

Opinion: Why Let Guildford Be Ruined By 'Monstrous Mass And Height' Buildings?

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Most of us enjoy visiting towns and cities such as Oxford, Cambridge, Canterbury, Chichester and Winchester. Part of our enjoyment is that these towns and cities respect and enhance their heritage and have a reassuring and appealing consistency of scale of buildings.

Many of their streets are formed by buildings no more than four storeys in height. There are virtually no buildings in their centres higher with a few exceptions such as church steeples.

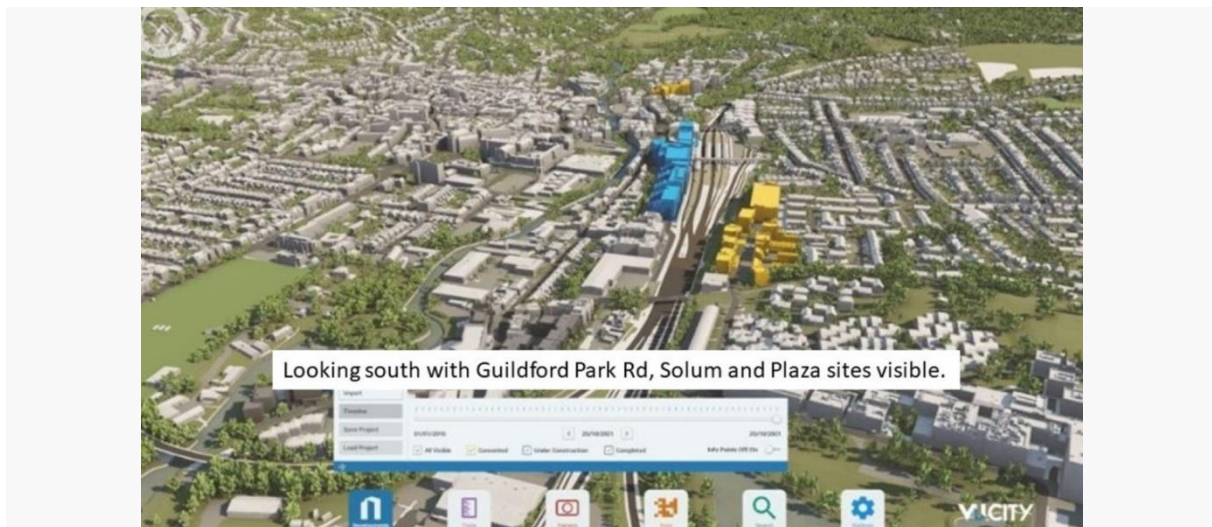


A model of the North Street Friary Quarter with proposals for buildings of up to 14 storeys high.

Their streets and public spaces have therefore a pleasing human scale with building heights to which we can relate.

Opinion

Streets with buildings of these heights permit good levels of daylight and, importantly, sunlight making the street a pleasant space to enjoy. Buildings of these heights also help permit views across their town or city centres and with some like Guildford's longer vistas to the surrounding countryside, hills and landscape beyond. I would be shocked to see buildings of eight or ten storeys appearing in the centre of any of these towns or cities.



Screenshot from the Guildford Society website [Changing Views Across Guildford](#).

Which raises the question, why is Guildford different? Why are there battles and division about all of the major projects in our town centre?

Is Guildford so much lesser of a town than these others that we don't care how it is developed or we want to relegate it to a lower league?

See also: [North Street Developer Cuts Tallest Building Height By One Storey](#)

I believe all of these towns and cities have carefully written planning policies which are there to influence and protect the townscape of their centres.

Cambridge's original tall buildings policy 2012 is now integrated into their [Local Plan as Policy 60 which states:](#)

“Any proposal for a structure that breaks the existing skyline and/or is significantly taller than the surrounding built form will be considered against the following criteria:

