

# Designing for tall buildings

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## **Introduction**

The Design Commission for Wales considers that well-designed tall buildings in appropriate locations can make a positive contribution to the quality of a place. However, we know that the impact of any 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 – although we would expect to see some form of analysis or guidance which identifies optimum locations. This guide, moreover, highlights key considerations for developing and assessing proposals for tall buildings.

The development of the design should be carefully documented for clients and stakeholders and for any presentation being made when engaging the Commission through its Design Review service, and in any Design and Access Statement accompanying a planning application.

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

We welcome and encourage early engagement and the opportunity to comment and input into proposals for tall buildings early in the design process, well before a planning application is submitted.

You can find out more about how to engage with the Commission here:

- [Client Support](#)
- [Design Review](#)

The following key considerations will help you prepare and inform dialogue at Design Review or early Client Support discussions.

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## **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.

National planning policy promotes development that increases the population density of our towns and cities. *Future Wales: The National Plan 2040* states that new developments in urban areas should be built at urban densities of at least 50 dwellings per hectare, which are sufficient to support public transport and local facilities, with higher densities in more central and accessible locations. These medium-density developments have been described as 'The Missing Middle' and can be achieved with fine-grain, midrise buildings, which occupy small- to medium-sized building footprints, such as terraced houses, townhouses, mews houses, and small blocks of flats.

### **The Missing Middle**



## **Planning Policy and Guidance**

National and local planning policies and guidance should inform all 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.

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## **Exploration of Alternative Strategies**

The Design Commission for Wales must be satisfied that a tall building is the most appropriate response to the client brief, site and context. A record of the evolution of the design and testing of alternative schemes should be demonstrated as part of the design process and clearly communicated in the Design and Access Statement 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. See our guide for good practice:

- [Design and Access Statements in Wales: Why, What and How](#)

## **Site and Context Analysis**

The site and 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 analysis of the site and its immediate context.

A thorough site and 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 microclimate.

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.

See our guide for good practice:

- [Site & Context Analysis Guide](#)

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## **People and Community**

The design of tall buildings should ensure the people living there have a good home, with sufficient space, natural light, ventilation and quiet spaces. The Design Commission encourages the design of tall buildings to accommodate dual-aspect flats, as they can provide better natural light, cross-ventilation and quieter spaces, and discourages single-aspect flats, which lack daylight, are at risk of overheating and have implications on the fenestration and windows of the buildings.

The local community should be involved in the development of the proposals. 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 involvement. The material should include details of the impact of the proposal on the immediate public realm. Evidence of how members of the public have been or will be involved prior to the submission of a pre-application consultation (PAC) and planning application should also be provided.

## **Sustainability**

Sustainability should be an integral consideration in the design approach from the outset. The sustainability strategy and performance of the proposal will need to be demonstrated, including carbon budgets, embodied and operational carbon, energy targets, environmental performance, renewable energy, passive solar gain, overheating, materials, and recyclability.

The Welsh Government's aspirations for sustainable development are set out in *Planning Policy Wales* and *Technical Advice Notes 12: Design*. 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. See our good practice guide:

— **Practice Guide: Planning for Sustainable Buildings**

## **Design 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 will be seeking and 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.

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## **Microclimate**

Tall buildings can have a particular impact on the microclimate through overshadowing 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 material, if the scheme is to be presented to the Design Commission's Design Review service, to explain how these considerations have been addressed.

## **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 and the activation of the space.

Public facing facades should contribute positively to the public realm with active frontages at ground floor level, the mix of uses, location of entrances and arrangement of windows given careful consideration. There should be no blank inactive elevations at ground floor.

Any public space around the building should be of a high quality. The space that the building sits in should be carefully planned to ensure that any private/semi-private space is well defined. Public realm design should be informed by stakeholder engagement at the earliest stages.

## **Transport and Servicing**

Managing connections, travel choices, vehicle parking and servicing are important considerations for tall buildings. The Design Commission encourages car-free developments, reduced car parking provision and shared mobility measures where appropriate.

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 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.

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## **Building Safety**

Early and close consideration on safety, comfort and security are key elements of the earliest design stages.

The Building Safety (Wales) Bill is planned to be introduced in 2025 to bring forward new fire safety duties that will be developed for residential buildings and residential parts of mixed-use buildings.

## **Environmental Impact**

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.

## **Common Concerns**

The Design Commission's experience of proposals for tall buildings indicate some common challenges which need to be resolved through the design process.

Clients and design teams should ensure that these matters are considered and effectively addressed in the design process.

- **Active frontages** – proposals should ensure the design positively addresses 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** – should be clearly defined and well designed to avoid any 'left over' spaces and provide a clear distinction between public and private space.
- **Sustainability, carbon and building performance** – the design should be informed by a sustainability strategy.
- **Facade treatment** – should ensure the proportions, materials and detailing create appropriate visual clarity, interest and quality from a distance and close up.
- **Transport and parking** – entrances and exits to car parking should be accommodated in a way that does not detract from the urban quality of the building. Proposals should consider the arrangements for pick-up and drop-off and how the space will be managed.
- **Residential amenity** – the design should provide a high quality living environment, including appropriate external private or communal space, the best views available, and lack of overlooking.

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- **Mix of units** – the design must provide sufficient flexibility for a variety of unit sizes and configurations, and meet affordable housing requirements.
  - **Single-aspect flats** – should be avoided to ensure homes have good natural light and avoid overheating.

## **Presenting Proposals**

Our Design Review guidance sets out the material and information we would expect a proposal to include to sufficiently convey the design proposal and rationale. For tall buildings, this 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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