Tall Buildings in Gloucester
Issues & Options Consultation

November 2007
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1. Introduction

1.1 This consultation document has been produced in order to stimulate debate and generate views on the provision of tall buildings in Gloucester.

1.2 In this paper we set out the key issues relating to the provision of tall buildings and five alternative policy approaches towards dealing with them. We would welcome your views on the five alternative options that have been identified.

1.3 All comments we receive will be taken into account and we will look to produce a draft Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) on tall buildings in 2008. This will be subject to further consultation and will then be formally adopted as part of the Gloucester Local Development Framework at which point it will become a material consideration in planning decisions.

1.4 The deadline for submitting comments on this issues and options consultation paper is 5pm on the XXXX 2008

2. Background

2.1 Tall buildings often stimulate debate and generate strong opinions. Whilst they can in some cases, enhance an area and even act as tourist attractions, they can also obscure important views and sometimes detract from the character of an area through poor siting or inappropriate design.

2.2 Gloucester is one of England’s most important historic cities dating back to Roman times when it was settled as a colonia – the highest status a settlement could be awarded at that time. More recently, the City’s historic importance has been reflected in its role as Britain’s most inland port.
3.0 The Key Issues

Obscuring Important Views

3.1 A tall building can block or obscure important views, both more immediate, local views and wider, more strategic views from further afield. This can have a harmful impact on the character and perception of an area.

3.2 A good example in Gloucester is the large Annex of the County Council’s Shire Hall building on Westgate Street, which obscures key views of Gloucester Cathedral from a number of important viewpoints.

Impact on the Setting of Significant Historic Buildings and Spaces

3.3 Tall buildings can also have a negative impact on the setting of historic buildings and spaces by appearing over-bearing and visually intrusive.

3.4 A good example of this is the tower block at the former GLOSCAT campus on Brunswick Road, which can be seen to have a negative impact on the historic Greyfriars monument.

Impact on the Historic Character of the City

3.5 In more general terms, tall buildings if inappropriately designed and located can have a harmful impact on the historic character of an area. Gloucester has a rich historic environment and this makes it an attractive area to live and work in and for tourists to visit.

3.6 The City’s historic importance is reflected in the establishment of the Gloucester Heritage Urban Regeneration Company (GHURC) the only one of its kind in the Country.

3.7 It is essential that new development including tall buildings does not have a harmful impact on the historic character of the City and wherever possible, makes a positive contribution.

The Pressure for High-Density Development

3.8 The need for tall buildings must be seen in the context of the Government’s current desire for high-density development. In order to reduce the need to build on Greenfield sites, local authorities and developers are encouraged to achieve high-density development of at least 30 dwellings per hectare and higher in urban areas such as Gloucester.

3.9 Urban capacity and space is ultimately limited and so in some cases, the answer is to build upwards through the provision of taller buildings.

3.10 There is a need to carefully balance the need for high-density development with the need to safeguard the historic, built environment. High-density development will not be appropriate in every situation.

The Opportunity for ‘Landmark’ Development

3.11 Tall buildings if well designed and properly located can have a positive impact and can create impressive ‘landmarks’ by which residents and visitors are able to orientate themselves. They can create lasting impressions and add to the variety of the built form in a particular area.

3.12 It is important to consider the provision of tall buildings in this context as well as considering the potentially negative impact they can have if poorly designed or inappropriately located.
4.0 The Options

4.1 Having outlined the key issues relating to tall buildings and how they have the potential to impact both positively and negatively on a historic environment like Gloucester, in this section we set out a number of alternative options for how the City Council could consider the provision of tall buildings in new development.

4.2 Five alternative options are proposed. These are:

Option 1 – Do Nothing (Business as Usual)

Option 2 – Continuation of the 1983 Local Plan Approach

Option 3 – An ‘Area Based’ Approach

Option 4 – A ‘View Corridor’ Based Approach

Option 5 – Prohibitive Approach

4.3 Each of these options is explained in more detail below. Please indicate in your response which of these options, or combination of options you support.

4.4 If you do not support any of the options please let us know why, and do feel free to suggest any alternatives.

Option 1 – Do Nothing (Business as Usual)

4.5 Option 1 is to do nothing, in other words to have no policy in place with which to guide the provision of tall buildings in Gloucester.

