

12

SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES



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12

SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Introduction



12.1 Tonbridge and Malling Borough includes diverse countryside, including the nationally protected landscapes of the Kent Downs and High Weald National Landscapes, high-quality agricultural land, and a significant portion of the Metropolitan Green Belt.

12.2 These rural areas are central to the borough's identity, supporting biodiversity, heritage, and community wellbeing.

12.3 The countryside is home to a network of villages and hamlets, each with its own distinct character and history. It provides a setting for recreation, tourism, and a resilient rural economy, while also contributing to the borough's environmental sustainability. The Local Plan recognises the need to protect the intrinsic value of the countryside, while enabling appropriate development to support rural communities and meet local needs. The planning policies provided are aligned with Local Plan objectives and reflect national planning guidance, including the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).





Rural Exception Sites



Introduction



12.4 Tonbridge and Malling Borough contains a diverse range of rural communities, many of which face increasing pressure from high housing costs and limited development opportunities. In these areas, particularly where services and facilities are scarce, enabling local people to remain in their communities is essential to maintaining their vitality and sustainability and supporting the long-term viability of rural settlements.

12.5 Rural Exception Sites allow small-scale affordable housing development on land not normally allocated for housing and which would not otherwise be released for residential development. These sites are specifically intended to meet the needs of local households who are unable to access market housing, and who have a strong connection to the area.

12.6 The council supports the use of Rural Exception Sites to meet identified local housing needs in smaller communities. This policy sets out a framework to deliver such sites in appropriate locations, ensuring they are locally supported, well-designed, appropriately scaled, and secured for long-term community benefit.

12.7 House prices in rural areas often exceed local incomes, limiting the ability of younger people, families, and key workers to remain in or return to their communities. This affects the long-term sustainability of rural settlements, including the viability of local services, schools, and businesses and can contribute to population decline in some villages.

12.8 National planning policy requires planning policies and decisions to respond to local circumstances and support housing that meets local needs, including through Rural Exception Sites (as set out in the NPPF). This Policy therefore aligns with national policy and provides a locally responsive framework for delivery.

Policy R1: Rural Exception Sites

- 1 Small scale residential development in rural areas outside defined settlement boundaries may be permitted where they are consistent with all other Local Plan policies and national policy, accord with national Green Belt or grey-belt policy where applicable, and meet all the following criteria:
 - a The site is identified to meet unmet local housing need either within the Parish or an adjacent Parish that cannot be located elsewhere and as evidenced by an up-to-date and robust housing needs survey, the Council's Housing Register, or other appropriate evidence;
 - b The exception site is in a suitable location within, adjacent to, or closely related to an existing settlement;
 - c The proposed development reflects the required housing need in terms of appropriate size, type, tenure, mix and price, is of high-quality design and responds positively to the character of any adjoining development and the locality;
 - d The affordable homes are of the same or similar design to any market homes that may be allowed, ensuring no material distinction in external appearance or quality;
 - e The development provides suitable and safe access and parking in accordance with adopted local standards;
 - f The homes are secured as affordable homes in perpetuity, through a legal agreement, and managed by the Council, a Registered Housing Provider, or other relevant bodies, to ensure that the housing remains as affordable and available to meet the affordable housing needs of local people; and
 - g The proposal does not include mixed uses, unless such uses are demonstrated to be ancillary or complementary to the residential use and necessary to support the sustainability of the scheme.
- 2 Proposals that require a small element of market housing to enable the delivery of affordable homes will only be permitted where a viability assessment confirms that the need for market housing is necessary. The scheme will be subject to an independent viability assessment, at the applicant's cost. The quantum of market housing should be the minimum necessary to secure delivery of the affordable housing, having regard to national policy requirements. The primary purpose of the development must be the delivery of affordable homes.



Policy Implementation

12.9 The council will consider Rural Exception Sites based on evidence of local housing need, demonstrated by an up-to-date housing needs survey (undertaken within the last five years) supported by the Housing Register or equivalent data. Proposals must demonstrate that the identified need cannot be met within existing settlement boundaries or through allocated sites.

12.10 Affordable housing must be secured in perpetuity via Section 106 legal agreements, using tenures that ensure long-term affordability. Homes must be allocated to those with a strong local connection in accordance with the adopted Housing Allocations Policy.

12.11 Schemes should be well-integrated with the surrounding environment, particularly in areas such as the Kent Downs National Landscape, where great weight is given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty. Affordable homes should be indistinguishable from market homes in terms of design, materials and external appearance.

12.12 Where a small proportion of market housing is proposed to support scheme viability, this must be justified through a viability assessment, demonstrating that market housing is necessary to enable delivery. The council will arrange an independent review at the applicant's expense. Only the minimum number of market homes necessary to deliver the affordable housing will be permitted.

12.13 Rural Exception Sites are normally brought forward by a Registered Provider or Community Land Trust. Providers should liaise with the Parish Council, and early and meaningful engagement with local communities and stakeholders is encouraged.



Housing For Rural Workers



Introduction

12.14 The borough's rural character includes farm holdings, horticultural enterprises, equestrian facilities, and other land-based rural businesses. These enterprises are important to the local economy and countryside management. In undertaking business activities, there may sometimes be special circumstances where it is essential for a rural worker to live permanently at or in close proximity to their place of work in order to support the effective operation of the enterprise.

12.15 Policy R2 seeks to address the specific housing needs of rural workers by enabling the provision of accommodation outside settlement boundaries, where a genuine, functional and financial need is demonstrated.

12.16 This Policy supports rural businesses and communities, while ensuring development remains sensitive to countryside character and complies with national policy, including Green Belt protections where relevant. It aligns with national policy, which allows isolated homes where an essential need exists for a rural worker to live nearby.

12.17 Housing development in the countryside must be carefully controlled to protect the openness of rural areas and prevent unnecessary encroachment beyond settlement boundaries. This policy supports genuine rural occupational housing where needs cannot be met through existing accommodation, ensuring proposals are essential, justified, proportionate, sustainable and represent the minimum necessary to meet the identified need.