- a. location, setting and context – applicants should demonstrate through visual assessment or appraisal with supporting accurate visual representations, how the proposals fit within the existing landscape and townscape;*
- b. impact on the historic environment – applicants should demonstrate and quantify the potential harm of proposals to the significance of heritage assets or other sensitive receptors (view of, backdrop and setting), assessed on a site-by-site basis but including impact on key landmarks and viewpoints, as well as from the main streets, bridges and open spaces in the city centre and from the main historic approaches, including road and river, to the historic core. Tall building proposals must ensure that the character or appearance of Cambridge, as a city of spires and towers emerging above the established tree line, remains dominant from relevant viewpoints as set out in Appendix F;*
- c. scale, massing and architectural quality – applicants should demonstrate through the use of scaled drawings, sections, accurate visual representations and models how the proposals will deliver a high-quality addition to the Cambridge skyline and clearly demonstrate that there is no adverse impact;*
- d. amenity and microclimate – applicants should demonstrate that there is no adverse impact on neighbouring buildings and open spaces in terms of the diversion of wind, overlooking or overshadowing, and that there is adequate sunlight and daylight within and around the proposals; and*
- e. public realm – applicants should show how the space around tall buildings will be detailed, including how a human scale is created at street level.”*

These policies do not totally prevent taller buildings but are there to challenge why tall buildings are needed and if they can be justified make certain they are of absolutely the highest quality.

[Canterbury's Local Plan states:](#)

“Building heights should be determined by the immediate context of a development. However, it is not expected that new buildings will exceed four residential storeys over an active ground floor (i.e. five storeys maximum height).”

Why does Guildford not have similar policies?

Our town is about to have its centre destroyed by buildings of excessive, some might say monstrous, mass and height. These, at eight storeys and above are totally out of scale with the generally three to four storey town centre. See the illustration of proposed Debenham’s replacement, St Mary’s Wharf, below.

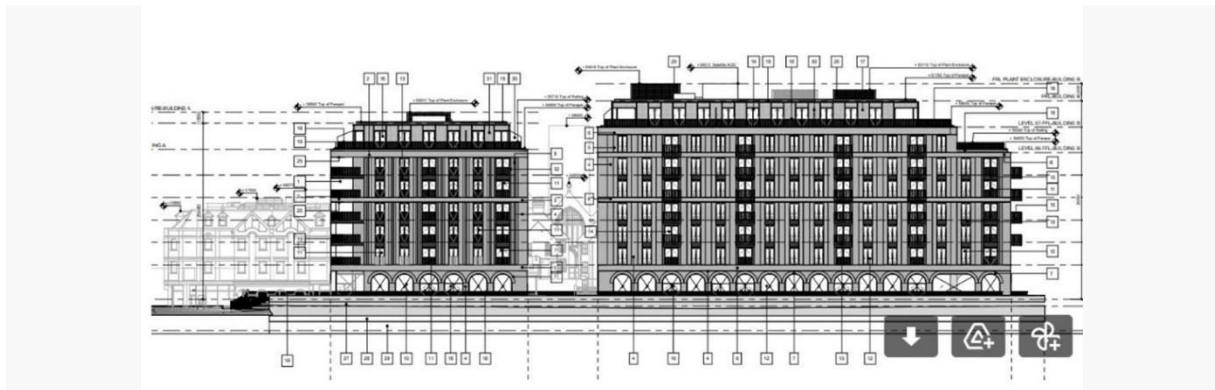


Illustration from the St Mary’s Wharf (ex-Debenhams) proposed scheme.

It shows the view from the west. If you look hard you can see faintly the existing buildings behind. Through the gap between these huge new buildings is St Mary’s Church dwarfed by the new buildings. St Mary’s Saxon tower is the oldest structure in Guildford which sits in Quarry Street amongst some of Guildford’s most attractive, much-loved heritage buildings. All will be overshadowed and have their settings destroyed by new buildings of this mass and height.

The scale and impact of these huge developments is worsened when they are considered together as shown on the Guildford Society website: [Changing View Across Guildford](#). We will have no one else to blame for our town’s destruction if we don’t act now. Developers will continue to push through their excessive schemes knowing that the GBC policies are insufficient and even if applications are turned down by the council they can win on appeal as happened with Solum.

We all want to see new development in Guildford but not poorly conceived development that destroys our town.

Guildford’s attraction, as the other towns and cities I mention, is its heritage and townscape. Our town centre with its heritage and setting is an economic benefit.

Tall buildings and overdevelopment will just add to the often-quoted “Guildford has been spoilt” list of negatives at a time of economic downturn.

Why are the council, which should be safeguarding its future, avoiding the adoption of policies to protect it?