

Building Heights Strategy

SWINDON LOCAL PLAN (2023 – 2043) TOPIC PAPER

Purpose of The Document:

The purpose of this document is to provide an evidence-based framework for guiding the appropriate location, scale, and design of taller buildings within Swindon. It draws upon the borough-wide Townscape Character Assessment to examine variations in urban grain, built form, and prevailing density, thereby identifying plan areas where taller development may be contextually suitable. The document also assesses the availability and capacity of sustainable transport infrastructure within these areas to ensure that any future intensification can be delivered in a sustainable and well-connected manner.

Further analysis considers regeneration opportunities emerging through site allocations in the New Local Plan, identifying strategic locations where taller buildings could contribute positively to place-making, housing delivery, and economic revitalisation. An assessment of existing building uses within the identified zones provides an understanding of functional character and potential for mixed-use development. Additionally, key long-range and short-range viewpoints have been identified—not to restrict development—but to ensure that any proposed tall buildings enhance the Swindon’s skyline through high-quality architecture and a positive contribution to Swindon’s townscape.

Policy Analysis:

As Para 7 of NPPF clarifies the purpose of the planning system to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, including the provision of homes, commercial development and supporting infrastructure in a sustainable manner and para. 8 mentions three objectives: Economic, Social and Environment.

Para. 125(C) suggests to give substantial weight to the value of using suitable brownfield land within settlements for homes and other identified needs.

Para. 129-130 suggests to achieve appropriate density within the borough with delivering different types of housing based on local market and viability and to avoid homes being built at low-density through policies to optimise the use of land in their area and meet as much of the identified need for housing as possible.

In accordance with national planning policy, the updated housing targets for Swindon, and the emerging tall buildings policy within the New Local Plan, the identification of suitable locations for taller development—alongside the promotion of higher-density schemes where contextually appropriate—offers a strategic means to help meet housing needs. This approach enables the delivery of high-quality, sustainable urban development while respecting local character and ensuring that intensification is design-led and infrastructure-supported.

Scope of this Paper

This assessment has been prepared as a Regulation 18 background paper to inform consultation on the role and location of taller buildings in Swindon. The work undertaken focuses on:

- Establishing a definition of what constitutes a “tall building” from a Swindon perspective;
- Townscape character assessment;
- Sustainable transport infrastructure and accessibility;
- Regeneration opportunities;
- Building height analysis, including contextual comparison with the existing urban fabric to identify areas where taller elements may be appropriate;
- Conservation and Heritage Sensitivity
- Identification of potential viewpoints where the skyline could be enhanced.

The design and integration of taller buildings can have a significant impact on the surrounding urban fabric, influencing how spaces are experienced in terms of character, comfort, and functionality. Key considerations such as the relationship of taller elements to the street environment, orientation, microclimate, overshadowing, and façade treatment are critical in shaping successful places, and poor handling of these issues can undermine efforts to deliver high-quality urban environments. It is therefore important to note that this paper does not provide detailed design guidance on these matters at this stage. Such guidance, including placemaking principles and the detailed design of the public realm, will be developed at a later stage of the Local Plan preparation, once feedback from this consultation has been received.

Townscape Character Assessment:

The historic period of urban development and growth makes a unique amalgamation of variety of urban structure and urban grain, however predominantly most part of the borough contains sub-urban development with the lower density.

Both urban structure and urban grain are essential tools to understand where tall buildings can be accommodated sensitively, and where they would feel out of place or disruptive. The urban area of Swindon has fine grain urban development with low density and cul-de-sac streets, containing detached and semi-detached developments in general. Long linear growth form or large courtyard centric urban blocks surrounded by low density development, strong sense of uniformity expressed through repetition of similar housing types, roof forms, window openings and boundary treatments. Some of the neighbourhoods contains rectangular housing development with narrow plot width compared to their depth.

With very low height to width ration due to large front and back gardens with space given over to adjacent road access makes most of neighbourhood outside of the Central Area inappropriate for tall buildings.

Historical Development of Local Centres

Swindon’s network of local centres reflects a layered history of urban growth shaped by evolving planning paradigms and mobility trends. In the 19th century, Gorse Hill and the original Town Centre emerged as early local hubs structured around compact, walkable street grids and modest, human-scaled buildings, forming the historic core of the borough. The post-war decades—particularly the 1960s and 1970s—saw a significant transformation of the Town Centre through modernist redevelopment, introducing larger building plots, multi-storey car parks, and vehicular-prioritised layouts that replaced finer-grained urban fabric. This marked a broader shift toward car-centric planning. In the 1980s and 1990s, centres like the Orbital Retail Park were developed following North American suburban models, with large-format retail, expansive surface parking, and auto-dominant access, representing a stark contrast to traditional centre typologies. These contrasting eras of development—ranging from walkable Victorian neighbourhoods to automobile-oriented retail districts—have left a diverse and fragmented urban structure across Swindon, underscoring the

need for context-sensitive strategies in town centre regeneration and building height management.

