

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

### Policy DM39

#### Local Community Facilities

Development proposals for new and/or expanded provision of local community facilities will be supported where the proposal complies with the following criteria:

- a. A local need can be demonstrated;
- b. It is accessible and inclusive to the local community it is intended to serve;
- c. It is of a high quality design and proportionate in scale to the local area;
- d. It has been subject to prior meaningful local community engagement; and
- e. Appropriate consideration has been given to the use of shared spaces, the re-use and/or redevelopment of existing buildings within the local community.

Proposals which would result in the loss of an existing local community facility will only be permitted where it can be clearly demonstrated that:

- i. It is no longer viable to retain the facility in its current use; or
- ii. The facility is no longer needed and any need arising from its loss can be accommodated within easily accessible existing facilities, or
- iii. To outweigh the loss of the existing facility, the proposal will deliver equivalent or, where possible, greater community benefit which is easily accessible to the community it is intended to serve.

The Council will support local communities who seek to provide and/or retain local community facilities through the Community Rights agenda.

### Supporting Text

**12.65** The provision and retention of local community facilities is essential to the creation of sustainable communities, particularly in our rural areas. These facilities play an important role in providing for day-to-day living, as well as positively contributing towards wellbeing and social cohesion.

**12.66** The NPPF is clear that local planning policies should plan positively for the provision and use of shared spaces, community facilities and other local services to enhance the sustainability of communities and residential environments. Planning policies should also guard against the unnecessary loss of valued facilities and services, particularly where this would reduce the community's ability to meet its day-to-day needs.

**12.67** For the purposes of this policy, local community facilities include:

- Shops selling essential goods;
- Halls or meeting places for the principal use of the local community;
- Places of worship;
- Cultural buildings;
- Areas or places for community outdoor sport or recreation;
- Public houses;
- Post offices;
- Public health care facilities, including GP surgeries, dental practices and pharmacies.

#### Provision of local community facilities

**12.68** This policy seeks to support suitable proposals for the provision of local community facilities in order to enable communities to meet their day-to-day needs. The provision of such facilities will allow local communities to thrive, and reduce the need to travel by car for everyday essentials.

**12.69** It is important that proposals are sensitive to its particular location and proportionate in scale to the local area. Development proposals that deliver inclusive local community facilities through the shared use of space in accessible locations will be encouraged. The re-use and/or redevelopment of existing buildings within the local community will be supported where suitable opportunities exist, especially where sites are physically well-related to existing settlements.

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**12.70** Local community engagement is essential to gauge the need for current and proposed local community facilities. Such engagement and consultation should be proportionate to the scale of the proposal.

### Retention of local community facilities

**12.71** The Council, through this policy, will seek to protect and retain local community facilities unless it can be demonstrated that, in order to outweigh the loss, the proposals will deliver equivalent or, where possible, greater community benefit which is easily accessible to the community it is intended to serve, or the facility is no longer viable, or it is no longer needed and any need arising from its loss can be accommodated within easily accessible existing facilities.

**12.72** Where a development proposal could lead to the loss of a local community facility or reduce its functionality and/or viability, applicants must provide justification/evidence for its loss. As part of any assessment it will be essential to gain the views of the local community it is intended to serve, through meaningful community engagement and consultation.

**12.73** Where an applicant wishes to demonstrate that the facility is no longer viable the following information should be provided:

- a. A marketing report that outlines a robust marketing strategy and its results. As a minimum, the market report should outline details of a robust marketing strategy for the site, one which genuinely tests the markets at a realistic price over a period of at least six months. The report must also show, as a minimum:
  - o Official confirmation by the marketing agent that the premises were appropriately and extensively marketed with no reasonable offer of sale or rent;
  - o An enquiry log, details of how the enquiry was followed up and a review of why it was unsuccessful; and
  - o Evidence of property particulars and extensive advertising, via photos of physical signage and adverts, along with screenshots from online advertisements and accompanying analysis of activity.
- b. A commercial viability study that sets out as a minimum, financial viability details and what measures have been taken in an attempt to return the facility to a viable business. This could include details of commercial initiatives introduced, development proposals for the business etc.

**12.74** Where an applicant wishes to demonstrate that a facility is no longer needed/required and any need arising from its loss can be accommodated within easily accessible existing facilities, an assessment of local need will be required to support such a proposal. This assessment will need to demonstrate, as a minimum, that there are available, accessible and inclusive alternative existing community facilities, of an equivalent or better quality to those lost, which would meet the community need without causing an unreasonable shortfall in local provision.

**12.75** Public houses in particular serve important social, community and economic functions in maintaining the vitality and viability of communities. Public houses also have important links to leisure and tourism, and contribute to the distinctiveness and vibrancy of towns and villages. The loss of a public house from a community can be especially severe if it is the only remaining facility in the area and is a focal point for that community. While the planning system cannot prevent a business from closing, it can positively manage any applications for change of use, including conversions to private dwellings. The Council will encourage the combination of services or activities, such as post offices, shops or related brewing functions with the existing public house use.

**12.76** Any partial loss or subdivision of a local community facility will only be permitted where it can be clearly demonstrated that this will contribute to and/or not prejudice the economic viability or future operation of the facility as a whole. In order to avoid the unnecessary loss of such facilities, this policy applies to any building or the land upon which it sits.

**12.77** The NPPF is clear that proposals for small scale rural development will not be subject to the sequential approach. Where the decision maker has concerns over the scale and/or impact of a proposal in a rural area a sequential assessment and/or impact assessment may be sought.

**12.78** When considering planning permission for new buildings or changes of use to local community facilities, an assessment will be made as to whether planning conditions will be required to limit changes of use which would otherwise be permitted under the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 (as amended) in order to achieve the objectives of the policy.

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### Community Rights agenda

**12.79** The Community Rights agenda was introduced as part of the Localism Act in 2011 and includes initiatives such as the Community Right to Bid and the Community Right to Build.

**12.80** The Community Right to Build gives local communities the right to bring forward small-scale community-led developments. This right forms part of the neighbourhood planning provisions. The Community Right to Bid<sup>(141)</sup> gives local communities the ability to nominate local land or buildings to be included in a list of Assets of Community Value (ACV). This list is held by the Council, and once an asset is listed certain restrictions are then placed upon the owner should they decide to sell the land/building. The Council will support local communities who seek to provide and/or retain local community facilities through the Community Rights agenda.

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141 Community Right to Bid: <https://westberks.gov.uk/community-bid>