

Guidance on Horse-related Development in the Malvern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

1.1 Introduction

The Malvern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is renowned for its landscape and scenic beauty. Both natural and cultural influences have combined to produce the landscape that is so highly valued today.

The way that land is used and the buildings within it make a key contribution to the special character and local distinctiveness of the area. The keeping of horses can have a very positive impact on the landscape but it also has the potential to introduce new buildings, structures and equipment into the countryside. Without due care these can affect the quality and character of the landscape.

Please note that this is a companion document to Malvern Hills AONB guidance on 'A Guide to Keeping Horses in the Landscape', where further advice and information about good practice in horse management can be found¹.

1.2 The purpose of this document

The purpose of this document is to encourage those thinking about equine development to carefully consider the potential impact on the special qualities of the AONB. By paying careful attention to matters such as siting, layout and design, new equine development can sit comfortably within this nationally important landscape and help to conserve the natural beauty of the area. Development proposals in the setting of the AONB can also have adverse impacts and the advice in this document also applies to these areas².

The Malvern Hills AONB covers a wide geographical area and falls under five administrative bodies at county, unitary and district level. The aim of this guidance is to encourage a consistent, 'good practice' approach across the whole of the designated area.

1.3 Who this document is for

This document provides guidance for everyone considering equine development within the Malvern Hills AONB and its setting. This may include horse owners, land managers, architects and landscape architects and agents. It is also targeted at those with responsibility for setting the planning framework for development and for making decisions about individual planning

¹ <https://www.malvernhillsaonb.org.uk/our-work/publications>

² National Policy Planning Framework, paragraph 176

applications.

Every equine development, from the building of stables and arenas to new gates and fencing, has the potential to make a positive or negative contribution to the landscape of the AONB. The guidance in this document will help those who value this area to make sure that future developments contribute to its special qualities³.

1.4 Status of this guidance

This document has been produced to help deliver the Malvern Hills AONB Management Plan which 'formulates local authority policy for the management of the AONB and for the carrying out of their functions in relations to it' (Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000). The AONB Management Plan, and its associated guidance, is a material planning consideration in decision making by local planning authorities⁴.

Using the guidelines within this document will also help public bodies to meet their statutory duties to have regard to the purposes of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB⁵.

2. The need for this guidance

The riding and keeping of horses for both commercial and domestic purposes brings great pleasure to many people. The economic benefit of these activities to the countryside is also acknowledged but it is essential to make sure that related equine development does not impact on the special qualities of the Malvern Hills AONB. Even small developments may have a relatively large impact on the landscape. The planning issues this guidance seeks to address are:

- stables, field shelters, manèges (outdoor schools), jumps, fencing and equine equipment
- the subdividing of agricultural land into smaller scale paddocks, altering landscape character
- damage to vegetation, soil structure and cover
- adverse impacts on nature conservation
- pollution from manure heaps

For further advice and information about good practice in horse management please refer to the MHAONB guidance 'A Guide to Keeping Horses in the Landscape'⁶.

³ <https://www.malvernhillsaonb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/19-24-MHAONB-Management-Plan.pdf> - refer to Page 9 - 'Special Qualities of the Malvern Hills AONB'

⁴ A material consideration is a matter that should be taken into account in deciding a planning application or on an appeal against a planning decision.

⁵ In exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect AONB land (Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000).

⁶ <https://www.malvernhillsaonb.org.uk/our-work/publications>

3. Horses in the Context of the Planning Framework

3.1 Local plans are the starting point for assessing any development proposals⁷. All the local plans covering the AONB area refer to the need to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB and some of the plans also contain policies relating to equestrian development. This guidance encourages the adoption of good practice by developers and applicants. Advice should always be sought from the relevant local planning authority before submitting planning applications, preferably including pre-application advice. We recommend that all equine related planning applications also include an equine management plan, setting out how the land will be cared for, if planning permission is granted. (Refer Appendix 1)

3.2 Within the planning system, the hierarchy is as follows:

The adopted development plan comprises the Local Planning Authority Development Plan, and any 'made' Neighbourhood Development Plan, in which decision-making is taken in accordance with these plans, unless material planning considerations indicate otherwise.

