


Greater Cambridge Shared Planning

Skyline and Tall Buildings Baseline, Strategy and Guidance

Final Report
June 2026



4309

Report presented by	Urban Initiatives
In association with	CBA
Status	Final Report
Issue no.	03
Date issued	12 June 2026
File name	4309_20260612_CambridgeTallBuildingsStrategy_FinalRev1.indd
Project director	Matthias Wunderlich
Reviewed By Design Director	Hugo Nowell
Approved by Design Director	

This document has been prepared for the exclusive use of the commissioning party and unless otherwise agreed in writing by Urban Initiatives Studio Limited, no other party may copy, reproduce, distribute, make use of, or rely on its contents. No liability is accepted by Urban Initiatives Studio Limited for any use of this document, other than for the purposes for which it was originally prepared and provided.

Opinions and information provided in this document are on the basis of Urban Initiatives Studio Limited using due skill, care and diligence in the preparation of the same and no explicit warranty is provided as to their accuracy. It should be noted and is expressly stated that no independent verification of any of the documents or information supplied to Urban Initiatives Studio Limited has been made.

All maps in this report are reproduced from Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, Crown Copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown Copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. Ordnance Survey License no. AC0000810824 (2021)

Urban Initiatives Studio Limited. Registered in England No. 8236922



150 Holborn
London EC1N 2NS

www.urbaninitiatives.co.uk

Executive Summary

The Skyline and Tall Buildings Baseline, Strategy and Guidance study has been prepared for Greater Cambridge Shared Planning to inform the emerging joint Greater Cambridge Local Plan and the development of an updated skyline and tall buildings policy.

The purpose of the study is to provide a proportionate, robust and evidence-based approach to managing the skyline of Cambridge and the wider Greater Cambridge area. It reviews the existing policy approach to tall buildings, identifies spatial qualities and sensitivities, defines what should be considered a tall building in different contexts, and provides a strategic framework and guidance for assessing future proposals.

Cambridge's skyline is a distinctive and highly valued aspect of the city's character. It is shaped by a restrained pattern of generally low-rise development, extensive tree cover, historic open spaces, the River Cam corridor, and the landmark towers, spires and collegiate buildings of the historic core. The study recognises the need to safeguard these special qualities, while also enabling Greater Cambridge to accommodate growth, intensification

and regeneration in a sensitive and well-managed way.

The study finds that tall buildings can play a positive role where they are in the right location, of exceptional design quality and supported by clear planning, placemaking and public benefits. However, in the wrong location, or where poorly designed, they can have significant adverse impacts on skyline character, heritage assets, townscape, landscape setting, views, open spaces and residential amenity. This is particularly important in Cambridge, where even relatively modest increases in height can become visually prominent due to the city's flat topography, low prevailing building heights and sensitive historic skyline.

The report also identifies that South Cambridgeshire requires a more tailored approach to height. Many of its villages and settlements are low-rise, rural or historic in character, and buildings of three or four storeys may already be perceived as tall in their local context. The strategy therefore establishes a Greater Cambridge-wide approach that reflects both the urban sensitivities of Cambridge and the rural, village and landscape sensitivities of South Cambridgeshire.

A key output of the study is a revised definition of tall buildings based on three Tall Building Threshold Zones:

- Suburban / Rural Height Zone, where buildings of 13 metres or above are considered tall;
- Urban Height Zone, where buildings of 19 metres or above are considered tall;
- Increased Urban Height Zone, where buildings of 25 metres or above are considered tall.

These thresholds provide a clearer and more context-sensitive basis for policy and development management than the existing approach. They are intended to trigger appropriate scrutiny of buildings that break the threshold within each of the zones to ensure their impact can be appropriately considered.

The strategy also identifies areas that are likely to be highly sensitive or generally inappropriate for tall buildings, including the historic core, conservation areas, registered parks and gardens, historic villages, open spaces, sensitive townscape areas, rural edges and valued landscape settings. It then identifies Areas of Search where there may be potential for taller buildings, subject to

detailed testing and justification. These are generally associated with strategic growth, regeneration or major development locations.

Six major areas of search were tested in more detail: Clifton Road Industrial Estate and Leisure Park, Newmarket Road / Cambridge Retail Park, East Cambridge, West Cambridge, Addenbrooke's Hospital and Cambridge Biomedical Campus, and North East Cambridge. This testing shows that the greatest potential for carefully managed height is likely to be in larger planned growth areas such as North East Cambridge, East Cambridge and the Addenbrooke's / Biomedical Campus area. Opportunities are more constrained in other areas of search, particularly where development would affect views towards the historic core or the rural setting of the city.

