

Sam Harrison

From: Caroline McHardy <Caroline.McHardy@berkeleygroup.co.uk>
Sent: 26 March 2021 18:13
To: Williams, Julie (Planning); Markwell, Jonathan (Jonathan.Markwell@reading.gov.uk)
Cc: Kim Cohen; Craig Pettit
Subject: Reading Vastern Road
Attachments: Cllr Brock v1.pdf; Vastern Road Councillor Details.pdf

Dear Julie and Jonathan,

Further to our latest correspondence and the published committee report regarding Vastern Road, I am writing to inform you that we have written to the members of the planning committee and our ward councillors clarifying our position regarding the reasons for refusal. We have also produced a short brochure to be read alongside the letter, which we hope provides some clear visuals of what we are trying to achieve at Vastern Road and most importantly our view that the scheme does comply with Policy CR11ii, CR11g and the RSAF with regards to the North-South Route. I have provided a copy of this on the link below;

<https://berkeley-group.sharefile.eu/d-sa3e97b9e1abe4488a2e818d3a62afc44>

To clarify this has been sent to the list of councillors we sent the members brochure to previously (attached). However, please feel free to pass on to anyone we may have missed.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries.

Kind regards

Caroline McHardy
Land and Development Director

Berkeley
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Councillor J Brock,
Civic Offices
Bridge Street
Reading
RG1 2LU

26th March 2021

Dear Cllr Brock,

The Old Power Station, Vastern Road, Reading

We recently wrote to you with our vision to transform the Old Power Station on Vastern Road, I hope you have enjoyed reviewing our proposals.

Over the past 2 years, we have worked with Officers, Councillors, key stakeholders and residents to evolve the scheme and overcome as many concerns as possible. Before you is a scheme for 209 homes with a new north/south public green link from Vastern Road to the Christchurch Bridge, high quality public realm, ecological enhancements and a new riverside café, overlooking the River Thames.

Those of you familiar with Berkeley will know that we pride ourselves on not only the development of high quality homes and public spaces, but on timely delivery and certainty to decision makers that we will get on and build. We will commit to the delivery of the site, starting within 3 months of securing planning permission. Berkeley have a reputation for continuing to deliver during tough economic climates and more recently during the Covid pandemic. We adapted our sites quickly to new ways of working and we have safely managed to continue delivering new homes, jobs and the wider economic benefits a regeneration scheme brings with it.

Our application for the redevelopment of this redundant brownfield site is due to be presented to you for determination at Wednesday's planning meeting, and we are deeply saddened to learn that officers are recommending refusal, despite the many benefits the site brings forward.

Further to the committee report released earlier this week, we would like to take the opportunity to address the proposed reasons for refusal as follows;

Reason 1

Failure to provide high quality north-south link through the site and related public realm, safety and directness concerns largely due to the alignment of the site/buildings primarily contrary to Policies CR11ii and CR11g and the RSAF.

As part of the Station/River Major Opportunity Area Policy CR11ii states that all sites within the opportunity area should help facilitate greater pedestrian and cycle permeability, particularly on the key movement corridors. North-south links through the area centred on the new station, including across the IDR, are of particular importance.

Berkeley Response

- The scheme includes a direct pedestrian and cycle link which provides members of the public with a safe and high quality landscaped route in a north-south direction through the site connecting Vastern Road to Caversham.
- Pulling on the sites heritage, wayfinding sculptures such as the old railway sidings, will further add to the users experience of this new and improved route between the river and the station.
- The planning package also includes a S106 contribution of **£200,000** which covers the full cost of delivery of a new pedestrian and cycle crossing on Vastern Road.

Policy CR11g states that development should maintain and enhance public access along and to the Thames, and should be set back at least ten metres from the top of the bank of the river. Development should continue the high quality route including a green link from the north of the station to Christchurch Bridge, with potential for an area of open space at the riverside. The main use of the site should be residential, although some small-scale leisure and complementary offices will also be acceptable. Development should take account of mitigation required as a result of a Flood Risk Assessment.

