

## West Berkshire Local Plan Review 2023-2041 (adopted June 2025)

### North Wessex Downs National Landscape

#### Policy SP2

##### North Wessex Downs National Landscape

The North Wessex Downs National Landscape will have appropriate and sustainable growth that conserves and enhances its special landscape qualities. Development will be required to respond positively to the local context, conserving and enhancing local distinctiveness, sense of place and setting of the National Landscape. The strong sense of remoteness, tranquillity and dark night skies, particularly on the open downland, should be preserved. The conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the landscape will be the primary consideration in the assessment of all development proposals.

Development in the setting of the National Landscape will be required to have regard to the interrelationship with the National Landscape and its landscape character and special qualities. Proposals will be required to be sensitively located and designed to avoid or minimise any adverse impacts on the National Landscape.

Development in the North Wessex Downs will be required to support its local communities and rural economy in a manner commensurate with the statutory status of the National Landscape as a nationally valued landscape. Planning permission will be refused for major development in the National Landscape except in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated to be in the public interest.

In determining what constitutes major development, the Council will consider whether the development, by reason of its scale, character or nature, has the potential to have a significant adverse impact on the landscape and scenic beauty of the National Landscape. This will include the consideration of the individual characteristics of a proposal and its context and the impact of cumulative development.

If an application is deemed to be major development then further consideration will take account of:

- a. The need for the development, including in terms of any national considerations, and the impact of permitting it, or refusing it, upon the local economy;
- b. The cost of, and scope for, developing elsewhere outside the National Landscape, or meeting the need for it in some other way; and
- c. Any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities, and the extent to which that could be moderated.

If it is considered that exceptional circumstances exist and development would be in the public interest, all opportunities to conserve and enhance the special qualities of the National Landscape will be sought.

#### Supporting Text

**4.24** The North Wessex Downs is a nationally important landscape, designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and protected by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act) to conserve and enhance its natural beauty. On 22 November 2023 AONBs across England and Wales became known as National Landscapes, but the formal designation, and the legal protections, remain the same. The primary purpose of AONB designation, 'to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area', is set out in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (as amended). The North Wessex Downs National Landscape covers 74% of West Berkshire and its natural beauty is a function of the relationship between people and place over time. It encompasses everything that makes the area distinctive: the area's geology and landform; its climate, soils and rivers; its wildlife and ecology; its rich history of human settlement and land use over millennia; its archaeology and buildings and cultural associations; and the people who have occupied the area in the past and those who currently live and work there. It is inevitable and appropriate that this unique landscape will continue to change and develop but it is important that this is done in a way that conserves and enhances its special qualities. Under Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (as amended), the Council has a duty to seek to further the primary purpose of designation and so this policy makes clear that the North Wessex Downs will have appropriate sustainable growth throughout the plan period to support its local communities and rural economy in a manner commensurate with its statutory status.

## West Berkshire Local Plan Review 2023-2041 (adopted June 2025)

**4.25** The setting of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape and the protected landscape of the National Landscape itself add value to each other as the landscape and landforms link visually and functionally. The policy recognises this important interrelationship and seeks to ensure that development in its setting does not cause significant harm to the National Landscape by being poorly located or designed. This is especially the case where long views from or to the National Landscape are identified as important, or where the landscape character of land within and adjoining the National Landscape is complementary.

**4.26** The North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment (2025)<sup>(23)</sup> draws out the special qualities of the landscape and identifies the main issues that will need to be addressed to conserve its special character and outstanding qualities. It is complemented by the West Berkshire Landscape Character Assessment (2019)<sup>(24)</sup> which identifies in more detail the sensitivities and qualities of the features that are particularly valued for their contribution to landscape character (i.e. if any one attribute ceased to exist, it would change the character to the detriment of the landscape).

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) requires local authorities to produce management plans for AONBs within their areas. The review, production and publication of the Management Plan for the North Wessex Downs<sup>(25)</sup>, together with the coordination of its delivery, has been delegated by the Council to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership (Council of Partners)<sup>(26)</sup>. It supports and complements the LPR, setting out a spatial policy framework that reflects national and local issues to ensure the National Landscape's natural heritage, landscape and built character are conserved, the local economy is supported and use of the National Landscape for recreation is encouraged. It sets out the approach that the Council of Partners will take on particular issues and will be used, where relevant, as a material consideration in the assessment of planning applications in West Berkshire.

**4.27** The policy also sets out what constitutes major development and, if an application is deemed to constitute major development, how that application will be considered. Firstly, an assessment will be made to determine whether development constitutes major development. The NPPF is clear that this is a matter for the decision maker. For the purposes of this policy, all of the following principles will be applied when determining whether an application constitutes major development:

- i. The starting point will be the definition of major development in the Town and County Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015, or to proposals that raise issues of national significance;
- ii. For applications below the Town and County Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015 threshold, the Council will consider development proposals on a case by case basis;
- iii. For all applications a judgement will then be made in light of all of the circumstances of the application and the context of the application site;
- iv. The final determination as to whether the development is major development will consider whether it has the potential to have a significant adverse impact alone or in combination with other development. It will not include an in-depth consideration of whether the development will in fact have such an impact;
- v. The application of other criteria may be relevant to the considerations, but will not determine the matter or raise a presumption either way.

**4.28** If the proposal is considered to be major development, then the following factors, as set out in the policy, will be taken into account:

- vi. The need for development in the location proposed. Where residential development is proposed, taking account of any local need identified by the Council or neighbourhood plan and bearing in mind that housing in the National Landscape should focus on the needs of its local communities;
- vii. Detrimental effects on businesses and employment in the local economy, in particular any that is specific to the site or location as opposed to general benefits to a sector such as on the construction industry;
- viii. The cost of, and scope for, meeting the need in some other way, on the assumption that it is a local need which should ideally not be met outside the National Landscape;
- ix. Detrimental effects on the environment, including biodiversity and cultural heritage, and the extent to which the effects can be moderated;

23 North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment (2025): <https://www.northwessexdowns.org.uk/the-landscape/landscape-character/>

24 West Berkshire Landscape Character Assessment (2019): <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/lca>

25 Management Plan for the North Wessex Downs: <https://www.northwessexdowns.org.uk/our-work/management-plan/>

26 This Partnership was formed in July 2001 to oversee the future of the AONB. It includes not only the nine constituent local authorities of the North Wessex Downs but also representatives of the local communities, the farming and rural business community, those representing nature conservation, heritage and landscape, and recreation interests, including members of government and voluntary agencies. The Partnership is underpinned by a small National Landscape delivery team.

## West Berkshire Local Plan Review 2023-2041 (adopted June 2025)

- x. Detrimental effects on the landscape and the extent to which the effects can be moderated;
- xi. Detrimental effects on recreational opportunities and the extent to which the effects can be moderated; and
- xii. Whether there is a reasonable expectation that exceptional circumstances exist and that it could be demonstrated that development would be in the public interest.

**4.29** As part of the development of the LPR the Council has demonstrated the exceptional circumstances which justify allocating the sites identified in the LPR within the National Landscape. Therefore, proposals that meet the requirements of the relevant site allocation policy, along with other relevant policies, will be deemed to be in accordance with the development plan and consistent with national policy.

**4.30** The exceptional circumstances necessary to justify the allocation of any sites for major development within NDPs will be expected to be demonstrated through individual neighbourhood plans. Proposals that meet the requirements of the relevant site allocation policy in the neighbourhood plan, along with other relevant policies in the development plan, will be deemed to be in accordance with the development plan and consistent with national policy.