

Gloucester City Council

Meeting:	Cabinet	Date:	15 January 2020
Subject:	Driving Up Architectural Design in Gloucester		
Report Of:	Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Strategy		
Wards Affected:	All Wards		
Key Decision:	No	Budget/Policy Framework:	No
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Appendices:	1. Summary of Recommendations		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To advise Members of a plan prepared by Officers intended to take steps to drive up the standards of architectural design across the City, to be delivered by the City Growth and Delivery service. The Action Plan has been drafted following a meeting with businesses in the development industry.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Cabinet is asked to **RESOLVE** to adopt the recommendations summarised at Appendix 1.

3.0 Background and Key Issues

3.1 Introduction

The desire for improved quality in design is consistent with the ambition to assert Gloucester as a nationally significant location offering a sustainable and distinctive place to live, work and visit. The challenge is to raise ambitions and to change the attitudes of the development industry, to assert pride in Gloucester's built environment, and to strengthen the sense of place in the City.

This issue sits at the heart of the statutory planning process, governed by national legislation, case law and guidance, as well as the adopted Local Development Framework, all of which already strive for local distinctiveness and high standards of urban design.

There are many good examples in Gloucester built recently and underway that are well designed, and much development is of a much higher standard than comparable examples in other towns and cities within the County and further afield. However, the recommendations are intended to address all development,

irrespective of size and type, to aim to raise the bar throughout the City and to strive for excellence.

3.2 Strengthening links with the local design industry

The Portfolio holder and Officers met in October with the Regional Chair and the Regional Director of the Royal Institute of British Architects. The RIBA has a similar ambition to raise standards of design and plans to roll out a series of learning and professional events across Gloucestershire for the development industry in 2020. The meeting was positive and the Council will work with the institute to enhance learning and to raise the profile of Gloucester's design ambition.

The Council also organised a meeting on 28th November with businesses from within the local development industry to discuss this issue. It was attended by 19 local developers, agents and architects and generated a healthy debate on measures to drive up standards of design. The key points made were:

- Make greater use of the Gloucestershire Design Review Panel, and require applicants to consult the panel as early as possible
- Opportunity for high level pre-app advice at an early stage would be very helpful (BANES offers a good example)
- Mixed views on design codes and guidance
- Working collaboratively between Council and businesses in the development industry is important. We should repeat the meeting in spring 2020.
- Involve County Highways earlier, understanding their requirements early on allows more options for a good design response
- Learn from examples of good design elsewhere, such as Norwich.
- Training and seminars for Members and officers, possibly involving RIBA and Design Panel members.

3.3 Local policy context

Policy SD4 of the adopted Joint Core Strategy (JCS) is extensive and refers specifically to the need for new development to achieve good urban design, emphasising the importance of good quality design in creating quality places. The JCS also makes specific reference to the Principle of Architectural Design in new buildings and alterations of existing buildings, stating that such development should demonstrate a creative response to a specific site and locality. Compared to many other areas the policy is extensive and robust, providing a detailed explanation of what the policy is aiming to achieve.

The Pre-submission Gloucester City Plan, which is currently out to public consultation, strengthens and provides local context to the requirements set out in the JCS, including in relation to architectural design.

The new Gloucester Heritage Strategy refers explicitly to the importance of good quality design pointing out the direct relationship between the quality of the environment and the ability of Gloucester to attract investment, businesses, shoppers and visitors. The Strategy recognises that local character is diverse, based on changes over time and including both local vernacular and national/international influences. It therefore advises discouraging stylistic imitation of any period of historic buildings, as this harms the integrity of Gloucester's historic places. The Council should positively encourage creative and innovative

architecture, as these are likely to be the legacy and heritage of 21st century, which will help in raising the profile of the area and projecting a positive and dynamic image.

3.4 Townscape Character Assessments

The Council has recently produced a very detailed Townscape Character Assessment to inform the Gloucester City Plan. The Assessment provides detailed information on and understanding of the design and character of Gloucester City, analysed by each of the 15 Wards in the City.

The document describes the different character areas across the city, and in detail the materials that are prominent in each. It highlights those areas where the Council needs to either raise the standard of design and local distinctiveness, and those areas that already have a strong character that ought to be preserved and enhanced. The document can be viewed on the Council's website at <https://www.gloucester.gov.uk/planning-development/planning-policy/evidence-base/>

Recommendation 1: The Gloucester Townscape Character Assessment is promoted, referred to and used as part of plan making and the decision making process

3.5 Design Guidance

Design guides, design codes and other area focussed planning documents, including Neighbourhood Plans, that have been adopted by the Local Planning Authority, are recognised in the National Planning Policy Framework (2018) as providing an opportunity to set out a clear design vision and expectations, giving developers as much certainty as possible about what is likely to be acceptable. The NPPF asserts that design policies should be developed with local communities so they reflect local aspirations, and are grounded in an understanding and evaluation of each area's defining characteristics. The Government published on 1st October the National Design Guide setting out the characteristics of well-designed places and demonstrates what good design means in practice.