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Berkeley Response

- The scheme is set back 10m from the water's edge.
- Current areas of hardstanding are proposed to be replaced with a luscious green landscaped area with high ecological and biodiversity benefits adjacent to the river.
- Public access to the River has been improved by not only a new pedestrian and cycle connection to the Christchurch Bridge but also through the introduction of a step free footpath link to the existing towpath.
- A high quality green route through the site is to be delivered, along with open space adjacent to the river for the public to enjoy.
- The main use of the site is residential along with a new café for the local community to further enhance the enjoyment of this new riverside destination in Reading.
- The development has been designed in conjunction with the EA requirements for the programmed Caversham Flood alleviation scheme. Rather than introduce a permanent wall along the back of the towpath as is envisaged for the majority of the surrounding area, our engineered solution is more discreet so the riverside can be transformed into an open green, soft landscaped edge. Most importantly, it opens up the site and does not form a barrier to prevent public enjoyment of the riverside.

Officers raised concerns regarding safety and directness resulting from the alignment of the site/buildings. We wish to address these comments as follows;

Berkeley Response

- We recognise the importance of this route and have worked with officers to make it as direct as possible which has been a challenge due to the retained SSE infrastructure on the adjoining land. It is important to note that this is outside of our land ownership and therefore we have no control over the retention of this key infrastructure which provides electricity for Reading.
- RBC officers have accepted in their report that a straight route connecting Christchurch Bridge and Reading Station and the subsequent view of the bridge from Vastern Road is not achievable.
- It has been suggested that 'The Goods Office (Block C)' is lost, to enable visibility to be achieved a little earlier on the journey south to north along the new route.
- The Goods Office (Block C) is a single aspect building which plays a key role in the high quality design of the scheme and ensuring the best experience for users of the new green north-south link.
- The benefits of the retention of the Goods Office (Block C) are;
 - Delivery of affordable housing - The loss of this building would significantly impact a scheme which officers have accepted is not viable.
 - Provides visual screening of the retained SSE kit which is unsightly and therefore improves the quality of the public realm on the north-south link.
 - Contributes to delivery of a safe route for the public providing good natural surveillance in the middle part of the site to deter crime.
 - The Goods Office (Block C) also plays a pivotal role in mitigating the noise levels from the SSE equipment, especially limiting any noise for the future residents and members of the public using the external amenity areas within the proposed development.
- With regards to the highway officer comments regarding vehicles crossing the pedestrian / cycleway we have written separately to your officers regarding these comments as the commentary in the report was not based upon our latest scheme. I am pleased to note we had taken these comments on board and the changes made to the scheme were as follows;
 - Widening the turning head to prevent any requirement for vehicles to reverse onto the cycleway.
 - Changing the surface materials to show clear delineation between the pedestrian cycle route and road.
 - Introduction of a raised table for the cycle route and white lines to show pedestrian and cyclists have priority.
 - Amendments to the waste collection strategy and refuse vehicle locations which were accepted by RBC in October 2020.

In light of the above, we believe that we will be delivering a high quality north south link within the site alongside strong place making, and that the route is also fully integrated into the development and urban design solution.

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Reason 2

The combination of the proposed height and proximity of Blocks D and E to the Thames Path will harm the setting and character of the path and the River Thames and thus harm the quality of the public realm in this area to the detriment of the value of this part of the Thames, an identified Major Landscape Feature and leisure and tourism destination.

Berkeley Response

- We submitted the application in February 2020 supported by a full Townscape and Visual Impact Assessment, which concluded that the development would be beneficial to the townscape character adjoining the riverside; no comments were raised by RBC regarding the TVIA during the application process.
- Further to the positive comments regarding the scale, height and massing of the development from Design South East, we were unaware officers were minded to refuse the scheme in relation to the height of the buildings in this location. However, we are of course acutely aware of the sites relationship with the river.
- The character of the Thames Path in this location already includes substantial buildings adjoining the river corridor, notably at crossing points.
- We believe our scheme suitably follows this trend and provides a strong and attractive gateway into Reading as envisaged when Christchurch Bridge was designed, which in itself is a significant and tall structure in this location.
- To state that our scheme causes harm to the quality of the public realm in this area suggests that there would be deterioration from the existing situation.
- We have included a short booklet with supporting images for your reference as we believe this is difficult to substantiate given the current poor state of the site and public realm along the Thames Path, compared to the many positive qualities of our proposed scheme.
- Our scheme celebrates the Thames as a Major Landscape feature as follows;
 - Providing direct and step free public access to the riverside.
 - Replacing hard standing with a green and diverse 10m ecological strip to encourage biodiversity whilst mitigating the need for a new flood wall.
 - Providing a leisure facility in the form of the new Christchurch Café to allow the public to have a new destination at the Thames Riverside by which to enjoy the river and equally encourage tourism