Policy R2: Housing For Rural Workers

- 1 Housing for rural workers will be permitted outside settlement boundaries where the following criteria are met:
 - a The proposal accords with national Green Belt policy where relevant and constitutes an appropriate form of countryside development having regard to the exceptional justification provided by this policy;
 - b There is an essential occupational or functional need for a full-time rural worker to live permanently at or in close proximity to their place of work in the interests of the effective operation of the enterprise;
 - c No suitable and available accommodation, either for sale or rent, within a reasonable distance of the site, can be found via existing housing in a nearby settlement or location or at the existing site through existing buildings or conversion of existing buildings;
 - d The business has been established for a sufficient period (normally at least three years) and is demonstrated to be financially sound, with detailed evidence including a financial appraisal showing the enterprise is likely to remain financially viable for the foreseeable future;
 - e All permanent housing should be of a size that is no larger than is functionally required and commensurate with the established need and sited as close as possible to existing buildings, minimising landscape and visual impacts;
 - f All housing will comply with minimum health standards; and
 - g All proposals will provide the necessary services to serve the dwellings including access, hardstanding, drainage and ventilation.
- 2 Evidence submitted on financial viability and functional need will be subject to an independent assessment by the council's appointed consultant at the applicant's cost.
- 3 If a new dwelling is essential to support new or existing farming activity, but the functional need or financial viability of the enterprise has not been fully demonstrated, then temporary accommodation may be permitted in locations where rural worker's accommodation is considered suitable in order to assess the functional need and financial sustainability of the enterprise. Planning conditions shall be used to limit the duration of the proposed use up to three years. After three years, a permanent dwelling will only be permitted where criteria 1a-1c and the relevant functional and financial tests are satisfied.
- 4 Both permanent and temporary accommodation will be subject to an occupancy condition. In addition, where there is a clear planning justification, permission may be subject to a legal agreement preventing the future separation of farmhouses from any adjoining farm buildings/land.



Policy Implementation

12.18 Planning applications will be assessed against the criteria set out in Policy R2. Applicants will be required to submit proportionate evidence demonstrating the essential need for on-site accommodation, the absence of suitable alternative accommodation, and compliance with the relevant functional and financial tests for rural workers' dwellings set out in national Planning Practice Guidance. This should include, where relevant, a functional assessment of the need for an on-site presence and a financial appraisal of the enterprise. The Council will commission an independent review of submitted evidence, at the applicant's expense. Financial information should normally cover the preceding three years, where available, and demonstrate that the enterprise is, or has a clear prospect of becoming, financially viable.

12.19 Where permanent accommodation is not justified, temporary structures may be permitted for up to three years, subject to occupancy conditions and a reassessment of need thereafter. Temporary permissions are intended to support new or emerging enterprises and to assess whether a permanent need can be justified. Occupancy conditions will normally limit occupation to persons solely or mainly employed, or last employed, in agriculture, forestry or other land-based rural enterprises, and their dependants. Removal of an occupancy condition will only be permitted where there is clear evidence that the condition is no longer justified. All rural workers' dwellings will be subject to occupancy restrictions to prevent misuse and ensure compliance with this policy.

12.20 Criterion 1(f) seeks to ensure that all rural workers' accommodation provides a safe and healthy living environment. Applicants should demonstrate that proposed accommodation would achieve appropriate living standards having regard to matters such as internal space, daylight, outlook, ventilation, accessibility and residential amenity.

12.21 To avoid isolated market housing in the countryside, proposals to remove occupancy conditions will only be approved in exceptional circumstances. Any application to remove an occupancy condition must demonstrate that the original need no longer exists. This includes demonstrating that:

- i the business no longer requires the accommodation;
- ii the dwelling is not needed for affordable housing; and
- iii there is no rural housing need locally.

12.22 Applicants will also be expected to demonstrate that reasonable efforts have been made to market the dwelling for occupation by eligible rural workers at an appropriate price for a sustained period.

12.23 Where justified by the circumstances of the case, planning conditions may remove permitted development rights to ensure that a dwelling remains proportionate to the identified functional need. Proposals for replacement dwellings, extensions or additional rural workers' accommodation may be required to demonstrate that the original need remains valid.



Replacement Dwellings Outside Settlement Boundaries



Introduction

12.24 While the focus remains on directing development to the borough's most sustainable settlements, the needs of existing rural residents are recognised. In particular, some residents may wish to replace existing dwellings that are no longer fit for purpose, whether due to age, condition, or design, including to meet changing household needs, accessibility requirements or modern living standards, so they can continue to live in the countryside in suitable homes that meet their needs.

12.25 While new buildings in the countryside are generally restricted, the replacement of lawful dwellings can provide a sustainable alternative to greenfield development. This can retain the existing rural housing stock, reuse developed land, and support sustainable rural communities. The policy below provides a clear framework for assessing these proposals, ensuring that replacement dwellings are of an appropriate scale, design, and located in a way that respects the rural setting and character and does not result in unjustified harm to landscape character or openness.

12.26 The policy takes a balanced approach, supporting rural residents while protecting the countryside from inappropriate change. It aligns with national policy by enabling replacement dwellings that support the vitality and continued occupation of rural communities while maintaining the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside.

12.27 Replacement dwellings can address matters such as outdated design, poor energy performance, inadequate internal space, changing household circumstances, accessibility needs and climate resilience. In some circumstances, a replacement dwelling may be located in an alternative position where this would deliver clear planning benefits.

Such benefits may include improved landscape integration, reduced visual impact, enhanced heritage conservation, improved residential amenity, reduced flood risk, or safer access arrangements.

12.28 However, to ensure that such development does not undermine the character or openness of the countryside, the policy sets clear parameters on scale, siting, and design. It applies only to lawful and active residential uses, preventing the reintroduction of residential use where it has ceased or been abandoned. In Green Belt locations, proposals must also comply with national policy and preserve openness and the purposes of Green Belt designation.

Policy R3: Replacement Dwellings Outside Settlement Boundaries

- 1 Replacement dwellings outside settlement boundaries will be supported where the following criteria are met:
 - a Replacement dwellings will be on a strictly 'one for one' basis and will only be supported where it can be demonstrated that dwelling benefits from a lawful residential use and has not been 'abandoned', having regard to the facts of the site and relevant case law;
 - b The replacement dwelling is of a comparable size and scale to the existing dwelling and will not result in a materially greater volume than the dwelling it replaces, unless there are clear planning benefits that justify an alternative approach e.g. landscape, heritage or local amenity. Where the latter is applicable, then the dwelling must be located within or closely related to the existing residential planning unit and must not result in greater harm to openness, landscape character or visual amenity or the wider countryside;
 - c The dwelling to be replaced shall be demolished following occupation of the replacement dwelling in accordance with a planning condition or other agreed mechanism, unless otherwise agreed by the Local Planning Authority;
 - d The design of the replacement dwelling is in keeping with the character of the area and is sympathetic to its setting in terms of form and massing and is no more visually intrusive than the existing dwelling. Design materials must reflect local character; and development must achieve a high standard of design consistent with national policy on good design. Design Codes or equivalent guidance should be applied where appropriate;
 - e The replacement dwelling provides suitable access, parking and amenity space without harming the living conditions of nearby residents or adversely impacting other nearby uses having regard to highway safety, residential amenity and the rural character of the area;
 - f Where the proposal is located in the Green Belt, it accords with Policy SP8 and national Green Belt policy, including the requirement that replacement buildings do not result in disproportionate additions over and above the size of the original building and preserve the openness of the Green Belt; and
 - g The replacement dwelling does not result in the coalescence of villages or an unacceptable cumulative impact on the rural character, landscape, or amenity of the area, either individually or in combination with other development.