The study recommends a proactive and plan-led approach to tall buildings. Tall buildings should not come forward as isolated proposals, but should be part of a comprehensive masterplan, planning framework or outline permission that establishes the role, location, height, massing and cumulative impact of development. Any proposal for a tall building should demonstrate that it is justified by its functional, placemaking or legibility role, that alternatives have

been explored, and that visual, heritage, townscape and landscape impacts have been fully tested and mitigated.

The report is structured as follows:

Chapter 1 introduces the purpose of the study, the need for skyline and tall building guidance, and the overall report structure.

Chapter 2 provides a focused baseline assessment of Cambridge, including its townscape, heritage, skyline, key views, open spaces, approaches, existing building heights and growth pressures.

Chapter 3 assesses the wider South Cambridgeshire context, including its villages, landscape character, heritage assets, building heights and strategic growth locations.

Chapter 4 summarises the national and local planning policy context relevant to tall buildings and skyline management.

Chapter 5 defines what constitutes a tall building in Greater Cambridge and sets out the proposed Tall Building Threshold Zones.

Chapter 6 sets out the Skyline and Tall Buildings Strategy, including the approach to sensitivities, the identification of Areas of Search, and recommendations for directing tall buildings to appropriate locations.

Chapter 7 provides design and application guidance for tall and large-scale buildings, including guidance on skyline impact, roofscape, settlement edges, landmarks, clustering, public realm, design quality and assessment requirements.

The report is supported by a series of appendices.

Appendix A provides detailed assessment of strategic and dynamic views.

Appendix B sets out the tall buildings background study.

Appendix C provides the expanded policy background.

Appendix D contains the Areas of Search assessment and guidance, including the detailed testing of the six strategic areas.

Overall, the study provides a clear framework for managing change. It supports growth in Greater Cambridge, but only where height is carefully located, fully justified, rigorously tested and designed to the highest standard. Its central purpose is to ensure that future development contributes positively to the evolving skyline while protecting the historic, landscape and townscape qualities that make Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire distinctive.

Contents

1 Introduction	5	3 Other villages and settlements	47	6 Cambridge Skyline and Tall Building Strategy	87
1.1 About Greater Cambridge	5	3.1 Overview	47	6.1 Introduction	87
1.2 What is this study about?	5	3.2 General characteristics	47	6.2 Aims and Objectives	89
1.3 Why provide skyline and tall building guidance?	6	3.3 Topography	49	6.3 Approach	89
1.4 Report Structure	7	3.4 Land uses	51	6.4 Responding to Tall Building Sensitivities	90
2 Cambridge focus	9	3.5 Townscape character	53	6.5 Directing Tall Buildings to Appropriate Locations	104
2.1 Overview	9	3.6 Landscape character	55	7 Skyline and Tall Buildings Guidance	125
2.2 General characteristics of Cambridge	11	3.7 Heritage	57	7.1 Introduction	125
2.3 Land use	15	3.8 Building heights	59	7.2 Managing visual impact and the skyline	126
2.4 Townscape character	17	3.9 Regeneration	61	7.3 Design guidance for tall and large-scale buildings	134
2.5 Heritage	21	4 Policy and Guidance	63	7.4 Application process and requirements	145
2.6 Skyline and key landmarks	23	4.1 Introduction	63		
2.7 Notable views and viewpoints	27	4.2 National Policy and Guidance	63		
2.8 Dynamic experiences and open spaces	33	4.3 Greater Cambridge Policy and Guidance	64		
2.9 Key approaches to city	37	5 Defining Tall Buildings in Greater Cambridge	67		
2.10 Existing building heights	41	5.1 Relative and absolute definition of a tall building	67		
2.11 Regeneration	43	5.2 Greater Cambridge Tall Building Definition	75		
2.12 Summary of key characteristics and considerations	45	5.3 Existing Tall Buildings in Greater Cambridge	83		

Note to reader:
 This document has been optimised for double-sided printing. Please print with the following print settings: A4 landscape, double-sided print, flip on short edge.

For PDF viewing of the document use the following Acrobat Settings: View/Page Display/Two Page View, and tick View/Page Display/Show Cover Page in Two Page View.



Garret Hostel Bridge

1 Introduction

1.1 About Greater Cambridge

1.1.1 Greater Cambridge covers the combined area of South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) and Cambridge City Council (CCC).

1.1.2 The Greater Cambridge Shared Planning service are currently preparing the first joint Local Plan for the area. This study has been prepared to inform the new Local Plan and overall approach to an updated Skyline and Tall Buildings Policy.

