

HOUSING

SWDP 13: Effective Use of Land

- A. To deliver places that are more sustainable, development will make the most effective and sustainable use of land, focusing on:
- i. Housing density;
 - ii. Reusing previously developed land; and
 - iii. Making only exceptional use of the Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land.

Housing Density

- B. Housing development in south Worcestershire will make the most effective and efficient use of land, with housing density designed to enhance the character and quality of the local area, commensurate with a viable scheme and infrastructure capacity.
- C. Housing density will be greater on sites with a high level of accessibility, including sites located in or close to city and town centres, or close to public transport stations.
- D. The form and density of housing will vary across larger sites, in response to current and future accessibility and other characteristics of each part of the site. Variations in density across a site should be used to develop different character areas.
- E. Subject to parts B, C and D above, on sites allocated for housing or for mixed use that includes housing, the following broad indications of appropriate average net densities shall apply:
- i. On sites within the city of Worcester and allocations for more than 100 new dwellings in Droitwich Spa, Evesham and Malvern, development should achieve an average net density of 40 dwellings / ha.
 - ii. On sites within Worcester city centre and the town centres of Droitwich Spa, Evesham and Malvern, development of mainly flatted units should achieve an average net density of 75 dwellings / ha.
 - iii. In Pershore, Tenbury Wells, Upton-upon-Severn and the villages, and on sites of less than 100 dwellings in Droitwich Spa, Evesham and Malvern outside their identified town centres, new development should be provided at an average net density of 30 dwellings / ha.

- iv. In the allocated urban extensions, densities will be determined through masterplanning and the development management process, subject to the overriding requirement that the number of dwellings indicated in the allocation policy for each urban extension is achieved.
- v. Where urban extensions and other large developments abut open land or sensitive locations such as conservation areas, listed buildings, areas of archaeological interest or ecological / biodiversity value, their design should reflect the sensitivity of those areas. Development densities immediately adjacent to such areas should be adjusted downwards as appropriate to ensure that impact on them is minimised, whilst maintaining the overall average density of the site.

Windfall Sites

- F. Windfall housing developments should be assessed against the density criteria (parts B, C, D and E above) relevant to their locality and the character of the built and natural environment context, including heritage assets.

Use of Brownfield Land (Previously Developed Land)

- G. The Plan includes an indicative monitoring target of 40% of housing development in the Plan period to be located on Brownfield Land.

Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land

- H. Windfall development proposals which would result in the loss of more than two hectares of Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land will be required to demonstrate that:
 - i. The proposed development cannot be reasonably accommodated on non-BMV agricultural land; and
 - ii. The benefits of the development significantly outweigh the loss of BMV agricultural land.
- I. In addition, the effect of the loss of BMV agricultural land on farm economics and management will be considered. Where development would fragment farm holdings, planning permission will be granted only where mitigation is possible e.g. the land can be incorporated into surrounding holdings and where there is no severance of agricultural buildings from the land.

Reasoned Justification

Residential Density

1. In line with the Framework, the partner authorities have, in this policy, set out their own approach to housing density to reflect local circumstances. The emphasis is on ensuring that developable land, which is a finite resource, is used effectively and efficiently to provide maximum flexibility in meeting local housing needs. In doing so, development should not adversely affect the character and appearance of existing cities, towns and villages.
2. Higher densities do not necessarily mean poor design or quality, for example, some older attractive parts of towns and villages are built to high densities. They can make development more sustainable by making more efficient use of land, concentrating development and bringing people, services and facilities closer together, thereby reducing the need to travel. Higher densities can however lead to land uses and their occupiers being in closer proximity, which could generate adverse impacts such as noise and disturbance, loss of privacy, additional traffic movements and pressure on parking spaces. Low densities do, however, mean that more land has to be used to deliver the housing needed, putting pressure on valuable and attractive countryside. A balance has to be struck between the two, but setting absolute density targets is not likely to be the most appropriate or effective way of achieving the best quality housing in all locations.
3. Evidence on local housing densities underpins the policy's minimum average net density levels. High levels of accessibility afforded by sites being located close to facilities and services in city and town centres, or near to public transport interchanges and high frequency public transport routes, justify higher densities in those locations. These levels are subject to the density criteria set out in the policy, which ensure the SWDP provides flexibility and responsiveness to local circumstances, including infrastructure capacity to support the development. Site density will be measured in terms of the number of dwellings per hectare, based on the net developable area.
4. It is important to consider the impact of development proposals on the character of the local area as well as the impact on the quality of new housing. Planning applications will need to demonstrate how the density of the surrounding area informs the scheme design and how the development proposal enhances the area.
5. The provision of "soft" development edges and open space, landscaping and buffer areas can all be appropriate in helping to preserve the setting of adjacent sensitive locations such as Conservation Areas, Listed Buildings and areas of archaeological importance or biodiversity interest.

