

The Civic Society's thoughts concerning the City Council's current reviews of the Local Plan and the Urban Living Supplementary Planning Document (SPD).

Introduction.

Bristol City Council is embarking on a review of its Local Plan and its approach to increasing the density of development in the City, the latter of which will replace its tall buildings policies in SPD 1. This paper sets out the Society's hopes and suggestions for the reviews and we will draw on it at appropriate stages in the Council's consultations on the two documents.

Although the forthcoming Urban Living SPD and Local Plan Review will be separate exercises, there will be considerable overlapping of the two in terms of their impact on the form and appearance of the City, the way it functions and quality of life in Bristol. Densification will require a robust policy framework to ensure consistency and quality and the Society feels that such policies should be addressed in the Local Plan Review.

We have first set out the Society's key aspirations for the thrust of the policies and advice in the two documents. There follows the Society's suggestions relating to the themes of the Local Plan Review including policy suggestions to support the SPD on Urban Living plus further suggestions relating to guidance in the SPD.

Aspirations.

The Society will support densification in the City if it is done well. It can drive a number of improvements such as less travel, better air quality and more satisfying lifestyles. We would hope for:

- Policies to achieve increases in density measurable against quantitative and qualitative criteria;
- An approach to densification that integrates with the grain of the City eg. good public transport corridors, local centres and other relevant infrastructure;
- Development which makes the most of site area at low to medium rise level eg. retro fitting more traditional street patterns in some of the space around existing high rise developments, utilising space above ground level supermarket car parks, more efficient use of road space eg. Redcliffe Way, Lawrence Hill;
- For residential uses, developments which achieve an appropriate mix of unit sizes and tenure with supporting activities/social infrastructure.
- Maintain and enhance local character and distinctiveness informed by local styles and materials throughout the City.
- Compatible with the above, encourage good contemporary design for individual buildings, the layout of developments and the public spaces created.
- No increase in highway capacity or parking provision in central Bristol and only in special circumstances elsewhere.
- Continuing improvement of public transport and cycling and walking environments.
- Attractive and viable centres for retail, leisure and community services.
- Maintain employment floorspace at or near existing locations.
- Better public realm – built up and open areas.
- Protection of valuable open spaces.
- Protection of key views into out of and across the City.
- Community involvement in policies and projects.

Local Plan Review Themes.

For the sake of clarity, the Society sets out first the main areas where it considers policies need to be adopted to achieve consistency and quality in implementing a densification agenda as they don't fit particularly neatly into the themes of the review chosen by the Council. We address those themes subsequently.

Quantitative Controls.

We suggest two measures for managing the increase of residential density:

- (i) Number of homes per acre plus
- (ii) Number of habitable rooms per acre.

We suggest that these calculations are made net of non-residential uses such as parking, roads and open space to ensure consistency. These calculations would also facilitate calculating the number of residents that would occupy developments and hence inform decisions about the physical and social infrastructure needed to support it.

Qualitative Controls.

Higher density development means better land use to deliver more and better homes. Higher density also carries a legacy of low quality social housing and unimaginative housing estates built by volume housebuilders with inadequate local facilities. Higher density development must be of high-quality which supports the delivery of better local services. The SPD should set out a list of factors that will determine the range of density in the local context. Some areas can support more intense development than others. Planning policy must ensure that development is fit for purpose for its location. The factors will include:

- (i) Levels of public transport accessibility
- (ii) How a scheme would integrate with its surroundings architecturally.
- (iii) The availability and capacity of local infrastructure, schools and pre-school facilities, medical resources and retail provision.
- (iv) Local green amenity space.

The guidance should cross-reference Local Plan policies that determine:

- (i) The quality of new homes. This could be supported by high level BREEAM standard and design guidance such as the CABI Design for Life approach.
- (ii) The type of homes required to meet the housing need of an area.
- (iii) Policies that support intensification areas
- (iv) Areas identified for densification in a hierarchy of the appropriate degree of intensification that can be accommodated.

BCC have said that the Local Plan Review will address four themes:

- Fair and inclusive city;
- Homes;
- Jobs;
- Clean and green city.

The Society hopes the Review will address the following issues:

Fair and inclusive city.

- Identify potential for growth and development (densification) in deprived areas – this could fit in with the hierarchical approach suggested above. The Society considers that equal weight should be given to regenerating all deprived areas of the City now that South Bristol has secured major improvements to its social and economic infrastructure including the improvements to north-south connectivity that the metrobus will offer;
- Facilitate development to make such areas more attractive to development such as improved social infrastructure, employment opportunities and better linkages;
- Seek appropriate mix of development – housing types, sizes and tenures, employment potential, supporting infrastructure – to improve lives of local people;
- Harness local opinion where possible.

Homes.