1.2 What is this study about?

1.2.1 Cambridge's skyline is an important aspect of its character and feel as a historic and growing City. The Skyline and Tall Buildings Strategy will provide advice to guide the future management of the City's Skyline through a review of the existing policy approach to tall buildings, by establishing spatial qualities and sensitivities for Cambridge and its Skyline, and by providing a robust strategy and assessment framework for building heights and guidance on tall buildings in Greater Cambridge.

1.2.2 The study will provide the Council with a proportionate and robust evidence-based approach to the management of the skyline and the potential delivery of tall buildings on identified allocated sites within and around the City through the new Greater Cambridge Local Plan.

1.2.3 The study takes a pragmatic and balanced approach, reflecting both the Council's desire to safeguard the special qualities of Cambridge and the wider area, while enabling and supporting the delivery of Greater Cambridge's growth aspirations and requirements in a sensitive manner.

1.2.4 This study will form part of the evidence base for the joint Greater Cambridge Local Plan and will be used to help define the content and the detail of the skyline and tall buildings policy in the upcoming Local Plan.

1.3 Why provide skyline and tall building guidance?

1.3.1 Cambridge's historic skyline is a distinctive asset to the city and it is desirable to preserve and manage the aspects that comprise this and positively contribute to the image of the city. The skyline is characterised by limited tall buildings which emerge over the treetops when viewed from open spaces and higher points in the surrounding landscape.

1.3.2 Tall buildings by virtue of their scale and height can bring significant change to a place's skyline, its townscape and character. Tall buildings in the right location and of high quality, can be transformative and have a lasting positive impact on the character and identity of a place. However, in the wrong location or of poor quality, it can become an eyesore, be resented by the community and detract from a place's character and identity.

1.3.3 The area of Greater Cambridge (including the city of Cambridge) is located in a strategic position due to proximity to Cambridge, London, and the market towns, and access to good transport connections. The district and city are in a period of growth with the population of South Cambridgeshire

growing 8.9% and Cambridge growing 17.6% between 2011 and 2021. To meet this growing demand there has been significant development in the area, including:

- Significant expansion with new neighbourhoods on the Southern Fringe, in the North West Quadrant, and around Cambridge Station.
- Further plans for housing and mixed-use developments at North East Cambridge and Cambridge East
- New settlements and urban extensions planned and under delivery at Waterbeach, Northstowe, Bourn Airfield, Cambourne and others.

1.3.4 "Cambridge has not experienced pressure for exceptionally tall structures as in larger cities such as London, Birmingham and Manchester.

1.3.5 However, it does face pressure for buildings that, at between five and ten residential storeys are taller than the prevailing built form across the city".¹ Cambridge City

1 Cambridge Local Plan 2018 Policy 60/ Appendix F

has an adopted policy to manage tall building proposals however, South Cambridgeshire has only recently experienced pressure for taller buildings through the emerging strategic growth sites and presently does not have a comprehensive tall buildings policy to manage this type of growth.

1.3.6 In this context, and in the context of the development of a joint local plan, it is essential that the city and district develop a robust and holistic policy-based approach to guiding tall building development and managing the skyline. This document provides guidance for both developers and Greater Cambridge Councils on an approach to managing the skyline, including what locations are most sensitive to tall buildings and which locations have less sensitivity and may offer potential for tall buildings. The purpose is to ensure the best outcome for Greater Cambridge through a robust and appropriate plan led approach to guiding growth and in particular tall buildings as well as determining tall building proposals at the delivery stage.

1.4 Report Structure

1.4.1 This report is structured as follows:

Chapter 1 - Introduction:

This chapter provides an overview of the purpose of the study, the importance of establishing a strategic approach to planning for the skyline and tall buildings, and an overview of the project methodology.

Chapter 2 - Cambridge focus:

This chapter provides a proportionate assessment of the physical and built context of the City of Cambridge, which covers aspects and sensitivities related to its spatial structure, natural features, built environment and development areas.

Chapter 3 - Other villages and settlements:

This chapter provides a proportionate assessment of the physical and built context of the South Cambridgeshire settlements, which covers aspects and sensitivities related to its spatial structure, natural features, built environment and development areas.

Chapter 4 - Policy and guidance:

This chapter provides a summary of the

relevant national and local planning policy context and evidence base.

Chapter 5 - Defining Tall Buildings in Greater Cambridge:

This chapter sets out how to define tall buildings in Cambridge and determines at what height buildings are considered tall across the settlement area. It also provides an analysis of existing tall buildings in Greater Cambridge.

