

Statement of Case

Appendix 16

Townscape and Visual Statement of Case – prepared by
Patrick Clark of Barton Willmore

Land at 55 Vastern Road, Reading:
Statement of Case on
Townscape and Visual Matters
of Patrick H. Clark BA, MA Lsc. Arch., CMLI

Application Reference: 200188/FUL

Prepared on behalf of Berkeley Homes (Oxford and Chiltern) Ltd

May 2021

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 My name is Patrick Harvey Clark and I am an Associate Landscape Planner in the specialist Landscape Planning and Design group of Barton Willmore LLP Chartered Architects, Town Planners and Environmental Consultants (BW). I work on landscape and townscape projects throughout the United Kingdom.
- 1.2 I hold a Master of Arts in Landscape Architecture from the University of Greenwich. I am a Chartered Member of the Landscape Institute.
- 1.3 I have over 12 years' professional experience in landscape planning and design. I have provided professional advice in relation to a wide variety of developments throughout the UK in the form of landscape and townscape and visual impact assessment; and strategic landscape design. These developments include both small and strategic-scale residential, commercial, industrial, infrastructure, power generation and transport schemes for local authorities, public and private companies. I have dealt with sites within and adjoining Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, National Parks, Green Belt and local landscape designations.

Background and Scope

- 1.4 BW were commissioned by Berkeley Homes Oxford and Chiltern ('the Appellant') in January 2019 to provide independent professional townscape and visual advice in relation to the re-development of the existing car parking and office uses of land at 55 Vastern Road, Reading ('the Appeal Site') for residential and public realm uses ('the Proposed Development').
- 1.5 BW townscape and visual advice informed some aspects of the design of the Proposed Development. BW also undertook a townscape and visual impact assessment (TVIA) to accompany the submission of the application for the Proposed Development. I oversaw the preparation of the TVIA.
- 1.6 Further description and illustration of the design approach is set out in the submitted package of information, notably the Design and Access Statement (DAS), built form plans and elevations, and landscape design plans (BHOC.448.LA.101E Landscape General Arrangement; and BHOC.448.LA.102F Planting Framework Plan).
- 1.7 The scope of the TVIA was informed by pre-submission dialogue with Reading Borough Council ('the Council')'s Planning Officer which included agreement of the representative viewpoints to be used for assessment of the visual baseline and of the visual effects of the Proposed Development (as set out in the Statement of Common Ground).

- 1.8 The application was refused by the Council, in a decision notice dated 9th April 2021. Reasons for Refusal (RFRs) 1, 2 and 3 (of seven) are of relevance to townscape and visual matters and state that:

'1. The proposed development fails to provide a high quality north-south link through the site by virtue of related public realm, safety and directness concerns, largely due to the alignment of the site and overprovision of proposed buildings, primarily contrary to Policies CR11ii and CR11g of the Reading Borough Local Plan (2019) and guidance within the adopted Reading Borough Supplementary Planning Document Reading Station Area Framework (2010), and also Policies EN11, CC7, CR2, CR3, TR3 and TR4 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (2019).

2. The combination of the proposed height and proximity of the proposed Blocks D & 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. The proposal is therefore primarily contrary to Policies CR4, CR11v) and CR11g of the Reading Borough Local Plan (2019) and guidance within the adopted Reading Borough Supplementary Planning Document Reading Station Area Framework (2010), and also Policies CC7, CR2, CR3 and EN11 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (2019).

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 with a lack of appropriate mitigation being demonstrated. There would also not be sufficient space within the riverside buffer for a sustainable long-term relationship between the riverside buildings and the required large canopy trees. The proposed development is therefore contrary to Policy EN11 in particular, and also Policies EN12, EN13, EN14, CC7, CR2, CR3, CR4 and CR11 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (2019), paragraph 175 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2019) and objectives of the adopted Reading Borough Council Tree Strategy (2021) and Reading Biodiversity Action Plan (2021).'

- 1.9 My evidence will primarily address RFR 2, with further reference to the relevant aspects of RFRs 1 and 3.
- 1.10 To this end, I describe first the context and character of the Appeal Site and the nature of views towards it, explaining how it is a utilitarian void detracting from the character of the townscape and views across it at a key strategic location between the evolving town centre and Christchurch Bridge.

- 1.11 I go on to describe the proposed design approach and the implications of this within the townscape, notably the positive addition to the riverside frontage, the legibility of the proposals within the wider townscape and the perception of linkage between the town centre and the riverside. I then note the Council and other consultees' consideration of the Proposed Development.
- 1.12 I then provide a summary of policy relevant to townscape and visual considerations.
- 1.13 I then provide a summary of my consideration of townscape and visual effects, concluding that the Proposed Development would result in beneficial effects on townscape features; beneficial or neutral effects on townscape character; and beneficial effects on the majority of views of the Proposed Development. I consider the specific effects of the scheme in relation to the RFRs and respond to the RFRs in townscape and visual terms.
- 1.14 Finally, I conclude that the Proposed Development can respond sensitively to baseline townscape and visual considerations and published guidance to result in a scheme which would provide a positive contribution in townscape and visual terms in this location.
- 1.15 Much of my evidence is based on the content of the submitted TVIA and I make reference here to illustrative material included within the TVIA, notably Site Appraisal and Site Context Photographs, Photomontages and other Computer Generated Images. However, my Statement of Case also reflects my consideration of points raised in consultee comment; the Council's Planning Committee report and update; and the decision notice.
- 1.16 The evidence which I have prepared and provide for this Appeal in this Statement of Case has been prepared and is given in accordance with the guidance of my professional institution. I confirm that the opinions expressed are my true professional opinions.
- 1.17 My evidence should be read in conjunction with that of the other witnesses acting on behalf of the Appellant, notably that of Mr Dave Taylor of Berkeley Homes Oxford and Chiltern, who deals with design matters; Mr Iain Corbyn of EcoConsult, who deals with ecological matters; and Mrs Kim Cohen of Barton Willmore, who deals with planning and policy matters.

Methodology

- 1.18 The BW TVIA methodology, used for the submitted TVIA and for this Statement of Case, is based on principles in 'Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment' (Landscape Institute and Institute for Environmental Management and Assessment), 3rd edition, 2013 (GLVIA3). The TVIA methodology identifies the value and susceptibility of townscape and visual receptors which are combined to provide their sensitivity to the type of development proposed. The likely magnitude of change experienced by these receptors as a result of the

Proposed Development is then considered and combined with the receptor's sensitivity, to identify a significance of effect.

