

building on success



Basements Visual Evidence

Partial Review of the Core Strategy

February 2014



THE ROYAL BOROUGH OF
KENSINGTON
AND CHELSEA

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Background¹

- 1.1 There has been a growing trend to construct basements in the borough as a means of extending accommodation. Basements are also built as part of both new residential and commercial developments (however, this is not a new trend). Land values in this borough are very high and in some locations are the highest in the country. The built environment is largely historic with 70% of the borough designated conservation areas and about 4,000 listed buildings. The dense built environment coupled with its historic character limits the scope to extend properties above ground. This has led to a growing number of developments below ground and this document presents aerial photographs in relation to applications which have a basement element associated with them.

Purpose of this report

- 1.2 It is commonly understood that basements can be designed to be less visually intrusive given their location below ground. It is considered that the only external manifestations of basements are light wells, roof lights, railings etc and that the structure of the basement itself is largely hidden from view after completion, with the garden generally reinstated above.
- 1.3 The Council produced a report on basements visual evidence in July 2013. This report includes a greater number of basements granted permission over a longer period of time.
- 1.4 This report also presents a time series of aerial photographs of different sites/areas of the borough from 1999, 2004, 2008, 2012 and 2013. It is acknowledged that the aerial photography for 2013 is in a period when trees are not in leaf (early spring). However, data set for the summer of 2013 was not available when this report was compiled. This may give a more stark appearance to the gardens in 2013, however the time series of photos overall do present a reliable comparator. This comparison has been undertaken to understand the visual impact (if any) of basement development on the character of the gardens in the borough.

Methodology

- 1.5 The Council grants permissions for a large number of basements every year. A separate report presenting data on basement applications is also available. The applications range from small basement extensions such as lowering the floor level of coal vaults to make them more useable for modern living to very large basements comprising several storeys.
- 1.6 Due to the nature and resolution of aerial photography the visual changes are more visible where gardens are relatively large. Many sites in the densely built up borough don't have a garden and are entirely built up. These have been discounted as there will be no discernable visual change in the aerial photographs. The external manifestations of such sites would only be visible in close proximity. A wide selection of planning permissions has been included to capture the degree of visual changes in the character of more open garden areas which are commonly green and leafy.
- 1.7 The trend for basement development is relatively recent with only 46 applications in 2000 compared to just over 300 in 2012 and about 450 in 2013. The aerial photographs present sites with a permission for a basement granted since 2000. The existing policy on basements was adopted in the Core Strategy in 2010 although guidance was provided in the 2009 Supplementary Planning Document. The previous Policy CD32 in the Unitary Development Plan did require 'adequate soil cover'. Whilst there was no formal requirement for the provision of 1m of top soil prior to 2009, the general policy was to require 1m of soil as adequate soil cover in accordance with the UDP. This is also evident from planning decisions made prior to 2009.
- 1.8 Prior to 2009 there was also no maximum limit (85%) on the extent of basements into the garden. However, not all basement proposals extended into the entire garden prior to 2009 and where they did the visual impacts are unlikely to be very different from the 85% maximum limits. It is clear from the aerial photographs that even where basements are restricted to 85% of the garden, entire gardens are excavated. Therefore sites where basements were granted permission under the UDP policies are still considered relevant. The range of aerial photographs presented demonstrate similar visual impacts of permission granted under the UDP and those granted under the more recent SPD and Core Strategy policies.
- 1.9 Further as previously mentioned basements are a relatively recent trend, with the existing policies in place since 2009. Therefore it is inevitable that permissions granted in recent years will be under construction.

¹ Please note this is an A3 sized document and is formatted accordingly.

Conclusion

- 1.10 The aerial photographs show that back gardens cumulatively form a chain of green links and together can constitute large areas. It is clear from the aerial photographs that gardens that have been subject to basement development underneath can generally be distinguished from those without basement development. Gardens with basements underneath generally appear artificial and sterile compared to the informal leafy character that was present before. Gardens with basements below also seem to have reduced planting. Some images show construction taking place in adjoining gardens. The cumulative impact of a large number of basements can change the character of the gardens in the borough and have implications for biodiversity in the longer term. This will fundamentally change the character of the borough, especially in conservation areas where there is an obligation to preserve the character and/or appearance of the area.
- 1.11 Some sites in the aerial photographs are under construction. It is acknowledged that the appearance of these sites would improve once the landscaping is in place. However these are considered relevant as they demonstrate the scale of excavation into the gardens and replacement of soil with impermeable materials. These images also show that in reality, the visual impact of the 85% limit, translates to (in many cases) the appearance that the entire garden has been excavated. This is because the majority of the garden has been excavated with only a 15% area, usually an inconspicuous strip along the side or bottom of the garden retained. Deep excavations in entire gardens can also break the continuity of back gardens supporting a range of biodiversity.
- 1.12 It is acknowledged that garden designs can be changed as a result of above ground extensions or just because the owner wishes to change the design of the garden as this may not fall within the definition of development. However, this does not seem to be a wide spread trend. In addition a superficial change such as placing hard paving on soil is an easily reversible process with flexibility for large scale planting if so required in the future, but basements are fairly irreversible as can be seen in the images of sites under construction.

1999



2004



2008



2012



2013



1999



2004



2008



2012



2013



1999



2004



2008



2012



2013

