THE CONVERSION OF TRADITIONAL FARM BUILDINGS

Adopted by the Council on July 18th 1990 following public consultation

Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paragraph</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change of use</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The scope of the guide</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The purpose of the guide</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important characteristics</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roofs</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roof lights and dormers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openings in walls</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortar mix</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timber</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extensions and additions</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rainwater goods</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chimney stacks</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heating</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interiors</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curtilages</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface materials</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscape</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicles</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archaeology</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Supplement</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural Survey</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Agreements</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Regulations</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help and Advice</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Important characteristics:
Traditional farm buildings can be delightful structures with individual charm and even majesty, yet typically they are simple, straightforward buildings constructed by local workmen with local materials.

The amount of alteration necessary to accommodate modern living and working conditions makes conversion difficult whilst retaining those features which give the building its distinctive agricultural identity. This normally means that farm buildings cannot be converted for intensive use, and will usually provide fewer residential units or less floor space than would be the case with a new build scheme.

Most farm buildings have unbroken roof slopes, few windows and open interiors which show the roof structure. It is possible to convert farm buildings without changing their character by recognising these principal features and by not seeking to accommodate the maximum floor space. Too many doors and windows, the insertion of dormers, roof lights and chimneys and the alteration or removal of roof trusses will devalue the character of traditional farm buildings and that of the environment.

Roofs:
The single most important external feature of a traditional farm building is the roof; roofs are seen at a distance and they tend to dominate elevations. Large unbroken roof slopes are a characteristic which should be respected. In order to preserve the original form and appearance of traditional farm buildings it is desirable not to disturb roofs in any way at all.

Change of use:
The question of whether a particular farm building is an acceptable candidate for conversion is covered by separate policy documents. The Aylesbury Vale (Rural Areas) Local Plan adopted in 1995 establishes the policy for the rest of the District outside Aylesbury and its immediate environs. Within the area covered by the Aylesbury Local Plan, adopted in 1991, the policy document “Traditional Farm Buildings in the Open Countryside” (1989) still provides the policy background. These documents are available from The Planning Department at 66 High Street, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, HP20 1SD. The two Local Plans will be superseded by the Aylesbury Vale District Local Plan when it is adopted.

The scope of the guide:
The points in this leaflet apply to the conversion of all traditional farm buildings i.e. those in the open countryside and those within settlements. The design guide does not address conversions to Statutory Listed Buildings where any proposed alterations will be subject to special controls.

The purpose of the guide:
Traditionally constructed farm buildings are part of our heritage, the objective of allowing conversions is to keep these buildings for the benefit of future generations. In the process of conversion, these buildings are vulnerable to the loss of their essential characteristics. The Council’s attitude is that traditional farm buildings should remain unaltered and remain looking like farm buildings after conversion. The guide is intended to explain the limitations of acceptable change.

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Roof lights and dormers:
The Council is generally opposed to the insertion of roof lights and dormers. Dormers are not usually found on agricultural buildings and even small roof lights catch the eye by reflecting open sky or sunlight. Experience has shown that both dormers and roof lights can be disproportionately responsible for a change in character away from that of a farm building. It is less damaging to disrupt walls than roofs. An alternative may be a suitable opening in the gable end to supplement light levels.

Any proposal to form an opening in the roof slope of a traditional farm building will be treated with caution. In special circumstances some alteration of roofs may be allowed but only to a limited degree on less important slopes. Roofs must continue to be overwhelmingly undisturbed and any glazing in the roof slope should hardly be noticeable in an expanse of matt textured tiles or slates.

Normal roof lights have the disadvantage of an upstand which visually jars with the roof profile. Flush fitting roof lights with concealed integral gutters are now available. Also, it is now possible to obtain special non-reflective (Schott) glass to fit into the roof light.

Single storey farm buildings should remain single storey accommodation in order to avoid the need to provide openings in the roof.

Openings in walls:
The simplicity of traditional farm buildings should be retained in any conversion. Agricultural buildings are characterised by a few window and door openings. Conversion to a single dwelling house is generally preferable to the creation of more than one dwelling since this will usually involve fewer new window and door openings. New window and door openings should preferably be located on ‘inside’ elevations away from public view. Apart from primary wagon door openings, windows and doors are commonly small and insignificant on agricultural buildings. In conversions, designers will be expected to follow the type, proportion and detail of existing openings. The position and size of existing openings should also be taken into account when determining the accommodation to be provided within the building. This will affect both the number of rooms that can be formed and the uses to which they are put.

The re-use of existing openings, existing doors and window frames will be encouraged. Any additional doors and windows should copy existing patterns. Large wagon door openings should be used to provide the majority of internal natural light by constructing an inconspicuous frame set back into the building.