2.0 APPEAL SITE CONTEXT

- 2.1 The submitted TVIA sets out the context of the Appeal Site in detail, which I do not repeat here. I provide a summary of key considerations of relevance to the matters in question in this appeal.
- 2.2 As shown on **TVIA Figures 1 and 2**, the Appeal Site lies close to the centre of Reading, between Vastern Road (A329) to the south; residential properties along Lynmouth Road to the north-west; and the Thames Path, Christchurch Bridge and River Thames to the north-east. An electricity sub-station operated by Scottish and Southern Energy (SSE) is situated immediately to the east of (and indenting) the Appeal Site. Further large-scale office and commercial development lies to the south-east of SSE.
- 2.3 As shown on **TVIA Figure 3**, Reading town centre lies on a spur of gently elevated land between the Rivers Kennet and Thames. The Appeal Site lies on the flood plain of the River Thames at an elevation of approximately 38m AOD, as does Fry's Island, within the river to the north of the Appeal Site; and the substantial open space of Christchurch Meadow, to the north of the river. Caversham is set on rising land further to the north and whilst now part of the wider urban area, maintains some sense of distinction from the town centre as a result of its less intense land uses and the physical and perceptual division provided by the broad expanse of the river and open space uses on the valley floor.
- 2.4 This part of the town centre is heavily influenced by the station (approximately 150m to the south of the Appeal Site), which is an important junction in the national rail network on key mainline routes extending west of London. Industrial influences associated with this rail hub historically extended to the riverside in the form of a coal-fired power station, including substantial built form and a distinctive tall flue (see pages 16-21 of the DAS). This historic arrangement was broken up by the replacement land uses to the north of the railway line and the expansion of Vastern Road as part of the Inner Distribution Road. The town centre is now re-extending its influence to the river in a contemporary form of urban intensification, driven by local planning policy. This includes the re-development of not only the Appeal Site but also land to the south, between Vastern Road and the railway.
- 2.5 As part of this intensification, the Appeal Site is the principal location at which the evolving town centre reaches the river corridor, as set out in policy documents. This location has additional significance as it is also the south-western landing point of Christchurch Bridge, which provides a non-vehicular crossing of the river.
- 2.6 In terms of **vegetation**, the river corridor in the wider landscape west of Caversham Bridge and east of Reading Bridge includes substantial canopy trees (see **TVIA Site Context**

Photographs 16 (right hand side); and **23**). However, between Reading Bridge and Caversham Bridge, canopy trees are more limited. Such vegetation is present on Fry's Island and in Christchurch Meadow (see **TVIA Site Context Photograph 11**) and in a number of specimen trees within the riverside terrace of the Covea office building, to the south-east of the Appeal Site (see **TVIA Site Context Photograph 17**). However, typically there is limited or no canopy vegetation on the north-facing south bank of the river, including south-east of the Appeal Site at Clearwater Court and residential development at Norman Place (see **TVIA Site Context Photographs 6** and **17**); and along the frontages of residential development north-west of the Appeal Site (see **TVIA Site Context Photographs 6, 9, 10** and **11**).

- 2.7 The Appeal Site lies within the Station Area Boundary as defined in the Reading Station Area Framework (RSAF, 2010). The Appeal Site lies to the north of the Local Plan policy area CR10: Tall Buildings, which defines tall buildings in Reading as being 36m in height/12 storeys of residential use. The Appeal Site lies within the Station/River Major Opportunity Area and forms part of sub-area CR11g: Riverside, which also includes the substation to the east. I consider further the policy implications of these designations in section 5, under the heading of Planning Policy below.

Townscape Character

- 2.8 Published character assessments covering the Appeal Site are at a national and local level. National Character Area (NCA) 110: Chilterns, is of limited relevance, other than to note the Statement of Environmental Opportunity of removing existing development to significantly strengthen character, views and access; enhancing Green Infrastructure and access linkages; and using traditional local materials.
- 2.9 The local level assessment in the Reading Tall Building Strategy (RTBS) in 2008, prepared by Entec Ltd on behalf of the Council (updated 2018) is of more relevance.
- 2.10 As shown on **TVIA Figure 4**, the majority of the Appeal Site and its immediate setting fall within Character Area (CA) 22: Vastern Road. The western edge of the Appeal Site falls within CA12: Caversham Road. CA1: Station Hill abuts the boundary of CA22 to the south and CA23: King's Meadow abuts the northern and eastern boundaries. The assessment notes for Character Area 22, which includes the majority of the Appeal Site, among other points, *'an unexceptional area of townscape which does not respond well to the surrounding residential land use... [building design] is unattractive and creates a weak and uninspiring area of townscape.'* A small part of the western edge of the Appeal Site lies within Character Area 12, which, although it has a prevailing residential character and small

scale, is already subject to the influence of a number of larger built forms, including apartment blocks at the northern end of Lynmouth Road, adjacent to the Appeal Site.

- 2.11 In addition to the published local level commentary, I note below my further observations on the townscape character of the vicinity of the Appeal Site in the context of the expanding town centre of Reading, summarised from the TVIA.
- 2.12 The River Kennet forms a key feature of the town centre compared with the River Thames, which is physically, visually and perceptually separated from central Reading. The support pier of Christchurch Bridge goes some way to addressing this problem by providing a distinctive and eye-catching skyline form associated with the Thames crossing. However, as the RTBS sets out, Christchurch Bridge is also visually separated from the town centre to the south, principally by the perception of being set beyond substantial massing, including the retail sheds on Vastern Road and the utilitarian infrastructure and continuous Vastern Road office frontage of the Appeal Site, with no clear legibility of the link between the bridge and the town centre. Therefore, whilst the bridge pier and suspension cables provide strong legibility of the river and the new crossing in views from Christchurch Meadow and along the riverside, this appears isolated for lack of any further visual waymarkers continuing the progression of the route further into the town centre.
- 2.13 The ongoing construction of tall buildings to the south of the bridge, as driven by planning policy, notably those to the south of Vastern Road, will further screen the bridge pier from the town centre (see **TVIA Addendum, April 2020, Appendix A1, Cumulative Photomontages**, notably **P1, P2, P3** and **P6**). As a result, the legibility of the bridge pier will be exclusively in views from north of the river and along the river corridor.
- 2.14 The utilitarian character of the Appeal Site including a car park; a retaining wall topped by security fencing; and the adjacent SSE substation, which blocks the direct route between the bridge and station, detracts from any perception of a positive southern landing of the bridge on crossing the Thames from the north (see **Site Context Photograph 6**).
- 2.15 In combination, the above factors result in a lack of perceived connection between the town centre and the open space of Christchurch Meadow, which has potential to serve the expanding town centre.
- 2.16 The utilitarian edge of the Appeal Site to the towpath, as described above, also detracts from the experience of moving along the riverside Thames Path and the lack of positive, overlooking built form frontage has created a hidden, unsupervised and vandalised space between the Appeal Site and the bridge ramp and steps (see **TVIA Site Appraisal Photographs, Site Context Photograph 6** and images below).