4.6 Under this option, any proposal for a tall building that comes forward as part of a planning application would be considered on its merits and there would be no agreed policy framework to guide developers in drawing up proposals or to assist the Council’s Planning Committee in determining planning applications.

4.7 Whilst this approach would perhaps offer developers a greater degree of flexibility it may lead to pressure for inappropriate forms of development that would be difficult to resist without some sort of policy framework in place.

Option 2 – Continuation of the 1983 Local Plan Approach

4.8 Option 2 is to continue the approach set out in Policy A.1(a) of the 1983 Adopted Local Plan. The policy which is attached at Appendix 1, identifies three zones of height restriction within which different building heights will be allowed. In the ‘Inner Area’ for example, new building will be restricted to existing building heights. The proposals map to the 1983 Local Plan identifies several important ‘avenues of vision’ that will be safeguarded.

Option 3 – An ‘Area Based’ Approach

4.9 Option 3 would be to adopt an, ‘area-based’ approach. Under this option, we would designate a number of important ‘character areas’.

4.10 Development proposals within these designated character areas would be limited to a height that does not exceed that of the surrounding buildings in order to preserve the historic character of each area.

4.11 Under this option, we would look to designate the following ‘character areas’:

- Cathedral Precincts
- City Centre and Gate Streets
- Historic Docks and Quays
- Spa Area

4.12 These character areas are shown on the plan attached at Appendix 2 and a brief description is set out as follows.
4.13 The Cathedral Precincts area is located within the north-western quadrant of the city, filling much of the area bounded by Westgate Street and Northgate Street in Gloucester’s cross-based grid of streets. The area is of high archaeological potential, with above ground buildings from the Saxon period and buried remains from the Roman foundation of the city. The area has a diverse mix of medieval and later building types, linked by their association with the cathedral and the King’s School.

4.14 Though there are sinuous and curving streets and boundaries within the conservation area, these are set within a distinctive rectilinear grid of street and building alignments that ultimately derive from Roman and Saxon topographical and settlement features. The topography of the conservation area preserves to a remarkable degree alignments from the earliest layout of the city, as well as the influence of the River Severn and its watercourses and of ponds and ditches that have long since ceased to be visible. The Cathedral Precincts are characterised by areas of mature trees, green open spaces and historic built structures, including the Cathedral, St. Mary de Lode Church, St. Oswald’s Priory and the many other listed buildings.

4.15 Winding lanes with high stonewalls and more intimate meeting spaces create an intimate connection with the long history of the central area. Much of the area surrounding the Cathedral has a pedestrian friendly feel as many of the roads are for access and parking purposes.

4.17 The conservation area retains a large number of historic buildings, dating from the 11th century onwards. Medieval churches and former merchant's houses, many with fine timber-framed frontages, can be found in the main streets, of which Westgate Street is the most intact.

4.18 Today, the conservation area has a dense urban character along the four main streets, where continuous terraces of varied buildings sit on the back of the pavement. Of note is the variety in width of these principal streets, representing the sites of medieval markets or island buildings, which have been demolished as part of highway improvements, which started as early as the 18th century.

4.19 The most complete and unaltered street is Westgate Street, containing a rich mix of well-detailed historic buildings with very little 20th century infill. Because most of the buildings were built as houses, the street retains a more intimate domestic scale, despite most of the ground floor accommodation now being in commercial uses.

Historic Docks & Quays

4.20 The Docks Conservation Area is important historically as an example of a 19th century dock and canal terminus on the River Severn. When at its busiest the Docks contained 15 major corn warehouses, two basins and a complicated network of rail lines that covered 22 acres of Gloucester. Despite a falling off in trade and a post-War period of near dereliction, most of the original 19th century buildings remain albeit converted to new uses. Today, Gloucester Docks has become a popular destination for tourists and shoppers, attracting about one million visitors a year.
Spa Area

4.21 The Spa Conservation Area is located to the south of the town centre, just beyond the extent of the medieval walled city. The Conservation Area is characterised by early 19th century buildings associated with the creation of Gloucester Spa in 1815. The conservation area contains a high proportion of listed buildings, as well as areas of green open space and mature trees. The area includes the distinct sub-areas of Gloucester Park, Brunswick Square and the Spa and Montpelier. Uses within the area can be split into recreational, including the Park area, and mixed residential and office, spread out between the Park and city centre.