Use of Brownfield / Previously Developed Land

6. Development would not be refused planning permission simply because it is not on brownfield land, but the benefits of developing Brownfield sites will be taken into consideration when determining planning applications, in the context of other policy requirements in the Plan. The SWC will monitor take up of Brownfield land against the target stated in section G above.

7. Consistent with the requirements of the Framework, the policy focuses on the effective use of land by encouraging the reuse of land that has been previously developed, provided that it is not of high environmental value. This is also in line with the requirements of the 2005 UK Sustainable Development Strategy, which identified planning as being at the heart of sustainable development and reflected a desire to see the development of brownfield land before using previously undeveloped sites, as well as increased housing densities on development sites.
8. The effective use and reuse of accessible, available and environmentally acceptable brownfield land should be encouraged consistent with SWDP2 A (iv), taking into account the site's current biodiversity and local amenity value. Likewise, there may be opportunities to incorporate the historic environment into regenerated sites, subject to the policies for the conservation and enhancement of heritage assets.
9. The south Worcestershire 2010 Annual Monitoring Report demonstrates that in 2009 - 2010, 82% of new and converted homes and 72% of the total amount and type of completed floorspace were built on Previously Developed Land. This position is likely to change in future years as currently available Brownfield sites are developed. This will increase the pressure on Greenfield sites to meet local housing, employment and service needs, including the main allocated urban extensions.
10. Since June 2010, residential gardens are no longer included in the definition of Previously Developed (Brownfield) Land. For the purposes of five -year supply calculations, windfall development now excludes development on residential gardens.
11. The SWC have used the evidence in the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment to identify Brownfield sites to allocate for housing purposes in the SWDP and housing monitoring information to identify completed and committed Brownfield sites. This evidence informed the choice of the 40% target for reuse of Brownfield land for housing. The target is realistic in the context of the amount of available, suitable Brownfield land in the SHLAA.
12. To deliver 40% of housing development in the Plan period located on Brownfield land, the Plan:
 - a. maximises the amount of allocations on previously developed land that is available or developable;
 - b. encourages the effective use and re-use of accessible, available and environmentally acceptable Brownfield land; and
 - c. includes housing development as part of wider regeneration packages for the Worcester Opportunity Zones, where this does not undermine their ability to support local economic prosperity or the vitality and viability of Worcester city centre.
13. The allocated Opportunity Zones in Worcester City are the main sources of Brownfield land, with significant capacity to bring about regeneration and accommodate new mixed-use development, but their regeneration will not be housing-led.

Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land (BMV)

14. Fertile soil is a strategic asset. Strategic issues relating to Climate Change and food security strengthen the need, wherever possible, to retain agricultural and horticultural capacity. It is therefore important to protect the most productive agricultural land, i.e. BMV.
15. In identifying land to meet development needs that cannot be met through urban capacity, the SWC were aware of the need to protect BMV agricultural land. This was balanced against other environmental constraints, in order to meet Plan objectives and remain consistent with the Framework. Agricultural land will be necessarily lost to development, but this policy ensures the loss can be minimised.
16. The Framework (paragraph 112 refers) requires a Local Planning Authority to take into account the economic and other benefits of BMV agricultural land and minimise its loss to development. The Framework does not set out an amount which would constitute a significant loss of BMV agricultural land. Worcestershire has a total area of 174,051 hectares, 17.1% of which comprises Grades 4 and 5 agricultural land and non-agricultural and urban land which is non-BMV; 56% is Grade 3 but the proportion that is Grade 3b land is not quantified. In that context two hectares of BMV land is considered to be an appropriate threshold to further assess proposals. Development proposals will generate benefits depending on the nature of the use and its scale. Therefore, the scale and nature of the proposed use will be factors in determining the appropriate area to investigate e.g. settlement, Parish, District, for the consideration of reasonable non-BMV alternatives. The policy sets out the circumstances when development on BMV land will be permitted. If there is a choice between sites of different grades, the lowest grade should be used. However, there may be cases where, for example, lower grade land has greater biodiversity, landscape or heritage importance and should be retained in preference to higher grade land. Moreover, some losses can be mitigated. Planning for Soils in Worcestershire (2011) identifies options to protect Worcestershire's soils. This highlights the opportunity for mineral working to be returned to agricultural use through soil restoration. There are also opportunities for improving soil quality thereby achieving an upgrade of the land's Agricultural Land Classification to mitigate for BMV land lost elsewhere to development.
17. The loss of BMV agricultural land could affect the viability of an existing farm holding and put its future agricultural use at risk. In addition, such a loss could lead to the fragmentation of a farm holding into smaller units, thereby creating a demand for more farm buildings and potentially harming the landscape and nature conservation interests.