

HEIGHT AND SCALE OF NEW BUILDINGS ACROSS WOKING

Executive Summary

At its meeting on 3 December 2020 Council considered the following Notice of Motion submitted by Councillor Lyons. The current Design Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) does not provide clarity on the permissible height and scale of new buildings across Woking, particularly those in the town centre. It was therefore proposed that Officers should produce a report at the earliest opportunity setting out existing guidance, along with the consequential impacts which may arise from any changes, with the view to updating the Design Supplementary Planning Document if appropriate.

Councillor Lyons advised that the Notice of Motion had been drawn up in the light of concerns over the number of planning applications received by the Council for large scale tower blocks and the changing character of the town centre.

Council resolved to support the Motion.

This report sets out the existing guidance on ensuring high quality design and the implications for introducing height restrictions on development within the town centre.

Recommendations

The Executive is requested to:

RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL That

- (i) **the existing guidance on the design of development, including tall buildings in the town centre, as set out in Section 2 of the report, be noted;**
- (ii) **the consequential impacts for introducing height limits on development in the town centre, as set out in Section 3 of the report, be noted; and**
- (iii) **the current suite of Local Plan documents referred to in the report remain in force until the next review which is due in 2023 and which will be informed by the Big Conversation which is proposed in the Corporate Plan 2021 – 2022.**

Reasons for Decision

Reason: To inform Members of the existing guidance on the design of development and the implication for setting height limit on development at the town centre.

The item(s) above will need to be dealt with by way of a recommendation to Council.

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Background Papers: [Woking Core Strategy](#)
[Character Study](#)
[Draft Site Allocations Development Plan Document](#)
[Design Supplementary Planning Document](#)

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Date Published: 19 March 2021

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 One of the important duties of the Council that is expected by the Government and local residents is to plan to meet the development needs of the diverse community in a sustainable manner. The Council has an adopted up to date Core Strategy that helps to achieve this aim.

1.2 The following provides a brief background on how the policy on high density development in the town centre was developed. The preparation of the Core Strategy started in 2009. With the Council spending a lot of time engaging with local residents and key stakeholders to understand and agree with them the issues that the community would like to be addressed and the challenges associated with addressing them. This exercise culminated in the publication of an Issues and Options document that was the subject of extensive consultation with the community between 27 October 2009 and 7 December 2009. There was broad consensus about the need for the Council to make provision for:

- Housing to meet the diverse needs of the community, in particular, Affordable Housing;
- High quality jobs; in particular, support for small and medium sized enterprise formation by encouraging a range of types and sizes of premises,
- Improved retail offer;
- Leisure and community facilities;
- Infrastructure and services to support development;
- Improved transport and accessibility;
- Measures to address and adapt to climate change and protect the environment and heritage assets.

1.3 Based on various studies to assess the quantum and nature of the above needs, the Core Strategy makes provision for the delivery of at least 4,964 dwellings (equivalent of 292 dwellings per year), 28,000 sq.m of office floorspace, 20,000 sq.m of warehouse floorspace and 93,600 sq.m of retail floorspace between 2010 and 2027. The Secretary of State has agreed that the above should be the basis upon which the Borough should be planned up to 2027.

1.4 Right from the beginning, the Council also understood the importance and the need for a clear vision that gives an idea of the destination when everything has been achieved and the basis for measuring its performance. A question was put out for discussion, which is – what would the community wish the Borough to look and feel like by 2027 when all the issues they have identified are delivered? Residents Forums, Developers Forums, Statutory Consultees, key stakeholders, Members and various sections of the Council were extensively engaged to develop and shape the vision. The vision that eventually commanded broad consensus was:

‘Woking will be a Borough of high environmental quality and standards where people choose to live, work and visit, an exemplar in the achievement of sustainable growth; Woking will be a regional focus of economic prosperity centred on a vibrant, enhanced town centre that provides a good range of quality shops, jobs, cultural facilities, services and infrastructure to cater for the Borough’s needs, surrounded by distinct communities anchored by attractive district and local centres providing convenient access to everyday shops, services and local community facilities.

Woking will be a sustainable community where the benefits of growth and prosperity are shared throughout the Borough without pockets of deprivation.

New development in the Borough will be well designed to respect the character of the area. New housing development will help to meet the needs of all sections of the community.

A green Borough where people will have easy access to good quality green spaces and infrastructure for recreation and leisure.

