

2 Basements and lightwells

KEY MESSAGES

The Council will only permit basement and underground development that does not:

- cause harm to the built and natural environment and local amenity;
- result in flooding; or
- lead to ground instability.

We will require applicants to demonstrate by methodologies appropriate to the site that schemes:

- maintain the structural stability of the building and neighbouring properties;
- avoid adversely affecting drainage and run-off or causing other damage to the water environment; and
- avoid cumulative impacts upon structural stability or the water environment in the local area.

Applicants will be required to submit information relating to the above within a Basement Impact Assessment (BIA) which is specific to the site and particular proposed development.

In certain situations we will expect an independent verification of Basement Impact Assessments, funded by the applicant.

- 2.1 This guidance gives detailed advice on how we will apply planning policies when making decisions on new basement development or extensions to existing basement accommodation.
- 2.2 Policy DP27 Basements and lightwells of Camden's Local Development Framework requires applicants to consider a scheme's impact on local drainage and flooding and on the structural stability of neighbouring properties through its effect on groundwater conditions and ground movement. Section 3 of this guidance document sets out how basement impact assessments need to provide evidence on these matters.

Planning and design considerations

- 2.3 We recognise that there can be benefits from basement development in terms of providing additional accommodation, but we need to ensure that basement schemes:
- do not cause undue harm to the amenity of neighbouring properties;
 - do not have a detrimental impact on the groundwater environment, including ponds and reservoirs;
 - do not have any effects on surface water run-off or ground permeability;

- do not harm the recognised architectural character of buildings and surrounding areas, including gardens and nearby trees, and that conservation area character is preserved or enhanced;
- conserve the biodiversity value of the site;
- achieve sustainable development; and
- do not place occupiers at risk or have any effects on the stability or bearing capacity of adjacent land generally.

Size of development

- 2.4 Often with basement development, the only visual features are lightwells and skylights, with the bulk of the development concealed wholly underground, away from public view. However, just as overly large extensions above the ground level can dominate a building, contributing to the over-development of a site, an extension below ground can be of an inappropriate scale. There may be more flexibility with the scale of a development when it is proposed underground, but there are a number of factors that would mean basement development would be overdevelopment.

SKYLIGHT

A window, dome, or opening in the roof or ceiling, to admit natural light.

LIGHTWELL

An opening within or next to a building that allows natural light to reach basement windows, that would otherwise be obscured.

- 2.5 Larger basement developments, such as those of more than one storey in depth or which extend outside of the footprint of the building, can have a greater impact than smaller schemes. Larger basement developments require more extensive excavation resulting in longer construction periods, and greater numbers of vehicle movements to remove the spoil. These extended construction impacts can have a significant impact on adjoining neighbours through disturbance through noise, vibration, dust, and traffic and parking issues. Larger basements also can have a greater impact on the water environment by reducing the area for water to runoff and soak away. Basement development that extends below garden space can also reduce the ability of that garden to support trees and other vegetation leading to poorer quality gardens and a loss in amenity and the character of the area.
- 2.6 The Council's preferred approach is therefore for basement development to not extend beyond the footprint of the original building and be no deeper than one full storey below ground level (approximately 3 metres in depth). The internal environment should be fit for the intended purpose, and there should be no impact on any trees on or adjoining the site, or to the water environment or land stability. Larger schemes, including those consisting of more than one storey in depth or extending beyond the footprint of the above ground building, will be expected to provide appropriate evidence to demonstrate to the Council's satisfaction that the development does not harm the built and natural environment or local amenity.

- 2.7 The Council recognises that in the case of larger buildings in central London and on large comprehensively planned sites (for example on large sites that occupy an urban block) the impacts of basements will differ to basement schemes in primarily residential neighbourhoods and in such circumstances larger basements are likely to be appropriate.

Habitable rooms

- 2.8 Development Policy DP27 (Paragraph 27.6) states that the Council will not allow habitable rooms and other sensitive uses for self-contained basement flats and other underground structures in areas at risk of flooding. Outside of these areas, where basement accommodation is to provide living space (possibly for staff), it will be subject to the same standards as other housing in terms of space, amenity and sunlight. Suitable access should also be provided to basement accommodation to allow for evacuation. Further guidance is contained in CPG2 Housing (refer to section 4 on residential development standards).

