

Westmeath County Council

Rural House Design Guidelines

ADDENDUM – August 2008

In April 2005, Westmeath County Council published Rural Design Guidelines, the intention of which was to offer support and guidance to those in the county who are contemplating building a house in the countryside. The guidelines were intended also to guide and assist through the process of planning consent and to establish approaches to design which would be of benefit to staff, designers, applicants and the general public. Emphasis was placed in the guidelines on the importance of designing **with** the landscape, and of siting of the development to maximise integration and minimise visual intrusion. The adopted County Development Plan 2008 - 2014 contains a landscape characterisation for the county and this should be the starting point in the achievement of an acceptable design solution.

The aims of the design guidelines may be summarised as follows:

- To promote an understanding of key design principles in relation to proposals to construct, renovate or extend individual houses in the countryside of County Westmeath.
- To inform applicants and design professionals of the Council's requirements in relation to design, which can then be taken into account at an early stage in the design process.
- To conserve and enhance Westmeath's rural landscape and heritage. - a full site appraisal is a pre-requisite to good design.
- To provide for both contemporary and energy efficient approaches to design. This aspect now requires further elaboration in the light of changing government policy.
- To raise the standard of design in the county

The guidelines are not intended to be prescriptive; rather they put forward a set of design principles to be followed. In addition, it is emphasised that the approach to design should be based on an understanding of the character and form of traditional

buildings in the countryside of County Westmeath. Aspects such as simplicity of forms, discreet siting and access, boundary treatment, use of contours and orientation to achieve energy conservation and shelter are considered. Historically, traditional buildings fitted into the landscape and they now contribute positively, for the most part, to their setting.

In this era of continually increasing energy costs, it is necessary to achieve greater levels of energy efficiency in the design and use of materials in all types of housing, including that in rural areas. There are now mandatory requirements to apply sustainability principles to the design of dwellings and to maximize energy performance in buildings. The general rule of passive solar energy is to reduce the glazing on the northside and maximise it on the southside, thereby offering the potential to exploit passive heat gains. In this regard, the use of extensive glazing on southern elevations to maximise solar gain and natural light will be encouraged subject to privacy requirements being observed. Plan form in addition should recognise the advantages offered by increased solar access by placing living areas on the southerly aspect, whilst service zones are located in the less favourable northern elevation. Westmeath County Council will facilitate the application of **site** specific contemporary design, based on the application of sustainability and energy efficiency principles, to new housing in the countryside.

Clarification on Specific Design Details

- **Structural Form** The principal plan form of the dwelling should reflect traditional proportions as follows:
 - A rectangular plan, on one, 1.5 or two storeys, with a pitched roof or a series of such forms.
 - Generally roof pitch of 35° to 42°
 - Roof span should normally not exceed 8.5m and other dimensions should be proportionate to this.
 - Roofs should be spanned across the narrowest plan dimension.
 - Over complicated forms and multiplicity of planes should be avoided.

- For reasons of energy efficiency, the 1.5 storey or two storey is a preferred form over bungalow subject to local siting issues. Roof Dormers should be avoided as these are not traditional, are energy inefficient and are more costly to build than the 1.5 storey eaves dormer.

Where larger dwellings (in excess of 230 square metres or 2,500 square feet) are proposed, the bulk should be reduced by introducing smaller subsidiary elements attached to the main structure, in keeping with traditional practice. A very large house requires a large site to provide a setting and context for the structure

- **Materials** – the number of materials should be kept to a minimum. The traditional rendered finish may be complemented with natural stone panelling and / or timber. A natural stone finish over the entire external surface is only acceptable where it is traditional in the local area. Stone can be used to provide contrast and reduce apparent size.
- **Windows** – Where the house is designed to be traditional in form, windows should be vertically emphasised and generally exhibit a wall to window ratio which reflects traditional proportions. Where larger window openings are proposed, these should be vertically sub-divided to achieve glass planes of similar size and re-establish the vertical emphasis. Bay-windows are not regarded as a traditional feature in rural areas; however contemporary treatment of larger window openings may provide for a projecting regular shaped window opening.
- **Porches** – the projecting entrance porch is a traditional feature of Westmeath rural dwellings and improves energy efficiency, where a second door is provided. The entrance porch should be designed such that it is an integrated element of the overall house design, rather than an element that appears to have been added later. The size and shape of the porch should be proportionate

to the scale of the house and should be secondary to the principal structure of the house.

The above is intended to clarify particular design issues raised by the Members. It is important to note that the Guidelines are intended to elucidate the principles involved in achieving good design and are not intended to stifle innovation or impede creativity. Design is a creative process which is constantly evolving and therefore will be subject to continuous review and learning, for staff, designers and the community at large. In this regard, it is proposed to arrange design workshops / seminars in conjunction with the Annual Design Awards Scheme towards the end of 2008.