

## Introduction - Why Do We Need This Debate?

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Cambridge must continue to grow if it is to maintain its economic and social prosperity. The core issue is how this growth should be managed, and specifically how can we reconcile the need for expansion with maintaining the character and ambience that makes Cambridge so special.

Until quite recently, this debate has focused on the spatial planning, particularly the impact of lateral growth – infill within the city, new housing around the city fringe, new developments in the surrounding villages, even the creation of whole new towns like Cambourne and Northstowe.

This in turn has generated concerns about the provision of the essential infrastructure, especially the adequacy of public transport, about encroachment into the Green Belt, and about maintaining the urban/rural interface. Extensive new housing developments also raise concerns about sustainability in terms of the energy profile of the new buildings, waste management, and water supply, as well as the creation of vibrant new communities where people will want to live – all issues that are close to the heart of CambridgePPF.

More recently the debate has moved on from just a two-dimensional spatial consideration to include the third dimension of height. Increasing the settlement density by building upwards - whilst maintaining the same overall footprint - has apparent advantages, not least in curtailing inevitable creep of the city into the surrounding Green Belt and countryside.

However, as Richard MacCormac will demonstrate, building higher does not necessarily generate an increase in density – in fact, similar densities of around 75 dwellings/ha can be achieved through relatively low-rise development of 3-4 storeys without the downside of despoiling the skyline.

So why should Cambridge go for tall buildings if its housing need can be met through low-rise without raiding the Green Belt? There are a number of sound other reasons for building high – to create a gateway, for symbolic reasons, for image projection, for excitement and drama – but do these basically non-essential reasons justify the threat to Cambridge's skyline? Experience from other cities shows that where the precedent is made by allowing one tall buildings, then suddenly they start springing up like mushrooms in an uncoordinated way, that lacks any sense of harmony or integration.

So does Cambridge really need tall buildings? Indeed, what actually constitutes a “tall building”? There used to be an unwritten rule “no higher than the top of King's Chapel”, but this has already been breached not least by the Addenbrook's chimney. In fact, the whole concept of “tall” in this usage is misleading as it implies a finite cap can be imposed, whereas in reality “tall” is a relative term – any building that emerges conspicuously above its surroundings is tall, even a three-storey building surrounded by bungalows. And where in Cambridge would tall (that is, emergent) buildings be appropriate? Should we be looking at height zoning in different parts of the city,

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keeping the historic centre free of intrusion and clustering tall buildings towards the periphery? Indeed, do we have an agreed vision for how Cambridge should look in 20 or even 50 years time?

In September last year, the Joint Urban Design Team hosted a colloquium of professional planners and urban designers to explore these questions. The general conclusion was that tall buildings could play a role in Cambridge's future, particularly in the regeneration of some of the more deprived areas of the city, provided their design and construction was of the highest quality. This session tonight is essentially a follow-up to that first meeting to allow a wider range of professional opinions to be heard as well as ideas and concerns from the general public. Such a fundamental change in planning policy must be rooted in a comprehensive public consultation exercise of which this is part.

The distant panorama of Cambridge at the head of tonight's programme shows that compared with many other cities of similar size, Cambridge has largely escaped the post-war drive for tall buildings and tower blocks. As John Preston, the City's Historic Environment Officer, comments, "the Dreaming Spires and Teeming Towers" described so eloquently by Thomas Sharp in 1963 still dominate the skyline. In fact this photograph is actually taken from the West of the city from the top of Red Meadow Hill in the Coton Countryside Reserve, a site that I would urge all of you to visit if you want to get a real perspective on tall buildings in Cambridge.

However, the rapid expansion of the city driven by the high-tech revolution combined with the constriction on lateral expansion imposed by the Green Belt inevitably means that vertical development becomes more attractive. This drive though has created tensions. The height restrictions for the hotel and office developments at CB1 and the rejection of the plans for a six-storey Travelodge on Newmarket Road have generated warnings from some that Cambridge could drive away developers, that Cambridge is "too tough a nut to crack", especially for lower value schemes like budget hotels or social housing.

What all this emphasises is the increasing urgency for some form of policy framework to assess proposals for high buildings. We need a coherent advisory framework so that proposals can be reviewed in a rational and consistent way – a level playing field. It is therefore welcome news that Glen Richardson and his colleagues in the City Council and the Joint Urban Design Team are currently preparing a **Tall Buildings Strategy** for Cambridge as a Supplementary Planning Document. I know that Glen and his Team are keen to hear the views of residents, particularly on such key questions as what is so special about the skyline of Cambridge, what makes a tall building successful, and where should tall buildings be located?

We need to be aware of best practice elsewhere in the country. The Mayor of London in 2007 introduced the **London View Management Framework** as supplementary planning guidance, which seeks to protect the best city panoramas, particularly of the River Thames. Before such in London the magnificent view from Richmond Hill – I think I'm right in saying this – is still the only legally protected view in the UK by an Act of Parliament. That other place, Oxford, has protected its city-skyline with a strong restrictive policy on the height of new buildings, and is now preparing a policy framework based on the London experience to enhance the protection of its finest city views.

Cambridge has a number of magnificent city panoramas like the views of the Backs, the cityscape from Great St Mary's, even the view of the city from Red Meadow Hill -these are of iconic significance to the city's heritage. Consideration of tall buildings in Cambridge must go hand in hand with the identification and protection of these key city views as a core part of the Tall Buildings Strategy. The loss of the view cones in the preparation of the recent Local Plan of the City has been, in my opinion, a backward step in protecting the City's skyline, and we need to introduce Quality Visual Assessments into our policy framework for the consideration of tall buildings.

For the last sixty years, Cambridge has largely escaped the horrors of the unplanned and discordant high-rise buildings that have spoilt the skyline of so many other cities. Our character is a low-rise city allowing the great ecclesiastic and college buildings to be enjoyed from many different perspectives both within and outside the city boundary. But we are also a city with areas of economic and social deprivation where the current architecture is of zero interest, and where sensitive high-rise could play a valuable regeneration role. If there are to be new taller buildings, then they must be of the highest quality and designed not as an opportunistic collection of one-off proposals but as part of an agreed vision for the future of our great city.