Duration	Character	Building Height	Ave. Density
19 th Century	consisting mainly of a well-defined gridded urban structure and accompanying finely-scaled urban grain.	2-4 Storey	26-72 dph
1920s-30s	long-straight streets, with cul-de-sacs, tree- lined avenues and properties with long, rear gardens and spacious front gardens with drives	2-2.5 Storey	20-26 dph
1940s-50s	formal street pattern, consisting of large blocks and straight streets with cul-de-sacs. Mostly residential uses throughout with mixed-uses located in local centres.	2-2.5 Storey	28-34 dph
1960s-70s	Residential development along loose street patterns, large blocks and short-straight streets, estate housing consists predominantly of terraced, semi-detached, linked-detached and detached housing typologies on loops and cul-de-sacs.	2-2.5 Storey	19-25 dph
1980s-90s	loose street patterns, short, sinuous streets ending in cul-de-sacs. terraced, semi-detached, linked-detached and detached housing in courtyard-type formations.	2-2.5 Storey	28-34 dph
2000-2020s	strong public realm enclosures within higher density formal and urban core character areas. Street structures range from formalised routes to looser, sinuous street patterns ending in cul-de-sacs as	3-4 Storey	33-47 dph

	part of the semi- rural-character types at the periphery.		
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Table 1: Historic Growth in Swindon

Swindon’s built form has evolved predominantly through low-rise, suburban expansion, with development from the 1920s to the 1990s characterised by loose street structures, cul-de-sacs, and consistent building heights of 2 to 2.5 storeys. These areas display a highly uniform residential character with limited density (typically between 19 and 34 dwellings per hectare), and do not possess the spatial or morphological conditions suitable for accommodating taller built forms.

In contrast, the Central Area—originating from 19th-century urban growth—exhibits a well-defined gridded street structure and a finer urban grain, supporting greater permeability, walkability, and visual coherence. It has historically accommodated higher density residential and mixed-use development. This signals a gradual intensification and a morphological shift toward a more urban character.

The Central Area also offers locational advantages, including proximity to Swindon Railway Station, key commercial and civic functions, and potential brownfield redevelopment opportunities. As illustrated in Figure 1, the central area has significant number of bigger vacant development parcels which provides opportunity to improve the character of town centre and provides suitable locations for taller buildings. These characteristics position the Central Area as the most appropriate location for tall buildings, where increased height can support regeneration objectives, reinforce townscape legibility, and align with national policy emphasis on density in accessible, infrastructure-rich locations.

This strategy therefore identifies the Central Area as the primary spatial zone where taller buildings (typically above five storeys) may be supported, subject to detailed townscape, heritage, and view assessments. Elsewhere in the urban area, building height should remain sensitive to local character and established built form.

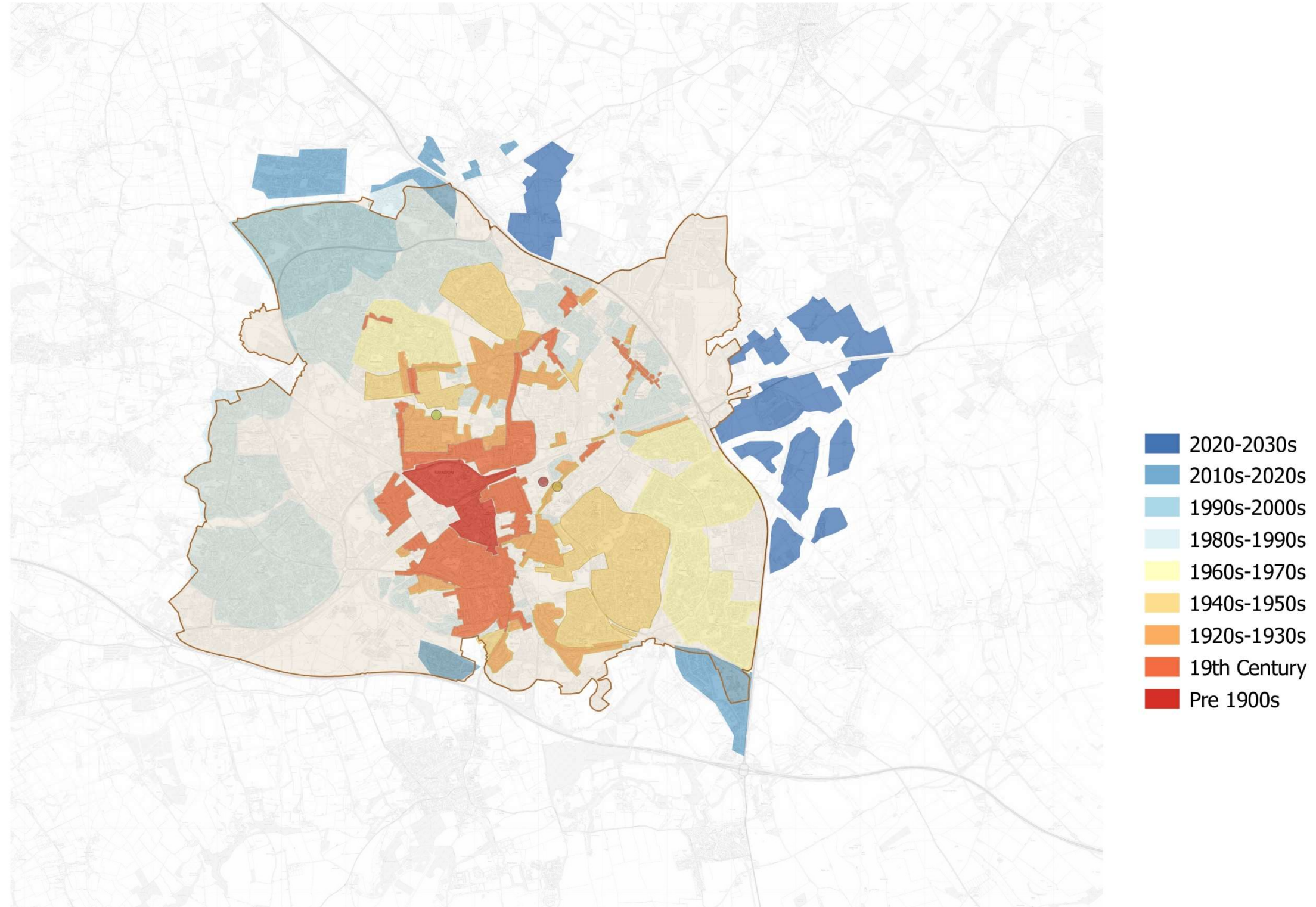


Figure 1: Historical Urban Expansion of Swindon (Pre 1900 – 2030)

