

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

Town and District Centres

Policy SP18

Town and District Centres

The Council will seek to maintain and enhance the vitality and viability of West Berkshire's town and district centres. The scale, character and role of each centre defines its position within the District's hierarchy of centres:

- i. Major town centre: Newbury
- ii. Town centres: Thatcham and Hungerford
- iii. District centres: Lambourn, Pangbourne and Theale.

The extent of the town centre commercial area boundary for each of the above designated town and district centres within the hierarchy is defined on the Policies Map.

Development proposals for main town centre uses will be directed to the town and district centres defined in this policy in line with the sequential test set out in the NPPF. New office developments within Designated Employment Areas (DEA) will be exempt from the sequential test in accordance with policy SP17.

Development proposals within a town or district centre will be supported where they:

- a. Are of an appropriate scale and character that reflect and respond to the role and function of that centre;
- b. Create a high quality, well designed environment and public realm that promotes the individuality of the centre and responds to its historic built heritage;
- c. Contribute to the vitality or viability of that centre;
- d. Do not have an adverse impact on the safety and capacity of the local highway network; and
- e. Do not have an adverse impact on local amenity.

Retail uses will be encouraged within the primary shopping area as defined on the Policies Map. Changes of use within the primary shopping area from Class E to other uses will be permitted where they do not result in a disproportionate concentration of non-Class E units that would be harmful to the vitality of that centre.

The Council will support redevelopment/regeneration proposals within town and district centres that provide a net additional contribution to office space to assist in meeting identified needs.

To contribute to the diversity and vitality of the District's centres, the Council will seek to retain and enhance existing town centre markets, where appropriate.

Supporting Text

7.24 The key aim of this policy is to maintain and enhance the vitality and viability of West Berkshire's town and district centres to ensure they are places where people want to live, work, shop and spend leisure time.

7.25 The policy also promotes a network of dynamic and successful town centres across the District in accordance with the NPPF. The position of each centre within the hierarchy reflects the scale and character of that town centre, as well as its role and function within the community they serve mainly based upon their retail and leisure offer. The extent of the town centre commercial area boundary for each of the designated town and district centres within the hierarchy is defined on the Policies Map.

7.26 The NPPF requires plans to take a positive approach to the growth, management and adaptation of town centres, allowing them to grow and diversify in a way that can respond to rapid changes in the retail and leisure sectors. Over recent years the retail industry has faced a number of challenges and is continuing to experience a period of unprecedented change as the country emerges from the COVID19 pandemic and establishes its position after exiting the EU. This is evident in our town centres as consumer shopping behaviours have dramatically shifted with the growth of online shopping and 'click and collect', and retailers are having to adapt and respond to these macro-economic 'shocks' as well as the changes in shopping trends. The nature of retail and our high-streets continues to adapt, and the commercial leisure sector is becoming an increasingly important contributor to the vitality and viability of town centres.

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7.27 The Western Berkshire Retail and Commercial Leisure Assessment (2016)⁽⁹⁷⁾ identifies an additional need of 25,600sqm of comparison goods floorspace to 2036 within West Berkshire. However, since this evidence was published the retail industry is experiencing an unprecedented period of change as outlined above. Given the challenges being faced and the need for the sector to take time to adjust and adapt it has not been possible to update the retail evidence in a meaningful way to feed into this Local Plan Review. The Council is therefore committed to a review of the District's retail needs in the first five year review of the Local Plan.

7.28 In responding to the changes within the retail sector, the Use Classes Order was amended in 2020 and now allows much greater flexibility with the introduction of a new use class, Class E (Commercial, Business and Service). Changes of use between the different uses within Class E, which includes typical high street uses, can take place without the need for planning permission. This is to help our high streets and town centres adapt quickly to changing demand and trends.

7.29 The NPPF supports a town centre first approach when locating development for main town centre uses to assist in maintaining the vitality and viability of town centres. This policy promotes a sequential approach and directs main town centre uses (including retail, leisure, cultural and office development) to town and district centres in the first instance, followed by edge of centre, and then out of centre sites.

7.30 The strategic residential allocations, at Sandford and North East Thatcham, will create new convenience retail floorspace to serve the local communities and this provision will need to complement rather than compete with the existing centres.

7.31 The policy encourages retail uses to be the focus of the primary shopping area, as defined on the Policies Map, however other appropriate Class E uses such as cafes will also be acceptable. Changes of use within the primary shopping area from Class E to other uses will only be permitted where they do not result in a disproportionate concentration of non-Class E units that would be harmful to the vitality of that centre.

7.32 The Council recognise the importance of providing a diverse range of uses within existing centres, and will seek to retain and enhance existing town centre markets, where appropriate. The importance of residential development within a town centre is also recognised as adding vitality to centres, providing activity outside of normal business hours. However, residential that would result in the loss of ground floor retail space and would impact upon the vitality and viability of the centre will not be permitted.

7.33 As the nature of our town centres continue to change we see regeneration for mixed use schemes as centres evolve and ensure they have a viable function moving forward. A vital component of town centre development is accessibility as well as an attractive environment and public realm. In addition, the Council is keen to ensure such mixed use regeneration/redevelopment proposals include provision for office space to assist in meeting the identified need over the plan period. As such, this policy supports town centre regeneration/redevelopment schemes where they provide a net additional contribution to office space.

7.34 The Council's Economic Development team has been working with consultants to prepare place-making strategies for existing centres within the District. These strategies seek to provide a long-term strategy and masterplan for the centres to reposition their commercial, leisure, residential, cultural and public realm offer and to ensure the centres continue to meet the needs of residents, businesses, workers and visitors now and in the years to come. West Berkshire's town and district centres have a lot to celebrate and these strategies draw upon their individual challenges and opportunities to help enhance their environment and offer through a series of actions set out within a Delivery Strategy. The Newbury Town Centre Masterplan was prepared in 2020, and the Council has also completed similar strategies for Thatcham and Hungerford.

7.35 The cultural heritage offer in West Berkshire is vibrant, diverse and strong and it makes a unique contribution to the richness of West Berkshire as a place to live, work and learn. The West Berkshire Cultural Heritage Strategy 2020-2030 sets out a vision to have a sustainable, resilient and thriving cultural heritage sector by 2030 which continues to contribute to the local economy, increases its contribution to the health and wellbeing of residents and that our historic environment is protected and better understood for the enjoyment of all.

7.36 The Council will continue working in partnership with businesses, independent organisations, venues, the Business Improvement District (BID), community and voluntary organisation and other stakeholders to promote West Berkshire's town and district centres as the preferred shopping and leisure destinations for local residents.