

The Wirral Density Study prepared for the Council by Urban Imprint on behalf of Arup comprises four reports.

The purpose of these reports is to review the Council's approach to the density of development being promoted within existing planning policies.

Their focus was on:

- undertaking locally-based research, to make recommendations on how best to make the most efficient use of available urban land in a Wirral context;
- to prevent the need for development on sites outside the existing urban area; and
- to directly address the requirements of national policy in section 11 and paragraph 137 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, 2019).

Stage 1 and 2 Report (H5.1)

Published for consultation in January 2020, set out why a different approach to residential density was needed, based on a review of the current policy approach to housing density in Wirral (Stage 1) and of the wider national context and best practice approaches (Stage 2).

The review concluded that:

- the efficient use of land was not being encouraged, particularly within urban areas (paragraph 6.7, page 14);
- density assumptions and the eventual capacity of certain sites is being undervalued in the calculation of the future land supply (paragraph 6.12, page 15);
- the existing approach was too cautious (paragraph 6.14, page 15) and did not marry with the aims of national policy (paragraph 6.13, page 15);
- a step change was required, as opposed to a traditional model of replicating existing densities (paragraph 10.5, page 28);
- a more robust strategy was needed to ensure that higher densities were achieved (paragraph 10.2, page 28); and
- identifying different densities for different zones would allow for consideration of local context and allow higher densities to be targeted upon specific locations (10.4, page 28)

Stage 3 Report (H5.2)

Published for consultation in March 2021, sets out how different 'density zones' could be identified based on an analysis of the access to transport, services and facilities within each area of the Borough.

It includes a map of the recommended 'density zones' for Wirral, based on the results of that analysis (Appendix, page 10).

Stage 4 Report (H5.3)

Published for consultation in March 2021, sets out how higher residential densities might be achieved on particular types and location of site in Wirral based on 14 site and neighbourhood-specific case studies, to further test the feasibility of achieving higher densities in different locations based on a series of ‘real world’ scenarios.

Table 1 (page 7) sets out the sites and areas that were selected for each of the case studies;

Table 2 (page 14) sets out the findings from a review of existing densities within the Borough;

Figure 3.1 (page 16) compares the typical range of densities already found within different areas of the Borough;

Figure 3.2 (page 19) sets out the types of development that could typically be delivered at different densities, from 3/4-bed detached properties to 1/2-bed flats and apartments;

Figure 3.3 (page 20) sets out the range of densities that could be accommodated within each of the proposed recommended ‘density zones’;

Table 4 (page 49) then sets out the recommended approaches for each different type of area within the Borough, after taking account of the site and neighbourhood-specific case studies.

The review of existing density showed that assuming a standard density of 30 dwellings per hectare (dph), with 20dph in conservation areas was artificially low (paragraph 3.4, page 13) and took no account of the local characteristics or qualities of a particular location (paragraph 3.1, page 12).

In conservation areas, existing densities vary from between 17 and 51dph and densities around 40dph are common (paragraph 3.3, page 12). Existing development within the suburban areas was in some places as high as 70dph (paragraph 3.9, page 13). The overall average for all the areas studied was 51dph (paragraph 3.7, page 13).

The site-based case studies showed that only larger sites would be able to achieve higher densities and provide some on-site open space (paragraph 4.10, page 27). Smaller sites would need to focus on creating a high-quality public realm, with strong connections to nearby routes and contribute to off-site improvements (paragraph 4.9, page 27). Traditional on-plot approaches to parking should be discouraged (paragraph 4.15, page 28)

The neighbourhood-based case studies led to the following broad conclusions and recommendations (paragraph 5.41, page 46):

- Subdivision of plots should be encouraged across the board. This includes backland development of gardens, side gardens and redevelopment of larger properties to provide a greater number of smaller units, where they are not suitable to be converted or retained, subject to their contribution to local character;

- The subdivision of larger properties or buildings into apartments should be encouraged and the need for lower levels of parking explored;
- Surface level car parks should be evaluated and their potential to contribute higher density residential development explored, subject to any impact on highway safety;
- Backland commercial or disused plots should be utilised for housing, particularly around town centres;
- Disused retail units and especially underutilised space on upper floors should be encouraged into residential use.

Stage 5, 6 and 7 Report (H5.4)

Published for consultation in March 2021, sets out a summary of final recommendations (Stage 7), a review of the Council's existing and emerging policies (Stage 5) and a proposed policy approach, to secure the most efficient use of available development land (Stage 6).

The report recommends that the emerging Local Plan should include a policy to set out minimum densities for different areas, subject to their access to transport and services and local character (Appendix 1, page 17).

The policy should be based on identified 'density zones' and a 'staircase' of minimum densities (paragraph 2.22, page 8), applied to gross developable areas (paragraph 4.15, page 16).

Existing policies for density and design in the existing Unitary Development Plan, which are currently out of step with present approaches, should not be taken forward (paragraph 2.12, page 7).