Figure 1: Thames Path adjoining Appeal Site, looking south-east



Figure 2: Thames Path adjoining Appeal Site, looking north-west



- 2.17 Along the Thames riverscape in Reading there are many examples of built form addressing the river positively in the form of glazed frontages and balconies of garden rooms/pavilions/villas (see **TVIA Site Context Photographs 10, 11, 17 and 23**).
- 2.18 To the north-west, built forms flanking the riverside are predominantly of late-20th century apartment blocks, of up to 4 storeys (2.5-3 immediately adjacent to the Appeal Site) and of limited local distinctiveness. As shown in **Mr Taylor's Appendix A** (Locations A-C), built form set-back from the water is approximately 5.5-7.5m along this extent, with the exception of the two short rows of older terraced houses at the northern end of Thames Avenue. The buildings provide a strong and almost immediate frontage of built form to the riverside, softened by their immediate garden curtilages although the purely ornamental and domesticated character of the latter does little to reinforce distinctive riparian character. (see **TVIA Site Context Photographs 11 and 17**).
- 2.19 To the south-east, varying types of interfaces of built form with the riverside are evident. Clearwater Court, incorporating undercroft + 5 commercial storeys + roof, continues and accentuates the approach of a strong built form edge to the riverside (set back approximately 7m from the water). This creates a dramatic 'reveal' of the river on the public realm approach to the river between the building and Reading Bridge through tight control of spaces, resulting in a strong anticipation of the riverside just before reaching it, as shown below.

Figure 3: Pedestrian route between Clearwater Court and Reading Bridge, looking north



- 2.20 Intimacy and interest are evident in the visible outdoor spaces at Clearwater Court; as well as through a strong vertical form, with notable visual interest adjoining the water (see **TVIA Site Context Photograph 17**, left hand side). These factors allow a perception of human engagement and visual links with the river corridor. This is in contrast to Reading Bridge House which turns a blank end to the river (set back approximately 14m from the water); and the dark, sealed windows of the Covea Building at Norman Place (set back a minimum of approximately 25m from the water) and associated bland, strongly-fenced open space, which

detracts from the perception of positive overlooking and human engagement with the river corridor (see **TVIA Site Context Photograph 17**).

- 2.21 The positive frontages of built form to the river corridor on the southern bank in the vicinity of the Appeal Site are suggestive of the arrival of the River Thames alongside the centre of a busy, modern urban area, in contrast to the leisurely suburban riverbanks of villas and long gardens, as is seen further to the north-west and north-east. The Appeal Site detracts from this impression by presenting a utilitarian void in the townscape as well as by preventing any relationship between Christchurch Bridge and the town centre through the Appeal Site.
- 2.22 Vehicular crossings at Caversham Bridge and Reading Bridge are marked by substantial built form, of greater scale than adjoining buildings along the riverside, which provide strong perceptual signposting of key movement routes crossing the river.

Figure 4: Caversham Bridge, looking south-west (up to 5 residential storeys)



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- 2.23 These gateway features are particularly marked at Reading Bridge which is closer to the town centre than Caversham Bridge (see **TVIA Site Context Photograph 7** and below).

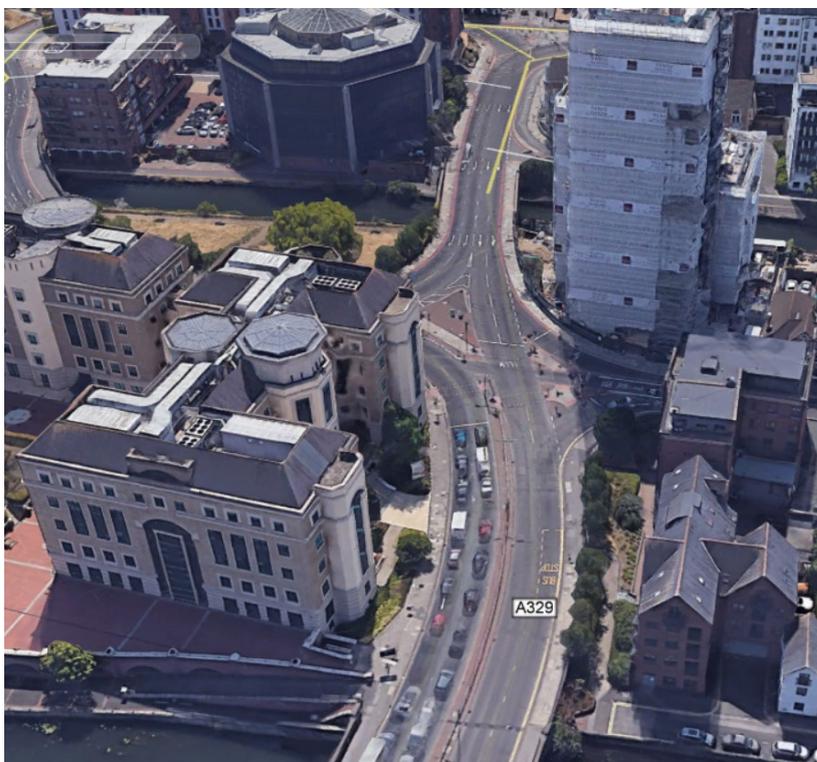
Figure 5: Reading Bridge, looking south (up to 11 storeys + roof plant)



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2.24 Similarly, buildings of substantial massing and/or height are present at other bridging points in central Reading, notably at the locations shown below.

Figure 6: Forbury Road, looking south (up to 17 residential storeys)



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Figure 7: King Street, looking north-east (up to 8 commercial storeys + roof)



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Figure 8: Duke Street, looking north-east (up to 5 residential storeys + roof)