The MH AONB Management Plan, like the National Planning Policy Framework, is a material planning consideration, but does not form part of the adopted development plan. MH AONB Position Statements and Guidance Documents can supplement the AONB Management Plan.

4. When is planning permission needed for the keeping of horses?

If you are thinking of using any land for equestrian use you need to make sure the correct permissions are in place, before such a change of use commences. In determining whether planning permission is needed, the local planning authority will look at factors such as:

- Whether the field will be used permanently for horses
- Whether the horses will be fed primarily from grazing or from other sources
- Where and how often you ride the horses (including within the field)
- Whether there will be any related structures on the land such as field shelters, stables and jumps
- Whether it is for a private or commercial purpose
- What the land is currently being used for

All this information can be presented in a simple equine land management plan (Refer to Appendix 1).

The use of land for simply grazing horses or ponies does not require planning permission, as it is considered an agricultural use. However, planning permission is likely to be required if:

- the land area is not large enough to support year-round feeding and additional feed is needed;

⁷ <https://www.swdevelopmentplan.org/> <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/local-plan-1/local-plan-2021-2041>
<https://www.fdean.gov.uk/planning-and-building/planning-policy/our-current-local-plan>

- horses are turned out on the land mainly for exercise;
- rugging the horses and/ or riding on the land is taking place;
- the land is subdivided into paddocks and shelters, where this is associated with recreation rather than agriculture; or
- grazing is part of a commercial activity, such as livery, or if other activities take place on the land.

5. Horse-related development considerations

5.1 Siting of stables or shelters

Three-sided, open fronted field shelters require planning permission if they are fixed in a permanent position and have solid floors. Mobile field shelters may not require planning permission but they must be fully capable of being moved within the land. The shelters must be moved at least annually. Most stables and other buildings related to the keeping of horses require planning permission. There may be some exceptions for stables/loose boxes erected within the curtilage of dwelling houses for horses 'kept as pet animals for the domestic needs or personal enjoyment of the occupants of the dwelling house'. In accordance with good practice, it is recommended that you only apply for sufficient stabling to keep the number of horses that can be sustainably supported on the land holding⁸.

Wherever possible attempts should be made to avoid the need for new development through the reuse or conversion of existing buildings.

When new horse-related development is necessary, it should preferably relate to any existing buildings. This is especially important where the stables or shelters are close to historic farmsteads, the historic patterns of buildings and the land within and around them should be conserved. The advice provided in the Malvern Hills AONB Guidance on Building Design should be closely followed and the aim should always be to integrate new buildings sensitively into the landscape⁹.

When developing in a new location the building(s) should be sited as inconspicuously as possible, so critical viewpoints in the surrounding landscape should be identified to determine the visual impact of any development. Even small developments can affect the landscape and people's enjoyment of it. The AONB Partnership has produced guidance on views¹⁰, which provides non-technical advice to help people assess views and development impacts on them.

Generally new buildings should relate to existing features and respect the lie of the land, so isolated, elevated or skyline sites should be avoided. The use of earth mounding and cutting into the ground to change levels should also be avoided.

⁸ It is recommended that one hectare (2.5 acres) of mixed species grassland be provided per horse (500kg+)

⁹ MHAONB Guidance on Building Design, ref 7. Farmsteads and agricultural buildings.

¹⁰ MHAONB Guidance on Identifying and Grading Views and Viewpoints

Wherever possible, buildings should be sited to benefit from the natural folds in the land and from existing trees and woodland to both minimise the impact of new development and to maximise protection from the weather.

