



Report of the Berkshire Design Review Panel

**The Old Power Station,  
Vastern Road, Reading**

5<sup>th</sup> December 2019

## The design review meeting

<b>Reference number</b>	1345/201119
<b>Date</b>	20th November 2019
<b>Meeting location</b>	Barton Willmore, The Blade, Abbey Square, Reading, RG1 3BE
<b>Panel attending</b>	Lorraine Farrelly (Chair), Architecture, Urban Design James O'Callaghan, Civil and Structural Engineering Murray Smith, Architecture, Public Realm
<b>Panel manager</b>	Timothy Cantell, Design South East
<b>Presenting team</b>	Joe Harding, Berkeley Homes Caroline McHardy, Berkeley Homes Thomas Nicholas, Berkeley Homes Dave Taylor, Berkeley Homes Craig Pettit, Barton Willmore
<b>Other attendees</b>	Jonathan Markwell, Reading Borough Council
<b>Site visit</b>	A full site visit was conducted by the panel prior to the first review. Lorraine Farrelly, who did not attend the first review, saw the site before this meeting.
<b>Scope of the review</b>	As an independent design review panel, the scope of this review was not restricted.
<b>Panel interests</b>	Panel members did not indicate any conflicts of interest.
<b>Confidentiality</b>	This report is confidential as the scheme is not yet the subject of a detailed planning application. Full details of our confidentiality policy can be found at the end of this report.

## The proposal

<b>Name</b>	The Old Power Station
<b>Site location</b>	SSE site, 53-55 Vastern Road, Reading, Berkshire RG1 8BU
<b>Site details</b>	<p>The application site area is 0.767 hectares. The site is located to the north of Reading town centre, between Vastern Road to the south and the River Thames to the north. There are two-storey traditional houses to the west and a recent low-rise development of flats facing the river at the north-eastern corner of the site.</p> <p>Christchurch Bridge, a pedestrian/cycle bridge over the River Thames, has recently been constructed. It connects to Christchurch Meadows and Caversham beyond. Its southern landings, steps and ramp to the towpath, lie immediately north of the centre of the site.</p> <p>The site is part of the Scottish and Southern Electric (SSE) landholding that derives from the power station here until the mid-20th century. SSE still occupy the eastern part with electrical equipment. The site for development thus has something of a dumbbell shape, with substantial frontages to the river and Vastern Road, but a much narrower neck connecting them – the whole flanked to the east by the retained operational equipment.</p> <p>The existing buildings are not of merit, save for a locally-listed building at the eastern end of the Vastern Road frontage.</p>
<b>Proposal</b>	This is a proposal for some 208 homes, in a range of 1, 2 and 3-bed accommodation. The scheme also has a café just south of Christchurch Bridge.
<b>Planning stage</b>	The scheme is at pre-planning application stage. Pre-application discussions began in October 2018. A detailed application is to be submitted in 2020.
<b>Local planning authority</b>	Reading Borough Council
<b>Planning context</b>	The new Local Plan for Reading was adopted on 4 November 2019. Policy CR11g for this site in the Station/River Major Opportunity Area 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 the 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.’

Earlier, the Reading Station Area Framework and the Reading Central Area Action Plan had assumed the entire SSE site would come forward at the same time. The location of the bridge was presumably predicated accordingly and an avenue offering a straight connection south was envisaged. However, it has become clear that part of the site needs to be retained by SSE and such a visibly direct link is frustrated.

<b>Planning history</b>	There have been no planning applications for this site or the wider landholding in the recent past.
<b>Planning authority perspective</b>	<p>In June 2019, the Council welcomed significant changes that had been made to the scheme reviewed in April, but set out a number of unresolved matters remaining, some ‘potentially fundamental to the future assessment of any application’. The scheme before the panel in November is a further iteration and in particular the width of routes through the scheme have been increased following LPA concerns about pinch points.</p> <p>The parking ratio of 26% is accepted for this site close to the railway station and bus routes.</p>
<b>Community engagement</b>	A public exhibition was held on site on 15 October 2019. The response of local communities was ‘positive’ according to Berkeley, with 92% support for the design.
<b>Previous reviews (delete if n/a)</b>	This scheme has previously been reviewed by the Berkshire Panel on 24 April 2019. Following that review our report stated that the scheme had not yet found an effective way of resolving the disconnect between town and river (while acknowledging the handicap of a site with a bite out, such that a straightforward link south from the new footbridge is no longer possible). The scheme should offer a more legible gateway to the river from Vastern Road, and provide a more inviting route between the two. The scheme could also do more to relate to the river and should certainly offer a connection at ‘towpath’ level. The height and massing were broadly acceptable, though more modelling north-south would be helpful. The warehouse typology at the height and complexity envisaged was queried.

