



## 2 BUILT CHARACTER IN THE ROYAL BOROUGH

### Urban form

**2.1** The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea is characterised by a finely grained historic street pattern with an outstanding building stock of Georgian and Victorian town houses, and Edwardian mansion blocks. The urban form becomes more diverse and fragmented for the most part along the main transit corridors and barriers – the Westway and the Grand Union Canal/ Paddington Main Line in the north, the West London Line and West Cross Route (A3220) in the west, and the River Thames in the south.

**2.2** The majority of the Borough is residential. The retail sector in the Borough is significantly developed with a number of well-established town centres and high streets, often supported by office uses. Other employment uses tend to cluster alongside the railway lines. The Borough also contains a variety of cultural, educational, leisure, and health and sport facilities.

**2.3** The predominant development form is the urban street block with buildings following the perimeter of the block.<sup>11</sup> This typical arrangement creates a clear distinction between external public and internal communal and private spaces. In many parts of the Borough the urban grain is fine. Quarters consist of medium to small sized urban blocks, whilst blocks themselves are subdivided into finely grained development plots. In contrast, most areas along the western and northern edge of the Borough have a coarse and disjointed urban grain. These places are less permeable and are affected by severance.



**2.4** Throughout large parts of the Borough the scale of development shows little variation. The width of a typical unit ranges between 5 - 7.5m (16 - 24ft) for terraced and town houses, and 12 - 18m (39 - 59ft) for mansion blocks. Depending on building height, these very compact development patterns result in medium to high density areas. This is particularly the case in the central area of the Borough, including parts of Notting Hill, Kensington, South Kensington and north Chelsea.

**2.5** The layout of typical Georgian and Victorian estates is characterised by the deliberate formation of clear, well-defined

and enclosed street spaces. Building lines are usually continuous and follow the street. They may be straight or curved in the form of a crescent, or enclose one of the many garden squares. Terraced houses or mansion blocks establish continuous and unbroken street frontages between street corners, giving a strong sense of enclosure. With a direct relationship to the street, regular and frequent doors and windows with few blind frontages, Georgian and Victorian terraces assist overlooking and passive supervision of the street space. This makes streets feel safer and creates a more attractive environment for pedestrians.

**2.6** Contemporary thought on urban planning recognises the Georgian and Victorian forms as excellent examples of good urban design. The architects and builders of those times not only created urban areas of outstanding beauty, but also established robust and adaptable urban structures, to the extent that these quarters and properties today rank as some of London's most desirable.

### Building heights

**2.7** With the exception of a few clusters of tall buildings along main transit corridors, along barriers (e.g., by railway cuttings) or around central nodes, the majority of the Borough has a relatively homogenous and level roofscape.

**2.8** Building heights are relatively consistent within each quarter. Average heights range from 2-storey to 3-storey terraces in North Kensington and the Lots Road area, to 3-storey to 5-storey Georgian and Victorian terraces and town houses for much of the rest of the Borough, with pockets of up to 8-storey late Victorian, Edwardian and 1930s mansion blocks in and around Kensington High Street, Old Brompton Road, Sloane Avenue and Knightsbridge. Final storeys often provide

attic accommodation lit by dormers and are occasionally double-storey in height.

**2.9** A single building height often prevails, especially within historical residential estates, and only key buildings stand out. Eaves lines are continuous and corners are seldom expressed through greater height. On opposite sides of a street, building heights are commonly of similar height. At streets where the edges of different residential estates meet, the difference in height seldom exceeds more than 2 or 3 storeys. The homogenous height, scale and architectural treatment of adjacent development ensembles ensure that streets appear balanced and coherent.

### Tall buildings and clusters

**2.10** Building plots along major transit corridors have experienced higher pressures for change, and show a greater variation in massing and height. This is especially evident around Notting Hill Gate, along Kensington High Street, Cromwell Road, Brompton Road, King's Road and parts of Sloane Avenue and Warwick Road. The tall building survey indicates that developments along these routes reach heights of between 7 - 9 and 10 - 14 storeys.<sup>12</sup> Many of these buildings are not high enough to provide

landmarks on the skyline, but are tall enough to have a distinct visual impact that often detracts from their surroundings. The Borough also accommodates a limited number of taller buildings of 15 storeys and above that have a dominant effect on their immediate and wider surroundings.