Chapter 6 - Skyline and Tall Buildings Strategy:

This chapter sets out a recommended approach to tall buildings in Greater Cambridge. The chapter identifies the objectives of the strategy and defines policy criteria for the assessment of tall buildings in respect of sensitivities and skyline. It undertakes a pro-active sifting approach to understand areas of the City particularly sensitive to tall buildings and associated skyline impacts. It further summarises the tall building testing undertaken for six large growth areas and respective height recommendations.

Chapter 7 - Skyline and Tall Buildings Guidance:

This chapter establishes guidance on how development should respond sympathetically to the skyline, and further provides best practice guidance for tall building design. Lastly, it sets out application requirements for tall buildings in terms of assessment of impact and the design considerations that will need to be demonstrated by proposals.

This document is accompanied by the following appendices:

- Appendix A: Views - provides an assessment of strategic and dynamic views.
- Appendix B: Tall Building Background Study - provides theoretical context to tall buildings.
- Appendix C: Policy Background - provides an expanded policy context to this study.
- Appendix D: Areas of Search Assessment and Guidance - provides the detailed sifting of areas of search for tall buildings and includes the detailed assessment of six strategic areas of search.



2 Cambridge focus

2.1 Overview

2.1.1 In skyline terms, Cambridge is a remarkable but subtle city. Its lack of dramatic topography limits its visual presence in the landscape instead it sits in a gentle landscape anchored along the banks of the River Cam which winds its way through the heart of the city. Cambridge's drama and beauty is best experienced up close in the historic heart of the city, with the River Cam, historic colleges and civic buildings creating a dense and, largely, beautiful urban form. Outside of the core the 19th and 20th century expansion of the city saw outlying settlements subsumed and new development largely expand on a low-rise basis, characterised by housing and smaller scale commercial development. This pervading low form being punctuated by a dispersed ensemble of taller structures including church steeples, college towers, the bulk of the University Library, emerging 21st century development, Addenbrooke's and the expansion of West Cambridge and Marshalls which add increased scale and massing to the city's edge.

2.1.2 As a consequence, Cambridge has a very subdued skyline, albeit a dramatic one in more local circumstances such as views of King's College and St John's which are clear from various vantage points and have a significant role in forming the city image of Cambridge and acting as orientation markers. The following explores a number of the key characteristics and features of Cambridge with the aim of exploring and better describing the subtle and refined characteristics of Cambridge and its skyline. These characteristics are considered of importance to understanding the unique nature of the city to help inform assessment and decision-making about tall structures that impact on the skyline and setting of Cambridge, should they come forward in the future.

2.1.3 The section is structured to:

- Provide an overview of the character and form of the city and its underlying topography
- Describe townscape character and land use
- Describe the nature of its skyline at a strategic level
- Highlight and assess the key views that enable us to appreciate the city and the key elements of them that are sensitive to change
- Set out the role of the open spaces and dynamic view corridors within and around the city
- Identify the key approaches to the city
- Evaluate existing building heights, tall buildings, and context heights
- Set out current large scale regeneration ambitions

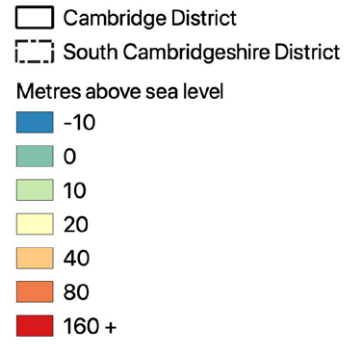


Figure 1: Topography mapping - Cambridge City scale

2.2 General characteristics of Cambridge



Image 1: King's College Chapel © Graham Hogg



Image 2: Pitt Building © Stanley Howe

2.2.1 Cambridge sits on the banks of the River Cam in a very gentle horseshoe of generally low lying landscape with higher ground to the south east, south and west and low lying fen and clay lands to the north and east (see Figure 1).

2.2.2 Cambridge's image as a compact and contained collegiate city in a rural setting has largely been preserved by the surrounding green belt and green fingers extending onto the City. The Cambridge Local Plan (2018) identifies this relationship between the city and the wider landscape as "one of the most important characteristics of Cambridge".

2.2.3 The city's historic core spans the edge of the fenland / ridge interface, with the Roman fort and Medieval castle sitting above the floodplain and the later colleges and historic city set out below on the very level floodplain of the Cam. The setting of the historic core has been preserved by the substantial areas of open space which encircle it, including The Backs, Midsummer Common, Jesus Green, Sheep's Green and Coe Fen, and Parker's Piece. The historic core itself is characterised by "the intermingling of the generally larger scale collegiate buildings and the more 'domestic scale' vernacular market town buildings. There is a hierarchy of streets ranging from the Market Square

through to the main routes, linking lanes and alleys. The street layout affords a wide variety of vistas which are often terminated by towers and spires creating a highly attractive and legible townscape." (Cambridge Skyline Guidance, 2012)

2.2.4 The River Cam serves as a key approach into the city and practically encircles the city. Its open character, close proximity to the historic core and interplay with green spaces offers distinctive views to the city in its landscape setting. Existing landmarks such as churches and collegiate buildings contribute to the character and distinctiveness of the river corridor.



