

Do Mobile Field Shelters Need Permission?

Many landowners assume that keeping horses on agricultural land is straightforward and that some types of stables and shelters don't require permission, but the planning rules can be more complex than they first appear.

Mobile field shelters are a popular choice for horse owners because they provide protection from the weather while offering greater flexibility than permanent buildings. However, one of the most common questions landowners ask is whether a mobile field shelter requires planning permission.

The answer is not always straightforward. Whether planning permission is needed depends on several factors, including how the shelter is constructed, whether it can genuinely be moved, how often it is relocated, and the use of the land itself. A shelter described as "mobile" by the manufacturer may not automatically be considered mobile for planning purposes.

Understanding the planning rules before purchasing or installing a field shelter can help avoid costly mistakes and potential enforcement action. This simple guide explains how local planning authorities assess mobile field shelters, the key factors that determine whether planning permission may be required, and the practical steps horse owners can take to remain compliant.

While every site is different, knowing the basic principles can help you make informed decisions and reduce the risk of planning problems in the future.

What Is a Mobile Field Shelter?

Many horse owners assume that if a field shelter has wheels, skids, or can theoretically be towed by a vehicle, it will automatically be considered a mobile structure. However, planning authorities are often more interested in how the shelter is used in practice than how it was originally manufactured.

A genuinely mobile field shelter is typically designed to be moved around a field without the need for dismantling. It may sit on skids, have a towing mechanism, or be capable of relocation using a tractor or suitable vehicle. The purpose of mobility is often to allow grazing land to recover, reduce poaching around entrances, and provide flexibility for livestock management. However, a shelter that remains in the same position for a prolonged period, is connected to services such as electricity or water, or has become effectively fixed to the ground may be regarded as a permanent structure, regardless of whether it has wheels or skids.

What factors the Planning Authority are likely to consider

When assessing whether planning permission is required, local planning authorities will often consider factors such as:

- Whether the shelter can be moved easily and without dismantling.
- How frequently it is relocated.
- Whether it has foundations or ground anchors.
- Whether it is connected to utilities.
- The purpose for which the land is being used.
- The visual impact on the surrounding area.

For this reason, simply purchasing a product marketed as a "mobile field shelter" does not guarantee that planning permission will not be required. Each case is assessed on its individual circumstances, and the practical use of the structure can be just as important as its design.

When might Planning Permission be required?

There is no simple rule that says all mobile field shelters either do or do not require planning permission. Instead, planning authorities will consider the individual circumstances of each case.

In many situations, a genuinely mobile shelter used for grazing livestock and moved regularly around the land may not be regarded as operational development requiring planning permission. However, there are several circumstances where planning permission may become necessary.

For example, permission may be required if:

- The shelter remains in the same location for an extended period.
- It is used primarily in connection with an equestrian rather than agricultural use and change of use has not been approved.
- Groundworks, hardstanding, access tracks, or foundations are installed to support the shelter.
- The structure is connected to electricity, water, or drainage services.
- The structure has a permanent floor, such as hardcore, paving slabs or concrete
- The shelter has a significant visual impact on the surrounding landscape.
- The site is located within a protected area, such as Green Belt land, a National Landscape (formerly Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), a conservation area, or near a listed building.

One of the most common misunderstandings arises where horse owners believe that because a shelter is mobile, planning permission is automatically unnecessary. In reality, planning

officers often assess the overall use of the land and the shelter's permanence rather than focusing solely on whether it has wheels or skids.

The distinction between agricultural and equestrian use can also be important. A mobile shelter used for sheep, cattle, or other agricultural livestock may be viewed differently from an identical shelter used for recreational horse keeping. As a result, two seemingly similar shelters can receive very different planning assessments depending on the circumstances.

Because local planning authorities have discretion when interpreting the facts of a case, seeking advice before purchasing or installing a field shelter can help avoid unexpected enforcement issues later.

Agricultural Use vs Equestrian Use – Why It Matters

One of the most important factors in determining whether a mobile field shelter requires planning permission is the use of the land on which it is located. In planning terms, agricultural use and equestrian use are not generally treated as the same thing, and this distinction can have significant implications.

Agricultural land is typically used for farming activities such as growing crops, grazing livestock, or breeding animals for food production. Structures that support these activities may benefit from different planning considerations than those used for recreational purposes.

By contrast, land used for keeping horses for leisure riding, exercising, training, or private enjoyment is generally considered an equestrian use. Even if horses are grazing in a field, the overall use of the land may still be classed as equestrian rather than agricultural if the primary purpose is recreation rather than agriculture.

This distinction is important because planning authorities will often assess a field shelter in the context of the wider use of the land. In addition, agricultural use of land has the benefit of some permitted development rights, whereas there are no such rights for equestrian land.

For example:

- A mobile shelter used to protect sheep or cattle on agricultural land may be viewed as supporting a farming activity.
- The same shelter used to house horses kept for recreational riding may be assessed as part of an equestrian use.
- Additional features such as stables, tack rooms, hardstanding, lighting, jumps, or riding arenas can further reinforce the equestrian nature of a site.

Many horse owners are surprised to learn that simply grazing horses does not automatically mean the land remains as agricultural. Planning officers will usually look at the primary purpose of the land use rather than the type of animal occupying the field.

Understanding whether your land is considered agricultural or equestrian can therefore be a key factor when assessing whether planning permission may be required for a mobile field shelter, or any other equestrian development. If there is uncertainty, obtaining professional planning advice before carrying out works can help clarify the position and reduce the risk of future enforcement action.

Critical things to be aware of

Regardless of whether the building has the potential to move, the council will look at the intention to move it in assessing whether the building requires permission.

In other words, if you buy a 'mobile shelter' and 'park' it in the paddock and leave it there in the same place for more than 6 months, the council are likely to conclude there is no intention to move the shelter and as such, consider that it requires permission.

If you add a floor of concrete, or hardstanding (i.e stone) to the mobile shelter, you are indicating a lack of intention to move it. Even paving slabs, which can be moved, can be considered a more permanent option, as it's unlikely someone is going to lift concrete slabs on a regular basis.

If you add guttering and collect water in tubs, especially 1,000 litre IBC containers, again the intention suggests the building is a permanent fixture.

Do you have permission for change of use from agricultural land to equestrian? If not, the council will require a planning application for the change of material use. **Please see the free resource [Agricultural Land vs Equestrian Land Explained](#).**

A truly mobile field shelter must be:

- small scale
- capable of being moved
- should be moved regularly – at least every 6 months
- must not be fixed to the ground
- must not have a permanent floor (stone, concrete, slabs etc)
- must not have permanent attachments such as electricity or water