Policy Implementation

12.29 Applicants will be expected to provide clear and proportionate evidence demonstrating that the dwelling to be replaced benefits from a lawful residential use and has not been abandoned. Evidence may include planning permissions, lawful development certificates, council tax records, utility records, electoral roll information, tenancy records or other relevant documentation, having regard to the circumstances of the case. Proposals should be accompanied by plans and supporting statements demonstrating compliance with the requirements of Policy R3, including scale, siting, volume, design and visual impact.

12.30 The Council will assess all relevant evidence holistically, taking account of the facts of the site and relevant case law relating to abandonment. Where a replacement dwelling is proposed in an alternative location, applicants will be expected to demonstrate clear planning benefits arising from the relocation. Such benefits may include improved landscape integration, reduced visual prominence, improved relationship to heritage assets, reduced flood risk, improved access arrangements, enhanced residential amenity, or other site-specific planning benefits. Any alternative siting should remain reasonably related to the existing dwelling and must not result in greater harm to the countryside, openness, landscape character or visual amenity.

12.31 The removal of the original dwelling will normally be secured through planning conditions or other appropriate mechanisms to ensure that the proposal does not result in the creation of an additional dwelling in the countryside. The precise timing of demolition will be determined having regard to the circumstances of the proposal and any practical, construction or safety considerations. In Green Belt areas, proposals must be assessed against both local and national Green Belt policy. Applicants should demonstrate that the replacement dwelling would not result in a disproportionate increase in size or volume over the original building and would preserve the openness and purposes of the Green Belt. Pre-application discussions are encouraged to ensure that proposals are well-informed and policy-compliant from the outset.





Conversion of an Existing Building to Residential Use Outside Settlement Boundaries

Introduction

12.32 Outside settlement boundaries, the countryside is protected from unsustainable or inappropriate forms of development. However, in limited circumstances the conversion of existing buildings to residential use may be acceptable, particularly where it supports the re-use of redundant or underused buildings and contributes to rural vitality. National planning policy supports the effective re-use of existing buildings and previously developed land, where development is sensitive to its surroundings and conserves the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside.

12.33 Policy R4 sets out the criteria for assessing proposals for residential conversion or subdivision of buildings in rural areas. It ensures that such proposals are only supported where there is clear justification, where the building is suitable for conversion without substantial reconstruction, and where the location allows for reasonable access to services and facilities. The policy also safeguards against the loss of viable rural businesses and protects the architectural and historic value of rural buildings.

12.34 The conversion of existing buildings outside settlement boundaries can offer a sustainable way to meet housing needs, particularly where it avoids the need for new-build development on greenfield land.

12.35 However, such proposals must be carefully managed to ensure they do not result in the unjustified loss of employment or community uses or lead to isolated or sporadic forms of development that would undermine the character of the countryside.

12.36 This policy ensures that residential conversions are only permitted where the building is no longer viable for its current or previous use, or where there is no reasonable prospect of its continued use for employment generating purposes, as demonstrated through proportionate evidence, which may include a robust marketing exercise. It also requires that the building is structurally capable of conversion without substantial rebuilding, in line with national policy.

12.37 This approach helps retain the character and integrity of rural buildings, and their contribution to landscape character. The policy further ensures that new residential uses are located in sustainable rural locations, where opportunities exist to minimise the need to travel and where there would be no adverse impacts on the surrounding environment or heritage assets.

Policy R4: Conversion of an Existing Building to Residential Use Outside Settlement Boundaries

- 1 The conversion or sub-division of an existing building to residential use outside settlement boundaries will be supported where the following criteria are met:
 - a It has been demonstrated that the existing use of the building is no longer viable and that there is no reasonable prospect of it being used for its existing or an alternative employment generating use, having regard to its condition, location and market demand. Where appropriate, this may include evidence of active and realistic marketing for a continuous period of at least 12 months at an appropriate market rate with a specialist agent;
 - b The building is structurally sound, permanent and of substantial construction, as demonstrated by a structural survey;
 - c The conversion or sub-division can be achieved without substantial reconstruction, extensions or alterations or the construction of new buildings. Limited and proportionate alterations or extensions will only be permitted where they are necessary to secure the optimal viable use of the building, achieve a high-quality design or meet building regulations, and where they remain subordinate to the existing building and preserve its character, appearance, setting, without harm to the countryside;
 - d The site is not isolated and represents a sustainable location for residential use, having regard to accessibility, its relationship to nearby settlements, access to services and facilities and opportunities to minimise the need to travel;
 - e Any residential curtilage shall be limited to that which is necessary to facilitate access, parking and a reasonable level of amenity space and shall avoid excessive domestication, including boundary treatments, lighting or ancillary structures, to preserve the character of the countryside;
 - f The proposal conserves and, where appropriate, enhances the character, appearance and features of architectural or historic interest of the building and its setting, and demonstrates a high standard of design that respects local character, materials, landscape context and the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside; and
 - g Where the proposal is located in the Green Belt, it accords with Policy SP8 and national Green Belt policy.



Policy Implementation

12.38 Applicants will be expected to provide proportionate evidence demonstrating that the existing use of the building is no longer viable and that there is no reasonable prospect of the building being retained in, or re-used for, an employment-generating use. The nature and extent of the evidence required will depend on the circumstances of the building, including its condition, location, lawful use and market context.

12.39 Where marketing evidence is relied upon to demonstrate compliance with Policy R4(1)(a), applicants will normally be expected to provide a comprehensive marketing report prepared by a suitably qualified agent. The report should demonstrate that the building has been actively and appropriately marketed for its existing or other suitable employment-generating uses for a continuous period of at least 12 months. The marketing should be realistic in terms of price, terms and visibility and should include details of enquiries received and the reasons why no viable occupation or reuse has occurred.

12.40 In some circumstances, alternative evidence may be accepted where it robustly demonstrates that there is no reasonable prospect of the building being retained in, or re-used for, an employment-generating use. Such evidence may include site-specific constraints, viability evidence, physical limitations of the building, or other material considerations.

12.41 Applicants will be expected to provide a structural survey, where necessary, demonstrating that the building is permanent, structurally sound and capable of conversion without substantial reconstruction. Limited and proportionate alterations or extensions may be acceptable where they are necessary to secure the viable re-use of the building, achieve a high standard of design or comply with building regulations, provided they remain subordinate to the existing building and do not harm its character, setting or the wider countryside.

12.42 The extent of any residential curtilage should be clearly defined and limited to that reasonably required for access, parking and residential amenity, avoiding the unnecessary domestication of the surrounding countryside through excessive hardstanding, boundary treatments, lighting, outbuildings or other urbanising features.

12.43 Where necessary, a Transport Statement or other proportionate evidence should be provided to demonstrate that the proposal represents a sustainable location for residential use, having regard to accessibility, its relationship to nearby settlements and services, highway safety and opportunities to minimise the need to travel.

12.44 In all cases, proposals should demonstrate that the conversion would conserve the character, appearance and significance of the building and its setting, particularly where the building is of architectural, historic or local interest. Where proposals are located within the Green Belt, applicants will also be expected to demonstrate compliance with national and local Green Belt policy. Early engagement with the Local Planning Authority is encouraged to ensure that proposals are appropriately evidenced and informed by relevant policy requirements.



