



Planning Advice Notice

Planning Applications for Tall Buildings

I Introduction

In recent years there have been a number of proposals for the development of tall buildings in Warrington. The built form of the borough is predominantly low rise and thus taller structures have the potential to change the appearance and image of the town. The implications of such developments can be complex and need to be carefully assessed. The symbolic status given to both existing and proposed structures is tied up with the image and identity that individuals have of the borough and how they perceive or wish its future to be.

Warrington Borough Council has produced a “Planning Advice Note & Checklist for Planning Applications for Major Developments” (May 2006) that sets out the form and content of information required to support the submission of a major planning application. Additional information is often required in order to assess proposals for tall buildings and this leaflet has been written to provide details of the possible scope and content of this and as such comprises informal guidance.

I Definition of Tall Buildings

It is difficult to devise a definition of a tall building because this is influenced by the local context as much as the intrinsic height of the structure. Instead of naming a height threshold the guidance in this advice note will be applicable to proposals which are for:

- i) buildings that are significantly taller than the predominant height of buildings in the surrounding area; and/or
- ii) buildings that have a notable impact on the skyline of the borough.

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Different parts of the borough are sensitive to different building heights so pre-application discussion is important in order to establish whether a planning application will need to be submitted with the information outlined in this guidance. To be taken into account will be the scale and height of the surrounding buildings, the local topography and the siting of the building within the borough with reference to important panoramas and vistas.

I Consultation - CABE and English Heritage

The scope and content of application submissions will be discussed as part of the pre-application discussion process that applicants are recommended to have with Council officers and external consultees. The external consultees who the Council may involve in order to assess proposals for tall buildings may include CABE and / or English Heritage as they are national bodies with responsibility for, respectively, promoting high standards in architecture and urban design and with the conservation and enhancement of the historic environment. The appropriateness of consulting CABE and English Heritage will be discussed as part of pre-application meetings with officers and applicants will be encouraged to liaise with these bodies in advance of application submission if this is considered to be appropriate. English Heritage is the Government's statutory adviser on the historic environment and a statutory consultee within the planning process; CABE is a statutory body but a non-statutory consultee.

The circumstances in which CABE should be consulted about planning applications:

1. Proposals that are significant because of their size or the uses they contain. This category includes large buildings or groups of buildings; major infrastructure projects; major changes in the public realm; and large scale masterplans.
2. Proposals that are significant because of their site. Those which affect important views; give rise to exceptional effects on their locality; are at particular regional or local significance; are subject to major public investment.
3. Proposals with an importance greater than their size, use or site would suggest. This includes proposals which are likely to establish the planning, form or architectural quality for future large-scale development or re-development; proposals which are out of the ordinary in their context or setting because of their scale, form or materials; and proposals which are particularly relevant to the quality of everyday life.

[this is an extract from DCLG letter to Local Planning Authorities, December 2006]

I Consultation - the local community

Discussions with the local community may also influence the scope and content of submissions, as they may raise queries and concerns that need to be answered. The Council's policy framework and the process for this are set out in the approved "Statement for Community Involvement" (March 2006). A number of proposals for tall buildings within Warrington have been resisted by the local community and it is important that applicants not only undertake the recommended consultation but also take note of the issues raised. The purpose of community consultation should not just be to satisfy the local planning authority's requirements for the submission of applications but to explain the proposals and refine them as part of the design process.

I Design and Access Statements

Design and access statements are required to be submitted as part of a planning application submission for tall buildings and DCLG Circular 01/2006 provides guidance on the content of these; a two page summary of this has been written by the Council and a guide from CABE has also been produced.

As explained in the Circular, "a design and access statement is a short report accompanying and supporting a planning application to illustrate the process that has led to the development proposal, and to explain and justify the proposal in a structured way" (paragraph 60). Proposals for tall buildings will be major developments and the supporting information will require more than just a short report but the inference that the documents should be clear and concise, without unnecessary padding, is clear. Illustrative material will be an important part of the submission and this should also be easy to understand. Illustrations will supplement the detailed plans and elevations that form part of the application submission and could include photographs/photo-montages, sketches, concept plans, computer-generated images and models.

The need for the statements to “explain and justify” proposals is reiterated throughout the Circular. As part of the design statements it necessary for applicants to explain why a tall building is proposed for this site. Why a tall building rather than another form of high-density development? Why is it appropriate for this site and this location? What is the design process that has taken place that has led to the development of this proposal? All these questions need to be answered as part of the statement.

Warrington Borough Council recommends that the evaluation criteria outlined in the CABA / English Heritage publication “Guidance on Tall Buildings (2007) is used as the basis for establishing the scope of issues discussed in the design statement, although statements do not need to follow the format of that document. The “Guidance...” note can be considered to be a material planning consideration and will be used by the Council in assessing applications.