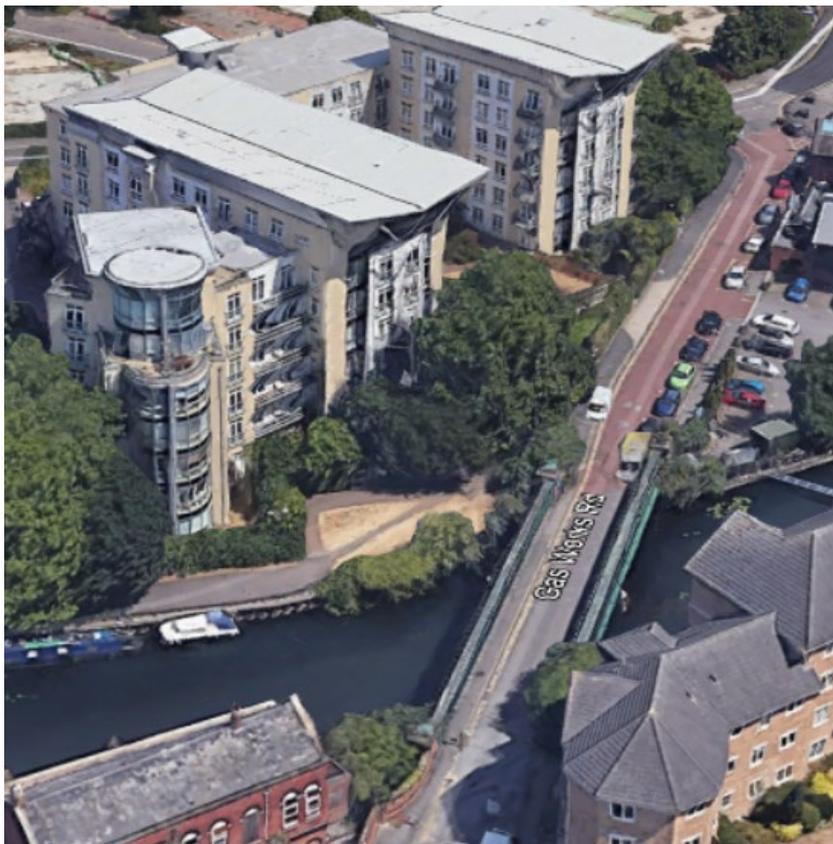
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Figure 9: Bridge Street, looking south-east (up to 8 residential storeys + roof)



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Figure 10: Gasworks Road, looking north-east (up to 7 residential storeys)



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2.25 This approach to massing in relation to water, when perceived along the Thames corridor, creates a legible rhythm of taller built form at bridging points, albeit this rhythm is weakened by the lack of landmark built form at the southern landing of Christchurch Bridge at the Appeal Site.

- 2.26 West of Caversham Bridge and east of Reading Bridge, the character of the riverside is more suburban, lower density, and open in character, including substantial gardens and open spaces, as shown in **TVIA Site Context Photographs 16** and **23** and below:

Figure 11: East of Reading Bridge, looking north-east



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Figure 12: West of Caversham Bridge, looking north-east



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- 2.27 Vastern Road creates a further perceived barrier to north-south movement, through its dominant vehicular carriageway (including up to 6 lanes of traffic), the engineered character

of the retail car park and the blank, reflective glass windows of the existing office block on the Appeal Site. These factors detract from the perception of a pedestrian environment at a human scale and of human interest, albeit this character is softened slightly by emerging street tree planting in the central reservation (see **TVIA Site Context Photographs 4 and 13**).

- 2.28 In appraising the character of the vicinity, it is noted that a number of taller buildings are present in the town centre and number of others are under construction or planned. A number of these are shown in outline form in the photomontages in **TVIA Appendix 3a** and **TVIA Addendum Appendix A1**.

3.0 APPEAL SITE AND VISUAL APPRAISAL

- 3.1 As set out in the TVIA, section 3 and as seen in **TVIA Site Appraisal Photographs A-D**, the character of the Appeal Site is of a utilitarian void in the townscape, detracting from the sense of place in the vicinity, including the riverside; and from the experience of moving towards central Reading over the recently-constructed Christchurch Bridge. The character of the Appeal Site is also strongly influenced by adjacent/nearby substantial built form to the east and south-east as well as the busy Vastern Road to the south. The infrastructural, utilitarian character of the Appeal Site is in marked contrast to the domesticating influence of smaller-scale residential built form to the west, albeit noting that adjoining the Appeal Site on the riverside, apartment blocks forming Lynmouth Court are substantial in form and reach 2.5-3 storeys. I consider the character of the Appeal Site to be of low sensitivity to the type of development proposed, as set out in paragraph 3.6 of the TVIA.
- 3.2 From the surrounding townscape, there are glimpsed views of the Appeal Site (encompassing the scale of the Proposed Development) from isolated locations within the urban centre to the south and south-east of the Appeal Site, dependent on the alignment of road/open space corridors towards the Appeal Site and the level of intervening built form and vegetation (**TVIA Site Context Photographs 1-3**). From Vastern Road the Appeal Site is visible in the context of substantial built form along Vastern Road to the east; and domestic scale development immediately to the west, beyond which lies more substantial massing and prominent rooflines at Great Brighams Mead (**TVIA Site Context Photographs 4 and 13**).
- 3.3 From the river corridor, where visible beyond riverside vegetation and built form, the Appeal Site is seen in the context of the built form that extends along the southern bank of the River Thames, both large-scale office and residential buildings to the east and residential blocks to the west; and in the town centre beyond. The Appeal Site in its current state appears as an incongruous gap in the townscape and detracts from views towards central Reading (**TVIA Site Context Photographs 6-11, 17 and 18**).
- 3.4 There are partial long range views of the Appeal Site encompassing the scale of the Proposed Development from isolated elevated locations in the northern area of Reading, dependent on the alignment of road/open space corridors towards the Appeal Site and the level of intervening built form and vegetation (**TVIA Site Context Photographs 19-22**). In these views the Appeal Site is seen in the context of existing substantial built form in central Reading, including the recently-completed re-development of the BMW garage on Napier Road as 'Thames Quarter'. From wider locations in the townscape to the west, south and east, the Appeal Site encompassing the scale of the Proposed Development cannot readily be

perceived beyond existing substantial built form and vegetation within the townscape (**TVIA Site Context Photographs 23-28**).

4.0 COUNCIL AND CONSULTEE COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

4.1 I set out here commentary made by the Council and other consultees in relation to townscape and visual matters. I respond to these comments in detail as I address the Reasons for Refusal in section 7 of this document.

4.2 The Officer's Report to the Planning Committee (the 'Committee Report') sets out the position of the Council's **Planning Policy** team on the nature of the visual link through the Appeal Site, envisaged by policy as set out in paragraph 7.10 of the RSAF.

4.3 Paragraph 4.29 sets out the RSAF expectation for a visual link between the station and the Thames and paragraph 4.27 quotes paragraph 7.10 of the RSAF, which states that:

'Of particular significance are views along the direct north-south link, between the Station and the Thames, where there should be an unbroken line of sight.'

4.4 The commentary in paragraph 4.45 of the Committee Report acknowledges that, in fact, the retention of the sub-station means that the visual link '*would be very difficult to achieve*' but that '*even if this is not achievable in full, efforts should certainly be made to keep visual fragmentation of the route to an absolute minimum.*'

4.5 **Design South East** were twice consulted on the emerging proposals through design review sessions, in April and November 2019.

4.6 It is of particular note, as set out in paragraph 4.2.2 that '*the panel broadly supports the scheme and has no major issues with use, quantum, height and massing*'.