Residential Caravan and Park Home Sites



Introduction

12.45 Residential caravan and park home sites including caravan sites form an important part of the housing offer, particularly for older persons and households seeking lower-cost forms of home ownership. Such accommodation can make a valuable contribution to housing choice and meeting identified housing needs.. While their contribution to meeting housing needs is recognised, it is essential that new proposals are appropriately located and designed to respect their surroundings and the character of the area in which they are proposed. This policy sets out the criteria under which new residential caravan and park home sites and small-scale extensions to existing sites will be considered acceptable.

12.46 This policy supports proposals for new residential caravan and park home sites within settlement boundaries, together with small-scale extensions to existing sites where appropriate. In accordance with national policy, planning policies and decisions should promote an effective use of land in meeting the need for homes and other uses, while safeguarding and improving the environment and ensuring safe and healthy living conditions.

12.47 The council acknowledges the role that residential parks can play in broadening housing choice, particularly for older people and those seeking lower-cost home ownership. To be acceptable, such developments must integrate successfully with existing communities, protect local character and safeguard the amenity of neighbouring occupiers.

12.48 The criteria within the policy are designed to ensure that proposals are of a scale and are designed in a way that responds positively to their context, provide adequate infrastructure and services, and do not result in harm to the countryside, Green Belt, or neighbouring uses. By directing new residential caravan and park home development to sustainable locations, the policy seeks to ensure that occupiers have good access to services, facilities and public transport, in line with national planning objectives and the Council's strategic housing aims.

Policy R5: Residential Caravan and Park Home Sites

- 1 Proposals for new residential caravan or park home sites, and the extension of existing residential caravan or park home sites will be supported within settlement boundaries where they contribute to meeting the council's housing needs and all of the following criteria are met:
 - a The proposal is sympathetic to the existing surroundings in scale, siting and design, reflects the character and materials of the local area, safeguards the amenity of neighbouring properties, and provides a high quality living environment through well-designed layouts, landscaping and adequate internal and external amenity space;
 - b The proposal would not have an adverse impact on local character or the amenities of adjoining sites or settlements, including through its scale, layout, intensity of use or visual appearance;
 - c The proposal includes safe vehicular and pedestrian access, storage areas for waste and recycling, and sufficient parking arrangements appropriate to the scale and nature of the development;
 - d Adequate services and utilities are provided and the site has good accessibility by sustainable modes of transport to a sustainable settlement;
 - e The proposal would not place unacceptable pressure on local infrastructure, including transport, health, education and utility infrastructure where relevant;
 - f It can be demonstrated that there will be no unacceptable adverse effect on the character or appearance of the countryside, residential amenities, traffic conditions or public safety, having regard to cumulative impacts where relevant; and
 - g Where the proposal is located in the Green Belt, it accords with Policy SP8 and national Green Belt policy.

Policy Implementation

12.49 Proposals for new residential caravan and park home sites or extensions to existing sites will be assessed against the criteria set out in the policy. Applicants must submit supporting evidence demonstrating how the proposal responds to its context, including details on scale, design, layout and relationship to surrounding uses.

12.50 Applications must include information on access arrangements, parking provision, waste and recycling storage, and the availability of essential services and utilities. Where relevant and proportionate, assessments of landscape impact, transport accessibility, and effects on residential amenity should be submitted along with details of any necessary infrastructure improvements to ensure sufficient capacity in roads, health, education and other local services.

12.51 In locations within the Green Belt, proposals must clearly demonstrate compliance with national policy, including the preservation of openness and the purposes of the Green Belt. The council will also consider cumulative impacts where multiple proposals are brought forward in close proximity, to ensure that the character of the area and the capacity of local infrastructure and services are not compromised. Where appropriate, applicants should also demonstrate how the proposal provides residents with reasonable access to local services, facilities and public transport.



Employment Development Outside Existing Settlement Boundaries



Introduction

12.52 The NPPF encourages planning policies that support a prosperous rural economy, including the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business in rural areas. This includes enabling the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses, and the re-use of redundant or disused buildings. While development is generally directed toward existing settlements, the NPPF neither defines settlement boundaries, nor prohibits development beyond them where proposals are appropriately located, not isolated, and can be justified in terms of sustainability.

12.53 Policy R6 reflects national policy by providing a locally tailored framework to support rural businesses and employment growth, whilst ensuring development contributes positively to the economy and respects the character and openness of the countryside and Green Belt.

12.54 Policy R6 supports growth on existing rural employment sites (including identified Strategic Employment Areas under Policy E2), while protecting the countryside's character. It balances economic development with environmental sensitivity by ensuring proposals are appropriate to their location, proportionate in scale, and prioritise the reuse and adaptation of existing buildings where feasible and practical.

12.55 National policy supports the sustainable growth and expansion of rural businesses, including through the conversion of existing buildings and the provision of well-designed new buildings. Policy R6 supports sustainable rural business growth through the reuse of existing buildings, well designed new development, and the intensification or extension of existing employment sites where there is a demonstrated operational need. This approach aligns with national guidance promoting the reuse of previously developed land and buildings, while safeguarding the Green Belt in accordance with Policy SP8 and national policy, which distinguishes between forms of development that are appropriate in the Green Belt and

development that is not appropriate development and therefore would require a demonstration of very special circumstances.

12.56 By requiring proposals to demonstrate operational justification and to consider the re-use of existing buildings, the policy ensures that development is necessary, proportionate, and supports economic growth without resulting in unacceptable harm to landscape character, openness, amenity or the undermining environmental objectives of the Plan.

12.57 The policy is not intended to support unrestricted expansion into the countryside but to enable proportionate, sustainable growth on established sites.

Policy R6: Employment Development Outside Existing Settlement Boundaries

Intensification or extension of existing employment development

- 1 Proposals for the intensification or extension of existing employment development within existing operational sites outside settlement boundaries will be supported, in principle, subject to the below criteria:
 - a A clear functional and operational need is demonstrated for the continued operation, adaptation or growth of an existing business, including where it is operating at, or is reasonably expected to reach, near or full capacity; and
 - b The scale and nature of the proposal is proportionate to the site, avoids disproportionate expansion into the countryside, and supports the vitality of the local economy.
- 2 Proposals will be supported where it can be demonstrated that:
 - a The scale, layout and design of development is appropriate for the site, its proposed use and its surroundings, and would respect the character of the area, having regard to local distinctiveness, landscape character and, where relevant, heritage assets and their settings;
 - b Development would not give rise to unacceptable adverse impacts on the amenities of neighbouring uses, including through noise, disturbance, traffic movements or other operational effects;
 - c Priority has been given to re-use or adaption of existing buildings within the site, with well-designed extensions or new buildings only being proposed where re-use or adaption of existing buildings is not viable or practical, and this has been demonstrated proportionately having regard to viability and operational requirements;
 - d Development would not result in unacceptable transport impacts, having regard to the nature of the use, the suitability of the access and parking arrangements and the capacity and character of the rural highway network;
 - e Development will make efficient use of the land and will not result in unnecessary encroachment into the countryside beyond the established site; and
 - f Development will, where appropriate to its scale and nature, incorporate measures to support sustainable transport, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and biodiversity enhancement.
- 3 Where development is proposed within the Green Belt, it must accord with Policy SP8 and national Green Belt policy and will only be supported where it preserves the openness of the Green Belt and does not conflict with Green Belt purposes.

