

Building Height & Tall Buildings SPD Consultation

Response from Maidenhead Civic Society

Maidenhead Civic Society

Maidenhead Civic Society was founded in 1960 to provide considered community opinion on urban planning in the town. That remains our prime purpose today.

Building Height & Tall Buildings SPD Response

The Building Heights and Tall Buildings SPD will be used by developers and designers as a guide for selecting the optimal locations for tall buildings in the borough and achieving excellence in design. It will also be used by planning officers and local councillors to assist in determining planning applications.

In its opening paragraphs the SPD says:

“Tall buildings, if properly sited and designed can have a role in regenerating central locations, concentrating activity and making efficient use of land. They can also be beautiful landmarks that enhance the Royal Borough’s image.”

“However, if improperly located and of the wrong height and design, tall buildings can be eyesores for years to come and may become obsolete and need of redevelopment themselves.

“Poorly designed tall buildings can negatively affect people’s standard of living, whilst well designed, high quality development can generate wellbeing and local pride.”

MCS: The Civic Society concurs with the above.

The SPD has been prepared to:

- identify what parts of the Royal Borough are inappropriate for tall buildings in principle;
- guide the appropriate location and height of tall buildings;
- provide clear objectives and design guidance for tall buildings;
- highlight the heritage and townscape elements that should be considered in relation to tall building proposals; and
- identify areas that can accommodate a general increase in context heights thereby intensifying the urban fabric.

The SPD accords with NPPF principles and aligns with Historic England advice as it supports the Local Plan Policy QP3a on Building Height and Tall Buildings with more detail.

QP3a states that *within established settlements new development will be generally expected to maintain the existing context heights, to reinforce and reflect the character of the local area.* As for what constitutes a “tall building”, it says *a building of more than 1.5 times the context height of the surrounding area, or a minimum of 4 storeys in a 2 storey area, will be considered a tall building.*

The Borough Local Plan (BLP), however, makes an exception for Maidenhead.

Maidenhead town centre is identified in Policy QP1a as *“the key focus in the Borough for accommodating future development”* and accordingly will *“play a major role in delivering*

the scale and mix of development types that the Borough requires,” with 12 of the Local Plan’s 40 allocated development sites in the Maidenhead town centre area.

The justification for this level of development seemingly centres on “sustainability” and, in particular, Maidenhead’s accessibility in terms of transport links.

MCS: This remains debateable but the Policy is set and we are left only to acknowledge that the complexity of the town centre demands a more specific approach to planning for tall buildings.

According to the Local Plan, an increase in the context height by 2 storeys, up to a maximum of 5, is deemed acceptable in Maidenhead town centre. Tall buildings above 2.5 times the context height, rather than the 1.5 times elsewhere in the Borough, may also be acceptable.

MCS: This is, in our view, a step too far and smacks of a political rather than a pragmatic planning rationale but this too is now enshrined as policy.

During the BLP examination, the government’s planning inspector clearly felt that tall buildings, of a scale more suited to a major city centre, were simply not suited to Maidenhead and that a 13 storey maximum was more appropriate.

MCS: This is a view shared by the Civic Society and many who care about the future viability of our town.

However, councillors had already approved the 17 storeys (later amended to 19) for The Landing and 25 as part of the Nicholsons redevelopment. And, pending adoption of the BLP, others have followed.

So the SPD draughtsmen had their work cut out. And they earn our respect for the way some admirably sound principles have been woven around those decidedly dodgy planning decisions. While the SPD guidance should ensure the same mistakes are not made again, it cannot undo the permissions already granted.

However, some of the planning approvals accommodated in caveat clauses in the SPD, e.g. Nicholsons in the Town Centre Core and former Magnet site in Northern Gateway Cluster, may not come to fruition and actually be built. So we suggest:

MCS: Avoid setting a precedent. Remove references to specific heights for these unrealised proposals.

Future development proposals will then be encouraged to follow the guidelines, which are otherwise sound and sensible, and reflect the 13-storey maximum.

BLP Policy QP3a states that in all cases tall buildings are “*exceptional forms of development*” that will “*only be appropriate in a limited number of locations and circumstances*”. The Policy adds that to be acceptable “*tall building proposals will need to be part of a comprehensive approach to development and placemaking and have a clear purpose.*” And that proposals should also demonstrate how “*they will significantly enhance legibility and deliver significant regeneration benefits for the locality.*”

MCS: Many will say the SPD has overtones of the stable door and bolted horse and it’s true that damaging, irreversible planning approvals have been given for a number of extraordinarily tall buildings in Maidenhead. Some may never be built. This well-

principled SPD then comes into play to ensure that those mistakes and others like them will not happen again.

The SPD sets out 10 Key Principles of how these objectives should be met. These are pretty comprehensive.

They include the following requirements:

- be part of a plan-led approach and create a sense of place
- have a clear purpose
- support a mix of uses
- protect and enhance the landscape and views
- be of high quality design and deliver high quality places
- contribute positively to their surroundings, and
- be sustainable and innovative

MCS: Re. Section 4.2 Tall buildings of an appropriate scale, purpose and design could help revive Maidenhead's identity, character and prestige but their location and function should be part of a coordinated masterplan, like the forthcoming Town Centre SPD.

Principle 4.2 & 4.3: Consideration should be given to a requirement for mixed usage in buildings over a certain height, not just at ground level but throughout the building. A tall building is more likely to be welcomed by the community if it houses facilities they can use, e.g. a rooftop restaurant/bar, a clinic or even a council department as well as housing, rather than just a faceless, forbidding block of flats.

Summary comments

Overall: The Civic Society would like to see the number of tall buildings kept to a minimum and restricted in height, as per the guidelines, as part of a coordinated Town Centre Plan.

Housing: From the Borough's own statistics and from evidence on the ground, Maidenhead would already appear to be over-supplied with high-rise housing. MCS does not believe that high-rise apartments are the right answer to the housing crisis. Government surveys and opinion polls repeatedly indicate that almost everyone would prefer to live in a house in a street rather than a flat; in seven controlled surveys people living in high-rise dwellings were the least satisfied with their homes. And most people would always avoid multi-storey blocks, particularly since lockdown. In a recent MORI survey of 1,056 respondents, not one wanted to live in a tower block. Moreover, family houses are scarce and overpriced; the shortage of truly affordable accommodation is at risk of becoming a crisis; and a growing proportion of exclusive rentals does little to help the market. A better solution is called for.

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