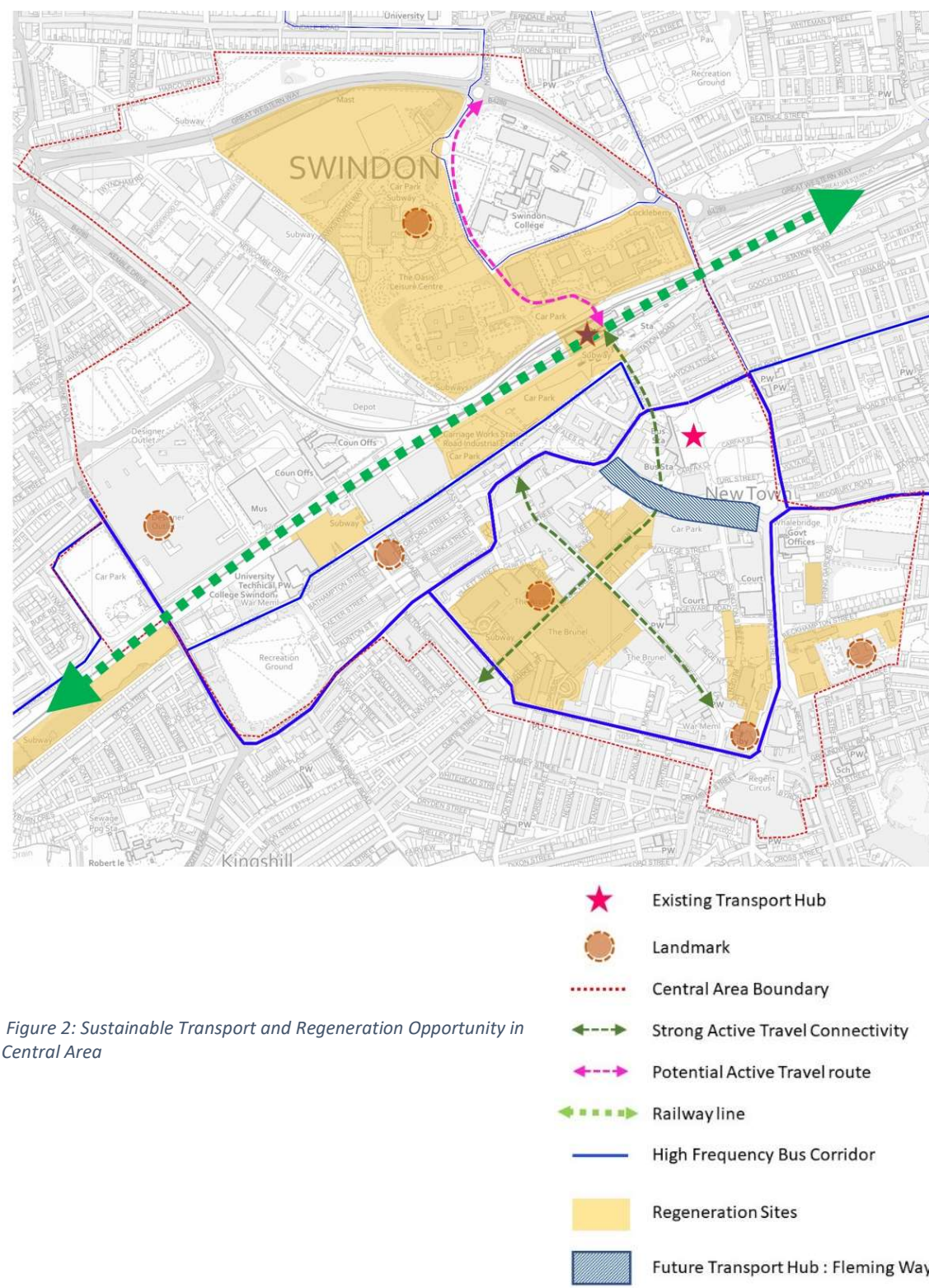


Figure 2: Sustainable Transport and Regeneration Opportunity in Central Area

Sustainable Transport:

It is vital to prioritize area for tall buildings where strong transport infrastructure is available to support accessibility and permeability through sustainable transport modes. The increment in density caused by introduction of tall buildings within the existing urban fabric leads to higher number of people commuting and contributing overall carbon emission within transport sector.

Para 7 of NPPF states that the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, including the provision of homes, commercial development and supporting infrastructure in a sustainable manner which justifies the central area being most suitable for higher density because of availability of necessary supporting infrastructure to deliver sustainable development.

Despite the potential for increased commuting and associated carbon emissions resulting from the densification inherent in tall building clusters, such developments can contribute to a reduction in energy-intensive travel behaviours. This outcome, however, is contingent upon a strategic and context-sensitive approach to urban planning. Specifically, the benefits are realizable when tall buildings are appropriately sited in proximity to high-capacity public transport networks, integrated with mixed-use functions that promote walkability, and supported by infrastructure enhancements that prioritise sustainable mobility. In this way, high-density vertical development, when thoughtfully embedded within an urban system, can mitigate the reliance on private motorised transport and foster more sustainable patterns of movement within the city.

As shown in the figure 02 central area provides multimodal approach to access short and long destinations. Close proximity to existing transport hubs including railway station, existing bus station and New Fleming Way bus corridor enable strong regional accessibility with neighbouring towns and urban centres including London, Bristol, Bath, Chippenham, Oxford and other regional

villages and towns. Availability of high frequency public transport on Commercial Road, Farnsby Road, Faringdon road, Bristol Street, Station Road, Manchester Road and Fleming Way enables strong local accessibility with the other part of the borough.