Reason 3

By virtue of its height, massing and proximity to the river, the development will shade the River Thames and impact on its marginal habitats. There would also not be sufficient space within the riverside buffer for a sustainable long-term relationship between the riverside buildings and the proposed new large canopy trees.

Berkeley Response

- Berkeley have extensive experience developing adjacent to the River Thames along with the creation of new Riverside and Wetland habitats, including our involvement in the creation of Woodberry Wetlands alongside the London Wildlife Trust and many developments along the banks of the Thames.
- It is important to note that the quality and ecological value of the existing marginal planting in this location along the tow path and surrounding the bridge is poor.
- To improve the current situation, the scheme has been designed to create a 10m green ecological buffer from the top of the river bank in line with RBC policy and EA drainage by-laws which requires an 8m buffer.
- Species rich planting and purposefully selected native species have been chosen.
- The biodiversity net gain for habitat creation is an improvement of 189% and for linear features such as native rich planting there is a 1,133% improvement on site.
- In the EA's consultation response, it was suggested that we either reduce the heights of the river fronting buildings or mitigate the impacts of the shading.
- The EA acknowledged that a significant change to the layout may not be possible due to the sites irregular shape and technical constraints and so proposal for further off site mitigation could be the most suitable solution.

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- We had hoped the Council agreed that the NPPF paragraph 175 mitigation hierarchy could be applied, and so a mutually beneficial mitigation solution could be agreed between the EA, RBC and Berkeley.
- This would negate the requirement to lose any quantum of development which would further worsen the sites confirmed viability position, and so jeopardise our ability to offer the affordable betterment, whilst also meeting the EA's objectives and RBC's aspiration to enhance the biodiversity of riverside settings, and enjoyment of the river by the public.
- We propose that an appropriate riverside mitigation planting scheme can be agreed and secured within the S106 legal agreement as we have done elsewhere in collaboration with Reading and the EA at our nearby scheme at Huntley Wharf.
- With regards to the impact of large canopy trees and their relationship to the proposed development, we have already submitted plans and adapted a new smaller canopy variety of the same tree species. We hope this can be addressed by way of planning condition.

Reason 4

The proposed development has failed to demonstrate that a suitable quality of accommodation can be provided for all future occupiers as the mitigation measures submitted would not be sufficient to minimise the impact of nearby noise pollution.

Berkeley Response

- Berkeley have no control over the noise emission from the neighbouring substation as it is outside of our land ownership and as a result, it cannot be controlled at source.
- The proposed development has been designed (internally and externally) to minimise noise impact through layout optimization including the placement of the Goods Office (Block C), building facades and internal ventilation and glazing systems.
- The scheme has been designed primarily with back of house areas such as communal corridors, lift shafts and other servicing elements abutting the retained substation equipment, utilising the built form to naturally mitigate any noise. This again reiterates the benefits of the retention of the Goods Office (Block C) building in the centre of the scheme adjacent to the SSE substation equipment.
- The proposed new dwellings will ensure that noise levels internally in habitable rooms do not exceed 30 dB during the day and at night in line with British Standard and World Health Organisation Guidelines.
- The layout has been optimised, working with our external consultants, to ensure that the noise level in all amenity areas is acceptable for residents and users of the new spaces during the day.

Reason 5

The proposal would result in the complete loss of 55 Vastern Road, a Non-Designated Heritage Asset and building of local significance.