4.7 The Design South East November 2019 report quoted in the Committee Report goes on to note the need for more obvious entry to the north-south route from Vastern Road (paragraphs 1.2 and 1.3) and also how the route through the Appeal Site:

'...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.'

[my emphasis]

4.8 The **Natural Environment** officer notes in paragraph 4.19.15 of the Committee Report that:

'When viewed from both Vastern Road and Christchurch Meadows, the proposal presents a large scale of building

frontage that is not in scale with adjacent houses or office buildings. The visuals provided within the DAS illustrate how imposing the proposal is from those viewpoints, albeit the design is much improved on the Vastern Road frontage in terms of appearance by omission of the originally proposed upper story building link between Blocks A & B (as originally proposed at pre-app stage).'

4.9 The commentary goes on to note that:

'...the EA have expressed concern about the height of the buildings and detrimental impact on the river. Whilst an offset has been provided from the river this has only resulted in a 5m buffer strip in front of the buildings which limits meaningful tree planting in terms of large canopy species, which is what should be provided in this location to be in line with objectives of the Tree Strategy (the river being a designated treed corridor) and to enable planting to adequately soften the buildings. The EA's comments emphasise the need to increase the width of this buffer to include the 10m from the river edge and greater space for landscaping which the Natural Environment officer agrees with.'

4.10 **Caversham and District Residents Association (CADRA)** notes in paragraph 4.25.3

'...the 10 residential storeys proposed for the eastern block on the site is excessive and not in accordance with the framework. There will be significant new overshadowing of the River Thames as indicated in the applicants Daylight/ Sunlight report. The proposed 10 storey eastern block alongside the Thames is also substantially higher than the successful Thames Water HQ building to the east. The skyline as viewed from the Thames itself and from Christchurch Meadows will be damaged.'

4.11 The **planning officer** notes in paragraph 6.13:

'...the impact of the tall buildings on the appearance and character of this part of the riverside for the many who come here to walk along either bank. From either direction passers-by currently enjoy low level buildings or buildings set so far back from the tow path that they do not compete with the character and appearance being dominated by the river [sic].

...

there is a clear risk that the proposed buildings will harm this character by being too high and too close to the tow path and dominating the view. The design accepts there is a risk and tries to mitigate it by setting back the top 2 storeys but officers consider that this will not prevent the harm as will be experienced by pedestrians on the tow path.'

- 4.12 The planning officer goes on to note in paragraph 6.14 that the Proposed Development would be:

'...overbearing ...for those passing through the site using the pedestrian/cycle route and particularly for the residents in properties on Lynmouth Road at about 24 metres to the west. Trees are proposed planted on the boundary to help screen views eventually but will be a significant change to the outlook for these residents. Therefore, by addressing the constraint on the east of the site the development would create an oppressive character and fails to address the constraint on the west boundary. Block F and the house at Block G have been designed to be small enough to not have an adverse effect on views from outside the site but in the context of the other new blocks proposed risk looking incongruous and out of place.'

- 4.13 In Paragraph 6.17, the planning officer notes that:

'Officers are satisfied that in terms of appearance the proposed scale and design of Blocks A and B are acceptable.'

- 4.14 In the Update Report of 31st March 2021, The **Reading Civic Society** note in paragraph 1.9 that:

'5. It seems unlikely that the Substation/ SSE equipment will be removed unless RBC is able to exercise due influence. A pragmatic approach must be taken with the vision for the clear line of sight whilst also seeking a good scheme for Reading.'

- 4.15 The Civic Society go on to note in paragraph 1.11:

'Design and proposals for the site - Overall the Committee rated the final design very highly and felt it was one of the best we had seen for some time. We consider this to be a high-quality proposal which delivers significant housing benefits. We felt that the progressive refinements in design had sought to responded [sic] to concerns about the impact on the Thames, the concerns of neighbours and the constraints imposed by the SSE equipment remaining.'

- 4.16 It is notable that the Committee Report did not mention the submitted TVIA at all or make any references to the photomontages appended to it and no evidence was provided to suggest that detailed and specialist professional advice has been sought regarding townscape and visual impacts. The only design advice received by the Council was from DSE (report dated November 2019) who broadly supported the scheme, including in terms of height and massing.

- 4.17 The TVIA concludes that there would be beneficial effects on townscape character in relation to the townscape adjoining the riverside. Neither this conclusion nor its underlying justification appeared to have been considered by officers.
- 4.18 I consider that omission of reference the TVIA was potentially misleading to Members in restricting the opportunity to consider a professional opinion of the townscape and visual impacts of the Proposed Development. Other submitted material relating to key matters, including the Transport Statement, Design and Access Statement, Ecological Assessment, Planning Statement and Heritage Statement were all referenced in the Committee Report. Following this omission being highlighted in a letter from Barton Willmore dated 29th March 2021, inevitably, the Update Report claims (in paragraph 7.3) that the TVIA had been taken into account in the assessment of the application. This claim nevertheless remains surprising given the importance that the Council are now according this issue and the fact that professional inputs made in relation to other issues identified by the Council were fully referenced in the Committee Report.

5.0 POLICY RELEVANT TO TOWNSCAPE AND VISUAL CONSIDERATIONS

5.1 Planning policy of relevance to townscape and visual considerations is set out below.

Reading Borough Local Plan (Adopted, November 2019)

5.2 Policy CC7: Design and the Public Realm, states:

'All development must be of high design quality that maintains and enhances the character and appearance of the area of Reading in which it is located. The various components of development form, including:

- *Layout: urban structure and urban grain;*
- *Landscape;*
- *Density and mix;*
- *Scale: height and massing; and*
- *Architectural detail and materials*

will be assessed to ensure that the development proposed makes a positive contribution to the following urban design objectives:

- *Character - a place with its own identity and sense of place;*
- *Continuity and enclosure;*
- *Quality of the public realm and provision of green infrastructure and landscaping;*
- *Ease of movement and permeability;*
- *Legibility - clear image and easy to understand;*
- *...*

Developments will also be assessed to ensure that they:

- *Respond positively to their local context and create or reinforce local character and distinctiveness, including protecting and enhancing the historic environment of the Borough and providing value to the public realm;*
- *... Are visually attractive as a result of good high quality built forms and spaces, the inclusion of public art and appropriate materials and landscaping' (p.28)*

5.3 Policy CC8: Safeguarding Amenity, states:

'Development will not cause a significant detrimental impact to the living environment of existing or new residential properties, in terms of:

- *“Visual dominance and overbearing effects of a development ...” (p.26)*

5.4 Policy EN7: Local Green Space and Public Open Space, states:

- *‘The following Local Green Spaces (LGS) and Public Open Space (POS), as shown on the Proposals Map, will be protected from development. Proposals that would result in the loss of any of these areas of open space, erode their quality through insensitive adjacent development or jeopardise their use or enjoyment by the public, will not be permitted (...)’ (p.42)*

5.5 In this respect, Christchurch Meadows is designated as a Local Green Space.

5.6 Policy EN11: Waterspaces, states:

‘Reading’s waterspaces will be protected and enhanced, so that they can continue to contribute to local and regional biodiversity and ecology, flood mitigation, local character, heritage and visual amenity, the provision of accessible leisure and recreational opportunities and, where appropriate, navigation. There will be no adverse impact on the functions and setting of any watercourse and its associated corridor.