Regeneration Opportunity:

The concentration of housing delivery within the town centre is supported by the spatial capacity of the urban fabric to accommodate increased residential densities, particularly through the strategic introduction of tall buildings. The accompanying map illustrates potential regeneration opportunities, which are aligned with existing or planned public transport infrastructure and areas of high accessibility.

Tall buildings within these designated zones can play a critical role in delivering a significant quantum of new homes while minimising urban sprawl, thereby supporting compact city principles. Their placement responds to local character considerations, view corridors, and transition zones between high- and low-rise contexts. Furthermore, tall buildings are prioritised in locations where their form and scale can contribute positively to the skyline, reinforce legibility and placemaking, and support the viability of infrastructure investment.

The mapped allocations illustrate how vertical intensification is not uniformly applied, but instead targeted toward nodes of regeneration, transport interchanges, and underutilised brownfield land, ensuring that tall buildings function as anchors of sustainable urban growth rather than isolated intrusions.

In addition to supporting housing growth and sustainable intensification, the regeneration opportunities within Swindon's town centres present a significant moment to redefine architectural character, enhance street-level experiences, and elevate the overall quality of urban space. Many of these areas currently lack a coherent identity or exhibit fragmented urban fabric, which regeneration can address through carefully designed interventions. Introducing tall buildings as part of a broader placemaking strategy enables not only increased density but also the creation of more distinctive and legible urban environments. Through high-quality architecture, active frontages, and improved public realm design, these developments can reinforce a stronger sense of place, enhance walkability, and contribute to the town centre's long-term civic and cultural vitality.

Land Use:

NPPF paragraph 90 (a) suggests to adopt policies that can define a network and hierarchy of town centres and promote their long-term vitality and viability – by allowing them to grow and diversify in a way that can respond to rapid changes in the retail and leisure industries, allows a suitable mix of uses (including housing) and reflects their distinctive characters which shows alignment with national policy to deliver housing allocations within town centres.

In terms of Swindon’s context, Regent Street is recognised as the borough’s principal retail high street, serving as a key commercial and social hub within the town centre. The street accommodates a range of mixed-use development, including retail shops and services, food and drinks, community facilities, and cultural uses, reflecting a multifunctional urban environment that supports daytime activity (Illustrated in Figure 4). The area also includes supporting infrastructure and a number of vacant properties, which, as illustrated in Figures 2, present opportunities for regeneration and contextually appropriate intensification. This diversity of land uses, combined with its strategic centrality, positions Regent Street as a key location for future growth and potential taller development, subject to urban design, heritage, and townscape considerations

Building Heights:

The map presents a spatial distribution of building heights across central Swindon, categorised into height bands ranging from 0–2 storeys up to 10+ storeys. The visual representation highlights a concentration of mid- to high-rise buildings (5–10+ storeys) primarily within the Central Area.

Within this defined zone, there is a discernible cluster of taller buildings, particularly in and around the town centre core, such as along Regent Street, the Parade, and adjacent to key civic and commercial nodes, including the Swindon College campus, the former Debenhams site, and The Brunel centre although the area around college campus offers low density non-domestic development. This pattern suggests that vertical intensification is already a characteristic of the area, and new development would not disrupt the townscape if it respects existing form and scale transitions.

In contrast, surrounding residential neighbourhoods such as Gorse Hill, New Town, and Kingshill are predominantly low-rise (0–2 storeys), which reinforces the importance of focusing taller development within the central plan area where the urban grain, plot sizes, and infrastructure capacity are more conducive to vertical growth. In terms of residential use town centre does not offer significant housing development except from low density houses on Bristol St., London St., station Rd and commercial St.

Conservation and Heritage Sensitivity

In considering the potential for taller buildings in Swindon, it is important to recognise the town’s heritage context. Swindon’s historic skyline is primarily defined by 19th-century church towers and other heritage assets and conservation area including railway village, which contribute to the town’s character.

The Railway Conservation Area possesses significance both as a coherent historic environment and through the presence of numerous individual heritage assets that cumulatively reinforce its character and special interest. These include a substantial number of statutorily listed buildings and undesignated heritage assets which, by virtue of their architectural or historic qualities, make a positive contribution to the area’s significance. However, despite their listed status, some buildings have been subject to unsympathetic alterations and repairs that have diminished their architectural integrity and weakened their contribution to the Conservation Area. There remains potential to enhance the significance of these assets, and to strengthen the overall character of the area, through the sensitive reversal or replacement of inappropriate interventions. In contrast, certain later buildings and structures are of limited or no heritage value, with some actively detracting from the integrity and legibility of the historic townscape.

Proposals for taller buildings in proximity to these assets and Swindon's conservation area are likely to be particularly sensitive and will require careful assessment to ensure they respect the setting and significance of heritage features. This background paper flags these sensitivities at a high level, noting that detailed guidance on heritage impact, contextual design, and mitigation measures will be developed at a later stage of the Local Plan, informed by consultation responses.