Image 3: St John's Chapel © John Sutton

2.2.5 The built environment of the city occupies a level area of land generally between 5m and 15m AOD. Discrete areas of land above 20m AOD lie around Castle Hill, to the north of the River Cam and at the West Cambridge site. Castle Mound, a man-made structure which forms part of Castle Hill, rises up to approximately 32m AOD, and affords the only significant panoramic view within the city not taken from a public accessible building. To the south-east lies a chalk ridge including the high point of the Gog Magog Hills, rising to 74m AOD. To the west of the city, two gault clay ridges (north and south of Coton) run in a broadly east-west direction. The northernmost ridge rises up to 63m,



Image 4: Westminster College © Jim Linwood

south-west of the American Cemetery at Maddingly. The southern ridge generally lies around 50m AOD.

2.2.6 The city is characterised by its modest scale and its relatively flat topography situated within the shallow bowl of the wider South Cambridgeshire landscape. This position limits the panoramic and long-distance views over the city skyline. There are only a few vantage points such as Castle Mound and those around Red Meadow Hill and Magog Down from where the skyline can be appreciated. The subtleness of the landscape with its very slight undulations and gentle bowl-like character and the pattern of tight grain development in the



Image 5: University Library Tower © N Chadwick

historic core, means that even the tallest structures in the city (see skyline below) do not dominate a wide landscape or appear strongly in long-distance views.

2.2.7 Cambridge's unique character is principally experienced through being in the city, moving through its streets and spaces, engaging with its diverse characters and its layered history, experiencing the relationship between the built and natural environments along the river, its open spaces and the city's rural interface. Incidental kinetic, linear and panoramic views that emphasise landmark buildings, townscape ensembles and specific skyline characteristics form part of this experience.

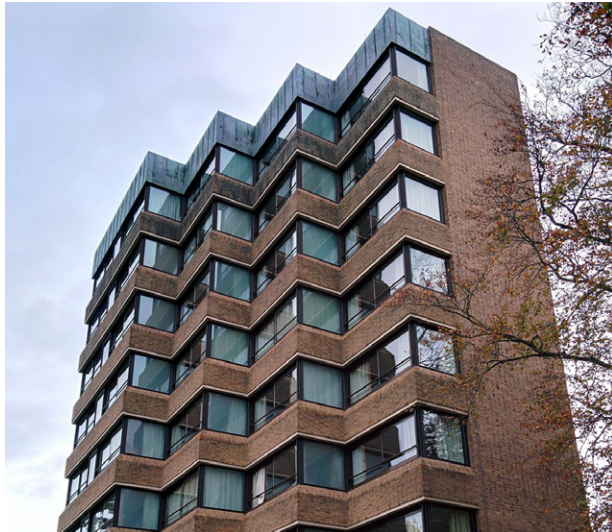


Image 6: William Stone Building © Wikimedia

2.2.8 Trees are a key element of the city’s character at both a local scale and in more distant views from around the city (see below). The screening and visual structure created by the city’s tree canopy reinforces the sense that the majority of the city is relatively limited in height, bulk and mass. The trees break up views of expanses of urban forms, masking large areas of development. Larger buildings, in terms of height and mass, do emerge over and around tree screening but the majority of the picture is of generally small-scale, low-lying development. This creates a skyline character of “relatively few taller buildings [which emerge] as ‘incidents’ above the prevailing lower buildings and trees” (Local



Image 7: Addenbrooke’s Hospital Chimney © John Sutton

Plan para. F.2). Many of these tall buildings are historic spires which contribute to the historic character of the city. Juxtaposed with this character and the context against the suburbs and rural edge of the city “there are the clusters of large-scale buildings at Addenbrooke’s Hospital and Cambridge Airport”. (Local Plan para. F.2).

2.2.9 On a more intimate scale when the viewer is in the city, the treescape is a key feature in many areas. In particular, the western ‘suburbs’ of often larger housing and plots; along the commons, green and meadows of the Cam; in and around the colleges in the centre; and more generally across the earlier housing developments around the city.



Image 8: CB1 Development, Foster’s Mill © N Chadwick

2.2.10 As a consequence, Cambridge has a very subdued skyline, albeit a dramatic one in more local circumstances.