



DESIGN
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Designing for tall buildings

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Introduction

The Design Commission for Wales believes that a well designed tall building in an appropriate location can make a positive contribution to the quality of a place. However, the impact of a new tall building is significant and it must therefore, be of the highest architectural quality and form part of a coherent urban composition.

This document sets out the Commission's expectations for proposed tall buildings.

Context is critical in considering the design of tall buildings, therefore this guide cannot be prescriptive as each case will be different. This is not a guide to where the design of tall buildings would be appropriate: rather, it highlights matters that need to be considered in developing and assessing proposals for tall buildings.

The development of the design should be carefully documented in any presentation to the Design Commission's Design Review service, and in any Design and Access Statement (DAS) accompanying a planning application.

Some local planning authorities have adopted their own guidance on tall buildings as Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) which should be referred to for more locally specific considerations.

We welcome the opportunity to comment on proposals for tall buildings early in the design process, well before a planning application is submitted, through the Design Commission's Design Review service.

The following key considerations will help to inform our review approach and comment, and may help you prepare, in the event of a presentation through our Design Review service.

What is 'tall'?

A tall building cannot simply be defined by its height or number of storeys, as what constitutes a tall building depends on the setting. For example, a building of five storeys may be perceived to be 'tall' if surrounding buildings are predominantly two storeys. The points raised in this document are relevant to all buildings that are considered to be tall in their context.

Planning guidance

National and local planning policies and guidance should inform design proposals. Tall buildings may have an impact beyond the immediate vicinity of the site, particularly on views from key points; on conservation areas and, from a distance, on the townscape and landscape context which may include protected/designated rural landscapes. A landscape and visual impact assessment should be undertaken in accordance with recognised guidance.

In the absence of specific local guidance, it may be necessary for applicants to support proposals with more extensive contextual studies, or to consider their development as part of a larger masterplan study, through discussion with the local planning authority.

Exploration of alternative strategies

The Design Commission for Wales must be satisfied that a tall building is the most appropriate response to the brief and the site. A record of the evolution of the design and testing of alternative schemes should be demonstrated and clearly communicated in the Design and Access Statement (DAS) and in any additional material requested for Design Review purposes. This should substantiate the reasons why a tall building is appropriate and what other options have been excluded.

Context analysis

The context analysis for a tall building should be extended beyond what is usual and encompass the area upon which the building could be considered to have a visual impact. However, consideration of distant views should not be at the expense of a thorough urban analysis of the site and its immediate context.

A thorough context analysis should therefore address:

- Important views that should be protected
- The existing skyline and how a new building would impact on it
- How the site relates to adjacent buildings
- The interaction between the building and the public realm – including the immediate pavement and street, and adjacent streets, squares, parks and other open spaces
- The relationship of the site to the wider townscape and landscape
- The density of the surrounding area and likely flows of pedestrians and traffic generated
- The impact of the micro-climate.

The Commission expects to see comprehensive, drawn analysis of the context including plans and sections (at appropriate scales) and accurate perspective drawings that identify important views looking both towards and away from the site. These drawings must demonstrate whether or not a tall building would interrupt existing important views, and how it would impact on the skyline viewed from significant viewpoints. Most importantly it must establish how the building will interact with the public realm at ground level and demonstrate that it has enhanced the pedestrian experience.

Environmental Impact and Sustainability

Tall buildings can have a particular impact on the microclimate through over shadowing and channelling of winds to ground level. An assessment of the impact of the proposed tall building on the microclimate of the surrounding area should be undertaken including wind and shadow studies. This analysis should be included in the presentation material if the scheme is to be presented to the Design Commission's Design Review service to explain how these considerations have been addressed.

As with all significant developments, the local planning authority will determine, in accordance with the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations, whether or not a full environmental impact assessment is required.