Conservation areas and listed buildings

- 2.9 In the case of listed buildings applicants will be required to consider whether basement and underground development preserves the existing fabric, structural integrity, layout, interrelationships and hierarchy of spaces, and any features that are architecturally or historically important. Where the building is listed, new basement development or extensions to existing basement accommodation will require listed building consent, even if planning permission is not required. The acceptability of a basement extension to a listed building will be assessed on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the individual features of the building and its special interest. Applicants should contact the Council at the earliest opportunity to discuss such proposals.

LISTED BUILDING CONSENT

Legally required in order to carry out any works to a Listed Building which will affect its special value. This is necessary for any major works, but may also be necessary for minor alterations and even repairs and maintenance. Listed Building Consent may also be necessary for a change of use of the property.

- 2.10 As with all basement schemes, we will need to be satisfied that effective measures will be taken during demolition and construction works to ensure that damage is not caused to the listed building and any buildings it directly adjoins. Poor demolition and construction methods can put neighbouring properties at risk and so can have considerable effects on the character and appearance of heritage buildings and conservation areas.
- 2.11 We will seek the submission of a management plan for demolition and/or construction where basement works are proposed in conservation areas or adjacent to a listed building. Further guidance on this is contained within CPG6 Amenity (refer to section 8 on construction management plans).

Basement walls, windows, and doors

- 2.12 The development of a basement and the introduction of light wells will result in an area of exposed basement wall and will usually mean new window or door openings. Any exposed area of basement development to the side or rear of a building will be assessed against the guidance in CPG1 Design (refer to section 4 on extensions, alterations and conservatories). In general, this expects that any exposed area of basement to be:
- subordinate to the building being extended;
 - respect the original design and proportions of the building, including its architectural period and style; and
 - retain a reasonable sized garden.
- 2.13 The width of any visible basement wall should not dominate the original building.
- 2.14 In number, form, scale and pane size, basement windows should relate to the façade above. They should normally be aligned to the openings above and be of a size that is clearly subordinate to the higher level openings so as not to compete with the character and balance of the original building. On the street elevation, and on certain rear elevations where there is a distinguishable pattern to the fenestration, the width and height of windows should be no greater than those above.

FAÇADE

The face or front of a building

FENESTRATION

The arrangement of windows in a building.

Trees, landscape, and biodiversity

- 2.15 Proposals for basement development that take up the whole front and / or rear garden of a property are very unlikely to be acceptable. Sufficient margins should be left between the site boundaries and any basement construction to enable natural processes to occur and for vegetation to grow naturally. These margins should be wide enough to sustain the growth and mature development of the characteristic tree species and vegetation of the area. The Council will seek to ensure that gardens maintain their biodiversity function for flora and fauna and that they are capable of continuing to contribute to the landscape character of an area so that this can be preserved or enhanced.

GREEN ROOF

A roof that has vegetation growing on it, which can help improve visual appeal, reduce the environmental impact of the building and create habitat for native flora and fauna.

DETENTION POND

A stormwater management facility that is designed to protect against flooding by storing water for a limited period of a time.

- 2.16 The basement development should provide an appropriate proportion of planted material to allow for rain water to be absorbed and/or to compensate for the loss of biodiversity caused by the development. This will usually consist of a green roof or detention pond on the top of the underground structure. It will be expected that a minimum of 1 metre of soil be provided above basement development that extends beyond the footprint of the building, to enable garden planting and to mitigate the effect on infiltration capacity. The use of SUDS is sought in all basement developments that extend beyond the footprint of the original building. For further guidance on SUDS, see CPG3 Sustainability (section 7 on water efficiency).
- 2.17 Consideration should be given to the existence of trees on or adjacent to the site, including street trees and the required root protection zone of these trees. CPG1 Design, (refer to section 6 on landscape and trees) sets out the evidence that the Council requires with respect to the protection of trees, including tree surveys and arboricultural method statements.

ROOT PROTECTION ZONE

The area around the base or roots of the tree that needs to be protected from development and compaction during construction to ensure the survival of the tree.

