

Do Mobile Structures Need Permission?



Many landowners assume that putting mobile structures on agricultural land, such as Shepherd huts or caravans is straightforward and that they don't require permission, but the planning rules can be more complex than they first appear.

Mobile structures, such as containers, shepherds' huts and caravans are a popular choice for many landowners because they provide protection from the weather for storage or comfort while offering greater flexibility than permanent buildings. However, one of the most common questions landowners ask is whether a mobile structure requires planning permission.

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

Understanding the planning rules before purchasing or installing a structure can help avoid costly mistakes and potential enforcement action. This simple guide explains how local planning authorities assess mobile structures, the key factors that determine whether planning permission may be required, and the practical steps landowners 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 Structure?

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

A genuinely mobile structure 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 structure 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 structure 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 and structure are being used.
- The visual impact on the surrounding area.

For this reason, simply purchasing a product marketed as a "mobile structure" 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 structures 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 structure, such as a caravan used in connection with agriculture or forestry workers shelter 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 structure remains in the same location for an extended period.
- It is used primarily in connection with a recreational use rather than agricultural use and change of use has not been approved.
- Groundworks, hardstanding, access tracks, or foundations are installed to support the structure.
- The structure is connected to electricity, water, or drainage services.
- The structure has a permanent base, such as hardcore, paving slabs or concrete
- The structure has a significant visual impact on the surrounding landscape, for example storage containers.
- 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 landowners believe that because a structure is mobile, planning permission is automatically unnecessary. In reality, planning officers often assess the overall use of the land and the structure's permanence rather than focusing solely on whether it has wheels or skids.

The distinction between agricultural and recreational use can also be important. A mobile structure used for sheep, cattle, or other agricultural livestock will be viewed differently from an identical structure used for recreational use. As a result, two seemingly similar structures 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 mobile structure can help avoid unexpected enforcement issues later.

Agricultural Use vs Recreational Use – Why It Matters

One of the most important factors in determining whether a mobile structure requires planning permission is the use of the land on which it is located. In planning terms, agricultural use and recreational use are not 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, for exercising dogs or just for a family to enjoy spending time outdoors is generally considered a recreational use.

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

For example:

- A mobile structure used to protect sheep or cattle on agricultural land may be viewed as supporting a farming activity.
- The same structure used to house horses kept for recreational riding may be assessed as part of an equestrian use.
- A caravan for someone to stay in and enjoy their land for pleasure would generally require permission, whereas a caravan used temporarily by farm or forestry workers would generally be seen as acceptable.
- A storage container used for long term storage would require permission.

Many landowners are surprised to learn that the land remains as agricultural, unless planning permission for a change of use is approved. Just because you buy a piece of land for your own enjoyment, doesn't change the use of the land and so anything unrelated to farming activities would generally require planning permission.

If there is uncertainty regarding the official use of the land, obtaining professional planning advice before carrying out works can help clarify the position and reduce the risk of future enforcement action.

The Caravan Act

In England and Wales, the main legislation is the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960. However, that Act does not generally give a blanket right to place caravans on agricultural land. Instead, it regulates caravan sites and provides certain exemptions.

People often refer to one of two separate provisions:

1. **The agricultural workers exemption** under Schedule 1 of the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960. This can allow caravans used in connection with agriculture or forestry workers for temporary and special purposes without a site licence.
2. **The "28-day rule"** under planning legislation (currently the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015). This can permit temporary use of land for certain purposes for up to 28 days in a calendar year without planning permission, subject to conditions. This is often confused with the Caravan Sites Act.

For caravan sites specifically, common exemptions include:

- A single caravan for up to 2 consecutive nights and a maximum of 28 days in any 12 months.
- Up to 3 caravans on a site of at least 5 acres for a maximum of 28 days in any 12 months.
- Certain agricultural and forestry worker situations.
- Sites operated by exempt organisations such as recognised caravan clubs.

Critical things to be aware of

Regardless of whether the structure has the potential to move, the council will look at the intention to move it, the length of time it has been in place and the intended use of it, in assessing whether the structure requires permission.

In other words, if you buy a 'mobile structure' and 'park' it in the field 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 structure and as such, consider that it probably requires permission, unless it is directly related to the farming enterprise and meets one of the exemptions, such as within the Caravan Act, or permitted development for agricultural land .

If you add a floor of concrete, or hardstanding (i.e stone) to the mobile structure, 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 structure is a permanent fixture.

Do you have permission for change of use from agricultural land to equestrian or other form of recreational use? 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 structure must be:

- small scale and directly related to the lawful use of the land
- capable of being moved
- should be moved regularly – at least every 6 months if a mobile field shelter
- must not be fixed to the ground
- must not have a permanent floor / base (stone, concrete, slabs etc)
- must not have permanent attachments such as electricity or water