Materials:
Rebuilding should be avoided, as much of the original fabric should be retained as possible. Where rebuilding is inevitable then existing materials should be re-used. When modern materials are used for repair or rebuilding they are invariably obvious and immediately noticeable. In order to maintain converted farm buildings in an authentic condition new work should blend harmoniously with old. Facsimile slates and tiles, reconstituted stone, concrete, aluminium and plastic are unacceptable materials.

Mortar mix:
Pointing should be flush or slightly recessed not proud of the wall surface. Do not attempt to make a feature of the pointing, brush pointing is better than a mechanically smooth finish. Lime should be used in the mortar mix to allow movement, it will also help to match the colour of the mortar with the original. Cement coloured mortars are to be avoided and care should be taken not to smudge the face of stone or brickwork.

Timber:
Timber frames should be preserved as completely as possible, scarfing new timber to old is preferred rather than replacement. Roof trusses should remain unaltered and if possible visible. Rough sawn boarding used to clad farm buildings should be of traditional size (225mm with 37mm overlap) and not smooth profiled modern types (usually 150mm or less). Wood types should be matched. Oak is normally used for structural elements and tar coated elm for weatherboards. Try to keep the main face of a timber framed building in original (re-used) weatherboards.
Extensions and additions:
Farm buildings are operational structures, generally without ornament or symmetry. They have a functional simplicity which is part of their appeal. Changes to the roof slope, amendments to the eaves line and the addition of porches will contribute to complexity and a loss of original character. It is important that farm buildings are preserved in their original form without alien additions or alterations.

Rainwater goods:
Rain was often allowed to run off the eaves of farm buildings without a roof drainage system. It follows that new rainwater gutters and downpipes should be discreet and mounted using stirrup brackets rather than a fascia board. Rainwater downpipes should be minimised on less prominent elevations where possible and made of metal (preferably in a traditional design) rather than plastic.

Chimney stacks:
The addition of chimney stacks can change the agricultural appearance of farm buildings by creating a domestic image. Where no chimney exists then a small metal flue finished in black or dark grey is acceptable provided that it is set away from prominent facades or otherwise located inconspicuously.

Heating:
The use of conventional central heating causes movement in timber framed buildings, due to the high surface temperatures of radiators. Underfloor, low temperature heating or fan convector heaters are kinder to timber flooring which have been exposed to ambient weather conditions for years. Specialist heating engineers or consultants will be required to advise on installation and maintenance.
**Interiors:**

Design solutions will have to be found which avoid disturbing the existing roof timbers and which do not require raising external walls. Conversion work needs special skill and consulting designers who have a proven record of success in this field is recommended.

Traditional farm buildings will most effectively retain their integrity if the interior is left open, or at least in part, to give an impression of the pre-converted space. Open plan designs within which the roof structure can be appreciated from the ground floor are preferred. Open layouts help natural light penetrate from a limited number of openings to illuminate a relatively large area of floor space.

Internal divisions should be kept to a minimum and in sympathy with the structural bay divisions of the building. Staircases and doors should be contemporary in design, akin to those compatible buildings such as water or windmills. The removal, cutting through or disturbing framing members will be resisted, new walls and partitions should avoid encasing the frame and, where necessary, a colourless fire resisting coating can be applied directly.

**Curtailages:**

Traditional farm buildings are generally associated with yards or open field locations. In order to maintain the agricultural character of converted buildings in their new use, they should retain their open setting. Farm buildings are simple and unfussy, suburban paraphernalia (patio equipment, interwoven fencing, greenhouses, pools and sheds) can detract from their farm like setting. The curtailage of a converted farm building should remain open and uncluttered.

There may be scope for private areas but these should be screened with hedging and walls of old brick.

**Surface materials:**

Modern ground surface materials, Tarmac, poured concrete, concrete paving and concrete blocks are out of keeping with the character of traditional farm buildings.

The first step is to retain or re-use existing stone, setts or stable blocks and to supplement these as necessary. For larger areas bound gravel and areas of clay bricks are recommended.

Landscape:

Try to retain existing trees and shrubs and supplement these with reasonably indigenous species, fast growing conifer screens are discordant. Wherever possible a forest tree or trees will enhance the setting of a converted farm building.
Vehicles:

Motor cars detract from the appearance of farm yards causing them to look domestic. Parking and garaging should be concealed as far as possible. The Council will expect that existing cart sheds should be re-used to garage vehicles provided that access arrangements are suitable for modern requirements. The Council is reluctant to accept new structures for garaging when suitable accommodation for vehicles exists, not all buildings will therefore be available for residential conversion.