Where development in the vicinity of watercourses is acceptable, it will:

- *Provide appropriate, attractive uses and buildings that enhance the relationship of buildings, spaces and routes to the watercourse, including through creating or enhancing views of the watercourse, and create a high quality public realm;*
- *Make positive contributions to the distinct character, appearance, historic significance, landscape and amenity of the watercourses;*
- *Provide a strengthened role for watercourses as important landscape features, wildlife corridors, historic features and recreation opportunities;*
- *Wherever practical and consistent with its biodiversity role, provide good, level access to and along the waterside for all those who want to use it;*
- *Be set at least ten metres back from the watercourse wherever practicable and appropriate to protect its biodiversity significance;*
...’ (p.49)

5.7 Policy EN12: Biodiversity and the Green Network, states:

- *‘(...) New development shall demonstrate how the location and type of green space, landscaping and water features provided within a scheme have been arranged such that*

they maintain or link into the existing Green Network and contribute to its consolidation (...).' (p.51)

5.8 The policy states that, among other features, the River Thames and Local Green Spaces form part of the Green Network.

5.9 Policy EN13: Major Landscape Features and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty states:

'Planning permission will not be granted for any development that would detract from the character or appearance of a Major Landscape Feature. The following areas, as shown on the Proposals Map, are defined as Major Landscape Features:

- *The Thames Valley;*
- *...*

5.10 Policy EN14: Trees, Hedges and Woodlands, states:

- *'Individual trees, groups of trees, hedges and woodlands will be protected from damage or removal where they are of importance, and Reading's vegetation cover will be extended. The quality of waterside vegetation will be maintained or enhanced;*
- *New development shall make provision for tree retention and planting within the application site, particularly on the street frontage, or off-site in appropriate situations, to improve the level of tree coverage within the Borough, to maintain and enhance the character and appearance of the area in which a site is located, to provide for biodiversity and to contribute to measures to reduce carbon and adapt to climate change. Measures must be in place to ensure that these trees are adequately maintained.'* (p.55)

5.11 Policy CR2: Design in Central Reading (which includes the Appeal Site), states:

'Applications for development within Central Reading should demonstrate the following attributes:

- a) *Development will build on and respect the existing grid layout structure of the central area, providing continuity and enclosure through appropriate relationships between buildings and spaces, and frontages that engage with the street at lower levels, and contributing towards enhanced ease of movement through and around the central area;*
- b) *Development will provide appropriate, well designed public spaces and other public realm, including squares, open spaces, streetscape, utilising high quality and well maintained hard and soft landscaped areas, and public art, that provide suitable functions and interest, sense of place and safe and convenient linkages to adjoining areas;*
- c) *Development should consider and, where possible, include ways of providing green infrastructure designed into the development, for instance through roof gardens, green*

walls and green roofs, to enhance the otherwise very urban environment;

- d) The architectural details and materials used in the central area should be high quality and respect the form and quality of the detailing and materials in areas local to the development site;**
- e) Development and any associated public realm should contribute to the diversity of the central area...’ (p.130)**

5.12 Policy CR3: Public Realm in Central Reading, states:

‘Proposals for new development will need to make a positive contribution towards the quality of the public realm of the central area and will be assessed against the following criteria:

- ...’**
- ii) Imaginative uses of open space and the public realm, which contribute to the offer of the centre, will be encouraged, and new open spaces should be of a size and shape to be flexible enough to accommodate such uses. The provision of water features, trees (including street trees) and other planting, as well as hard landscaping, to create high-quality spaces, will be encouraged;**
- iii) Development proposals adjacent to or in close proximity to waterways will retain and not impede existing continuous public access to and along the waterways, and will provide legible continuous public access to and along the waterways where this does not currently exist;**
- iv) The design of developments adjacent to a waterway, including the refurbishment of existing buildings, will be required to enhance the appearance of the waterways and to provide active elevations facing the waterways. Development that turns its back on the waterways and results in blank or mundane elevations facing the waterways will not be permitted (...).’ (p.54)**

5.13 Policy CR4: Leisure, Culture and Tourism in Central Reading, states:

‘The River Thames is a prime location for new or improved tourist attractions, and as such, this area is suitable for informal recreation and sporting uses and associated small-scale development, as well as improvements to management and access. Development or improvements in this area will be expected to add to or maintain the setting and character of the Thames and to conserve and enhance ecological value.’

5.14 Policy CR11: Station/River Major Opportunity Area, states in general terms that:

‘Development in the Station/River Major Opportunity Area will:

- i) Contribute towards providing a high-density mix of uses to create a destination in itself and capitalise on its role as one of the most accessible locations in the south east. ...;**

ii) 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;

iii) Provide developments that front onto and provide visual interest to existing and future pedestrian routes and open spaces;

...

v) Provide additional areas of open space where possible, with green infrastructure, including a direct landscaped link between the station and the River Thames;

***vi) Give careful consideration to the areas of transition to low and medium density residential...'* (p.145)**

- 5.15 In specific relation to the Appeal Site, which forms part of sub-area CR11g: Riverside, the policy goes on to state 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. ...'

- 5.16 Figure 5.3 on p.149 shows a Key Movement Route through the Appeal Site and adjacent substation, as well as a New Area of Open Space at the southern landing of Christchurch Bridge, alongside which is an area for Activation of Key Routes and Spaces with Town Centre Uses.

