

12th September 2018

Reading Borough Council Local Plan Examination

Matter 13 Q5. Having regard to the historic environment is Policy CA2 justified and will it be effective?

The BBC are at an advance stage of negotiations with partners to bring forward the development at Caversham Park.

Caversham Park is a windfall site that has become available at a time when the Local Plan is being prepared. In all other circumstances a Council would develop a more detailed site specific DPD or development brief, rather than trying to allocate the site in a Local Plan.

Caversham Park is a Grade II listed building; and sits within a Grade II Registered Park and Garden. The BBC has declared the site is surplus to requirement and is moving out over the course of the coming years.

The BBC's departure from the site will leave it empty, with no obvious management plan; and a building and landscape that are inaccessible to the public. Allowing the site to be redeveloped will secure the long term future of the listed building; and provide an opportunity to reinstate much of the historic landscape and provide an opportunity to allow public access to the grounds.

The importance of the landscape is not clearly set out within the policy or the supporting text. The site benefits from a 1720 Switzer landscape (Switzer is described as the pioneer of English Landscape Gardens) and a 1760s Brown landscape (Brown is described both as a vandal of 18th Century English Gardens and the most influential landscaper of the 18th Century). Clearly this is a landscape that has been created by two exceptional landscapers, who promoted conflicting styles. Historic landscape specialists (Debois and DE Landscape & Heritage Ltd) have been engaged to gain a better understanding of the site and the historic landscapes, and this work is on going.

Initial work has indicated that the pleasure gardens created by Brown remain to the east and west of the house, in the butterfly design. A line of lime trees remain, which are likely to be from the Switzer landscape. Also the canal created by Switzer is identifiable to the south of the house. The initial work has also identified that land to the west of Caversham Park is unlikely to have formed part of the original estate.

The BBC has undertaken significant landscaping work which has undermined the original landscape proposals of Caversham Park. The inclusion of satellites, sports pitches, car parking, new tree planting, particularly to the north of the site, and much more have degraded the original landscape(s). However, there

is the opportunity to reinstate elements which are of significance, if the site is redeveloped.

Based on the above, the proposed policy would not be effective in securing the long term future of the site, principally because it places a seemingly arbitrary suggested limit on development within the site (40-45 units) which has been generated without the benefit of detailed survey work or regard to the commercial viability of development proposals.

This is confirmed in the reasoned justification for Policy CA2 contained in Paragraph 8.3.11 which notes that:

“it has not been demonstrated that significant additional development within the area will not harm the historical significance of the site or is otherwise appropriate”

Paragraph 8.3.11 goes on to suggest that:

“any proposal that includes additional development [within the site] would need to be accompanied by compelling evidence that such development will not have a detrimental impact on the many features of importance within the site...”

This is how proper planning for the site should take place and would present a robust approach to any future development of the site but one which is not currently reflected in the proposed text for Policy CA2.

It is essential that the policy allows for a commercially viable development and one which would be capable of securing the long term viability of the heritage assets. It is highly unlikely that a cultural, community or heritage use, or a residential development of 40-45 units would represent an attractive development proposition or one which would justify the risk for any developer taking on such an important heritage asset as Caversham Park or prove to be commercially viable in the short or long term.

The BBC has selected partners who have significant experience with listed buildings, and who have a track record of looking after Grade I and II* listed buildings. To ensure access to the main parts of the listed building, much of this will need to be utilised as communal facilities, this constrain, along with the nature of the listed building means that around only 12 units of accommodation could actually be provided within the main house. This represents an unviable outcome for the retention of the listed building and it would be essential for any such development to be supported by additional development outside the main listed building.

To enable commercially viable development to come forward on the site, and to allow for a proper and rigorous evidence based approach to development, the BBC (and their development partners) believe the policy should be reworded to state:

CA2: CAVERSHAM PARK

Caversham Park and Caversham Park House are key features of the heritage and landscape of Reading. Caversham Park is a Registered Historic Park and Garden, and the site contains a number of listed features. These assets will be conserved. Conversion of the house from offices to residential and/or a cultural, community or heritage use will be acceptable if it sustains the significance of the listed building. The number of units provided within the house will be dependent on more detailed historic assessment of the building and the precise mix and nature of uses.

Any development or conversion proposals should open as much of the park as possible up to public access, including reinstatement of historic footpaths.

Any proposal that includes additional development within the site would need to be accompanied by compelling evidence that such development will not have a detrimental impact on the many features of importance within the site.

Development should not harm the historic interest or the important landscape or biodiversity value of the site and where possible enhancements should be sought