Archaeology:

Some barns and farms in Buckinghamshire fall within the curtilage of medieval manor houses or monastic establishments, and occasionally are sited on moats. Consideration will be given to the proximity of historic buildings if the proposed conversion lies on or adjacent to an important site. The county Archaeologist is at the County Archaeological Service, Spatial Planning Division, Planning and Transportation, Buckinghamshire County Council, County Hall, Aylesbury, Bucks. HP20 1UY. Tel: 01296 382927

Wildlife:

Old farm buildings can be the habitat of bats and owls. Roosts for these creatures are protected by the provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The Nature Conservancy Council must now be consulted before any new building work or the remedial treatment of timber is undertaken where the structure is used by bats or owls.
Technical Supplement

Potential applicants or their agents are invited to seek advice from Planning Officers and Building Control Officers at an early stage. The main technical requirements are as follows:

Structural Survey

The council will require the submission of a full structural survey and condition report from an appropriately qualified professional. This report should include an assessment of the extent to which works or repairs are necessary and the amount of new structural work needed to enable the conversion.

Additionally, the application plans should provide sufficient detail to make it very clear which parts of the building are to remain, which parts will be demolished and which parts are new build. Colour shading is recommended.

The following drawings will be required:

- a) Survey plan of ground floor (and upper floors if applicable)
- b) Survey elevations
- c) Plan of proposed conversion - ground floor (upper floors if appropriate) new work to be hatched or coloured or annotated clearly. New structural work to be indicated.
- d) Proposed elevations - new work, alterations to be clearly indicated.
- e) Site plan showing treatment of external areas, landscaping (hard and soft) and boundary treatments.
- f) 1:2500 location plan.

A structural Survey report with respect to each element of the group of buildings is required. This report should address:

- a) General description and age of building that is original.
- b) Condition-structural integrity, foundations, damp proofing, walls, joinery, timbers, roof structure and roof covering.
- c) Assessment of repairs necessary to ensure retention of building.
- d) Assessment of structural and other alterations necessary to implement proposed conversion (including those needed for thermal insulation).
- e) Assessment of percentage of building which needs to be rebuilt- walls and timbers.
- f) Opinion as to suitability of building for the proposed conversion.
- g) Photographs are often helpful, but are not essential.

An estimate of the cost of carrying out the proposed conversion should be provided, together with an estate agent’s estimate of the likely value of the converted unit(s).

A statement should also be submitted which explains why the buildings are no longer necessary or suitable for farming the land on which they are situated. This should also explain any need for replacement or new buildings which would arise if planning permission were to be forthcoming for the proposed conversion.

Legal Agreements

In granting permission for a change of use for the conversion of a traditional farm building, it is normal practice to remove, by condition, some or all permitted development rights in order to preclude further change or addition which will affect the character or setting of the structure.

The Council may also wish to restrict the use(s) by planning conditions. In certain cases the Council may decide that other restrictions, which cannot be imposed by conditions are essential. These will be the subject of negotiation with a view to a legal agreement being concluded between the applicant and the Council.

Building Regulations

When a proposal is put forward to convert a traditional farm building, the Building Regulations will apply.

1. All new work must comply fully with the Building Regulations.
2. The existing structure will need certain modification and improvements to bring it to the standards necessary for the use to which the finished building will be used for.

On completion of the conversion, it would be necessary to show that the finished building was structurally sound and weather resistant and there were necessary degrees of fire resistance for all elements of structure, such as walls, floors, columns, beams etc., that provision had been made for ventilation, satisfactory washing and sanitary facilities together with appropriate drainage, heating appliances, and in order that the occupants of the building should enjoy a comfortable and ambient condition, the satisfactory provision of thermal insulation and damp proofing.

When considering the design for conversion one should take cognizance of the requirements of the Building Regulations and Planning Legislation (which have different aims) in order to seek compatibility between the differing sets of legislation.

Particular attention should be paid to the external finishes where the use of materials for aesthetic purposes may not give the required fire resistance, or where the introduction of windows and other such openings required for light and ventilation purposes would effect the visual aspect of the building, also the retention or removal of structural elements, such as traditional roof trusses, collars or beams may effect the structure and in turn alter the planned design for the interior of the building.

There are a number of areas, other than those mentioned above, where compliance with the Building Regulations may affect Planning Requirements and vice versa, particularly if the building is subject to any form of listed building consent.

For further information please contact the Building Control Section.

Tel: 01296 585459 or
E-mail: BControl@aylesbury valedc.gov.uk
Help and Advice

For advice on planning applications and building control information contact our help and information desk at:

Aylesbury Vale District Council
66 High Street
Aylesbury
Buckinghamshire
HP20 1SD

Telephone (01296) 585630, 585631 or 585654

Information

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6 New buildings in the countryside
7 Shopfronts and associated advertisements