5.2 Materials and design of buildings

The design of prefabricated stables is often 'off the shelf' and fairly standard and in less sensitive areas is likely to be an acceptable option if appropriately sited. These stables are likely to be constructed of timber. Ideally these should be treated with a dark stained preservative/finish such as RAL Black-grey 7021/NCS 8502-B, or a 50/50 mix of black and a warm red-brown such as rosewood. The choice of colour should be made in relation to the context in which development will be viewed. The Malvern Hills AONB Guidance on the Selection and Use of Colour in Development can assist in this regard¹¹.

A dark coloured felt is often the least intrusive roof covering for small stables. For a more substantial stable roof, fibre cement roofing sheets provide a durable solution. Slate (dark) grey coloured roofing sheets or tiles, for example RAL 7015 slate grey/NCS 7005-R80B, will help the building recede within the landscape and minimize glare.

Metal buildings and roofs are also an option but these are often more problematic because metal sheets – even dark ones – will reflect light in certain conditions. Even small buildings can stand out in the landscape if the finish is shiny or if the colours chosen are too light or unsuitable. The choice of colour and finish is crucial. Light roofs including some standard shades, such as 'Goose Wing Grey' and certain standard greens such as 'Juniper Green,' should be avoided. Darker roofs and elevations can help ensure that buildings recede into the landscape. Colour choices for metal walls and roofs should be informed by the MHAONB Guidance on the selection and use of colour¹², which provides a range of colour suggestions in palettes appropriate for each character area of the AONB¹³. Profile sheeting may not be available in the full range of colours suggested by the guidance but there are 'off the shelf' colours available which are a close match. For example, Meadowscape (Anthracite) - NCSS 6052Y. A matt, leather grain finish is recommended for metal sheeting to minimise glare.

Wherever possible, for permanent buildings, the use of traditional materials and finishes will be encouraged, especially where new stables and barns are located close to older farmsteads. New buildings should take their design cues from the immediate vicinity and may include materials such as red brick, Malvern stone, dark stained waney edge timber, rough cut timber cladding and clay tiles, depending on locality.

5.3 Jumps

Brightly coloured jumps left in position after use can be visually intrusive in an open countryside landscape. Planning conditions may be imposed that require jumps to be

¹¹ https://www.malvernhillsaonb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/guidance_on_colour_use_screen-1.pdf

¹² https://www.malvernhillsaonb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/guidance_on_colour_use_screen.pdf

¹³ https://www.malvernhillsaonb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MalvernLandStratGuideLoResFinal_000.pdf

removed after use and stored off site. Jumps that are fixed to the ground do require planning permission and should preferably be constructed of unpainted natural materials e.g. for hunter trials and cross-country events. Ideally, jump wings should be coloured dark brown/black or another colour which ensures they do not stand out. The poles and fillers should also be of a colour finish that is unobtrusive and not brightly coloured. Wherever possible, poles and fillers should be stored overnight.

5.4 Lighting

The dark skies of the AONB are one of its special features so the lighting of stables and other equine buildings should be kept to the minimum required for safe working and should comply with guidance provided in the MHAONB Guidance on lighting in order to reduce light pollution¹⁴. Lighting arenas within or close to the AONB will be discouraged. Applicants should refer to the Malvern Hills AONB Guidance on Lighting in this regard.

National and local policies strictly control new residential development in the open countryside outside settlement boundaries of recognised settlements. That means that it is highly unlikely that planning permission would be granted in the open countryside for a new dwelling for occupation in conjunction with stabling¹⁵.

5.5 Manèges / Arenas

Manèges are increasingly included in equine planning applications and can have a large impact on the surrounding landscape. As a flat surface is needed for a manège it is essential to choose a level location where the re-contouring of the land surface is not necessary. In the often hilly landscapes of the Malvern Hills AONB this may be a challenge, but the use of cut and fill to create terraces should be avoided as it creates unnatural landscape features. Positioning manèges on skylines and within important views should also be avoided.