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The Borough will have a balanced and sustainable multi-modal transport system that links homes, jobs and key services and by doing so improve the overall health and well-being of all residents'

- 1.5 Given the quantum and nature and type of development that had been identified and needed, and the vision that was agreed, an important key issue that the Council had to work with the community to grapple with is where the development should be broadly located. Three options for the spatial distribution of the development were discussed extensively with the community, including Members, key stakeholders and Resident Forums. These were:
 - Directing most of the new development to previously developed land in the town, district and local centres (particularly the town Centre) with minimum encroachment into the Green Belt as possible;
 - Intensifying densities in the less dense areas of the Borough such as Hook Heath, Mayford and Horsell;
 - Significant extension into the Green Belt.
- 1.6 There was almost a unanimous agreement to focus most of the new development on previously development land in well designed, high density development that could include tall buildings within the town centre. A town centre specific policy, Policy CS2 of the Core Strategy was developed as a result. Of the quantum of development set out above for the Borough, the following were identified to be provided at the town centre: 2,180 new homes, 27,000 sq.m of office floor space and 75,300 sq.m of retail floorspace.
- 1.7 As required by the Government, the Core Strategy was reviewed in October 2018 and the Council resolved that there was no immediate need to modify it either in part or as a whole.
- 1.8 Members have accepted the award of £95M Housing Infrastructure Fund to replace the Victoria Arch and improve the road network within the vicinity of the Arch. In accepting the HIF award, Members also agreed to deliver an additional 3,304 dwelling on thirteen specific sites within the town centre. This is a contractual agreement that the Council has to deliver. There could be a significant risk of financial penalties for failing to meet this agreement. Taken into account housing that has already been delivered in the town centre since 2012 when the Core Strategy was adopted, the town centre has to accommodate an overall amount of at least 4,555 new homes by 2030 (2030 is the timescale for delivering all the HIF sites). The town centre is a compact geographical area, and the issue would always be how best the 4,555 homes could be accommodated, not to forget that the Council has also committed to make provision for jobs and retail.
- 1.9 The Council is acutely aware that when the community agreed to focus most new development at the Town Centre, it did so with the understanding that it will be of high quality design.
- 1.10 The above demonstrates the amount of work and engagement that the Council has undertaken in developing its strategy for the spatial distribution of development.

2.0 Existing guidance - What has been done so far

- 2.1 **Core Strategy Policy CS21** - It is essential for good quality design to be undermined by robust policy framework to ensure compliance of what is acceptable. In this regards, the first thing that the Council did is to ensure that it has a robust and carefully worded policy on design that is wide ranging in scope and comprehensive in all aspects of design. See Policy CS21 of the Core Strategy. The Core Strategy can be accessed by: <https://www.woking2027.info/developmentplan/corestrategy>. The policy continue to be successfully applied to determining day to day planning applications.

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- 2.2 **Character Study** - Development is of good design only if it has an appreciation of its context and the character of the vicinity within which it sits. In this regard, the Council has undertaken a character study that describes in detail the distinctive character of the various parts of the Borough. The Character Study can be accessed by: <https://www.woking2027.info/ldfresearch/charcstu>. The Study is helpful to make sure that development does not significantly detract from the character of the area within which it sits, whilst at the same time not stifling innovation in design and construction.
- 2.3 **Design Supplementary Planning Document (DPD)** - it provides detailed guidance to make sure that future development in the Borough is of high design standards. The SPD provides guidance on a number of topics including tall buildings, town centre developments and shop front design. It sets out specific design principles for tall buildings. It ensure that Policy CS21 of the Core Strategy is rightfully applied. It ensures that development complies with urban design principles. The Design SPD did not intend to set height limits, but to give the decision maker the tools and principles to determine proposals based on their individual merits taken into account the character and vision as set out above and in the Character Study. The SPD has a statutory status and is a material consideration in determining planning applications.
- 2.4 **Design Panel** – The Council has entered into an agreement to set up a Design Panel with Design South East to scrutinise, comment and challenge the design of schemes that comes forward. They do so with the view that applicants will take into account the importance of design as they develop their schemes.
- 2.5 **Staff training and Vu-City** – The Council has signed up to a PAN-Surrey procured design training scheme to train officers to improve design knowledge and expertise. Five Officers of the Planning Service are presently undergoing the training. It is a rolling programme, and it is envisaged that over the next few years, many of the Officers will have good design expertise as well. The Council has also subscribed to VU-City, a software that enables Officers to visualise development proposals in 3D and the possible impacts that they could have on surrounding properties.
- 2.6 As demonstrated, a lot has been done and continues to be done to improve design quality of development. It should be stressed that the design of development everywhere else other than the town centre is also treated with equal importance.
- 3.0 Consequential impacts of setting height limits of development in the town centre**
- 3.1 Setting height limits to development in the Town Centre should be a fundamental part of a discussion on determining the spatial distribution of development across the Borough. It should not be done in isolation. There is an inevitable truth that the Government will continue to expect the Borough to deliver homes and jobs to meet its future needs. The development will have to be accommodated somewhere. Given the geography of the Borough, the options available to distribute the growth will be to focus most of it in the town centre and to a lesser extent the other main centres such as West Byfleet; to intensify the density of development in the less dense villages/area such as Horsell, Hook Heath, Mayford and Brookwood or to encroach significantly into the Green Belt. The discussion should seek to strike a balance between these options. One of the main implications for setting height restrictions in the Town Centre could be the densification of development elsewhere in the less dense areas of the Borough or the release of more Green Belt land.
- 3.2 The Council in its role as a local planning authority would lose its flexibility to determine planning applications taking into account the unique context within which the application sits and the specific development objectives at the given time. For example, the topography of the town centre is not the same across board, so setting height limits will have different visual impacts depending on the specific location of the site. It would be difficult to defend a reason for refusal for a planning application that meets the height limit but without the desired or acceptable visual impacts.