## Summary

The panel broadly supports the scheme and has no major issues with use, quantum, height and massing. The attention given to the points made at the previous review is welcome and have gone some way to meeting our concerns, but there is further to go.

The panel's key observation, as at the first review, concerns the pedestrian and cycle link through the site. The route is now more of a street through the development but is not yet a clear and palpably public route to and from the footbridge. Points of conflict between motor vehicles and cyclists and pedestrians continue to be a concern. The buildings and public realm in the middle of the scheme are not fulfilling their role as way markers or giving a strong character. The landscape design approach could help more in making the route attractive and well-defined.

The scheme now relates better to the river and the connection at towpath level is welcome in principle but could be more inviting.

The architectural language has improved but the panel encourages a more contemporary approach to help the scheme to be assimilated into Reading and to be manifestly residential.

We support the proposal for a café and its location, but its design could contribute more to the scheme.

## Key recommendations

1. A more legible gateway to the river from Vastern Road should be formed.
2. The route for cyclists and pedestrians needs to be clearer and safer and developed as a series of spaces.
3. The buildings on the route in the middle of the scheme should be stronger and more distinctive.
4. The connection at 'towpath' level could be reinforced.
5. A more contemporary approach should be taken to the architectural language.
6. The café presents an opportunity for an exciting and more distinctive design.
7. The consideration of how the scheme would relate to development on the remainder of the SSE site is welcome.
8. Environmental sustainability should be more evident in the design of the scheme.
9. The consideration and description of the broader relationship to the Reading Station Area Framework is essential to relate the scheme to Reading strategically.

## Detailed comments and recommendations

### 1 Gateway to the river

- 1.1 A more legible gateway to the river from Vastern Road should be formed. The scheme does not yet fully meet the Council's requirement for a clear connection from the town centre and railway station to the bridge and the river beyond the site. Although the retained parts of the larger site prevent a line of sight to Christchurch Bridge, a glimpse of the river from Vastern Road might still be possible or, at the least, an opening that suggests a major route through.
- 1.2 For someone walking or cycling from the station and reaching Vastern Road, the route north would not be obvious, as the scheme stands. Removing the oversailing units has helped, as has the setback (and signposts would help too), but the opening is modest in relation to the scale of the blocks on Vastern Road.
- 1.3 The diagonal path entering the scheme from Vastern Road detracts from a sense of a major route (and is awkward for those coming from the west). A straight line aligning to the route would be more indicative of a route through. Creating a space at this threshold would be helpful.

### 2 Route for cyclists and pedestrians

- 2.1 The route for cyclists and pedestrians needs to be clearer and safer.
- 2.2 The landscape design approach could work harder in defining the route, in particular a more consistent line of trees to signal and mark the route. More emphasis could be given to the line of trees behind and parallel to Lynmouth Road. Trees will require substantial space as they grow; some seem very close to buildings.
- 2.3 The route is the public realm of the scheme and should be conceived also as a sequence of spaces. We envisage at least three spaces: at Vastern Road, in the centre of the scheme where the route has a dog leg, and south of the bridge. The Lynmouth Road entrance could be a fourth. It is a threshold that could be a positive part of the scheme.
- 2.4 The space south of the bridge has considerable potential. Currently it is shown as a route and this role is essential, but it could also offer a space, in fact a small square where people could dwell as well as pass through. This would be a harder area, with generous steps perhaps doubling as places to sit.
- 2.5 While the switchback complicates the directness of the route, we accept that it is a way to handle the change in level and to moderate cycle speeds that might otherwise be dangerously high southbound.
- 2.6 We doubt the benefit of segregating traffic. One strong, well-defined route would better serve the scheme as a whole but should be designed to indicate or compel low speed. Points of conflict between motor vehicles and cyclists/pedestrians will require very careful design to slow motor vehicles and give priority to cyclists and pedestrians.
- 2.7 Pinch points, though alleviated, remain a concern as do blind spots where vehicles crossing the route might not see cyclists approaching in time. The paths of servicing vehicles warrant further consideration.

### 3 Urban design in the middle of the scheme

- 3.1 The node where the route deviates is important and deserves to be thought of as a piece of urban design. The public realm should become a space, as stated above. The buildings here in the middle of the scheme should be stronger and more distinctive, especially the southern elevation of the Coal Drop Building which is prominent for

those heading north and could help draw people in and onward. As shown, the architecture does not rise to the occasion and seems suburban rather than a major scheme close to the town centre. Similarly, the CGIs of the public realm here look like an edge-of-town housing scheme.