The onus will be on applicants to demonstrate how they have responded to the minimum densities required within each area (paragraph 4.3, page 13), subject to flexibility for on-site constraints (paragraph 4.5, page 14) and mixed uses (paragraph 4.16, page 16).

The minimum densities are not out of step with previous performance (paragraph 4.9, page 15) and take account of the emerging Birkenhead Regeneration Framework (paragraph 2.19, page 8).

Areas where higher density residential development would not be appropriate or which would require an alternative approach to design and character, such as conservation areas, should be excluded (paragraph 4.4, page 14).

There is potentially a long-term supply of unallocated or windfall densification developments within existing urban areas (paragraph 2.27, page 9) and policies should support the principle of such development (paragraph 2.28, page 9).

Traditional approaches to parking, open space and amenity may need to be considered in a different way (paragraph 3.9, page 11), for example, by seeking off-site contributions to an existing larger public open space rather than further on-site provision (paragraph 3.10, page 12).

A design led approach is needed to ensure that higher density development is delivered in a sustainable manner (paragraph 3.2, page 11) in line with NPPF paragraph 123 (paragraph 3.12, page 12) and further guidance on design and density should be provided (paragraph 2.28, page 9).

Summary of principle findings by location

Density Zone/ Location	Existing Density Range (Stage 4 – Table 2)	Existing Average Density (Stage 4 – Table 2)	Recommended Minimum Density (Stage 4 – Table 4 and Final Report)	Typical form of development achievable (Stage 4 - Figure 3.2 and Figure 3.3)	Additional Advice
Waterfront	34-128dph Higher still at Wirral Waters	60dph	Overall minimum 70dph But If >2ha = minimum 90dph If <2ha = minimum 70dph	Small, terraced homes with gardens and 1 to 2-bed apartments of 3 to 5 storeys with small yards or shared amenity space	1-bed flats only as part of mix. Focus on multi-generational living. Include additional public open space and high-quality public realm on larger sites to relax private / personal space required. Relax parking standards without relying on parking in surrounding streets, with expectation of car clubs, shared transport and contributions for public transport. Explore contributions for open space, public transport and public services on smaller sites. (Stage 4 – Table 4, page 49) Parking arrangements of 1 or fewer spaces per dwelling (Stage 4 – paragraph 4.14, page 28)
Urban Core and Town Centres	41-125dph	61dph	Overall minimum 60dph But If >2ha = minimum 70dph	Same as for Waterfront but with some larger 3-bed, 2.5 storey terraces and semi-detached villas with small gardens	Limit 1-bed apartments, to focus on multi-generational living.

			If <2ha = minimum 60dph		<p>Include additional public open space and high-quality public realm on larger sites to relax private / personal space required.</p> <p>Relax parking standards, with expectation of car clubs, shared transport and contributions for public transport.</p> <p>Explore contributions for open space and, public transport on smaller sites. (Stage 4 – Table 4, page 49)</p> <p>Parking arrangements of 1 or fewer spaces per dwelling (Stage 4 – paragraph 4.14, page 28)</p>
			In or adjacent to town centres = minimum 60dph	Upper floor flats and apartments	Maintain active ground floor uses commercial uses. Relax parking and amenity distances and explore contributions for open space. (Stage 4 – Table 4, page 49)
Transit	32-67dph	41dph	Overall minimum 50dph (within a density range of 50-75dph)	larger 3-bed, 2.5 storey terraces and 3 to 4-bed semi-detached villas and some semi-detached houses with small gardens	<p>Parking standards should be reduced. (Stage 4, paragraph 5.41, page 46)</p> <p>Explore contributions for open space and public transport. (Stage 4- Table 4, page 50)</p>
Suburban	21-71dph	42dph	Overall minimum 40dph	Detached and semi-detached 2 to 2.5 storey, 3 to 4-bed properties with larger gardens	Parking standards should be reduced within 1km of an active high street. (Stage 4, paragraph 5.41, page 46)

Other urban (not covered by a density zone)	n/a	n/a	If >1ha = minimum 30dph If <1ha = subject to local character	Larger, 1.5 to 2 storey, 3 to 4-bed detached and semi- detached with larger gardens, subject to local character	Higher densities can be considered for mixed use or specialist housing schemes. (Stage 4 - Table 4, page 51)
Urban Edge	n/a	n/a	45dph minimum within 1km of railway station 30dph minimum outside 1km of railway station (within a density range of 30-60dph)		Subject to site-specific policy and detailed design and development SPDs. (Stage 4 - Table 4, page 51)

There should be a preference for flats on sites within 1km of a railway station or in areas served by high frequency bus services (Stage 4, paragraph 5.41, page 46).

Next Steps

Subject to the results of consultation, the findings will be tested for their viability, as part of the ongoing Viability Assessment of the Local Plan and will be used to guide the capacity assessment of future development sites and policies for the density and design of new residential development in the emerging Local Plan. The findings will also be used to inform Residential Design Guides for Birkenhead and for the Borough as a whole, which will provide further guidance on the design and layout of residential development in different locations.