Strategic Policy

Policy R6: Employment Development Outside Existing Settlement Confines Boundaries Continued

Re-use of existing rural buildings for business use

- 4 Development proposals that seek to re-use, convert or adapt existing redundant rural buildings for business use, including those previously in employment, agricultural or other lawful use, will be supported where:

- a A rural location is appropriate for the proposed use and would not result in an unsustainable pattern of development having regard to accessibility, infrastructure and environmental constraints and the scale, form and design of any works are proportionate to the original building, without the requirement for substantial reconstruction or additional buildings that would harm the character of the countryside;

- b The business will positively contribute to the rural economy through the provision of local employment opportunities, support for existing rural businesses, diversification of the rural economy, or the provision of services to rural communities;

- c The building is permanent and is of substantial construction and capable of re-use, conversion or adaptation without major re-building, alterations or extensions;

- d Where the building is currently or was last used for agricultural purposes, it is demonstrated that the building is no longer required for that use;

- e The development makes an efficient and viable use of a building that would otherwise remain redundant;

- f The proposal would not give rise to unacceptable adverse impacts on the amenities of neighbouring uses, including through noise, disturbance, traffic movements or other operational effects; and

- g Proposals that are located in the Green Belt must accord with Policy SP8 and national Green Belt policy and will only be permitted where they preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with Green Belt purposes.

Strategic Policy

Policy Implementation

12.58 Planning applications should be supported by proportionate and appropriate evidence that explains why the proposed development is necessary and how it responds to the specific characteristics of the site. Such evidence should set out operational need, site context, and the principles of sustainable rural development, commensurate with the scale and nature of the proposal. This may include demonstrating that the proposal represents a logical evolution of existing activity, and that it makes efficient use of land and buildings already in employment use. In order to recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of rural areas, the potential to make use of existing buildings should always be considered before the erection of new buildings or structures. Where new buildings or physical expansion are proposed, applicants should demonstrate, in a proportionate manner, that reasonable alternatives, such as internal reconfiguration or reuse of existing structures, have been fully explored and are not viable or practical.

12.59 The policy's emphasis on scale, character, and transport impacts means that proposals must be carefully designed to integrate with their surroundings and avoid adverse effects on local infrastructure or residential amenity. In rural and Green Belt locations, particular attention should be paid to visual containment, site layout, and the use of materials that reflect local vernacular. In assessing transport impacts, regard will be had as to whether any impacts on the rural highway network would be unacceptable, in accordance with national policy. Proposals should also be informed by early engagement with relevant consultees, including highways and landscape officers where appropriate, to ensure that technical matters are addressed from the outset.



Agriculture, Forestry and Horticulture

Introduction

12.60 The attractiveness of Tonbridge and Malling includes a rich historic heritage, a working countryside that includes small villages and hamlets supported by agriculture, horticulture and forestry. This includes some of the very best productive land in the country and other notable features such as the upper reaches of the River Medway and rich and diverse wildlife habitats. The borough's high-quality agricultural land and rural enterprises also play an important role in supporting food production and local economic resilience.

12.61 Agriculture, forestry, and horticulture are integral to the rural identity, economy, and landscape of the borough. These land-based industries not only provide food, timber, and other essential resources, but also contribute to the stewardship of the countryside, biodiversity, and the character of rural settlements. They are also key to supporting food security, climate resilience and the wider rural supply chain. As these sectors evolve in response to climate change, market demands, and technological innovation, there is a need to ensure that planning policy supports their continued viability and modernisation while safeguarding the intrinsic qualities of the rural environment.

12.62 Policy R7 recognises the importance of enabling appropriate development that supports rural land-based enterprises. It provides a framework for assessing proposals for new buildings and structures associated with these uses, ensuring that development is justified, proportionate, sensitively designed, and appropriately located. The Policy also reflects the need to balance operational requirements with the protection of landscape character, heritage assets, and the amenity of nearby communities, whilst taking a positive and enabling approach to sustainable rural growth.

12.63 The policy responds to the need for a clear and consistent approach to managing development in the countryside that supports rural productivity while maintaining environmental quality. Evidence from local and national sources, including agricultural land use data and rural economic strategies, highlights the importance of enabling modern, fit-for-purpose infrastructure for farming, forestry, and horticulture including water management, energy, and operational infrastructure necessary for efficient and resilient land management. However, this must be achieved without undermining the visual, ecological, or cultural value of the rural landscape.

12.64 Under policy R7, the requirement for accompanying proportionate evidence such as a business statement ensures that proposals are genuinely necessary for the operation or functional, environmental and welfare and husbandry needs of the enterprise and not speculative or unrelated to land-based activities. Prioritising the reuse of existing buildings aligns with sustainability principles and helps preserve the traditional character of farmsteads. Where new development is necessary, siting and design considerations are essential to ensure that buildings integrate well with their surroundings and do not result in visual or functional harm.

12.65 Outdoor storage solutions, including temporary structures such as polytunnels, while often essential for horticultural production, can have cumulative landscape and drainage impacts if not carefully managed. The extent, siting and design of such structures should therefore be carefully considered. The policy therefore includes provisions to ensure their seasonal use is controlled where justified by site-specific circumstances.



Policy R7: Agriculture, Forestry and Horticulture

- 1** Proposals for agriculture, forestry, horticulture and other rural land-based uses (including diversification) will be supported where they contribute to a sustainable, resilient and productive rural economy, including food production and land management, and meet the following criteria:
 - a** Proposals should be supported by proportionate evidence demonstrating that the development is reasonably necessary for the operation of the holding or enterprise, including its functional, operational, environmental and welfare and husbandry needs for the development having regard to the scale, nature and location of the activity proposed;
 - b** Existing buildings within the site should be prioritised first and be re-used, adapted or converted where appropriate where this would meet the identified need in a suitable and viable manner. Proposals should demonstrate that the potential for re-use or adaption has been considered. New buildings or structures will only be supported where the re-use or adaption / conversion of existing buildings is not viable or practical (i.e it would not meet operational, functional, environmental or welfare and husbandry requirements). Where this is not viable or practical, the new building or structure should be sited in or adjacent to existing building groups or associated operations, and be of a scale and design appropriate to its function whilst retaining the agricultural character of the site;
 - c** The design and / or location of the building respects rural distinctiveness and farmstead groupings, where applicable, with location also reflecting the building's proposed rural use and operational requirements;
 - d** Any associated essential infrastructure is acceptable where necessary to support the rural use where this does not give rise to unacceptable impacts on the character of the countryside, the amenity of neighbouring uses, or the environment; and
 - e** Outdoor storage, including polytunnels, should be limited to what is reasonably necessary for the operation of the enterprise and be sited and designed to minimise visual and landscape impacts.