Sustainability should be an integral consideration in the design approach from the outset. The sustainability performance of the proposal will need to be demonstrated including environmental performance, renewable energy, materials,

and recyclability. The Welsh Government's aspirations for sustainable development are set out in Planning Policy Wales, Technical Advice Notes 12: Design and in the Practice Guide: Planning for Sustainable Buildings. DCFW would expect a tall building to achieve the highest energy efficiency and sustainability levels possible and to be convinced of the economic and social viability of the scheme.

Consultation

Evidence of how the public has been or will be consulted prior to the submission of a planning application should also be provided. The Design Commission needs to be satisfied that the engagement strategy seeks to reach both immediate and more distant commercial and residential neighbours that will be affected by the proposals and that the proposals have been, or will be, presented in a form that enables effective public consultation. The consultation material should include details of the impact of the proposal on the immediate public realm.

Transport and Servicing

Managing car parking and servicing are two important considerations for tall buildings. The amount of parking to be provided and how it is accommodated must be carefully considered and well integrated. The commission would expect any tall building to accommodate the parking it requires underground, and the entrance and exit to minimise any impact upon the pedestrian environment. Multi storey parking at ground level is generally unacceptable due to the negative impact it has on the urban environment.

A thorough transport analysis should also include impact on pedestrian movement, links to public transport, bicycle facilities, and links to pedestrian and bicycle routes.

Servicing requirements should be accommodated in a way that does not have a negative impact on the public realm, particularly main pedestrian routes and public spaces. This would include refuse collection/disposal/storage, parking, transformer rooms etc.

Quality

A tall building will inevitably become a landmark and the proposals will need to demonstrate a design quality and detail that is of the highest order. This quality should be evident in the form, materials, detailing, longevity and sustainability of the building and extend to the associated public realm around the building.

The communities in which a tall building sits, be seeking and will deserve design of the highest quality. Evidence of a commitment to the highest quality should be clear in the submission. Reference may be made to built precedents by the use of photographs and, more compellingly, comparative analytical drawings.

Interaction with the Public Realm

The relationship between the building and the public realm that surrounds it is critical to its successful integration into the built fabric. Public facing facades should be active at ground floor level and therefore the mix of uses, location of entrances and arrangement of windows should be given careful consideration. There should be no blank inactive elevations at ground floor.

The space that the building sits in should be carefully planned to ensure that any private/semi private space is well defined and any public space is of a high quality and contributes positively to the public realm.

Common Concerns

The Design Commission's experience of tall buildings presented at design review indicates some common shortcomings.

Design teams should ensure that these matters have been considered and effectively addressed before attending design review.

- Active frontages – does the design positively address the relationship between the building and public realm with sufficient visual interest, activity and natural surveillance to create a vibrant and safe public realm?
- External spaces – have external spaces been clearly defined and well designed to avoid any 'left over' spaces and provide a clear distinction between public and private space?
- Facade treatment – do the proportions, materials and detailing create appropriate visual clarity, interest and quality from a distance and close up?
- Car parking – have car parks and their entrances and exits been accommodated in a way that does not detract from the urban quality of the building. What are the arrangements for pick-up and drop-off and how will this space be managed?

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- Residential amenity – does the design provide a high quality living environment including appropriate external private or communal space, the best views available, and lack of overlooking? Mix of units – does the design provide sufficient flexibility for a variety of unit sizes and configurations, and does it meet affordable housing requirements on or off site?

Presenting Proposals

Materials to convey the design proposals and rationale should include:

- Plans clearly showing how the building relates to the surrounding area
- Sections to demonstrate street width to building height ratio
- Elevations to show how the building meets the ground and relates to adjacent buildings
- Clear, unambiguous verifiable three dimensional studies
- Models to show the massing and impact of the proposed building on the surrounding area
- Illustrations of the scheme at pedestrian eye level from the adjacent street(s) and from the strategic locations identified
- Attention to the top of the building – including how plant will be accommodated.
- The nature of the impact, at ground level, of servicing the building;
- Materials and, at the appropriate stage, detailing of facade treatment.

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