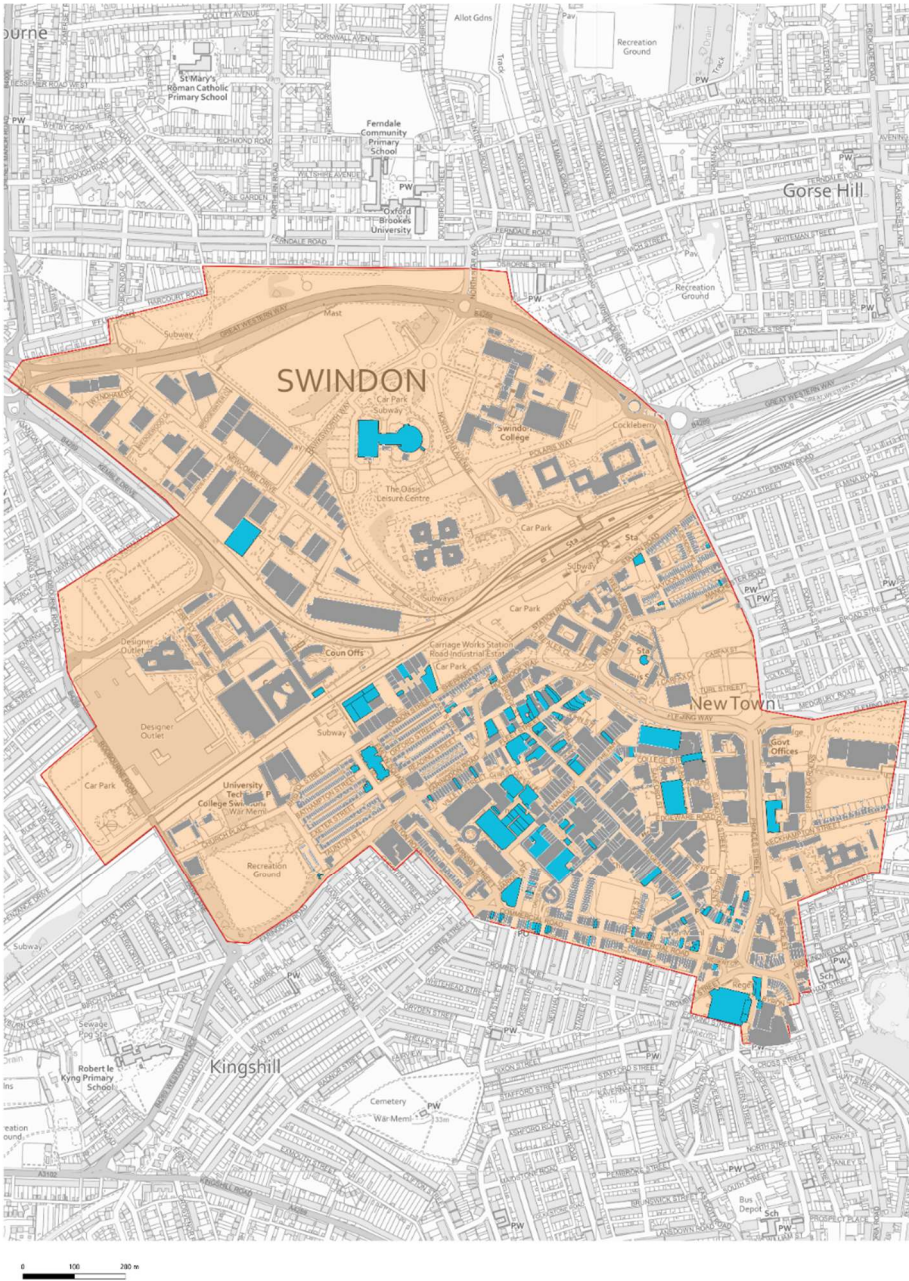


Figure 3: Central Area Vacant Properties

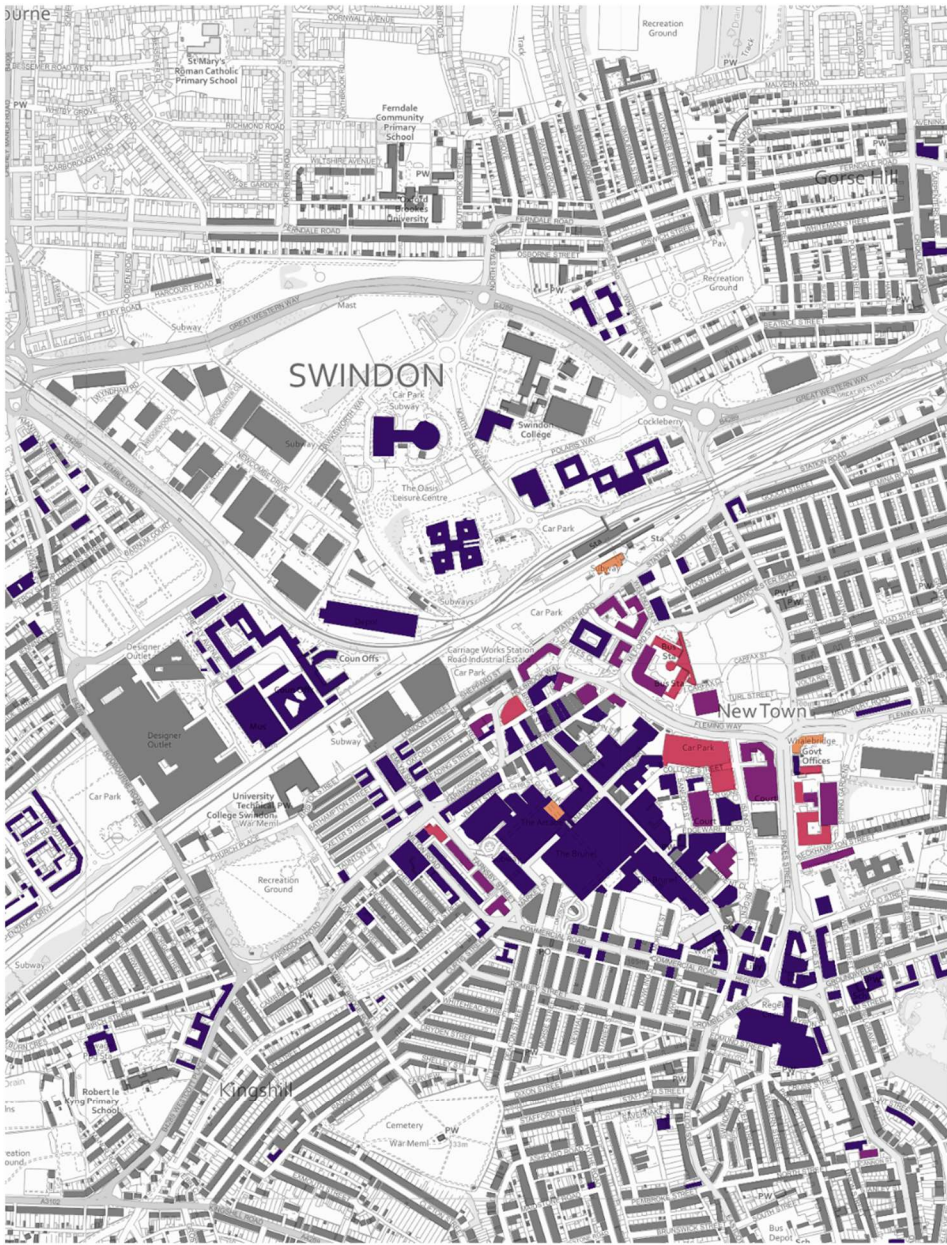


Figure 4: Central Area Building Heights

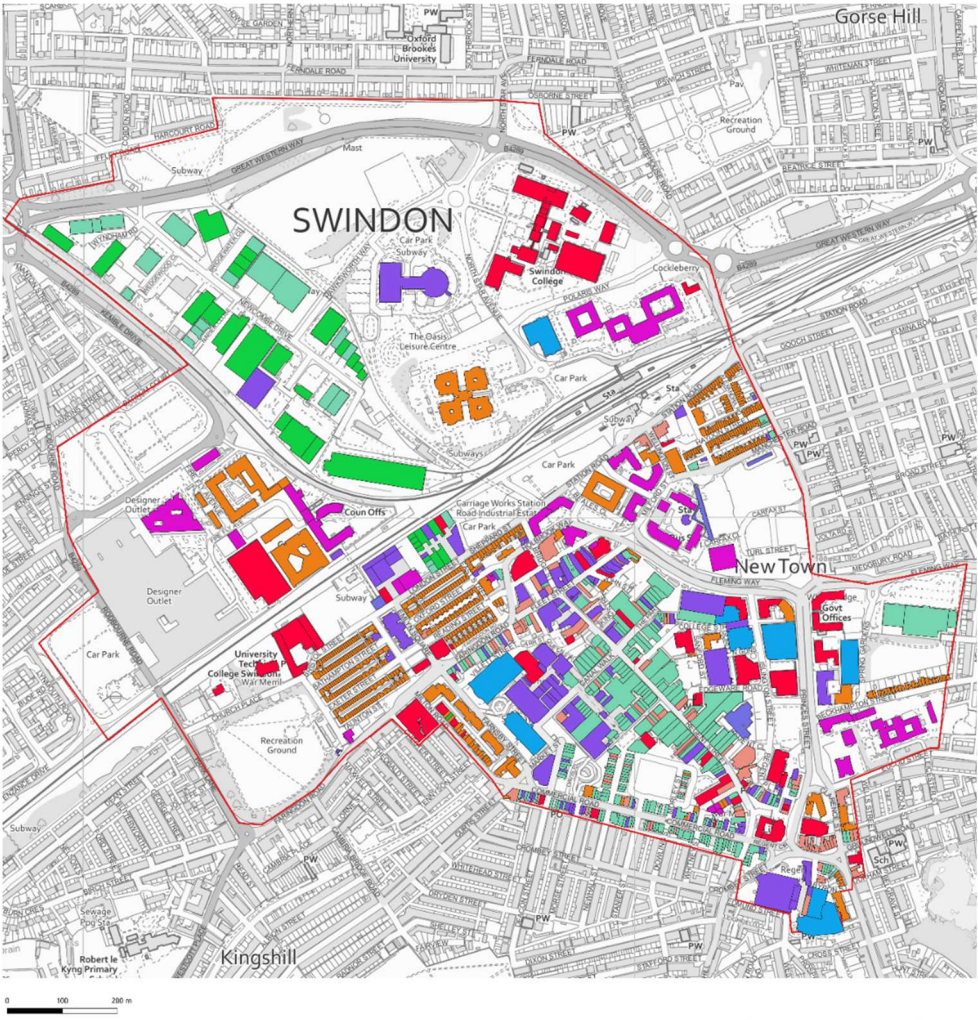


Figure 5: Central Area Land use



Conclusion:

The Central Area of Swindon emerges as the most suitable location for accommodating taller buildings, as evidenced through evaluation of townscape character, building heights, sustainable transport infrastructure, regeneration potential, and land use composition. The building height analysis clearly indicates a concentration of mid-rise and scattered high-rise development (5–10+ storeys), including DMJ Tower, development long Fleming way, and railway station building within the central zone, establishing both a physical and visual precedent for vertical growth. This contrasts with the surrounding residential areas, which predominantly comprise 0-2 storey development, underscoring the town centre’s unique capacity to absorb further height without disrupting townscape coherence or local character.

The existing urban grain in this zone is more varied and robust, with a precedent for mid- to high-rise structures and a looser urban block structure capable of absorbing additional height without overwhelming the surrounding built form. This aligns with sustainable transport objectives, as the area is well-connected through multimodal transport infrastructure, reducing the need for car-based travel and supporting compact, low-carbon urban growth which provides opportunity to reduce carbon emission and support environment conscious planning.