Strategic Policy

Policy Implementation

12.66 Policy R7 addresses the requirement for agriculture, forestry and horticulture related development within the countryside, should there be an operational, functional, environmental need for the development and/or in the interests of animal welfare and husbandry at an appropriate scale and location. This includes development required to support the ongoing viability, resilience and efficient operation of rural enterprises. Policy NE9 deals with the protection of the 'best and most versatile agricultural land'.

12.67 In order to recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of rural areas, the potential to make use of existing buildings should always be considered before the erection of new buildings or structures. However, it is recognised that existing buildings may not always be suitable or capable of adaptation to meet modern agricultural requirements, new buildings will be considered where this is the case. New agricultural buildings and the conversion of certain agricultural buildings to residential, or for business use may be covered by permitted development. However, within the Green Belt, National Landscapes, heritage assets or conservation areas planning permission may still be required. Therefore, this policy relates to proposals where planning permission is required.

12.68 Planning applications will be assessed against the criteria set out in Policy R7 and relevant national and local guidance. Applicants will be expected to provide clear and proportionate information and evidence demonstrating operational need, functional requirements and, where relevant, environmental or welfare considerations.

12.69 Where development is proposed within or near the Kent Downs or High Weald National Landscapes, additional landscape and visual impact assessments may be required. Proposals affecting high-quality agricultural land will be considered to ensure that land use is justified in accordance with Policy NE9 and does not result in unnecessary loss of productive capacity. Consideration will also be given to the efficient use of land and the role of development in supporting long-term agricultural productivity.

12.70 Planning conditions may be used to control the scale, appearance, and duration of development, particularly for temporary structures, where this is necessary and proportionate to address site-specific impacts. The council will also encourage early engagement through pre-application advice, especially for proposals in sensitive landscape areas or where large-scale or operationally complex agricultural development is proposed.

Farm Diversification

Introduction

12.71 Farm and other land-based rural diversification plays a vital role in sustaining the viability of businesses and enhancing the resilience of the rural economy. As farming faces increasing pressures from the market, climate change, and policy reform, diversification offers opportunities for farms to supplement income, retain employment, and contribute to the broader economic and social fabric of rural communities. This policy supports development proposals that enable farm and other land-based rural businesses to diversify in a way that complements their primary function, respects the rural character of the area, and contributes positively to the local economy and supports the sustainable growth and expansion of rural businesses.

12.72 National policy supports the sustainable growth, expansion and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses. Supporting farm diversification will help to support the long-term sustainability of agricultural enterprises and the wider rural economy. Evidence from national surveys indicates that over half of UK farms engage in diversified activities, with income from these ventures often exceeding that from traditional farming operations. Diversification can reduce reliance on agricultural subsidies, provide more predictable revenue streams, and help farms adapt to changing consumer demands and environmental challenges.

12.73 In Kent, the character and heritage of farmsteads are particularly valued, and the policy ensures that diversification proposals respect traditional farmstead groupings and rural design principles. The inclusion of criteria for farm shops reflects the growing consumer interest in local produce and the role such enterprises play in strengthening local food networks and supporting local supply chains.



Policy R8: Farm and Land-Based Rural Diversification

- 1 Development proposals relating to farm diversification of existing agricultural or other land-based rural business will be supported where the following criteria are met:
 - a A diversification plan, proportionate to the scale of development, is submitted, which demonstrates that the proposed development would support, strengthen and / or enhance the ongoing resilience, sustainability and viability of the existing agricultural or land-based rural business over the long term;
 - b The proposal would support the continued operation of the primary agricultural or land-based business and would not undermine its viability or continued operation, with diversification supporting the primary business;
 - c The development will make a positive contribution to the rural economy including through supporting the sustainable growth and expansion of rural business, including through the provision of local employment, local enterprise opportunities or support for local rural supply chains;
 - d The proposal prioritises the re-use or adaptation of existing buildings, infrastructure, utilities, services, parking and vehicular access where feasible. Well-designed new buildings and associated facilities and access will be supported where appropriate and where the re-use of existing assets is not viable or practical. In such cases, development should:
 - Be sited in or adjacent to an existing group of buildings;
 - Retain the agricultural character of the site; and
 - Be of an appropriate scale, massing and design appropriate to its rural context;
 - e The siting, design and appearance of any buildings respects local landscape character, rural distinctiveness and farmstead groupings and their location would be appropriate to the rural use proposed, and would conserve and enhance biodiversity, landscape character and, where relevant, the historic environment;
 - f The scale of development proposed is proportionate to and no more than is reasonably necessary to meet the current and reasonably foreseeable operational needs of the diversified business;
 - g The proposal will avoid the loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land, unless it is demonstrated that there are no suitable alternative locations within the site using lower quality land and the benefits of the development outweigh the loss;
 - h The nature and scale of the diversified activities would be compatible with the character of their rural setting and the nature of the business and will not result in unacceptable harm to the character of the area or the amenity of nearby occupiers;
 - i The proposal would not result in unacceptable transport impacts having regard to the nature of the use, the suitability of the access and parking arrangements and the capacity and character of the rural highway network; and
 - j Proposals located in the Green Belt must accord with Policy SP8 and national Green Belt policy and will only be permitted where they preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with its purposes.

Strategic Policy

Policy R8: Farm and Land-Based Rural Diversification continued

Farm shops

- 2 Where farm diversification relates to farm shops or extensions to farm shops, developments will be supported where the above criteria are met and:
 - a The farm shop would be clearly related to, and associated with, the existing rural or land-based rural business;
 - b The scale and operation of the farm shop would be appropriate to its rural location and will not have a significant adverse impact on the vitality and viability of nearby town or village centres having regard to the scale and nature of the proposal, or other accessible convenience retail offer available to the community in the surrounding area;
 - c The range of produce sold in the farm shop should be predominantly derived from the holding itself and/or from local and Kent-sourced agricultural and rural produce, with an emphasis on supporting local supply chains. Farm shops should sell:
 - i A minimum of 40% of products or produce from that produced on the premises or holding, unless otherwise justified;
 - ii 30% or more from the Kent region; and
 - iii The remainder being sourced from the South East region.
- 3 Where planning permission is granted, the Council may impose planning conditions to manage the future scale, nature or operation of the diversified use of the farm or rural land-use business, in order to ensure continued compatibility with the rural setting and the objectives of this policy. New farm shops will normally be restricted to Use Class E(a) retail with ancillary Use Class E(b) food and drink.

Strategic Policy

Policy Implementation

12.74 Policy R8 recognises the importance of maintaining the integrity of agricultural or land-based holdings while supporting appropriate uses such as farm shops, tourism, education, and small-scale renewable energy. It supports the reuse of existing buildings and infrastructure and ensures that new development is sensitively designed and located to preserve the distinctiveness of the countryside, conserve and enhance the natural and historic environment, and the openness of the Green Belt.