**2.11** With the exception of a few single developments, particularly along King's Road, tall buildings loosely cluster in ten groups: *[See Figure 1 following page]*

- 1** **Kensal New Town and Cheltenham Estates**
- 2** **Lancaster West and Silchester Estates**
- 3** **Notting Hill Gate**
- 4** **Kensington High Street (east)**

- 5** **Kensington High Street (west)**
- 6** **Knightsbridge**
- 7** **Cromwell Road**
- 8** **Sloane Avenue**
- 9** **World's End Estate**
- 10** **Edward Woods Estate**

**2.12** The majority of these clusters occur informally with only the World's End Estate laid out as a formal group. Unlike clusters of tall buildings in central London, none of these clusters signal a significant concentration of commercial activity. Nor do they produce a distinctive or 'signature' skyline. For the most part they are residential high-rise buildings and form part of post-war social housing developments. Others are hotels or offices. Many serve little purpose as way-finding devices and are of poor architectural quality.







- Key
- Boundary of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea
  - Built form
  - Major green spaces
  - Waterways
  - Railway line
  - 25+ storeys
  - 15-24 storeys
  - 10-14 storeys
  - 7-9 storeys
  - Other tall structures
  - Other high buildings outside RBKC
  - Cluster of high buildings
  - Protected view corridor to St. Paul's Cathedral

Figure 01  
Existing high buildings and structures

**2.13** The Borough accommodates within its boundary two clusters of tall towers in the range of 15 to 24 storeys. The first is formed by the Lancaster West and Silchester Estates<sup>13</sup> (2), which comprise five stand-alone towers located in the vicinity of Latimer Road underground station in North Kensington. The second is the World's End Estate (9) with its seven interlinked towers in southwest Chelsea.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the Edward Woods Estate (10), which is situated east of West Cross Route, is of a similar height. This residential group of four towers is located outside the Royal Borough, but has a strong impact on its skyline.<sup>15</sup>

**2.14** None of these clusters relates to its neighbours in terms of scale, height, pattern and character. They overshadow existing neighbouring buildings and amenity spaces; but also affect the setting of listed buildings and views of historic skyline some distance away: When seen from conservation areas nearby or from the river prospect of Chelsea Embankment, the clusters appear out of place disrupting the urban pattern, scale, roofscape and building line of homogenous Georgian and Victorian residential quarters.

**2.15** Only two buildings in the Borough have more than 25 storeys. The first is the

widely visible residential Trellick Tower by the architect Ernö Goldfinger. This iconic grade II\* listed building on the Cheltenham Estate is 98m (320ft) high and forms a major landmark, dominating the townscape and arguably contributing to the identity of North Kensington.<sup>16</sup> It sits close to the 14-storey Adair and Hazelwood Towers of the adjacent Kensal New Town Estate (1). The second tower is the Kensington Forum Hotel Tower at 84m (275ft) in Cromwell Road close to Gloucester Road underground station.<sup>17</sup> This highly prominent, bulky building appears out of scale and does not relate to its immediate context. It has been identified as an “eyesore” in the Core Strategy.<sup>18</sup> The slightly lower residential development across Cromwell Road, called Point West, seems similarly out of place (7).<sup>19</sup> The Empress State Building is 117m (384ft) high and is a dominant feature on the skyline in the Earl's Court area but is located in the London borough of Hammersmith and Fulham.

### Tall structures

**2.16** There are other tall structures located in or seen from the Borough which may not be thought of as ‘tall buildings’, but which are significantly higher than the surrounding context. These include the gasholders at Kensal, the chimneys of Lots Road Power Station, Earl's Court Exhibition Halls, the



Empress State Building (LB Hammersmith and Fulham) and Chelsea Football Stadium (LB Hammersmith and Fulham).

### Spires and towers

**2.17** A number of other tall structures equally determine the skyline of the Royal Borough. Among these are the spire of St Mary Abbot's Church, the spire-tipped domes of the Brompton Oratory and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the towers of the Natural History Museum and the Imperial College (City of Westminster).

**2.18** Most of the spires and towers are listed and form important landmarks of local and metropolitan importance. Owing to their slim and tapered profile, they contribute to an attractive skyline without harming their surroundings. Most importantly spires and towers were, and still are significant symbols of religious and civic meaning, and aid overall comprehension of the urban landscape.<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

**2.19** The Royal Borough is characterised by the consistency of building heights within its constituent parts and across the Borough as a whole. This is a reflection of its predominantly historic built form and has contributed to creating a highly attractive and distinctive townscape. Few buildings

punctuate the skyline, with tall buildings being the exception rather than the rule. They include important religious and civic buildings, as well as the more prosaic. Many are residential high-rises and cluster in the north and west of the Borough, built as part of the post-war social housing programme.

**2.20** Because of the consistency of building heights in the Borough, tall buildings tend to have a disproportionate effect on its skyline. *There is a strong policy presumption in favour of maintaining this consistency, and the Council will carefully assess the design and townscape qualities of proposals that may otherwise gradually erode this important historic character.*