#### **4 Connecting to the towpath**

- 4.1 The connection at ground level between the towpath on the Thames and the scheme is a most welcome improvement since the previous review.
- 4.2 The proposed link, however, seems minimal and even the description ‘additional link’ is half-hearted. The connection here is as important as that to the bridge. The short route should be more generous, and it would seem likely that space can be found to avoid steps.

#### **5 Architectural treatment**

- 5.1 The panel is inclined to accept the proposed massing but would suggest it is assessed further in context. The material presented showed little of the context close to or within sight of the SSE site. With this information the scheme could make its case for height and massing based on wider urban design considerations.
- 5.2 Arranging the substantial volume of accommodation in a series of blocks makes sense. Possibly some buildings could be taller, such as the currently weak Coal Drop Building. Accommodating the volume of development in taller buildings might allow for a smaller footprint and more generous public space.
- 5.3 A recessed element of a different design can mitigate height visually, but here the proportions feel uneasy with both the Vastern Road and river frontages having upper ‘boxes’ that are prominent and over-large in relation to the main structure underneath.
- 5.4 The reference to the site’s industrial past as a power station has logic as we suggested last time. The industrial referencing works better than before but could be seen as inauthentic or ambiguous. These are 21<sup>st</sup> century flats, not replicas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (which the Railway Warehouse, for one, might be taken as). A more contemporary approach should be taken to the architectural language so that the date and status of the buildings is clear while subtly evoking the site’s history.
- 5.5 The naming of buildings put forward is more interesting than A, B, C etc or 1, 2, 3 etc. and plays to the narrative of referencing the past. But such names will set expectations of distinctiveness and this is not always realised. The words shown on some buildings seem diminutive relative to the scale of the blocks.

#### **6 Cafe**

- 6.1 The panel wondered last time if the large brick blocks might be complemented by some smaller, lighter buildings with more glazing. The café presents an opportunity for such a contrast, a foil in style and scale to its powerful neighbours. There is no overriding logic to continuing the language of the residential blocks to the café. An exciting design, jewel-like perhaps, would add something to the scheme and express its different function (and indicate to passers-by along the river or over the bridge that there is a café).

#### **7 Comprehensive development**

- 7.1 The consideration of how the scheme would relate to development on the remainder of the SSE site is welcome. The panel assumes the Council will assess this possible future relationship as part of their consideration of this scheme and their aspirations for the wider site long term.

- 7.2 The presentation of the scheme would benefit from a physical model and more sections. Sun and wind studies were not presented, but clearly these are important considerations.

## **8 Sustainability**

- 8.1 Environmental sustainability should be more evident in the design of the scheme. Reading has declared a climate emergency.
- 8.2 The use of PVs on the roofs is good. Rainwater harvesting should be possible and would be useful for irrigation.

## **9 Wider framework**

- 9.1 The scheme should be considered in relation to the local authority's planning policies for the town centre and station area. These were contained in the Reading Station Area Framework and the Reading Central Area Action Plan but are now part of the recently-adopted Local Plan.
- 9.2 This strategic approach is especially relevant to the route between the Station and the river, as discussed in 1 *Gateway to the river* above.
- 9.3 The scheme should be described, and assessed, in terms of how it meets this strategic framework.

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### **Confidentiality**

If the scheme was not the subject of a planning application when it came to the panel, this report is offered in confidence to those who attended the review meeting. There is no objection to the report being shared within the recipients' organisations. Design South East reserves the right to make the contents of this report known should the views contained in this report be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). Unless previously agreed, pre-application reports will be made publicly available if the scheme becomes the subject of a planning application or public inquiry. Design South East also reserves the right to make this report available to another design review panel should the scheme go before them. If you do not require this report to be kept confidential, please inform us.

If the scheme is the subject of a planning application the report will be made publicly available and we expect the local authority to include it in the case documents.

### **Role of design review**

This is the report of a design review panel, forum or workshop. Design review is endorsed by the National Planning Policy Framework and the opinions and recommendations of properly conducted, independent design review panels should be given weight in planning decisions including appeals. The panel does not take planning decisions. Its role is advisory. The panel's advice is only one of a number of considerations that local planning authorities have to take into account in making their decisions.

The role of design review is to provide independent expert advice to both the applicant and the local planning authority. We will try to make sure that the panel are informed about the views of local residents and businesses to inform their understanding of the context of the proposal. However, design review is a separate process to community engagement and consultation.



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