As with new equine buildings a manège should sit close to other development wherever possible so that it 'reads' as part of the existing complex and can take advantage of existing buildings, trees and woodland to minimise its impact in the landscape. When deciding on the size of the manège, it is also important to consider the local landscape character and the space needed to develop surrounding access paths, track ways and gates, since this may be considerable. These elements too should be sensitively designed.

Manège fencing should be in an appropriate design reflecting local fencing styles and agricultural in appearance. Dark staining may help it recede within views and sensitive planting of native hedge and tree species close by can help soften the effect. Rigid, straight lines of planting along fence lines should be avoided as this can further emphasise the un-

¹⁴ <https://www.malvernhillsaonb.org.uk/mhaonb-guidance-on-lighting-final-2/>

¹⁵ In accordance with Paragraph 80 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2023)

natural shape of a manège within the landscape. Wet leaves can also be dangerous for riders if they fall on arena surfaces so allow space between the arena and the planting.

The surface materials of the ménage should, if possible, be dark in colour to avoid glare and to reduce general visibility but note that some dark sands may provide a riding surface which is unsuitable for use in an arena. Certain surfaces may not be suitable for sports horses jumping at higher levels and for dressage horses which are performing at an elite/professional level, although we would encourage darker materials surfaces where possible, and any alternatives should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Care should be taken to avoid materials often branded as 'recycled' (such as from carpet rubber or recycled tyres) which are harmful to the environment.

5.6 Enclosure

Whilst planning permission is not always required for enclosure, it is an integral part of the overall application. The most common form of field enclosure used is post and rail fencing which should always reflect local designs and materials, but the impact of fencing can be considerably softened by planting a native hedge alongside. Once established this can provide extra foraging for horses and shade and shelter.

The enclosure and sub-division of paddocks is of particular concern because they tend to be much smaller than the size and shape of traditional fields of the AONB, eroding the local landscape pattern. The hard grazing in these smaller 'starvation' paddocks can also change the appearance of the grass sward in each area, further leading to landscape character loss. A mixed sward instead of rye grass can avoid this scenario as horses can be kept on a larger area and avoid laminitis issues, which is often the reason for subdivision. Where field patterns have been enlarged over time, it is important to ensure that any sub-division of them respects historic field patterns and boundary lines.

Where temporary subdivision is needed, this should be using dark tape and posts. White tape is highly visually intrusive in the landscape as are brightly coloured electric posts. Green or brown tape and posts are preferable. Post and rail fencing should not be painted white, or any other bright colour for this reason. Gates should be traditional wooden or metal farm gates and the introduction of more suburban designed gates and gate piers should be avoided.

5.7 Access and services

New accesses will almost always need planning permission, especially when accessing onto a classified public highway or crossing fields. Wherever possible existing field gates should be used to gain access to stables, manèges and paddocks. Hedgerow and wall removal should be avoided (and may itself need permission under the Hedgerow Regulations Act) and the width and length of any new access formed should be kept to the minimum necessary for safety and practicality.

New buildings should be sited to minimize the need for new trackways wherever possible. Where needed, access tracks should be sensitively routed, working with existing landscape contours or following the lines of historic trackways, always avoiding them being routed directly across fields or using cut and fill.

Construction details for the trackway will reflect its anticipated level of use, the nature of the ground and drainage. In most situations, an un-bound or semi-bound surface will be sufficient for a lightly trafficked site and will be suitable for use by horses. Fully bound surfaces such as asphalt, bitumen or concrete will usually be less appropriate. Trackways should be of a rural appearance, constructed using local materials where possible; stone or crushed stone top dressings should be local or in a dark colour to avoid standing out in the landscape or should be matched to the colour of local stone. Reinforced grass tracks may be an option for lightly trafficked sites in areas which are particularly sensitive in terms of landscape and wildlife. Areas needed for car parking, turning and unloading should also be included in any application.

Services such as water and electricity are often required on larger equine sites and care should be taken that unsightly overhead wires are not used unless no other alternative is available. Where the undergrounding of cabling is considered, advice should be sought from the relevant Local Authority.