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- 3.3 The case for not setting a height limit does not mean that the sky is the limit. What it means is that the decision taker, with the right training and the right design principles should be capable to assembling all the contextual information to make informed decisions about height that is appropriate for its context.
- 3.4 Setting height limits could have an impact on the Council's ability to meet its development needs and certainly to meet the needs in the most sustainable location with relatively easy access to key services and facilities.
- 3.5 The Council is at an advanced stage of preparing its Site Allocations DPD. Specific sites have been identified to enable the delivery of the development requirements of the Core Strategy. The deliverability of the DPD is predicated on a certain quantum of development being met at the town centre. Together with the HIF commitment this is estimated to be at least 4,555 new homes. Any height limit that does not take this into account could lead to questions about whether sufficient land has been identified to meet the housing requirement and calls for more land to be released from the Green Belt. There is a potential risk of a legal challenge in this regard.
- 3.6 There is the likelihood that any height that would be set could become a target that developers would seek to deliver, regardless of the need to ensure variation that reflects the topography of individual sites.
- 3.7 **Factors to consider if height limit is to be set** – Height limit should not be set arbitrarily. It should be well informed by appropriate evidence to be defensible. It should be done through proper due planning process such as Supplementary Planning Document to avoid any risk of legal challenge. Setting height limits should not be seen in isolation. It would need to be considered in the broader discussion about the future spatial distribution of development. In its simplistic form, the less dense the town centre, the more Green Belt land would be needed to meet future development needs. In setting any height, the Council should certainly look beyond 2027. In the next few years, the review of the Core Strategy will begin, and the Council will be required to plan for another minimum of 15 years up to 2042. And it is reasonable to assume that the housing requirement for the next plan period will be greater than the current Core Strategy number of units. The Council should have a clear idea of where future development would be accommodated.
- 3.8 It is not advisable to set a height limit for development in the Town Centre at this point in time. However, if Members are minded to do so, it should be well informed by evidence and be done through due planning process. The importance of engaging the community and in particular, explaining the implications of setting height limit should not be underestimated. Any alternative spatial strategy that the Council come up with should have a long term vision to provide certainty. As required by the Government, the next review of the Core Strategy will need to be undertaken in 2023 and this can be informed by the Big Conversation which is proposed in the Corporate Plan 2021 – 2022. (See report earlier on this agenda.)

4.0 Implications

Financial

- 4.1 There are no additional financial implications. If as a result of the report, Members decide to set height limit for development, the cost for doing so will be assessed and reported.

Human Resource/Training and Development

- 4.2 Officers continue to be trained to develop design expertise and knowledge.

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Community Safety

4.3 There are no community safety implications.

Risk Management

4.4 The potential risks for setting height limit are as set out in section 3 above.

Sustainability

4.5 See Sustainability Impact Assessment.

Equalities

4.6 See Equalities Impact assessment.

Safeguarding

4.7 There are no safeguarding implications.

5.0 Consultations

5.1 The Portfolio Holder for Planning has been consulted.

REPORT ENDS