

Environmental Quality

Countryside

- 3.56** Although perceived to be mainly urban in character, the Falkirk Council area has an extensive and varied countryside, the quality of which has a major influence on the image of the area. It is an environment where people live, work, and visit for recreation and tourism, and which is subject to increasing development pressures for housing, business and infrastructure.
- 3.57** Structure Plan Policy ENV.1 sets out a policy approach of restricting development in the countryside unless a countryside location is essential or the activity is an appropriate form of agricultural diversification.
- 3.58** Within this context, Policy EQ19 defines the countryside by reference to a system of Urban and Village Limits, and establishes the overall policy approach to development within it, cross-referring to the other policies listed in Table 3.3 which give guidance on specific uses in the countryside. The objective is to encourage bone fide rural economic activity, whilst resisting sporadic development which would compromise the open character of the countryside. It will also encourage development to locate, where possible, within the rural villages, in order to sustain their vitality. It should be noted that in two of the areas identified for Special Initiatives for Residential-led Regeneration (SIRRs)- Banknock and Whitecross - the Urban/Village Limit is a provisional one pending redefinition of the urban area through the relevant development framework or masterplan.
- 3.59** Policy EQ19 also sets out design considerations which will be particularly relevant to the satisfactory integration of development into a countryside setting, and requires compliance with the 'Design Guide for Buildings in the Rural Area'. Reference should also be made, where appropriate, to PAN 36: Siting and Design of New Housing in the Countryside and PAN 39: Farm and Forestry Buildings.

3.60

EQ19 COUNTRYSIDE

- (1) The Urban and Village Limits represent the desirable limit to the expansion of settlements for the period of the Local Plan. Land outwith these boundaries is designated as countryside and will be subject to the detailed policies for specific uses indicated in Table 3.3. Development proposals in the countryside for uses not covered by these policies will only be permitted where:
- it can be demonstrated that they require a countryside location;
 - they constitute appropriate infill development; or
 - they utilise suitable existing buildings.
- (2) In circumstances where development meets the relevant countryside policy criteria, the scale, siting and design of development will be strictly controlled to ensure that there is no adverse impact on the character of the countryside. In particular:
- the siting should be unobtrusive, making use of natural features to integrate development into the landform and avoiding skylines;
 - building design should be sympathetic to vernacular building styles and comply with the design principles contained within the Council's 'Design Guide for Buildings in the Rural Areas'; and
 - boundary and curtilage treatments should be sympathetic to the rural area, with a preference for stone walling and hedging using native species.

3.61 Table 3.3 Detailed Policies for Specific Uses in the Countryside

Housing	SC3	Housing Development in the Countryside
Business	EP5	Business and Industrial Development in the Countryside
Leisure and Tourism	EP16	Leisure and Tourism Development in the Countryside
Minerals	EQ31- 39	Mineral Policies
Waste Management	ST17	Landfill
Facilities	ST18	Waste Management Facilities
Telecommunications	ST13	Telecommunications Development
and Infrastructure	ST14	Pipelines
	ST15	Overhead Power Lines
Renewable Energy	ST20	Renewable Energy Development
Development	ST21	Wind Energy
Gypsy/Travellers' Sites	SC4A	Gypsy/Traveller Sites

Landscape

3.72 The Falkirk Council area has a remarkably varied landscape in terms of character and quality. An overall understanding of the landscape resource is provided by the Central Region Landscape Assessment 1996 and Stirling/Grangemouth Landscape Assessment 1998, which identify the range of landscape character units present in the area.

3.73 Policy EQ22 is intended to ensure that development proposals which are likely to have a significant landscape impact are properly assessed to ensure that a suitable landscape fit can be achieved. This will be important both for developments located within the countryside and proposals to extend settlements. Landscape and visual assessment should be integrated into the Design Statement for developments (see Policy EQ2), where required, and should accord with the Landscape Institute's 'Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment', 2nd Edition. In the case of housing, reference should also be made to PAN 44: Fitting New Housing Development into the Countryside.

3.74

EQ22 LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL ASSESSMENT

Development proposals which are likely to have a significant landscape impact must be accompanied by a comprehensive landscape and visual assessment as part of the Design Statement, which demonstrates that the setting is capable of absorbing the development, in conjunction with suitable landscape mitigation measures, and that best environmental fit has been achieved, in terms of the landscape character of the area.

3.75 Areas of Great Landscape Value (AGLVs) are designated to safeguard locally important areas of outstanding scenic character or quality from inappropriate development. The Structure Plan identifies two existing AGLVs - the Avon Valley and the Denny Hills - and one new area - Bo'ness South - for such protection. These represent the highest quality landscapes in the area, and Policy EQ23 accords them additional protection over and above that provided by normal countryside policies.

