under the planning system will automatically satisfy building regulations, and vice-versa. For instance, internal works that do not normally require planning permission will need approval under the building regulations.

The consent of the District Council is required for works identified in the Regulations. You should obtain professional advice from an architect, structural engineer or building surveyor.

Business Advice

It is rare for the District Planning Authority to consider whether a proposal is likely to be viable or not. The planning system is responsible for deciding whether the use of land and buildings is acceptable and not whether a business will be successful.

Having said that, we want businesses to succeed as they help support the local economy and provide jobs for local people. Advice is available from many sources on how to identify diversification projects that are suitable to your circumstances.

Where to find more help...

Stratford-on-Avon District Council

for advice on planning policy, planning applications, conservation, trees and building regulations

- Tel. 01789 267575
- Fax. 01789 260306
- Email planning@stratford-dc.gov.uk

South Warwickshire Economic Development Team

for business advice

- Tel. 01789 296063

Warwickshire County Council

for advice on highways and access design

- Tel. 01926 412362

for advice on archaeology

- Tel 01926 412274

for advice on ecology

- Tel 01926 418060

Environment Agency

for advice on water supply, drainage and flooding

- Tel. 01684 850951

The Business Link Farm Business Advisory Service

helps farmers to develop projects, including diversification schemes

- Tel. 01789 296063

The Rural Hub (part of Coventry & Warwickshire Partnerships)

provides a regular series of events for rural businesses, including farmers, to help them tackle current issues

- Tel. 024 7685 8241

The National Farmers' Union

provides free initial planning advice to its members through its NFU Call First service

- Tel. 0870 845 8458

Quick Tips

- ✓ **Do** have a clear idea of your objectives
- ✓ **Do** study the competition and try to find a niche
- ✓ **Do** make sure your project fits in with the rest of the farm
- ✓ **Do** look at what the Local Plan says about your area
- ✓ **Do** take advice from a planning consultant
- ✓ **Do** check if the project is eligible for grants
- ✓ **Do** assess the impact of the project on the local area
- ✓ **Do** let your neighbours know what you have in mind
- ✓ **Do** be flexible and adapt your plans if necessary

- X **Don't** press on regardless with a poor idea
- X **Don't** expect the local authority to have the ideas for you
- X **Don't** cause damage to features of importance
- X **Don't** ignore local opinion and concerns
- X **Don't** rely on hearsay and assumptions
- X **Don't** expect an overnight decision by the local authority
- X **Don't** keep changing your plans once submitted
- X **Don't** start work without the necessary permissions

A large print copy, electronic copy or more copies of this publication are available on request from Environmental Services



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