This planning advice note has been written to explain the information that will be required under each part of the criteria although applicants should be aware that not all criteria will be relevant to every site and proposal and submissions should be tailored to focus on the pertinent issues to ensure that the statement is concise and relevant.

I Environmental Statements _____

Some development proposals require an Environmental Statement to be submitted that describes the likely significant effects of the development on the environment and proposed mitigation measures. At an early stage of the pre-application process for proposals that may require an ES under the EIA regulations the Council expects applicants to submit a formal screening and/or scoping opinion. At this point the issues to be addressed in the ES will be established, including whether information on the physical characteristics and effects of the proposal should be included within the ES.

I Full and outline applications _____

The submission of full planning applications for proposals for tall buildings is preferred rather than outline applications as tall buildings have a significant visual impact and it is important that designs are of high architectural quality. If applicants only wish to submit an outline application then the reasons for this must be made clear and discussed in advance with Council officers.

The ‘Guidance on Tall Buildings’ recommends that outline applications should only be acceptable if they will establish the principle of a tall building as part of a masterplan for an area which will be developed over a long period of time.

DCLG Circular 01/06 altered the basic level of information required with an outline application with the result that the extent and depth of information required is much greater than previously demanded. One element of which is the scale parameters of a proposal, with at minimum “an indication of the upper and lower limits for height, width and length of each building within the site boundary”.

I Evaluation Criteria

The following section takes each criterion from the “Guidance on Tall Buildings” note in turn and lists information on the issues raised and the information required to satisfy the matters raised. As already mentioned, not all criteria will be relevant to every site and proposal.

i) The relationship to context, including natural topography, scale, height, urban grain, streetscape and built form, and the effect on the skyline. Tall buildings should have a positive relationship with relevant topographical features and other tall buildings; the virtue of clusters when perceived from all directions should be considered in this light.

It is essential that accurate information is included as part of the planning application submission that illustrates and explains the visual impact of tall buildings on the existing environment, and that this information is clearly presented and easy to understand. As well as a short written report this information should be presented visually and a number of different presentation methods could be acceptable for this, including:

- Cross-sections: particularly useful for sites located in areas which have changes in topography and/or proximity to existing buildings, allowing an accurate illustration of the size and massing of the proposed development in relation to their immediate context.
- Photomontages: accurate superimposition of an image of the proposed development onto a photograph of a view, which may be a single photograph or a panorama created by the amalgamation of overlapping photographs. For photomontages illustrating distance views of a site it may be acceptable for the silhouette of the development to be illustrated, but usually the detail of the elevations is expected to be shown.
- Computer modelling: can be used to illustrate the massing of the proposed development and views from different angles giving a three-dimension impression of the proposal that cannot be understood by elevations alone. They are particularly useful if the local context created by the topography and built form is also included.

- Models: again, useful to illustrate the detail of the massing of the proposal and are often easily understandable by the local community.

A combination of near, middle and distant views of the proposed development may be needed and creating these may involve the use of different illustration methods.

It is important that the submission includes accurate plans showing the location of the viewpoints and their range of view plus an explanation of why these locations were chosen to demonstrate the effect that the proposal will have on the character of the area. Usually the general locations of viewpoints will be selected following discussion with Council officers and the local community but applicants are also expected to analyse the local context themselves and discover relevant locations for viewpoints that will illustrate the visual impact of the proposal.

Distant views of the site and proposal should be taken from significant locations and vistas across the borough and these will include easily accessible public places such as major transport routes (railways, main roads), local centres and/or areas that are well used for public enjoyment (parks, waterfronts etc).

The specific location chosen for viewpoints for photomontages should be selected to take account of and avoid foreground obstructions such as trees and signage. Photomontage illustrations should be annotated with details of the spot-height and camera elevation plus details of the camera (for example, if a zoom lens was used).

A useful publication that contains detailed guidelines for undertaking this work is “Guidelines for Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment” (2002) by the Landscape Institute and the Institute of Environmental Management & Assessment.

ii) The effect on the whole existing environment, including the need to ensure that the proposal will preserve and/or enhance historic buildings, sites, landscapes and skylines. Tall buildings proposals must address their effect on the setting of, and views to and from historic buildings, sites and landscapes over a wide area including:

- Scheduled Ancient Monuments
- Listed buildings
- Registered parks and gardens.
- Conservation Areas
- Archaeological remains
- Other open spaces, including rivers and waterways.
- Other important views, prospects and panoramas

As part of an application submission the visual impact of the proposal will have to be discussed and explained, paying particularly attention to the features listed above. This information should be in the design statement and include identification of pertinent features on plans as well as photomontages, plans, sketches etc that have been provided to illustrate the relationship between the proposed development and the existing built form and environment. Statements should include a discussion on how applicants have considered these features and how they have developed their scheme to sensitively respect the existing local context.

