



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
Subject:	Tall Buildings in Belfast – Policy Position
Date:	Friday 22 August 2008
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Relevant Background Information

Purpose of Paper

The purpose of this paper is to -

- update Members on the progress in relation to the issue of tall buildings and inform Members of the outcome of the meeting of the cross party delegation from the Council with the Environment Minister on the issue of tall buildings on 28 July 2008
- highlight the key issues that the Council would like to be addressed in the development of the new Tall Buildings Guidelines for Belfast which are being developed by the Department of the Environment
- seek agreement from Members to request a meeting between the consultants (*Urban Initiatives*) who have been engaged to help develop the new Tall Buildings Guidance for Belfast and a cross-party delegation from the Council

Background

Members will recall that in April the Strategic Policy & Resources Committee considered a paper on the importance of tall buildings for Belfast and agreed to request a meeting with the Minister for the Environment to discuss the viability of tall buildings in Belfast as mechanisms to help attract investment into the city and to help grow the city's rates base as long as they were linked to the right design criteria, were located in the right place and could also make developer contributions towards enhancing the city.

Subsequent to this request being submitted the previous Environment Minister (Arlene Foster) announced on 28 May that design guidelines on tall buildings in Belfast were to be produced. While this changed the initial focus of the meeting a cross party delegation from the Council met with the Environment Minister and representatives from the Planning Service on Monday 28th July.

Update on meeting with the Minister and the development of the Tall Buildings Guidelines

At the cross party meeting on the 28 July, the Environment Minister (Sammy Wilson) outlined that his Department would strongly welcome the Council's input into the development of the Tall Buildings Guidelines. It was acknowledged that the current lack of any framework was leading to speculative planning applications and that this was making it more difficult for the Planning Service to make decisions on tall buildings. He outlined that the Department had engaged consultants, *Urban Initiatives*, to help with this work and that they were meeting with the consultants that afternoon (Mon 28th July) to discuss the development of Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) on this area. No timetable is yet in place for the development of this Guidance but the Department is hoping for the Guidelines to be in place as soon as possible. It was confirmed that the Council would be formally involved in this process.

Key Issues

The Council welcomes the announcement from the Department that guidelines for tall buildings in Belfast are to be produced. Given the enhanced role which the Council will have in relation to planning matters as a result of the RPA, the Council looks forward to building a close and productive working relationship with the Department in relation to this area.

There are, however, a number of issues that may require further exploration in relation to tall buildings and the development of any new policy framework for these buildings. The locational issues previously highlighted by Committee, around the balance between the development potential and the protection of the City's built heritage and character, will be of particular importance in the formulation of policy.

Role in contributing to the vision of Belfast

Belfast City Council is ambitious for Belfast. This vision has been consistently expressed by Members and through work on key strategic areas such as the Corporate Plan, the Belfast Masterplan and the development of the new City Investment Strategy, the Council has become more directly engaged in shaping the future development of Belfast. This has contributed to the growing recognition of our role as the custodian of the city's economic, social and physical well-being. This role will be further enhanced with the Council's enhanced responsibilities under the RPA which will see the Council leading the development of a community plan for Belfast. It will be essential that any policy is adopted for the strategic development of the city.

Key issues to be considered in the development of the guidelines –

- *Vision – It is important that the principles underlying any tall buildings policy and locational proposals should be related to the longer term aspirations for the development of Belfast. How will the guidelines ensure development contributes to the realisation of the Council's vision for Belfast?*
- *Development of the Guidelines –What is the process for the development of the Guidelines? How will the Council be involved? What is the timescale for the development of the Guidelines?*

Harnessing the potential of tall buildings

Tall buildings as flagship projects can act as major catalysts for regeneration in areas and the best locations for tall buildings is obviously an issue of great debate. For commercial reasons tall building development has tended to be concentrated in city centres and the Council would continue to support the development of tall buildings primarily within the city centre in order to promote economic growth. However tall buildings do not necessarily have to be in the traditional core city centre to be successful and there is increasing pressure for tall buildings to be built in other locations. This has been evidenced across the rest of the UK. In Belfast there is considerable scope for tall buildings to be located not just in the city centre but on a number of gateway or peripheral city centre sites. The dBMAP has already identified a number of gateway locations (Gamble Street, Great Victoria Street and Central Station) which could be suitable for tall building developments which could contribute to the regeneration and revitalisation of these areas. There are also a number of significant development sites across Belfast e.g. Titanic Quarter, Girdwood and the Council would seek assurances that all these types of sites will fall within the scope of any policy which is developed.

According to NISRA Belfast's population is predicted to continue to decline over the next 20 years. It has already been acknowledged that this will have a detrimental effect on the city's rates base and the Council has identified this as a strategic issue. Looking at ways to increase the population, particularly of trying to bring people back into the city centre, is one way to reverse this decline. Building tall is not the only way to increase population density in cities but it is clear that tall buildings, particularly apartment blocks or mixed use developments, are a key way of helping to bring people back into the city centre and so helping to provide the intensification of activity and densification of people that help make cities thrive.