National Planning Policy Framework

- 5.17 Section 12 of the NPPF sets out requirements for achieving well-designed places. Paragraph 124 outlines the importance of the design of the built environment and states that ***'good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, creates better places in which to live and work and helps make development acceptable to communities.'***
- 5.18 Paragraph 127 goes on to state:

'Planning policies and decisions should ensure that developments:

- a) ***Will function well and add to the overall quality of the area, not just for the short term but over the lifetime of the development;***
- b) ***Are visually attractive as a result of good architecture, layout and appropriate and effective landscaping;***
- c) ***Are sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape setting, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation or change (such as increased densities);***
- d) ***Establish or maintain a strong sense of place, using the arrangement of streets, spaces, building types and materials to create attractive, welcoming and distinctive places to live, work and visit;***
- e) ***Optimise the potential of the site to accommodate and sustain an appropriate amount and mix of development (including green and other public space) and support local facilities and transport networks; and***
- f) ***Create places that are safe, inclusive and accessible and which promote health and well-being with a high standard of amenity for existing and future users and where crime and disorder, and the fear of crime, do not undermine the quality of life or community cohesion and resilience.'***

5.19 Paragraph 130 states:

- ***'Permission should be refused for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions, taking into account any local design standards or style guides in plans or supplementary planning documents. Conversely, where the design of a development accords with clear expectations in plan policies, design should not be used by the decision-maker as a valid reason to object to development (...).'***

5.20 Paragraph 131 states:

- ***'In determining applications, great weight should be given to outstanding or innovative designs which promote high levels of sustainability, or help raise the standard of design more generally in an area, so long as they fit in with the overall form and layout of their surroundings.'***

5.21 Under Section 15 of the NPPF: Conserving and Enhancing the Natural Environment, Paragraph 170 states that planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:

- ***'a) protecting and enhancing valued landscapes ... ;***
- ***b) recognising ... the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services ... ;***
- ***... '***

5.22 I note that the Council do not refer to any of these paragraphs in RFRs 1-3.

National Planning Practice Guidance / National Design Guide

5.23 The Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) provides guidance to support the NPPF. In respect of Design, PPG refers to the National Design Guide (NDG), published in September 2019, which sets out the characteristics of well-designed places. NDG is structured around 10 Characteristics. Of particular relevance to consideration of townscape and visual matters associated with the Appeal Site and Proposed Development are the characteristics of:

- Context, which includes emphasis on creating a positive sense of place, integration into the surroundings, influenced by and influencing the context positively and understanding opportunities for design as well as constraints;
- Identity, which includes emphasis on responding to local character and identity, including the distinctive elements of a place, as well as creating new character and identity where relevant;
- Built Form, which includes emphasis on compact, walkable development, streets and spaces defined by buildings and memorable features or groupings of buildings;
- Movement, which includes emphasis on walkable streets that help people to find their way around, form spaces that promote activity and social interaction and include green infrastructure, especially street trees;
- Nature, which includes emphasis on a variety of landscapes, connectivity of spaces and contribution to wider green infrastructure; and
- Public Spaces, which includes emphasis on being useful and attractive, supporting social interaction, enabling non-vehicular movement and including trees and other planting.

5.24 I note that the Council do not refer to any guidance within the National Design Guide within RFRs 1-3.

Further Council Documentation

Reading Borough Council Reading Station Area Framework Supplementary Planning Document (adopted December 2010)

5.25 The Reading Station Area Framework (RSAF) sets out six principles for the RSAF in guiding development within the Station Area, which should achieve; '***A vital and enjoyable place, a place to work, a place to live, a well connected and accessible place, a place to value and a highly sustainable place***'. The Appeal Site falls within the Station Area Boundary as defined in Figure 2.1 (p.12) of the RSAF.

5.26 The delivery of quality public realm within the Station Area is a key consideration of the RSAF, which sets out on page 24 the following detailed aims for achieving quality public spaces:

- *"Stitching" together the various development sites within the Area, both visually and physically;*
- *Unifying the area through a coordinated design approach that utilises the best contemporary modern materials and street furniture;*
- *Creating an environment that is busy, overlooked and safe through its relationship with adjoining buildings ("passive surveillance");*
- *Contributing to the character and identity of the town centre, helping to instil a strong sense of place and underpinning investment;*
- *Creating more opportunities for sustainable forms of transport, particularly walking and cycling, by enhancing the connectivity and legibility of the area.'*

5.27 Ten Public Realm priorities are listed within the RSAF, eight are specific location references and two general themes, of which the Appeal Site relates to Priority 3: Kennet-Thames Spine; Priority 4: Riverside Path and Water Spines; Priority 5: Vastern Road; and Priority 8: Riverside Open Space, Pedestrian Grid and Landscaping and Public Art.

5.28 Priority 3: Kennet-Thames Spine, states:

'A major "city spine" – a direct pedestrian route – is proposed through the historic core, the Station Area and through to the Thames. This spine is based on the north-south link which is the most significant movement corridor in the RCAAP [Reading Central Area Action Plan, now superseded], and is vital to the success of development in this area. The spine will extend across the Thames with a new footbridge(s) and new riverside parks, which can act as amenity space for new residents. The spine will include enhancements including wider pavements and greater pedestrian priority in Station Road. North of the railway, the spine will incorporate a 'green link' towards the river. Buildings will face onto the spine rather than away from it, and, on all parts of the spine south of Vastern Road, the frontages will be enlivened with active uses including retail and leisure.' (p.26)

5.29 Priority 4: Riverside Path and Water Spines, states:

'The extensive network of open spaces along the Thames and immediately adjacent to the Station Area are a valuable amenity which can act as counterpoint to the planned intensive urban development around the station. They will need to be closely linked through new and improved footpaths, river crossings etc.'

***Improvements to the riverside path along the south side of the Thames are proposed with the potential for 'pocket parks' to be opened up by negotiation with private land-owners. This will be combined with extension and enhancement of the routes leading from the river into the heart of the Station Area.'* (p.26)**

5.30 Priority 5: Vastern Road, states:

***'Potential changes to Vastern Road could reduce the dominance of speeding traffic and transform the character of the road from a by-pass at the edge of the town centre into a tree lined avenue as a central element of the town centre public realm, by planting in the central reservation and creating planted verges.'* (p.27)**

5.31 Priority 8: Riverside Open Space, states:

***'An area of high quality public realm will be created where the north-south spine meets the south bank of the Thames. This will not be of a large size, due to space constraints, but will be a high quality space to complement the tranquil nature of the Thames at this point.'* (p.27)**

5.32 'Landscaping' is also listed as a priority theme for the Station Area public realm. Under this heading, paragraphs 5.21 and 5.22 state:

'Although the development of the Station Area is unlikely to result in major new areas of green space, there will be a significant opportunity to provide new landscaping (...)

***In particular, the Council wishes to see new tree planting in the area. The Council's Tree Strategy (adopted 2010) states that the Council will seek to prioritise the protection, maintenance and planting of trees that enhance the appearance of central Reading, particularly its various [sic] public realm. There should be new tree planting along Vastern Road, for instance, including the central reservation.'* (p.29)**

5.33 The RSAF sets out guidance on development density, mass and height. The Appeal Site is partially covered by individual development plots **N1** and **N2**. In relation to density the document states that plots N1 and N2 should reflect a '**Medium**' density range (Figure 6.7, p.35).