Where transport and other infrastructure will support residential development:

- Exploit potential for developing underused space in and around existing residential areas, space above supermarket car parks and under-used space adjoining highways;
- Create family friendly accommodation, places and facilities at lower levels – higher rising accommodation more suitable to other household types could be compatible with this;
- Aim for a mix of accommodation to meet requirements at different life stages and/or more adaptable residential space to facilitate residents living in accommodation suited to their space requirements;
- Encourage smaller scale infills (eg. as is happening in Knowle West).

Jobs.

- Areas such as Bedminster Green with low density marginal employment uses or tired industrial estates could be considered for mixed residential and commercial development, so long as equivalent employment space can be provided more effectively at or near the existing location and the location is suitable for residential;
- Town centre and other retail areas could adapt more flexibly to provide new homes and employment opportunities;
- Encourage more developments like Paint Works and Wapping Wharf which successfully combine employment and residential uses;
- Encourage flexible working spaces like Engine Shed to attract start-ups in high tech and information type sectors;
- Get the most out of the Enterprise Zone particularly links with the new University campus.

Clean and green.

- Demanding standards to improve the performance of new or adapted buildings;
- Continue bearing down on private traffic particularly in central Bristol – more bus routes, less parking, more pedestrian and shared use spaces;
- Continue securing improvements to the pedestrian and cycling environments;
- Allow imaginative short term uses of parks to help fund their maintenance but without permitting inappropriate uses such as car parking;
- Seek CIL contributions for improving the quality of other public spaces.

Urban Living SPD.

Overview.

The challenge for the new planning Guidance is to overcome the negative inferences that the term ‘densification’ implies in the minds of many residents. The Guidance’s function is to describe how Bristol can make better use of its brownfield land, improve its urban fabric and green spaces and enhance its local character and identity.

The Guidance’s running theme should be that it is possible to achieve higher densities using different building forms and this does not have to mean high-rise development that an earlier planning regime encouraged. The result was frequently a poor public realm, tower-blocks poorly integrated into urban realm, perceived lack of security and underused land.

The Guidance could consider how to reintegrate the inherited tower-blocks with their surrounding cityscape and reinstate traditional street layout with active frontages. Tower blocks surrounded by sterile empty space can be lower density than the surrounding low-rise housing. A framework for scoping studies to assess the suitability of areas for densification and an optimal approach could also be included.

The Guidance should compare Bristol’s density within the city and with other cities. There could be a reference to the density achieved in the Clifton terraces compared to the density achieved in other inner-city wards followed by the densities achieved in other desirable residential locations say the London Borough of Islington and the centre of Paris.

The Guidance should state that the aim is to create a city centre of mid-rise mansion blocks and quality streetscapes that support a vibrant culture.

The Guidance must value the public realm. High density is not perceived if well-designed residential blocks are interspersed by attractive public streets and green ‘rooms’ to provide space and light and bordered by cafes, community and leisure facilities. It is the public realm, the space between the buildings that gives a city its character. When the design of a city centre is its main attraction, density becomes less important.

The importance of design:

(i) Buildings

Intensifying land use does not automatically mean high-rise buildings. The Guidance should not encourage a particular scale of increasing height such as twice the prevailing context. Rather it should encourage an increase in density which might be achieved by spreading the footprint of a building or group of buildings. There is much research that supports the conclusion that a large proportion of potential residents would prefer to avoid living in high-rise buildings unless they can afford the service charges sufficient to support on-site management and surveillance. The Guidance should state that mid-rise buildings are the appropriate form of densification in most areas. Terraced housing along traditional street patterns is another efficient use of land and is the most sought-after housing.

Tall buildings are appropriate in the city if clustered around transport nodes and close to employment centres. The Society suggest that the Guidance repeats the design Guidance of

SPD1 – Tall Buildings. There are parts of the city which have specific constraints, for example, the conservation of heritage assets. However, the Society accepts that those parts of SPD1 that attempt to define where tall buildings are appropriate and, by inference, areas where they would not be welcome should not be republished. Any proposal for development should be judged on a broad set of criteria, including: location; design; local and strategic context; transport and available or achievable social infrastructure.

(ii) Public Space

Denser development with higher concentrations of people requires a generous streetscape particularly if there are few local green spaces. The Guidance should alert developers of higher density schemes that the Council will require investment in the public realm to mitigate the impact of the development. The Guidance should require developers of large schemes to provide an impact assessment to plan the surrounding public space to promote a sense of place. The assessments should consider traffic management to give pedestrians and cyclists priority. The Guidance should require Street surfaces and street furniture of good quality and pocket parks with sustainable management plans wherever possible

Ideally, the Guidance should offer a template for the coordination of investment to deliver the needs and benefits that higher density should deliver. Intensified land use should support more shops, better local services and social infrastructure to support a more concentrated local population. Denser urban neighbourhoods create the opportunity to deliver better transport and contribute to the public finance. This is a very difficult project to deliver. The required investment would come from diverse sources; public funds, both National and local and from the private developers and land owners. The Society suggests that the Guidance should require developers of larger sites to prepare a report on the coordination of investment to unlock the value arising from more intensive land use. The developer would have a vested interest in improving the local infrastructure; it will improve land value.