12.75 Policy R8 is intended to enable farm and land based rural businesses to diversify in positive and flexible manner, in accordance with national policy, while ensuring that development remains appropriate to its rural context. Proposals will be assessed against Policy R8, proportionately, having regard to their scale, nature and setting.

12.76 Applicants will be expected to submit proportionate evidence set out in a diversification plan, demonstrating the necessity and benefits of the proposal and how the proposal would support and enhance the resilience, sustainability and viability of the agricultural business.

12.77 The diversification plan should demonstrate that the scale of development proposed is no greater than is reasonably necessary to meet the operational needs of the business. Where future growth is relied upon to justify development, this should be supported by proportionate evidence, such as business forecasts, operational requirements or market demand. Proposals should prioritise the reuse of existing buildings and infrastructure, where feasible, and any new development must be appropriately scaled, designed, and located to minimise landscape and amenity impacts.

12.78 Where proposals involve farm shops, additional criteria will apply to ensure that the retail offer supports the business and priorities locally and regionally sourced produce, contributing to local supply chains. Conditions may be imposed to control the nature and scale of the enterprise, including restrictions on use classes and the proportion and origin of goods sold, where justified, and future expansion.

Sustainable Tourism and Visitor Accommodation



Introduction

12.79 Tonbridge and Malling is home to a rich blend of historic towns, picturesque villages, and diverse landscapes, including the Kent Downs and High Weald National Landscape and the River Medway corridor. These assets underpin a growing visitor economy that contributes significantly to local employment and business vitality. The borough's tourism offer includes heritage attractions, walking, cycling and equestrian routes, nature reserves, and seasonal events, such as the County Show, that draw both domestic and international visitors.

12.80 Tourism in Tonbridge and Malling supports a significant number of staying and day trips annually and contributes to Kent's wider visitor economy, which generated over £4 billion in 2023. The borough's proximity to London, combined with its rural character and heritage assets, makes it an attractive location for short breaks, day visits, and nature-based tourism. However, the sector faces challenges including seasonal fluctuations, pressure on infrastructure, and the need to balance growth with environmental protection.

12.81 Policy R9 supports the development of sustainable tourism and visitor accommodation that enhances the borough's appeal while safeguarding its environmental and community assets. It aligns with the council's strategic priorities to promote economic resilience, protect the Green Belt, and improve access to nature and cultural heritage. The policy encourages well-located, high-quality proposals that contribute to the visitor experience and support the borough's identity as a destination for sustainable leisure and recreation.

12.82 The policy responds to the above challenges by setting clear criteria for new and expanded tourism development. It ensures that proposals are supported, where appropriate, by proportionate evidence of demand, meeting identified needs and where this is accessible by sustainable modes of transport. The policy also reflects the borough's Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy, which highlights the importance of protecting natural assets and enhancing biodiversity through sensitive development.

12.83 The policy supports the reuse of existing buildings and encourages proposals that complement existing attractions. It also introduces safeguards to prevent the loss of tourism facilities and to ensure that visitor accommodation remains in seasonal or short-term use, avoiding conversion to permanent residential dwellings.

Policy R9: Sustainable Tourism and Visitor Accommodation

- 1 New tourism facilities, including visitor accommodation¹ and improvements or extensions to existing facilities will be supported in accordance with the presumption in favour of sustainable development and where the following can be demonstrated:
 - a The proposal is located in a sustainable and appropriate location having regard to the nature, scale and impact of the tourism use. Development within settlement boundaries will be supported in principle. Development outside settlement boundaries will be supported where it can be demonstrated that:
 - i The proposal requires a countryside location or relates to existing rural assets or attractions; and
 - ii It respects the character of the countryside, contributes positively to the local economy and visitor offer and does not impact the amenity of neighbouring uses;
 - b The proposal supports and enhances the tourism economy and where relevant, does not detract from the vitality and viability of existing town, village or local centres or other local facilities;
 - c Where appropriate, the proposal relates well to or is closely associated to existing visitor attractions, services or clusters and supports the wider visitor economy;
 - d The location of the proposal is, or can be made, accessible by a range of sustainable transport modes, taking into account the rural location and characteristics of the site;
 - e The proposal would not result in unacceptable transport impacts having regard to the nature of the use, the suitability of the access and parking arrangements and the capacity and character of the rural highway network;
 - f The proposal, either individually or cumulatively with other tourism or visitor uses in the area, will protect and, where possible, enhance the character of the area, including its historical significance, landscape, natural environment, appearance or amenity of the area for existing and future users;
 - g The proposal makes best use of existing buildings and structures. Where new structures or buildings are demonstrated to be necessary, these should be well-related physically and functionally to the existing enterprise and be of an appropriate scale, form and design; and
 - h Proposals located in the Green Belt must accord with Policy SP8 and national Green Belt policy and will only be permitted where they preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with its purposes.
- ¹ Visitor accommodation includes hotels, guesthouses, bed and breakfast establishments, self-catering accommodation and outdoor accommodation such as caravan, camping sites and glamping sites (including yurts, log cabins and pods).

Policy R9: Sustainable Tourism and Visitor Accommodation continued

- 2 Proposals that would result in a loss of tourist facilities and / or visitor accommodation including to alternative use will only be permitted where it can be demonstrated that:
 - a the existing use is no longer viable; or
 - b the loss of the facility or accommodation would not result in harm to the local economy, tourism offer or community.
- 3 Where proposals for temporary structures such as yurts, glamping pods, towing caravans meet R9(1) and are acceptable in relation to other relevant policies in the plan, then a condition or legal agreement may be used to manage their seasonal use and removal, where appropriate.
- 4 Where planning permission is granted, the council may impose planning conditions to manage the occupation of any new tourist accommodation ensuring it is used for holiday purposes only and not as permanent residential occupation.

Strategic Policy

Policy Implementation

12.84 The policy seeks a balanced approach that supports tourism growth while safeguarding the borough's environmental and community assets. Planning applications will be assessed on their ability to contribute positively to the visitor economy, with particular attention given to their location, accessibility, and relationship to existing attractions, services or infrastructure. Proposals situated outside settlement boundaries will need to demonstrate a clear rationale, such as proximity to a geographically fixed natural or heritage feature, or alignment with rural tourism objectives.

12.85 Applicants will be expected to provide proportionate evidence, where appropriate, of demand for new or expanded facilities, which may include market research, business plans, or alignment with borough-wide tourism strategies. Significant weight will be given to the economic benefits of sustainable tourism development. Accessibility will be a key consideration, with developments required to demonstrate how they can be reached via sustainable modes of transport, including walking, cycling, by horse and public transport, having regard to the rural location and characteristics of the site. Where vehicular access is necessary, the impact on local roads and parking provision will be carefully considered.