4.22 Three or four storey townhouse development characterises the built environment, with a number of buildings (and groups) dating from the early 19th Century. These include Brunswick Square (1822-25), Christ Church (1822), the Judges Lodgings (1824) and the Beaufort Buildings (1818).

Option 4 – View Corridor Based Approach

4.23 The fourth alternative option would be to adopt an approach based on the protection of specified ‘view corridors’. Under this option, specific view corridors would be identified and safeguarded from inappropriate development.

4.24 These corridors will include wider strategic views and more local views. The strategic and local views identified will be those that are considered strategically important to protect in order to retain the unique character and distinctiveness of Gloucester.

4.25 We have identified a number of possible view corridors and these are illustrated on the plans attached at Appendix 3 (local views) and Appendix 4 (strategic views).

4.26 As can be seen from the plans, the identified views relate to the Cathedral Tower. Direct or partial views of the Cathedral tower and other historic buildings have an important influence on people’s perceptions of the historic character of the City and it is considered appropriate to focus a view-corridor approach around the Cathedral tower.

4.27 The view corridors have been identified having regard to points at which people may congregate or where there is a high frequency of vehicular or pedestrian movement (i.e. car parks, or particular points along roads, such as roundabouts), as well as sites that have a strategic or clear view of a particular structure.

4.28 We would welcome your opinion on the principle of a view corridor-based approach to tall buildings and also whether the views we have identified are the important ones.

Option 5 – Prohibitive Approach

4.29 The fifth option is to impose a complete ‘ban’ on tall buildings over a certain height. It is understood that such a prohibitive approach has been introduced in other historic cities including Bath, which is a world heritage site.

4.30 Under this option we would state for example that no building over a certain height, say 6-storeys, would be permitted anywhere in the City.

4.31 Whilst this approach would clearly safeguard important views within Gloucester it is perhaps a little inflexible offering no scope for taller buildings, which if properly sited and designed, could actually enhance rather than detract from the historic character of the City.

4.32 Your views on this fifth option are welcome.
5.0 Next Steps

5.1 This issues and options consultation closes on XXXX 2008

5.2 Following the close of the consultation we will consider which option or combination of options has been most strongly supported and has performed best in sustainability terms following a sustainability appraisal and will look to incorporate this/these into a draft Supplementary Planning Document (SPD).

5.3 The draft SPD will be the subject of a further 6-week period of public consultation in 2008 and following that, the Council will seek to adopt the SPD formally as part of the Gloucester Local Development Framework.
HEIGHTS OF BUILDINGS POLICY A.1(a)

Three zones of height restriction apply to new development within the City:-

(a) Inner Area - New buildings in the immediate vicinity of the Cathedral (see Proposals Map) and along avenues of vision from:

(i) The Park Pavilion and Robinswood Hill
(ii) The Horton Road Stadium
(iii) London Road and Hillfield House
(iv) Longford Lane

will be restricted to heights as existing.

(b) An area surrounding zone (a) above, north to Estcourt Road, east to Horton Road and south to Barton Street, Parkend Road and the old Docks Loop Railway line, is designated a zone of special control. New developments will be given individual consideration but, in any case, no new buildings will exceed 23 metres (75 feet) above ground level.

(c) An area south of the area defined in (b) above, east of the canal, extending south to Cole Avenue where higher buildings would be acceptable, subject to design and local environmental considerations.
Appendix 2 - Character Areas Plan

- Cathedral Precincts
- City Centre & Gate Streets
- Historic Docks & Quays
- Spa Area
Appendix 3 - Local Views
1 - Tewkesbury Road
2 - Hignham
3 - Junction of B4215 (from Hignham) with A40 – clear view from road
4 - Viewing area along A48 (off A40 near Hignham)
5 - Hempsted Village (all landmarks)
6 - Canalside
7 - Robinswood Hill

Appendix 4 - Strategic Views