3.76

EQ23 AREAS OF GREAT LANDSCAPE VALUE

The Council will protect Areas of Great Landscape Value from development which would be detrimental to its amenity and distinctive landscape quality. In addition to satisfying other relevant countryside policies, proposals within these areas will only be permitted where accompanied by a landscape and visual assessment demonstrating that the development can be accommodated without adverse impact on the landscape quality.

Biodiversity and Nature Conservation

3.77 The maintenance and promotion of biodiversity - the variety of life that exists on earth - is a key component of sustainable development. The SPP emphasises the duty on public bodies to further the conservation of biodiversity, and the need for this to be reflected in development plans. As well as national legislation, international obligations exist in the form of the Habitats and Birds Directives, and the Ramsar Convention.

3.78 The Falkirk Council area supports a rich diversity of different habitats. This includes rivers and other wetlands, estuarine habitats, woodlands, farmland, grassland and meadows, quarries and tips, peat bogs and urban open space. Habitat surveys carried out over recent years have helped to define the type and nature of the existing nature conservation resource. This has been followed up by the Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) process which has identified and produced action plans for local priority habitats and species.

3.79 Policy EQ24 sets out the Council's policy for protecting the network of sites of ecological importance within the area. Statutory sites designated under international legislation are afforded the greatest protection. These include Special Protection Areas (SPAs), and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), collectively known as Natura 2000 sites, and Ramsar Sites. At the national level, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are designated under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. At the local level, non-statutory sites which meet certain criteria are designated as Wildlife Sites, whilst further sites of local interest are identified as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs). The process of identifying and classifying local sites is ongoing, and other sites of value which would meet the relevant criteria, but have not yet been designated, will be afforded protection. A list of all protected sites is given in Appendix 2. Securing the management of all designated sites will be a key objective.

Windfall Housing Development within the Urban and Village Limits

- 4.10 In addition to the housing proposals identified specifically in the Local Plan, other housing development within the Urban or Village Limits will be supported where it meets the criteria set out in Policy SC2. Such windfall development will generally be on brownfield sites and will assist in meeting the general objective of recycling redundant land and minimising take up of greenfield sites. However, sites must meet requirements in terms of accessibility, amenity and infrastructure availability. An estimate of the output from windfall sites has been built into the housing land requirement calculation, and monitoring will take place to check the actual output against the estimate.

4.11

SC2 WINDFALL HOUSING DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE URBAN/VILLAGE LIMIT

Housing development within the Urban and Village Limits, in addition to proposals identified within the Local Plan, will be supported where the following criteria are met:

- (1) The site is a brownfield one, or comprises urban open space whose loss can be justified in terms of Policy SC12;
- (2) The proposed housing use is compatible with neighbouring uses and a satisfactory level of residential amenity can be achieved;
- (3) The site enjoys good accessibility by public transport, walking and cycling to shopping, recreational and other community facilities;
- (4) Existing physical infrastructure, such as roads and drainage, water supply, sewage capacity, and community facilities, such as education and healthcare, have the capacity to accommodate the increase in use associated with the proposed development, or can be upgraded through appropriate developer contributions as required by Policy SC11;
- (5) In the case of small gap sites and sub-divided plots, Policy SC8 is satisfied; and
- (6) There is no conflict with any other Local Plan policy or proposal.

Housing in the Countryside

- 4.12 There is continuing pressure for the development of individual houses or groups of houses in the countryside. Structure Plan Policy ENV.1 and Local Plan Policy EQ19 set out the broad approach of restricting new development in the countryside unless a countryside location is required. Policy SC3 contains detailed criteria for assessing the acceptability of proposals. In general, housing will be permitted where it is required to support a genuine rural economic activity. Further opportunities will arise from the rehabilitation of redundant properties and from appropriate infill sites.

4.13

SC3 HOUSING DEVELOPMENT IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Housing development in the countryside will only be permitted in the following circumstances:

- (1) Housing essential to the pursuance of agriculture, horticulture or forestry, or the management of a business for which a countryside location is essential. In these instances, the applicant must demonstrate all of the following:
 - The operational need for the additional house in association with the business;
 - That no existing dwelling which might have served that need has been sold or otherwise alienated from the holding;
 - That there are no reasonable opportunities for reusing or converting redundant buildings rather than building a new dwellinghouse; and
 - That the business as a whole is capable of providing the main source of income for the occupant;
- (2) Proposals involving the rehabilitation of former residential properties, or the conversion of farm and other buildings to residential use, where all of the following criteria are met:
 - The building, by virtue of its existing character, makes a positive contribution to the rural landscape;
 - The building is in a reasonable state of repair, still stands substantially intact and is capable of beneficial restoration, as verified by a report and certificate from a qualified structural engineer;
 - The restored or converted building is of comparable scale and character to the original building; and
 - In the case of former non-residential buildings, the building is no longer required for the purpose for which it was built; or
- (3) Appropriate infill opportunities within the envelope of an existing group of residential buildings, where the development would not result in ribbon, backland or sporadic development, and the proposal satisfies Policy SC8.

