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Contact:

Cllr Anthony Negus

cllr.anthony.negus@bristol.gov.uk



Liberal Democrat response to the “Urban Living Policy” consultation

We have serious concerns about the proliferation of tall buildings that will inevitably follow from the proposed "Urban Living policy". Our concerns fall on two principles:

- 1) Tall building proliferation will harm the architectural and visual heritage of the city.
- 2) Tall building proliferation will not achieve what the Mayor and we all desire, which is an increase in rate of housing delivery.

1) Harm to the architectural and visual heritage of the city

Bristol has a unique urban architectural heritage – a low-rise city built on hills that are visible in every direction, showcasing the undulation of terrain with a mixture of built forms where none are dominant. The Council’s very first Supplementary Planning Document – Tall Buildings Policy: SPD 1 – recognised this and handled the issue of tall buildings with great skill and sensitivity, and we do not believe it should be cast aside so quickly.

We note that there are almost no examples of “liked” tall buildings built in Bristol in the last century. All the liked tall buildings are monuments of greater age that were all built to exceptional quality as memorials, or religious statements. All those built since were feted by planners in their time as “modern” and “bold” but were hated by the public within a decade. We have no reason at all to think that – in these days of exceptional value-engineering – anything will be different this time. Indeed, the few tall buildings created in recent years are, predictably, nothing special.

Developers are already eagerly coming forward with plans for 20+ storey buildings in the numerous proposed new locations, and yet again: the designs are really nothing special. Their shiny cladding panels will be dull within a decade, and they will be regarded contemptuously within 15 years, but their great height and impact will blight the city’s views for generations.

2) Will not achieve an increase in rate of housing delivery.

We agree that Bristol needs to build more housing, quickly. If constructing tall buildings across the city was a guarantee of a big boost in housing numbers, we might be willing to accept the harm to the city's heritage in order to help deal with this housing crisis. However, we have no reason to believe that it will solve the problems the administration thinks it will.

It should be noted that the many council estates with tower blocks often have among the lowest average dwelling per hectare (DPH) values in the city. Conversely, the areas with the highest DPH values – Cotham, Clifton East, Southville – are areas that have maximum 4-5 storeys build. The requirements that those living in tall buildings have for green space to get out of their home and to enjoy life in, mean that tall buildings inevitably drive up the demand for new local parks and recreational space. Tall buildings with no recreational space might be okay for “yuppies” to live in while single, but are no place for the raising of families.

The Mayor's drive for tall buildings may be spurred by the policies of the global “mega-cities” (London included) which are taking a radically different direction in urban living that we believe Bristol neither wants nor needs – again this is no place to raise families, as people increasingly learn when they move to cities like London. As a counterexample, Paris is one of the densest cities in the world, but has not had a skyscraper built since 1973; almost all buildings are 6-8 storey high there. There is also evidence that, in order to avoid tall buildings dominating their environs too much, they tend to be designed thinner, and in some cases no extra units are delivered (we believe this is the case in the new Bedminster proposal).

An influential report published in 2013 by the think-tank Policy Exchange in conjunction with the Housing lobby group Create Streets, produced a highly regarded report [<https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/create-streets.pdf>] that called for tight low-rise housing "tailored to how people want to live". Though this report actually recommends demolition of existing tower-blocks and replacement with new streets (which we are *not* recommending) the evidence within in nevertheless counts against the proposition that tower-block living inevitably means more homes delivered.

It should also be noted that the city is currently missing numerous opportunities to increase density that wouldn't involve tall buildings, by accepting developments at or near the policy minimum DPH in areas that are well suited to higher densities. It is bad enough that private developers do this, but we are failing to do this even where *we* are the landowner. For example at Alderman Moore's allotments, and at Hengrove Park (both suitable for high density build, being on Metrobus lines) the Council itself brought forward plans at the policy-minimum allowed density that have already been granted permission. That is a scandalous missed opportunity, and set a bad example for private developers.

Conclusion

In order to be able to defend ourselves against inappropriate high-rise developments there is a need for a clear and strong policy – but this is the wrong one. It harks back to the mistakes of previous generations, when today we have the benefit of knowing why this high-mindedness failed then, and that we now have other – better – options to do things differently. There are other traditional and recent examples of high-quality low and medium-rise housing (and commercial) development, with densities matching or exceeding those of high-rise developments. More importantly, these are demonstrably better at creating the interactions that make for sustainable communities. This should be the Council's aim and it is both surprising and sad that its recommendation is to get there by an outmoded and failed solution, when with more thought and consideration we can achieve these ambitions without scarring our city and many of its residents. Therefore we continue to support the Council's existing tall buildings policy.

Bristol Liberal Democrat Council Group

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