The storage of manure also requires careful planning. A single horse can produce 50 pounds of manure per day which is 9 tonnes annually. The collection of manure and any spreading is likely to require hard surfaced areas and vehicle access so this, as well as any storage facilities, should be part of any planning application for equine development. Storage of dung on site should be carefully sited and carried out in such a manner as not to endanger or pollute the surrounding land or water environment through seepage into water courses, taking advice from the Environment Agency.

5.8 Planting

Planting may be used to reduce the adverse effects of development but this should always complement or reflect existing or historical tree and hedge cover. The starting point for any application should be good design rather than mitigation, especially now that so many tree species are suffering from tree diseases and may not be long lived. Hedges and informal groups of trees will usually appear more natural than screening along site edges or building boundaries. Non-native trees should be avoided.

All new planting should consist of native trees and shrubs appropriate to the Malvern Hills AONB and it is important to always match tree species to site conditions to make sure they thrive. Suggestions for suitable trees and shrubs are provided in the MHAONB Guidance on Keeping Horses in the Landscape.

The Malvern Hills AONB is an area with many important wildlife sites, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), these are indicated on development plan proposal maps and should always be avoided both for development and for landscaping, although horses can sometimes be valuable

grazers on such sites.

6. Additional advice and information

It is strongly recommended that early consultation and pre-application discussions are held with your local planning authority to ensure that you are aware of all relevant planning policy for any horse-related development you are proposing. As well as the guidance referred to throughout this document, further advice on the management of land for keeping horses is available from the British Horse Society¹⁶.

¹⁶ <https://www.bhs.org.uk/>

Appendix 1. Conservation-based Equine Land Management Plans

A well thought out Conservation-based Land Management Plan submitted alongside a planning application will help to provide comprehensive information to the planning authority. All management plans should establish a broad aim for the site and then a series of actions needed for this to be achieved. The broad aim should cover equine health/needs, conservation objectives, restoring field boundaries where appropriate, enhancing features that contribute to landscape character, and managing land to support good water quality. It should include the following information:

- Current land use and the extent of the land holding.
- Number and type of horses, ponies, donkeys or mules, including breed, height, weight, use.
- Any other livestock that may be grazed alongside equines on the site; mixed grazing can help with managing land positively.
- Amount of land available for turnout and grazing (owned/rented), it may be that additional land may be available off site to allow for resting and rotation of the land.
- Type of land, soil type, topography and grass sward type. MAGIC is an online mapping system which provides a useful source of site specific information on these areas.¹⁷
- Detail on land management objectives, i.e. will the horse receive most or all of its nutrients from the land, if biodiversity is a key aim how will grazing by horses help, if land is for limited turnout only where will horses spend the rest of the time and how will poaching and over grazing be prevented?
- What resting and rotation programme will be in place? Is there enough land to shut some up over the summer for standing hay, will horses be moved to another site when necessary to rest land?
- Parasite control regime to prevent latrine areas building up and over grazing. This might include daily dung removal, resting land for extended periods, mixed grazing with other livestock and regular worm counts.
- Weed management, how will overgrazing be prevented and how will notifiable weeds (ragwort) and other invasive weeds (docks, Creeping Buttercup) be controlled.
- What land management techniques will be used, such as rolling, harrowing, fertilising, reseeding? These shouldn't be necessary if good land management practices are in place on horse grazed land.
- How will damage to land be prevented in wet weather, especially on clay soils? E.g. horses will be stabled, kept on hard standing, turned out in arenas in wet conditions.
- Managing excessive seasonal growth. Laminitis and obesity are serious issues in equines and frequently these are managed by creating 'starvation paddocks' which have a negative landscape and biodiversity impact.
- Fencing proposals – permanent/non-permanent, where will they be sited? What materials will be used?

¹⁷ www.magic.gov.uk

- Include details of how waste (manure and bedding in particular) will be stored, managed and disposed.