The Unitary Development Plan contains a suite of policies to ensure that the impact of development on the (historic) built environment and landscape of the borough is taken into account as part of the design and assessment process. Policies include: DCS1, GRN13, BH3, BH8, BH12 and BH13.

iii) The relationship to transport infrastructure, aviation constraints, and, in particular, the capacity of public transport, the quality of links between transport and the site, and the feasibility of making improvements, where appropriate. Transport is important in relation to tall buildings because of the intensity of use, as well as density, that they represent.

Most application submissions will need to include an assessment of the current capacity of the local infrastructure and services, the impact that the development will have and an explanation of any intended remediation measures.

Applications will need to be accompanied by a separate Transport Assessment and assessment of this aspect of the proposal will be undertaken through analysis of the TA rather than the design statement although if recommendations within the TA influence the design of the proposal this needs to be explained in the design statement. UDP policy LUT12 “Transport Impact Assessments” confirms the need for a TA.

Unitary Development Plan policy LUT24 “Development Affecting Airport Operational Safety” sets out the policy on this matter, and the Proposals Map defines the safeguarded areas. This issue is only relevant to the design statement if it influences the design of proposals.

iv) The architectural quality of the building including its scale, form, massing, proportion and silhouette, facing materials and relationship to other structures. The design of the top of a tall building will be of particular importance when considering the effect on the skyline.

Full and detailed site plans, internal layout plans and elevations need to be provided as part of the application submission. Other plans and information required in order to assess the proposals may include:

- An explanation of the architectural principles behind the proposal and how they were developed. The evolution of the design of a scheme should start with an analysis of the local context and its character (architecture, urban grain, materials, topography etc) as well as the requirements of the proposed use. The Design & Access Statement should summarise this analysis and how it has influenced the design of the proposal.
- Long elevations and/or cross sections that illustrate the relationship of the scale, massing and architectural form of the proposal to the local area. These could be along streets or other boundaries to the site or cross-sections across the site and adjoining areas.

- Details and/or samples of facing materials to be used, including roofs, walls, windows, boundary treatments and external floorings. Information of other (local) sites that use the same materials could be useful to supplement this. Materials that are proposed should be of high quality and appropriate for the site and context and the reasoning for the choice of materials should be given.
- If telecommunications antennae or aerials are proposed for the top of buildings then the siting and installation should be planned at the design stage so the apparatus can be integrated into the scheme rather than fitted in and appearing as an afterthought at a later date.

v) The sustainable design and construction of the proposal. For all forms of development, good design means sustainable design. Tall buildings should set exemplary standards in design because of their high profile and local impact. Proposals should therefore exceed the latest regulations and planning policies for minimising energy use and reducing carbon emissions over the lifetime of the development. The long-term resource and energy efficiency of tall buildings will be enhanced if their design can be adapted over time.

Applicants are recommended to submit a sustainability appraisal as part of their submission. This could include information on:

- Appraisal of the sustainability of the development by a recognised assessment method such as BREEAM / EcoHomes. The council encourages a “very good” or “excellent” rating. From April 2007 new housing will be assessed against the “Code for Sustainable Homes”
- Energy conservation: how the development has been designed to minimise the use of energy and waste in its construction and use by the form and design of its construction, its orientation and the proposed appliances and heating systems.
- Renewable energy: the capacity of the development to generate its own energy by the inclusion of on-site power generation.

- Materials: the durability of the building and materials, and the ease of maintenance and repair.
The adaptability of the development to take into account changing lifestyles and work patterns: for residential developments this would include designing properties to be Lifetime Homes.
- Impact on nature conservation and ecology: the loss and/or gain of open space to an area; the philosophy behind the landscaping and how it will support and diversify nature conservation.

Other information that is required to support an application that explains specific details of the sustainability of the proposal includes:

- Location and provision of waste disposal areas: guidelines for this are set out in the Council’s publication “Planning Advice Note on the Provision of Waste Storage, Recycling and Collection Facilities” (2005).
- Disabled access: developments will have to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. Part M of the Building Regulations “Access to and Use of Buildings” (2006) provides standards that can be used to make development accessible.
- Location and size of cycle storage areas: secure, enclosed bicycle parking is expected for long-stay use (residents of housing developments, workers at employment sites). Bicycle racks located in a well-supervised area can be installed for short-stay visitors.

vi) The credibility of the design both technically and financially. Tall buildings are expensive to build, so it is important to be sure that the high standard of architectural quality required is not diluted throughout the process of procurement, detailed design, and construction. Location, use, the commitment of the developer, and ability and expertise of the consultant team will have a fundamental bearing on the quality of the completed building.

