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Guidance

## **Guide to assessing development proposals on agricultural land**

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### **1. Policies to protect agricultural land and soil**

Developers and local planning authorities (LPAs) should refer to the following government policies and legislation when considering development proposals that affect agricultural land.

They aim to protect the best and most versatile (BMV) agricultural land and soils in England from significant, inappropriate or unsustainable development proposals.

Natural England uses these policies to advise on development proposals as a [statutory consultee](#) in the planning process.

### **1.1 Government white paper - The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature 2011**

[The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature 2011](#) explains why you should protect soils and keep them healthy and productive. It makes sure the planning system:

- puts a value on [natural capital](#), such as fertile soil
- encourages local authorities to promote multi-functional development to get the most from land
- protects BMV agricultural land

### **1.2 National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2012**

LPAs should make decisions that contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:

- protecting landscapes, geology, and soils
- considering the economic and other benefits of BMV agricultural land, and try to use areas of poorer quality land instead of higher quality land
- preventing soil, air, water, or noise pollution, or land instability from new and existing development

Read [chapter 11: Conserving and enhancing the natural environment for full details](#) (paragraph 109 refers to soils and 112 refers to BMV land).

### **1.3 Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure (England) Order) (DMPO) 2015**

[Schedule 4\(y\) of the DMPO](#) requires that planning authorities must consult Natural England on certain development proposals affecting BMV agricultural land.

### **1.4 Planning Practice Guidance for the Natural Environment**

[Paragraphs 25 and 26: Planning Practice Guidance for the Natural Environment](#) explain why planning decisions should take account of the value of soils and BMV agricultural land.

## **2. LPAs: consult Natural England**

You must consult Natural England for development proposals not included in local plans or neighbourhood plans that are likely to cause the loss of 20 hectares or more of BMV land.

You don't need to consult if the land is already identified for development in an approved [local or neighbourhood plan](#).

Natural England will advise you on the level of impact the proposal may have on BMV agricultural land. Natural England will take into account the type of development and its likely long-term effects.

Email [consultations@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:consultations@naturalengland.org.uk) or write to:

Natural England consultation service  
Hornbeam House  
Electra Way

Crewe Business Park  
Crewe  
Cheshire  
CW1 6GJ

### **3. Agricultural land classification (ALC)**

As an LPA you can use ALC to help make decisions on the appropriate future development of land.

ALC uses a grading system to assess and compare the quality of agricultural land at national, regional and local levels. It assesses the potential for land to support different agricultural uses, such as growing crops for food. It doesn't consider the land's current use and intensity of use.

A combination of climate, site and soil characteristics and their unique interaction determines the limitation and grade of the land. These affect the:

- range of crops that can be grown
- yield of crop
- consistency of yield
- cost of producing the crop

### **4. ALC grades**

ALC is graded from 1 to 5.

BMV agricultural land is graded 1 to 3a. The highest grade goes to land that:

- gives the highest yield or output
- has the widest range and versatility of use
- produces the most consistent yield from a narrower range of crops
- requires less input

#### **4.1 Grade 1 - excellent quality agricultural land**

Land with no or very minor limitations. A very wide range of agricultural and horticultural crops can be grown and commonly includes:

- top fruit
- soft fruit
- salad crops
- winter harvested vegetables

Yields are high and less variable than on land of lower quality.

#### **4.2 Grade 2 - very good quality agricultural land**

Land with minor limitations which affect crop yield, cultivations or harvesting. A wide range of agricultural and horticultural crops can usually be grown. On some land in the grade there may be reduced flexibility due to difficulties with the production of the more demanding crops, such as

winter harvested vegetables and arable root crops. The level of yield is generally high but may be lower or more variable than grade 1.

#### **4.3 Grade 3 - good to moderate quality agricultural land**

Land with moderate limitations which affect the choice of crops, timing and type of cultivation, harvesting or the level of yield. Where more demanding crops are grown yields are generally lower or more variable than on land in grades 1 and 2.

#### **4.4 Subgrade 3a - good quality agricultural land**

Land capable of consistently producing moderate to high yields of a narrow range of arable crops, especially cereals, or moderate yields of crops including:

- cereals
- grass
- oilseed rape
- potatoes
- sugar beet
- less demanding horticultural crops

#### **4.5 Subgrade 3b - moderate quality agricultural land**

Land capable of producing moderate yields of a narrow range of crops, principally:

- cereals and grass
- lower yields of a wider range of crops
- high yields of grass which can be grazed or harvested over most of the year

#### **4.6 Grade 4 - poor quality agricultural land**

Land with severe limitations which significantly restrict the range of crops and/or level of yields. It is mainly suited to grass with occasional arable crops (for example cereals and forage crops) the yields of which are variable. In moist climates, yields of grass may be moderate to high but there may be difficulties using the land. The grade also includes arable land that is very dry because of drought.

#### **4.7 Grade 5 - very poor quality agricultural land**

Land with very severe limitations which restrict use to permanent pasture or rough grazing, except for occasional pioneer forage crops.

### **5. LPAs: carry out ALC assessments to support your planning decisions**

For an overview of ALC use:

- [1:250,000 scale regional maps](#) (grade 3 land is not subdivided into 3a and 3b)
- 1: 250,000 scale regional maps [predicting the likelihood of BMV agricultural land](#)

These maps are not at a scale suitable or accurate for assessment of individual fields or sites.

You can assess if a development proposal is likely to affect BMV agricultural land by using the [post 1988 ALC Magic map](#) and [detailed site survey reports](#).

If no site survey reports are available, a [new detailed survey](#) may be necessary.

## **6. Use ALC to support your planning decisions**

Use ALC survey data to assess the loss of land or quality of land from a proposed development. You should take account of smaller losses (under 20 hectares) if they're significant when making your decision. Your decision should avoid unnecessary loss of BMV land.

### **6.1 Protect soil**

You should make sure development proposals include plans to:

- [conserve soil during construction](#)
- avoid peat extraction
- protect soils from contamination
- [reclaim land after mineral working or landfilling](#)

### **6.2 Carry out new surveys**

If there's not enough information from previous data, you may need to have a new field survey to plan for development or to inform a planning decision. You should use soil scientists or experienced soil specialists to carry out new surveys. They should be:

- members of the British Society of Soil Science, the British Institute of Agricultural Consultants or similar professional body
- knowledgeable about the [ALC 1988 guidelines](#)
- experienced in soil description and ALC assessments

### **6.3 Soil specialists: survey requirements**

For a detailed ALC assessment you should normally make boreholes:

- every hectare on a regular grid on agricultural land in the proposed development area
- up to 1.2m deep using an auger

Dig small inspection pits by hand to a minimum depth of 1m to add supporting evidence to the borehole data. Dig pits where there's a change in main soil type and ALC grade to provide a good depiction of the site.

Combine the survey results with local climate and site data to plot on an Ordnance Survey base map. Use a base map at an appropriate scale for detailed work, such as 1:10,000 scale.

## **7. Developers: check if your proposal affects agricultural land**

Use the [post 1988 ALC Magic map](#) and detailed [site survey reports](#) to help you assess whether a development proposal is likely to affect BMV agricultural land. Natural England will be able to offer free initial advice for proposals. If no suitable data exists, you may need to carry out a [detailed survey](#) to support your planning application.

## **7.1 Chargeable advice**

You can use Natural England's chargeable [discretionary advice service](#) if your proposal is large, for example 20ha or more, and requires more detailed advice.

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