Lightwells

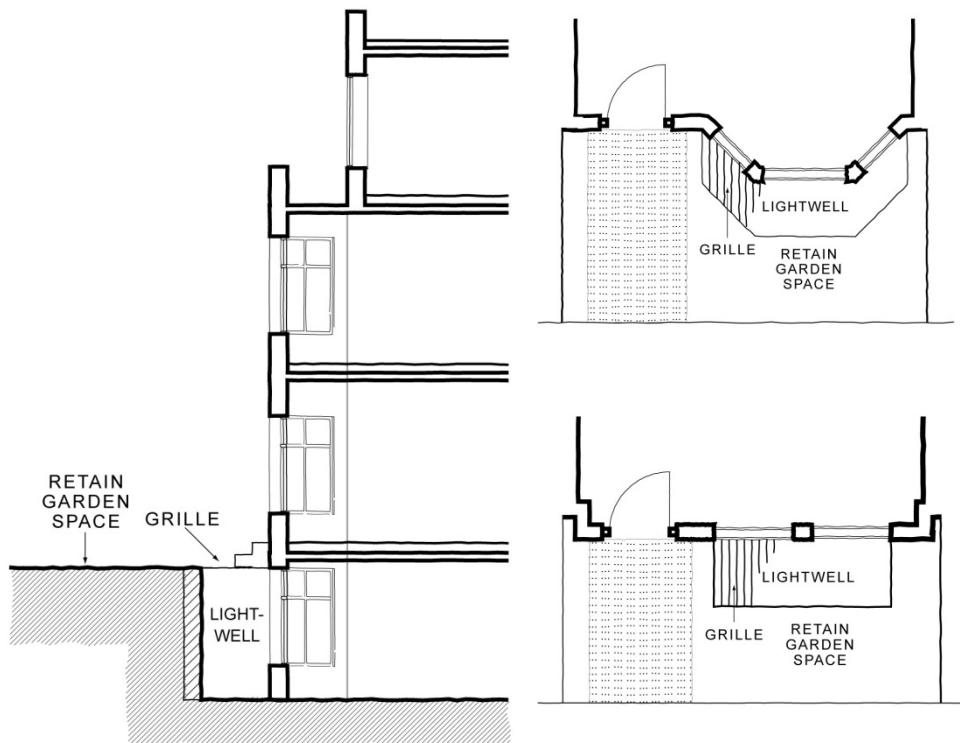
- 2.18 The building stock in Camden is varied. Some areas contain basements developments that include front lightwells taking up part, or all, of the front garden. Other areas do not have basements or lightwells that are visible from the street. The presence or absence of lightwells helps define and reinforce the prevailing character of a neighbourhood.
- 2.19 Where basements and visible lightwells are not part of the prevailing character of a street, new lightwells should be discreet and not harm the architectural character of the building, or the character and appearance of the surrounding area, or the relationship between the building and the street. In situations where lightwells are not part of the established street character, the characteristics of the front garden or forecourt will help to determine the suitability of lightwells.
- 2.20 In plots where the depth of a front garden is quite long, basement lightwells are more easily concealed by landscaping and boundary treatments, and a substantial garden area can be retained providing a visual buffer from the street. In these situations new lightwells that are sensitively designed to maintain the integrity of the existing building may be acceptable, subject to other design requirements and environmental considerations.
- 2.21 In plots where the front garden is quite shallow, a lightwell is likely to consume much, or all, of the garden area. This will be unacceptable in streets where lightwells are not part of the established character and where the front gardens have an important role in the local townscape.

- 2.22 Excessively large lightwells will not be permitted in any garden space.
- 2.23 A lightwell to the side or rear of a property is often the most appropriate way to provide a means of providing light to a new or extended basement development, and can often provide a link to the rear garden. Lightwells to the side or rear of a property should be set away from the boundary to a neighbouring property.

Railings, grilles and other lightwell treatment

- 2.24 In order to comply with building regulation standards, light wells should be secured by either a railing (1,100mm high) or a grille. In gardens that front a street, railings can cause a cluttered appearance to the front of the property and can compete with the appearance of the front boundary wall, or obscure front windows. This is particularly the case in shallow gardens. Where front light wells are proposed, they should be secured by a grille which sits flush with the natural ground level, rather than railings (refer to **Error! Reference source not found.** on the following page). In certain publicly accessible locations grilles should be locked to prevent lightwells being misused for casual sleeping and drug use.
- 2.25 Railings will be considered acceptable where they form part of the established street scene, or would not cause harm to the appearance of the building.

Figure 1. Lightwells and railings



- 2.26 The lowering of the natural ground level to the rear of the property should be minimised as much as is practicable. It is recommended that the rear garden should be graded rather than secured by railings.
- 2.27 Where a basement extension under part of the front or rear garden is considered acceptable, the inclusion of skylights designed within the landscaping of a garden will not usually be acceptable, as illumination and light spill from a skylight can harm the appearance of a garden setting and cause light pollution.