The National Design Guide advocates local authorities providing maximum clarity about design expectations at an early stage. Local plans and supplementary planning documents should use tools such as design guides and codes. These provide a framework for creating distinctive places, with a consistent and high quality standard of design. Their level of detail and degree of prescription should be tailored to the circumstances in each place and should allow a suitable degree of variety where this would be justified. However, it is important that such design tools have flexibility and do not stymie and restrict design creativity.

Recommendation 2: Particular attention should be given in Design Guidance and other location based planning documents to set out a clear design vision and expectations in new development and regeneration schemes.

3.6 Design Review Panels

Major applications are currently referred to the Gloucestershire Design Review Panel with the aim of securing independent, expert advice to the Local Planning Authority. The advice received from the DRP is a material planning consideration in the planning application process.

The Gloucestershire DRP describes itself as an independent, multi-disciplinary panel of local design professionals, who wish to make a positive contribution to the quality of Gloucestershire's built environment. Membership is intended to be representative of a broad cross section of design professionals practicing in Gloucestershire. The Panel is non-commercial.

The Gloucestershire Barriers to Development study, commissioned by the GFirst LEP in consultation with the development industry and the County's Local Planning Authorities during 2018, recognised the value of DRPs, though it commented that local authorities make insufficient use of the resource and expertise available in them.

In recent years the City Council has referred developers to the Gloucestershire DRP with the redevelopment of Kings Quarter being the most recent example.

Better links should be created with the DRPs and their constituent members to draw upon their expertise and to bring their attention to Gloucester. Developers and designers of major schemes should be required to seek DRP advice prior to the submission of planning applications, and preferably at an early stage in the design process. DRP members could be asked to speak to local businesses, developers and professional firms to promote awareness of good design and its benefits.

Recommendation 3: Make greater use of the Gloucestershire Design Review Panel, including referring more major applications to the panel, and inviting DRP members to Gloucester to provide training and awareness raising to the Council and to the local developer community.

3.7 Expertise within the City Council

It is important that the Council can draw upon expertise within the Planning service in order to interpret good design and to negotiate with developers to drive up standards within developments of all sizes and types. The City Council currently draws on advice from the Urban Design Officer within Tewkesbury Borough Council on individual planning applications. This advice is sought on all major developments that require consideration of design issues, and it is proposed that this relationship is reviewed.

The Council's own Planning Officers and Conservation Officers have expertise in urban design, and they regularly and consistently advise applicants with the aim of securing better quality, drawing on the policies within the Local Plan and their own professional expertise. However, they are not qualified urban designers, and inevitably the expertise varies according to the experience and knowledge of the individual. Officers acknowledge that further learning in urban design would benefit their skills and therefore the advice they are able to give to the Council and to developers.

It is equally important that Members on the Planning Committee can identify good urban design, and whilst they depend upon the advice of Planning Officers, they would benefit from recognising and supporting good design in the schemes they are required to consider. Several consultants and architects practice in the South West and would be able to meet Members and Officers to educate them on urban design.

Recommendation 4: Review the continuation of the service being secured from the Council's current design consultant

Recommendation 5: actively explore opportunities to enhance the design awareness and skills of Planning and Conservation officers, and Members of the Planning Committee, through CPD, looking to learn from other cities, and receive talks from architects in the region on what constitutes good architectural design.

3.8 Better use of Pre-App Consultations and a more robust approach to refusals.
The Planning service offers advice to developers on a Pre-App basis, prior to the submission of a full planning application. Applicants are not required to take the service but are certainly advised that it will flag up likely issues, including design, and challenges that may arise. An effective mechanism to drive up standards of design would be to:

1. Encourage greater use of Pre-App consultations with the service, including discussion of design issues at the outset. Furthermore, Pre-design community and stakeholder engagement should be strongly encouraged as a means to achieving better informed and more sustainable design.
2. Take a stronger stance to refuse planning applications that propose poor design quality.

At the meeting with development businesses referred to in paragraph 3.2 it was suggested that the Council provides an opportunity for consultation prior to pre-app stage. Where the Pre-app stage requires the drafting of plans and detailed proposals a stage prior to that would enable a more provisional sense check and general sounding on design and other planning principles.

Recommendation 6: Planning Officers encourage greater use of the Pre-App service and introduce an early Pre-App advice service.

3.9 Ensuring good design in the Council's own developments
The Council plays an active role in stimulating the regeneration of the City, including progressing the redevelopment of its own property assets. The Council provides financial support to developers (such as Project Pilgrim and Bakers Quay), delivers external financing to assist development (eg the HLF funded Southgate Street Townscape Heritage Initiative), and has invested in its own property portfolio. The King's Quarter programme in particular will bring about the regeneration of a key quarter of the city centre, and is an opportunity for the Council to draw upon its own assets to deliver a high quality and well-designed scheme.