Berkeley Response

- The sites heritage is at the heart of our vision for the Old Power Station.
- All the new homes have been designed to draw upon the sites history and its previous use, whilst the building materials and colour palette have been carefully selected to ensure a sensitive representation of the sites past.
- No objection was raised by the RBC heritage officer.
- No objection from Reading Civic Society.
- Historic England confirmed they did not wish to comment.
- It is considered that the benefits of this scheme do outweigh the loss of the locally listed building and the benefits include but are not limited to:
 - Full funding of a new crossing on Vastern Road.
 - Provision of 20% on site affordable housing despite the viability report confirming the site's viability means zero affordable homes are required.
 - Provision of the north/south pedestrian/cycle route.
 - High quality design solution, including public realm and new open spaces which was supported by the Design Review Panel.
 - 209 high quality town centre apartments providing much needed owner occupier housing in the town centre.

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Reason 6

Lack of a section 106 legal agreement

Berkeley Response

- It is important to note that should the application be approved by members at planning committee, we would be more than willing to enter into a s106 agreement as per our submitted heads of terms as follows;
 - Delivery of 42 (20%) high quality affordable homes of mixed tenure with 45% being affordable rented and the remaining 55% shared ownership to be delivered on site;
 - Enhanced planting and mitigation scheme to improve biodiversity along the River Thames;
 - New riverside Christchurch Café;
 - High quality North-South Link to improve pedestrian and cycle connectivity to Caversham and new pedestrian access to the Thames towpath;
 - Full £200,000 contribution towards the cost of the new Vastern Road pedestrian and cycle crossing;
 - £100,000 contribution to improve facilities in Christchurch Meadow;
 - An Employment Skills Plan including apprenticeship and training opportunities;
 - Public art and wayfinding signage to retain the heritage of the site;
 - Electric vehicle charging strategy for the site as well as a community car club;
 - Financial contribution of £228,420 to ensure the proposed development achieves the status of carbon zero.
 - The total s106 contributions for the site total in excess of £650,000 to RBC alongside CiL contributions totalling £2m for the local community.

Affordable Housing

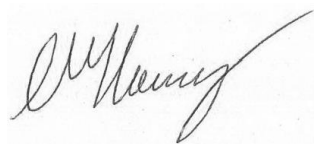
In addition to the above, I would like to take the opportunity to reiterate that amongst the many benefits of the scheme, Berkeley are proposing the early delivery of 42 affordable homes on-site. This represents delivery of 20% on site affordable housing

The submitted application was supported by a viability assessment which Reading Officers have accepted demonstrates that it is not economically viable for the scheme to support the delivery of any affordable housing on the site, due to the many technical constraints and high development costs. Nonetheless, we are proposing to deliver 42 homes on the site to create and mixed community, which will be delivered in the first phase of the development within the Goods Warehouse (Block B).

This is a real betterment to the scheme and one we would hope you feel able to support. We want to work with you and for the scheme to be approved at a local level, however, I hope you understand that Berkeley will reserve the right to revisit this offering of 20% affordable should the scheme be refused and we proceed with an appeal given the viability position.

We really hope you feel able to support the scheme and realise the benefits of good high quality development and the affordable housing betterment.

Yours sincerely



Caroline McHardy

Land and Development Director

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Phone: 07917520742

cc. Julie Williams RBC, Jonathan Markwell RBC

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Vastern Road Contact Details

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Cllr M Ayub	9 Carey Street		Reading	RG1 7JS
Cllr E McKenna	1 Hunters Wharf	Katesgrove lane	Reading	RG1 2NH
Cllr A Sokale	Civic Offices	Bridge Street	Reading	RG1 2LU
Cllr P Carnell	2 Pevensey Court	Newstead Rise	Reading	RG2 8JX
Cllr R Duveen	4 Chieveley Close	Tilehurst	Reading	RG31 5JD
Cllr J Ennis	5 Hampstead Court	Grovelands Road	Reading	RG30 2QQ
Cllr J Lovelock	66 Brooksby Close	Tilehurst	Reading	RG31 6LY
Cllr R McEwan	23 Bulmershe Road		Reading	RG1 5RH
Cllr S Robinson	78 Galsworthy Road	Caversham	Reading	RG4 6PP
Cllr D P Singh	7 Tuxford Mews		Reading	RG30 2NW
Cllr J Stanford-Beale	2a Albert Road	Caversham	Reading	RG4 7PE
Cllr J Williams	66 Cumberland Road		Reading	RG1 3JT
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