In parallel, the presence of active regeneration sites and vacant land parcels, as identified through Local Plan site allocations, demonstrates clear opportunities for targeted intensification. The existing mixed-use land patterns—comprising retail, food and drink, community facilities, cultural uses, and civic infrastructure—establish a vibrant and multifunctional environment that can be further enhanced through high-quality vertical development.

Collectively, these factors substantiate the Local Plan’s spatial strategy, which prioritises growth within the town centre. Concentrating taller buildings in this area enables Swindon to deliver higher-density, sustainable urban development while reinforcing its role as a strategic centre and protecting the character of lower-rise surrounding neighbourhoods. Crucially, it also provides a spatially efficient response to meeting the minimum annual housing requirement set through the standard method for local housing need. This approach ensures that Swindon can meet its housing targets while delivering resilient and place-sensitive growth.

Tall Building Definition:

When compared to other regional urban centres such as Bristol, Reading, and Oxford, it is evident that Swindon has historically accommodated a relatively modest urban form, with limited instances of higher-density or vertical development—even within its town centre. Based on the assessment undertaken as part of this topic paper, building of six storeys or more will be defined as tall buildings. This approach ensures that any proposed intensification remains sensitive to Swindon's established scale and urban grain, while also providing a framework for enhancing the town's identity through contextually appropriate design and placemaking.

Strategic View Assessment and Skyline Consideration:

View ID	View Name	View Towards
Views Within the Central Area		
V1	Oasis Leisure Centre	Town Centre Core
V2	Railway Station	Town Centre Core
V3	Regent Street	Town Centre Core
V4	The Parade	Town Centre Core/ DMJ
V5	GWR Park	Town Centre Core/DMJ
Views into the Central Area		
V1	LNS Swindon Old Cemetery	Town Centre Cluster
V2	Criklade Road	Town Centre Cluster
V3	National Collection Centre	Town Centre Cluster
V4	Barbury Castle Country Park	Town Centre Cluster

Table 2: Key View

As part of the spatial analysis for accommodating tall buildings in Swindon’s Central Area, a structured approach to view assessment has been undertaken to ensure that future development contributes positively to the borough’s evolving skyline and urban legibility. The selected views fall into three categories: long-range views looking into the town centre, short-range views within the town centre, and arrival/departure views along the railway corridor.

1. Long-range views capture the silhouette of Swindon’s town centre from various surrounding vantage points (refer to Figure 5 and Table 2), enabling the visual integration of tall buildings into a broader landscape context. These views provide opportunities to create a more articulated skyline, allowing taller structures to act as visual markers that

reinforce the identity and prominence of the town centre within the wider urban and peri-urban setting.

2. Short-range views focus on the spatial experience within the town centre itself. These include key streets, open spaces, and nodal points mapped in Figure 5 and Table 2, where visual corridors are framed by existing built form. In such contexts, taller buildings can serve to punctuate the townscape, aid wayfinding, and contribute to a dynamic and varied urban form—provided they are designed with sensitivity to scale, massing, and materiality.
3. Arrival and departure views from the railway line offer a unique experiential threshold, where the perception of Swindon is formed or reinforced as one enters or leaves the town. These movement-based views present a significant placemaking opportunity, where carefully positioned and well-designed tall buildings can contribute to a memorable and coherent town image when seen from passing trains and station platforms.

The purpose of mapping and evaluating these views is not to constrain development, but rather to guide the siting, height, and architectural quality of tall buildings so that they actively enhance the visual experience of the town. Collectively, these visual approaches contribute to the formation of a legible and distinctive skyline for Swindon, reflecting its ambitions for urban intensification while maintaining visual harmony with its built heritage and topographical context.