To ensure that a high quality is attained, the Council expects details of the proposal to be provided as part of a planning application submission rather than conditioned for later approval.

vii) The contribution to public spaces and facilities both internal and external, that the development will make in the area including the provision of a mix of uses, especially on the ground floor of towers, and the inclusion of these areas as part of the public realm. The development should interact with and contribute positively to its surroundings at street level; it should contribute to diversity, vitality, social engagement and 'sense of place'.

This is relevant to proposals for residential development and for sites in built up urban areas. Issues to be considered include: the size, shape and use of the space around the buildings; whether this will be publicly accessible; how it will be landscaped; how public and private areas will be demarcated; the siting of vehicle parking and ancillary facilities such as refuse storage. Discussions should take place with the Council's Landscape Services Section regarding the provision and adoption of on-site open space and with the Transportation Section regarding adoption of roads and footpaths.

The quality and detailing of the lower floors of buildings is important as they are viewed from ground level. As well as the materials used, the siting of entrances into buildings and the positioning and sizing of windows and other openings will affect the quality of the users' experience. Thought needs to be given to the casual supervision of open space and entrances and the legibility and accessibility of the development for users.

viii) The effect on the local environment, including microclimate, overshadowing, night-time appearance, vehicle movements and the environment and amenity of those in the vicinity of the building.

Information that could be required to support the application (dependant on the size and siting of the proposals) could include:

- Sun-path analysis and diagrams that illustrate the shadowing effect of the proposal at different times of the day and different times of the year.
- Wind tunnel analysis
- The impact that the development will have at night due to lighting, both external lighting on and off the building plus the likely impact that internal lighting will have on the character of the local and wider area. Details of proposed external lighting should be included as part of the application submission.

- Analysis of any interference that the tall building will have on telecommunications and broadcasting.

ix) The contribution made to the permeability of a site and the wider area; opportunities to offer improved linkages on foot, and, where appropriate, the opening up, or effective closure, of views to improve the legibility of the town and the wider townscape.

Whether it is possible or appropriate for a proposal to have an effect on the physical permeability of an area will depend on the location and size of the site. This issue is pertinent to the "access" element of the Design & Access Statement. Improvements could include not only the creation of new routes but improvements to existing routes that could be both on and off-site. Off-site routes could be created or improved through the use of S.106 agreements and proposals for these will be assessed together with other proposed regenerative benefits that the scheme would provide.

The influence that the proposal has on the legibility of Warrington's townscape should be assessed as part of the studies discussed under points i), ii) and iv) above. The legibility of the town will be affected by the addition of a tall building in the skyline and how this affects the orientation of travellers and the image of the borough. To be taken into account is whether the development will mark areas of importance (town and local centres, major transport interchanges, etc) or form a significant/distinctive use that is worthy of attention.

x) The provision of a high-quality environment for those who use the buildings including function and fitness for purpose, as far as relevant to the planning decisions.

All details should be considered at the design stages to avoid retrospective fittings and alterations. Thought needs to be given to long term management and maintenance of structures, including window cleaning and replacement or repair of facing materials. The safety of buildings and their occupiers is also an issue, and involves consideration of controlled entry, fire protection and means of escape.

Useful references

National Government guidance

www.communities.gov.uk

www.planningportal.gov.uk

DCLG Circular 01/2006: Guidance on Changes to the Development Control System (2006)

Code for Sustainable Homes (2007)

By Design: Urban design in the planning system (2000)

CABE and English Heritage

www.cabe.org.uk

www.english-heritage.org.uk

www.helm.org.uk

Guidance on Tall Buildings (2007)

Design & Access Statements: How to write, read and use them (2006) (CABE)

Conservation Principles, policies and guidance (2007) (English Heritage)

Landscape Institute / Institute of Environmental Management & Assessment

Guidelines for Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment (2002)

North West Regional Assembly

www.nwra.gov.uk

The North West Plan: Submitted Draft Regional Spatial Strategy (2006)

Warrington Borough Council

www.warrington.gov.uk

Unitary Development Plan (2006)

Design Statements Supplementary Planning Guidance

Planning Advice Note on the Provision of Waste Storage, Recycling and Collection Facilities (2005)

Planning Advice Note: Sustainable Design & Construction (2006)

Pre-Application Advice Note & Planning Checklist (2006)

Design & Access Statements: A Brief Summary (2006)

Statement of Community Involvement (2006)