12.86 Design quality and integration with the surrounding landscape will be essential, particularly in areas of high sensitivity such as the Green Belt or the Kent Downs or High Weald National Landscape. The re-use of existing buildings will be encouraged, and where new structures are proposed, they should be of a scale and form that complements the existing built and natural environment.

12.87 To prevent the erosion of the borough's tourism offer, proposals involving the loss of visitor accommodation or tourism facilities will be expected to demonstrate that the use is no longer viable or that its loss would not harm the local economy, tourism offer or community. Where relevant, evidence may include marketing information, business performance data or other proportionate viability evidence.

12.88 Justification for locating development outside settlement boundaries may include a requirement to rely on a geographically fixed resource or other clear operational or sustainability reasons why the development cannot be located within a settlement.



Equestrian Facilities in the Countryside



Introduction

12.89 The borough contains a number of private and commercial equestrian facilities used for training and breeding such as livery yards, stud farms and riding schools. The equine industry contributes significantly to the national and regional economy, but development related to equestrian uses can have a significant impact on a rural area by way of physical structures (such as buildings and fences), and by increased usage of roads and bridleways. Whilst such uses can be an important part of the land-based rural economy, an appropriate balance needs to be made against the impact of the scale, intensity and nature of the proposed use.

12.90 The keeping of horses and horse riding is an increasingly popular recreational pursuit and can be one form of farm diversification. Approximately 40% of Kent's bridleways are in the Kent Downs National Landscape, making the Kent Downs a significant area for horse riding in Kent. This network of bridleways continues beyond the National Landscapes into the wider countryside. The Landscape Character Assessment identifies locations across the borough where horse paddocks and grazing land are part of the intrinsic character of an area.

12.91 The NPPF advises that recreational facilities can make an important contribution to the health and wellbeing of communities. Whether planning permission is needed for the use of land and buildings for horses and equestrian activities depends on whether the horses are used for agricultural, recreational or commercial purposes. The need for planning permission arises when the land is used to keep horses for recreational or commercial purposes and not purely for grazing and other agricultural purposes. To ensure that equestrian facilities are located sustainably, proposals for new equestrian related development will need to demonstrate how they will be managed in a manner that does not rely on the provision of new supporting residential accommodation on the site, unless otherwise justified in policy terms.

12.92 In order to minimise any impact of any such development on the landscape character of the area, Policy R10 indicates that priority should be given to the conversion of existing buildings where they exist, and, where this is not possible, careful consideration should be given to the design, scale, siting, external appearance, access, lighting, and landscaping of any new development, having regard to the relevant Landscape Character Assessment and local context.

Policy R10: Equestrian Facilities in the Countryside

- 1 Proposals for equestrian facilities in the countryside (including extensions and changes of use) should have regard to the Tonbridge and Malling Landscape Character Assessment, the National Landscape Management Plans and national Green Belt policy, where relevant. Proposals will be supported subject to compliance with the criteria below:
 - a Proposals should prioritise the reuse of existing buildings where practicable within the site, with new buildings or structures only being proposed where re-use, adaptation, conversion or extension of existing buildings is not viable or practical and where the need for new development is clearly justified;
 - b The scale, intensity and level of activity associated with the proposal, whether for private or commercial use should be proportionate to the size, character and capacity of the site and no more than is reasonably required for the proper functioning of the enterprise or the use of the land to which it is associated, allowing for the proper care of horses, including stabling, grazing and exercise where appropriate;
 - c Proposals for development should be sensitively sited and designed so as not to introduce a prominent urban element into a countryside location, having particular regard to landscape character, topography, views and rural setting, including the impact of any new or improved access and car parking areas;
 - d Where external lighting is proposed, it must be the minimum necessary for operational and safety purposes, as demonstrated by a lighting strategy, including details of luminance, direction, hours of use and mitigation, and should not lead to significant increases in light pollution in accordance with Policy NE13;
 - e Proposals for riding arenas or other exercise facilities should minimise the extent of engineering operations. Any earthworks, regrading or structures should not result in incongruous or discordant landform out of character with its setting that cannot be mitigated through the use of appropriate hard and soft landscape techniques including biodiversity and green infrastructure principles. Planning conditions may be imposed to remove structures, engineering works and buildings serving equine uses from the site when they are no longer required;
 - f Proposals would not result in unacceptable transport impacts having regard to the nature of the use, the suitability of the access and parking arrangements, the frequency and timing of movements, and the capacity and character of the rural highway;
 - g Proposals will not have a detrimental effect on the amenity of neighbouring properties or uses or the local area and must ensure that there is no unacceptable risk of pollution to land, water or air, including from waste arising from the use. Appropriate arrangements for the storage and disposal of waste should be provided, proportionate to the scale of development. In certain circumstances, proposals may be required to be accompanied by a waste management plan or other appropriate supporting information; and
 - h Proposals located in the Green Belt must accord Policy SP8 and with national Green Belt policy and will only be permitted where they preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with its purposes, including through the scale, siting and design of buildings and associated infrastructure.

Policy Implementation

12.93 In order to recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of rural areas, the potential to make use of existing buildings should always be considered before the erection of new structures for equestrian purposes. For the protection of the countryside, proposals for stables, liveries and other horse related activities should therefore consider and demonstrate the effect the proposed development will have on the countryside and the local area. In addition, the effects of the proposed development on areas of nature conservation importance, archaeological sites and the local landscape should be considered, having regard to their significance and setting.

12.94 Commercial proposals will be expected to include proportionate evidence such as a business case, justifying any built development proposed and providing evidence that the development is in accordance with equestrian best practice. This is because manèges or arenas, events, external lighting and higher levels of traffic can have a more intensive impact on the surrounding area. Where a business case is required, the applicant will be expected to pay the Local Planning Authority's reasonable costs for having it independently assessed, where such assessment is necessary to inform the decision-making process. Development proposals should have regard to national Green Belt policy where relevant, relevant Landscape Character Assessments, and if located within one of the National Landscapes or their settings, should have regard to the relevant Management Plan and associated guidance. In addition, proposals for development in the Kent Downs National Landscape should have regard to [Managing Land for Horses – a guide to good practice in the Kent Downs National Landscape](#) or any updated relevant guidance.

12.95 Proposals for equine development must not result in an irreversible loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land and, as such, should the equestrian use cease, the land must be capable of being restored to a productive green environment, secured where appropriate through planning conditions or legal agreements.

12.96 Any proposed external lighting would need to be the minimum necessary for operational and safety purposes, and should be supported by a lighting strategy, designed to have minimal impact on both residential amenity and the visual amenity of the surrounding area, including impacts on dark skies and rural character where relevant.

12.97 The proposed development should consider its relationship to the existing bridleway network and proximity to the main network, as well as the safety and comfort of horses in terms of space for grazing, exercising and waste management, proportionate to the scale and nature of the use. Proposals must therefore have regard to the British Horse Society Standards (or any future equivalent) in terms of minimum requirements for housing horses and ponies, and the provision of adequate pasture-land, unless it can be robustly demonstrated that alternative arrangements would achieve equivalent welfare outcomes.