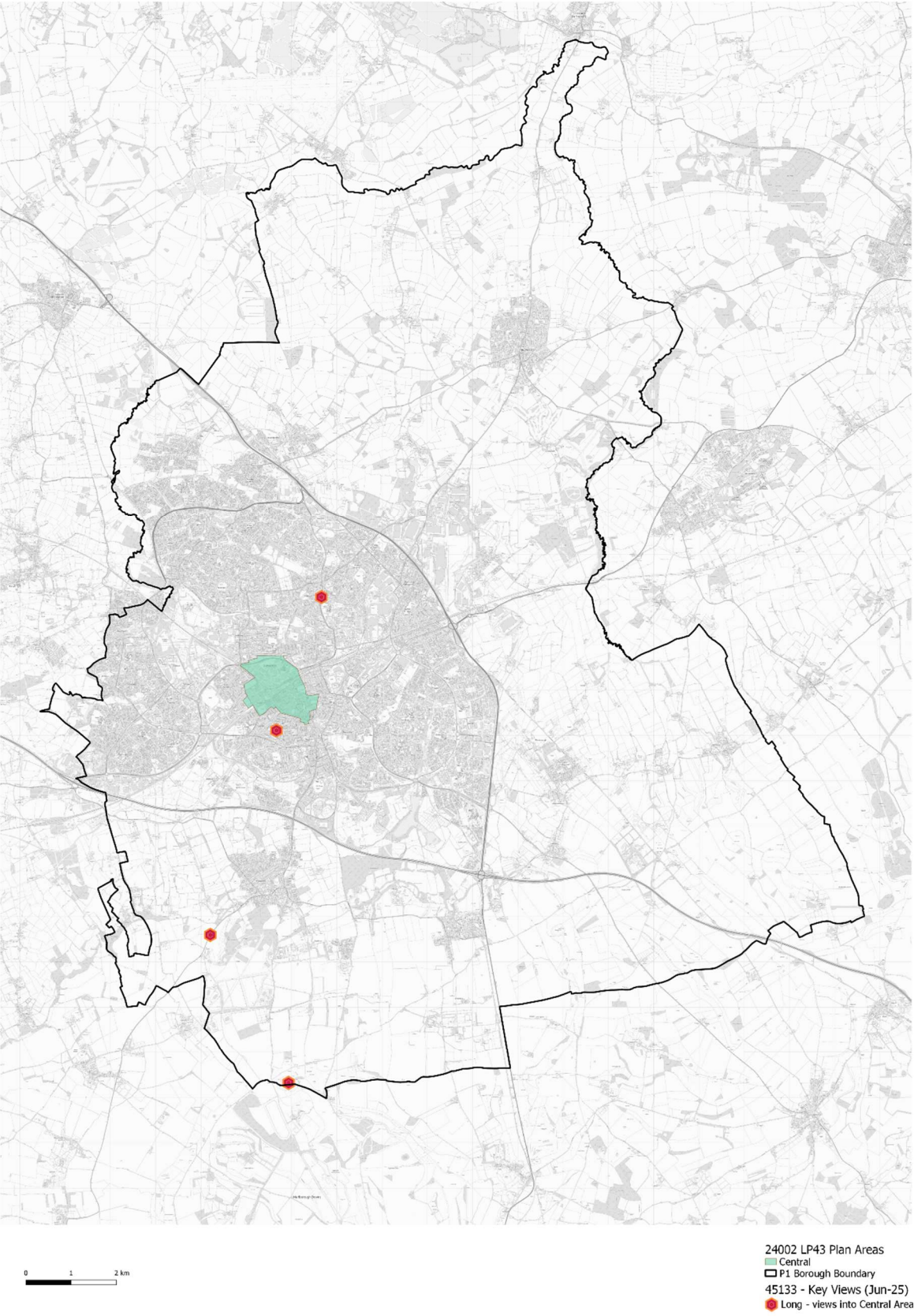


Figure 6: Long Views looking into Town Centre

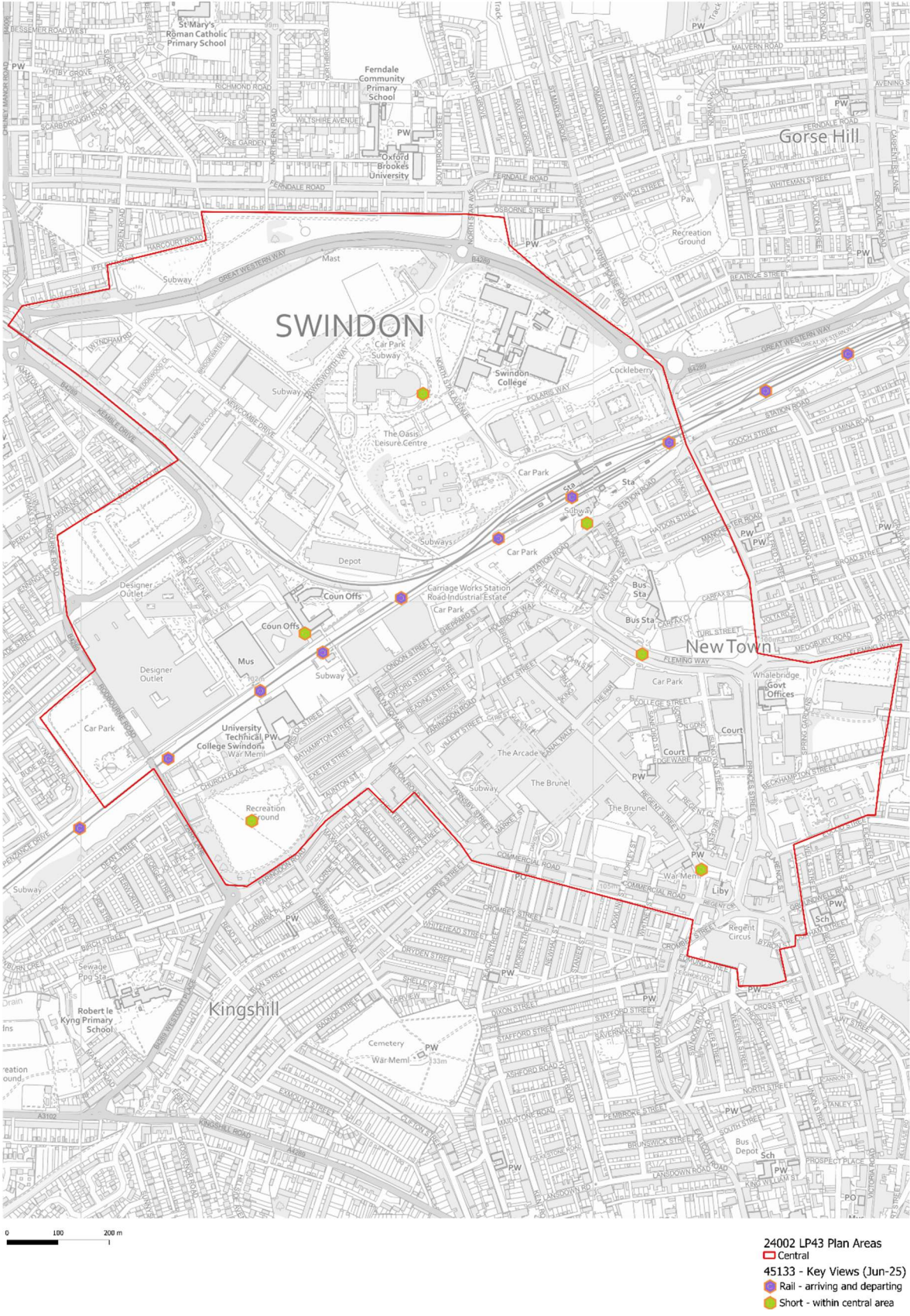


Figure 7: Short Views within Town Centre