It is important that the Council leads by example, setting the bar high and requiring developments in which it has a financial interest to be supporting its ambition to drive up design standards.

Recommendation 7: The Council seeks to ensure high design standards in its own developments, and those in which it has a financial involvement.

3.10 Recognising good design

The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) holds annual awards to champion and celebrate the best architecture in the UK and around the world within all Regions in the UK. Winners in the South West in 2019 included the Bristol Old Vic, the Kingswood Preparatory School, and the national headquarters of the UK Hydrographics Office in Taunton.

The City Council used to run a design awards scheme every two years in Gloucester, the last one being in 2015, but it was stopped due to the available of staffing resources. Were the Council to run the scheme itself in future years the resources that would be required would need to be diverted from the delivery of other planning services. An alternative model might be the Council working with one or more local architects or planning firms to run the scheme, perhaps with the Council offering design expertise to judge entries and/or sponsorship.

Developers in Gloucester should also be encouraged by Planning Officers to submit entries to the RIBA South West awards.

Recommendation 8: that the Council instigates a 2020 Gloucester Design Awards, working alongside the development industry and local architects.

Recommendation 9: individual developers will be encouraged to apply for RIBA design awards, and the Council will offer its support to high quality submissions to the awards.

3.11 Conclusion

The onus of responsibility to innovate and drive up the standards of architectural design and quality in Gloucester rests with the developer community, and the architects and designers employed by developers. However, the Council through its Planning function has an important enabling and enforcement role to drive up standards by supporting and advising the developer community and by resisting poor design; raising our own standards of what is acceptable and using the statutory planning system more effectively to achieve better architectural and urban design outcomes.

The Council has an ongoing plan in place to transform and improve the Development Management service, including through process redesign, effective professional training, and collaborating more closely with Tewkesbury Borough Council. If the recommendations proposed are accepted they will be included in the Planning Transformation Plan, which is managed by the Planning Business Transformation Manager, so that they can be introduced alongside other improvement measures and monitoring accordingly.

4.0 Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Considerations

- 4.1 Engagement and consultation with the community underpins the design and delivery of an effective planning process, and the service already consults extensively in the preparation of statutory planning documents and individual planning applications. The report describes examples where greater engagement of the community could be achieved (such as developers consulting more extensively with communities on major planning applications), and the report advocates closer working relations with development agencies and the industry.

5.0 Environmental Implications

- 5.1 The proposals contained in the report would have a positive impact on the physical appearance of development, and therefore a beneficial impact on the built environment in Gloucester.

6.0 Alternative Options Considered

- 6.1 Do nothing – the quality of design would continue at current standards, having a detrimental impact on the Council's vision to deliver high quality regeneration and growth.

7.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 7.1 To seek to drive up the standards of architectural design in the City

To counter perceptions that Gloucester is a low value location

8.0 Future Work and Conclusions

- 8.1 As per Recommendation 12 within the Action Plan as appended, the work will be included within the Planning Business Transformation Plan. Updates will be provided to the Planning and Strategic Housing Portfolio Holder as and when required.

- 8.2 A follow-up meeting will be held with local businesses in the design and development industry during spring 2020.

9.0 Financial Implications

- 9.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. The recommendations could have indirect financial implications on the financial viability of developments in the City, including those supported and funded by the Council itself, however, these would be considered on a case by case basis and implications would be reported to Council accordingly.

Financial Services have been consulted in the preparation this report.

10.0 Legal Implications

- 10.1 There are no direct legal implications of this report.

One Legal have been consulted in the preparation this report.

11.0 Risk & Opportunity Management Implications

Risk	Impact	Level of impact	Likelihood of impact	Mitigating measures
Developers are put off investing in the City due to the increased financial burden of investing in good quality design	Downturn in the level of development and under-achievement of the Council's regeneration and growth aims	2	1	Better relationship building with the development industry.
Higher number of development schemes refused Planning permission.	Aggrieved developers and planning customers.	1	3	Only developers presenting poor quality schemes would potentially be aggrieved.
Opportunities	Impact	Level of impact	Likelihood of impact	Maximising measures
Improved reputation for the City, which encourages good quality investment	Upturn in the level of development and delivery of the Council's regeneration and growth aims.	3	2	Celebration of good design through PR and the annual design awards scheme
To deliver a higher quality of development in the City	Improved appearance to properties, and less public objections to new development.	3	2	Use previous schemes as precedents to drive up standards.

12.0 People Impact Assessment (PIA) and Safeguarding:

12.1 There are no safeguarding implications of this report.

12.2 The PIA Screening Stage was completed and did not identify any potential or actual negative impact, therefore a full PIA was not required.

13.0 Community Safety Implications

13.1 Standards of physical design within the built environment can have a direct impact on community safety. The recommendations of this report would therefore have a positive impact.

14.0 Staffing & Trade Union Implications

14.1 None

Background Documents: None