It is generally accepted that tall buildings work better when they are clustered. Clusters of tall buildings can be appropriate in the right places and guidance in other administrations sets out the importance of promoting the expansion of clusters of tall

buildings. If appropriately planned, groups of tall buildings can offer the potential to manage their environmental impacts better than individual buildings.

Key issues to be considered in the development of the guidelines –

- *Location of tall buildings – The Council acknowledges the need for a balanced approach to development between the city centre and other city sites to ensure that the benefits are maximised for the city, taking account of the available Brownfield or under utilised land within the city, and harnessing the potential for such development to contribute to regeneration areas e.g. important gateway sites. However there also needs to be consideration of sites which fall outside the traditional core city centre*
- *Gateway sites – How will the policy consider tall buildings at key gateway sites across the city given the catalytic regeneration potential of these sites?*
- *Capacity - How will the guidelines ensure that a targeted/phased approach is taken to this issue to provide a degree of certainty and management?*
- *Approach - will the policy seek to prescribe areas for potential development or have criteria that will be applied generally across the city and wider BMAP area. Will it look at clusters as well as/or individual buildings?*

Heritage and Design – conserving the heritage of Belfast and ensuring a high calibre of design

The Council has acknowledged the need in its discussions to “ensure that the city’s built heritage is preserved”. Belfast has a very unique character - the setting of the city within Belfast Lough with clear views to the surrounding areas and the view corridors of prominent structures such as City Hall all contribute to the valuable unique character and image of Belfast. The introduction of tall structures, if inappropriately planned, has the potential to disrupt the built heritage of the city and undermine the experience offered to both residents and visitors.

However research has also shown that well designed tall buildings located in the right place can make positive contributions to cities. The Council has already acknowledged that “there has to be quality thresholds for tall buildings to ensure that they are iconic”. Guidance in other areas evidences that tall buildings should be of excellent architectural quality and designed to take account of their impact on the immediate surroundings and the wider environment.

Key issues to be considered in the development of the guidelines –

- *Heritage - How the new tall buildings policy will ensure that Belfast’s heritage is preserved and protected while balancing the aspirations for the continued regeneration of the city?*
- *Character – What approach will the guidelines take to those character areas not designated for conservation and those that contain important view corridors?*
- *How the new tall buildings policy will ensure that any tall buildings is of a high quality, iconic design and how it will be ensured that developers adhere to this?*

Planning Gain

An excellent tall building should positively enhance its locality and share the benefits of the investment throughout the local area for example by helping to improve the public realm or securing additional open space. In other planning administrations these additional improvements or benefits are often secured through the use of planning obligations. The purpose of planning obligations is to mitigate the impact of a proposed new development.

Planning obligations can be applied to all developments (commercial and residential). They are particularly used in England for securing social/affordable housing and improving the public realm/environment. While securing the obligations is a complex process research has evidenced their value in ensuring that the full impacts of a development are addressed and that any necessary infrastructure is secured.

However the NI mechanism for planning agreements (Art. 40) has only been restrictively applied here, primarily in relation to transport infrastructure issues. The public sector here is missing a significant opportunity that is afforded to councils elsewhere due to the differences in the legal basis for planning obligations. This means that Belfast is missing out on a potentially invaluable source of funding which could be used to significantly

improve infrastructure and the environment and public realm of the city. The Council has a very robust position on the need for planning gain which it has consistently conveyed (both in statutory consultation responses and discussions with the Planning Service and other government departments) and would take this opportunity to raise this issue again.

Key issues to be considered in the development of the guidelines –

- *Tall buildings offer the potential for a development premium that should be captured for the benefit of the local area and for the city as a whole. Will the new policy ensure that planning obligations can be sought from developers in order to enhance the local environment/public realm?*
- *For development proposals and planning applications which are likely to have significant implications in relation to both the physical development and planning gain it is proposed that the Council, as a statutory body, is engaged early in the process*

3-d model for the city

In addition to the absence of an overarching policy framework for tall buildings an additional weakness in the current system is also the lack of any system (such as visual or digital models) which can provide detailed contextual information.

The Council, in its role as civic leader for the city, has started to look at developing a physical masterplan for Belfast through the procurement of a 3-d urban design framework. This type of approach has already been successfully used in other cities. Essentially this would mean that a virtual model of any proposed development can be uploaded onto a 3-d map of Belfast to enable the potential impact of any building and the cumulative impact of development to be assessed. This would help inform the decision-making and place-making process. Such a model could be placed in a city centre location and/or viewed over the internet.

Key issues to be considered

- *A physical 3-d model of the city would significantly enhance the assessment of proposals and the cumulative impacts and co-ordinated access to information about proposals in a 3d form would better inform the decision making process. The Council would advocate that a partnership approach to the procurement of a 3-d model for Belfast is more fully explored*

Resource Implications

N/A

Recommendations

The Strategic Policy & Resources Committee is asked to -

- note the contents of this report
- agree the issues that the Council would like to be addressed in the development of the new Tall Buildings Guidelines for Belfast which are being developed by the Department of the Environment
- agree to request a meeting between the consultants (*Urban Initiatives*) who have been engaged to help develop the new Tall Buildings Guidance for Belfast and a cross-party delegation from the Council

Key to Abbreviations

N/A

Documents Attached

N/A