5.34 In relation to massing the RSAF states:

***'Development in the Station Area should be characterised by high density development with an intense, fine grained urban fabric framing flexible development plots capable of adaptation to many land uses, combinations of land uses (vertical and horizontal) and many building types and forms.'* (p.34)**

5.35 In terms of building heights, the RSAF uses landmark and benchmark heights, which are then applied to each individual development plot. Plot N1 is assigned a benchmark height of 4 storeys whilst Plot N2 6 storeys (Figure 6.9, p.37). Neither Plots N1 or N2 are considered in terms of landmark building heights.

5.36 The guidance does include for a degree of flexibility in benchmark heights, subject to specific criteria, as stated in paragraph 6.23:

'Benchmark heights may be modified upwards in order to realise certain urban design or other major planning benefits, or where applicants have demonstrated convincingly that the potential impact of higher buildings on the surroundings can be mitigated.' (p.36)

5.37 Paragraphs 6.28 and 6.29 make specific recommendations concerning building heights that relate to the Appeal Site and its immediate context:

'Much of the surrounding area consists of fairly low density, low rise residential areas. High-density development can also be achieved through lower-rise compact development forms and this will be particularly appropriate immediately adjoining low rise residential areas to the west of Caversham Road and the residential streets leading from Vastern Road northwards towards the Thames (e.g. Lynmouth Road);

A transition zone (buffer zone) should be formed towards adjacent areas (particularly the historic core of the town and low-rise residential areas to the west and north) with heights stepping down so that they relate appropriately to surrounding development and residential areas. Development should respect the amenity, privacy and light requirements of these properties (...).' (p.37)

5.38 Figure 6.10 (p.38) considers sensitive receptors within the Station Area and identifies properties along Lynmouth Road, which immediately abut the western boundary of the Appeal Site, as within an area of ***'particular sensitivity to the effects of tall buildings'***. Terraced properties along Vastern Road and De Montfort Road, to the north-west of the Site, also lie within this area.

5.39 Figure 7.2 Shorter Distance Views, on page 42, shows views extending north and south from the station and River Thames through the SSE substation as 'new views to be created'. Paragraph 7.10 states that:

'The new development will result in new views being opened up within the Station Area itself. Of particular significance are views along the direct north-south link, between the Station and the Thames, where there should be an unbroken line of sight.'

- 5.40 No further justification for this assertion is provided.
- 5.41 Figure 8.2 shows the Framework Structure and includes a 'Major Path/Pedestrian Link' extending partly through the Appeal Site and partly through the SSE substation to the east, between Christchurch Bridge and Vastern Road.
- 5.42 Figure 8.3 shows the Framework Diagram and includes an 'Ingress of Creek' as a central linear feature extending south-west from the Thames, partly through the Appeal Site and partly through the SSE substation to the east. No other reference to this feature is provided within RSAF, nor is any justification for this proposal set out, including for example that there was ever a creek in this location or that this is characteristic of the Thames riverside in this vicinity, neither of which are the case.
- 5.43 Figures 14.1-14.11 illustrate an indicative vision of the Station Area, including landmark buildings at the northern end of the Appeal Site, adjoining the riverside (see in particular Figure 14.5); and a broad, tree-lined canal extending through the Appeal Site and adjoining substation.

Reading Borough Council Tree Strategy (March 2021)

- 5.44 This document is adopted by the Council but does not constitute policy or a Supplementary Planning Document. It is an aspirational document setting out a series of objectives and aims for tree planting within Reading.
- 5.45 In Appendix 3 of this document, Figure 17, the River Thames is identified as a 'Treed Corridor'. Paragraph 1.65 states that these corridors **'are a priority for tree retention and planting to provide green corridors into, out of and through the town'**.
- 5.46 In relation to Where and How to Plant, paragraph 3.44 of the document states that **'When determining the right species to plant in any location, the Council will have due regard to the 'Right tree, Right Place' principle'**.
- 5.47 In relation to Climate Change, paragraph 3.60 states that the Council will **'aim to secure space for large canopy species within development sites'**.

6.0 SUMMARY CONSIDERATION OF TOWNSCAPE AND VISUAL EFFECTS

- 6.1 Section 6 of the TVIA sets out a detailed consideration of townscape and visual effects of the Proposed Development. I summarise these considerations here, noting also the revision to the Proposed Development since the submission of the TVIA, in the form of the revised energy strategy, requiring the introduction of rooftop plant on a number of blocks.
- 6.2 In terms of **Townscape Features**, as set out in the TVIA, I consider that there would be major beneficial effects on townscape features, from the introduction of a comprehensive, legible and visually interesting range of hard surface materials, and notably from the introduction of approximately 57 no. trees, of semi-mature planting stock, for the loss of the two existing small trees. The proposed trees would create an instant effect of structural contribution, sense of place, shelter, human scale, tranquillity, green relief and visual interest. Furthermore, extensive shrub planting would be provided through the Proposed Development. There would be a concentration of tree and shrub planting adjoining the riverside at the north-eastern edge of the Appeal Site and along the north-south link.
- 6.3 In terms of **Views**, as set out in the TVIA, including detailed assessment of visual effects in **TVIA Appendix 4**, I consider that there would be beneficial effects on nearly all visual receptor groups. The exception would be a limited number of residential properties on Lynmouth Road, where the introduction of built form where there is currently very little, would inevitably increase the perception of enclosure and loss of sky, notwithstanding the range of mitigation approaches employed to reduce such effects. Among other points, these measures include a considered progression in scale; variation between block sizes and rooflines in the view; and tree planting along the boundary with the residential properties. As a result, I consider that residual adverse effects would be reduced to not more than moderate significance for properties at the northern and southern ends of Lynmouth Road; and minor-moderate significance for properties in the centre of Lynmouth Road.
- 6.4 With specific regard to views from the **riverside corridor including Christchurch meadows** (receptor locations 6-11 and 16-18) receptors would typically experience the following in terms of beneficial changes:
- Creation of a strong reinforcement of sense of place in the view, by replacing the existing utilitarian townscape of the Appeal Site, which forms a void in the urban grain and is a negative influence on character, as well as the largely non-descript skyline beyond, at the point where at a human, pedestrian level the evolving town centre meets the Thames.

- Introduction of a positive townscape frontage on the southern riverbank facing Christchurch Bridge and Christchurch Meadows, including built form of a scale reflecting this notable interface. This would affirm the closer relationship of Christchurch Meadows with the town centre and herald the urban character of the town centre to the south (see **CGI 3** in **TVIA Appendix 5**).
- Provision of a positive landscaped setting to the southern riverbank, including riparian shrub and tree planting, as part of a new southern landing of the bridge.
- The scale of built form at the riverside and alongside Vastern Road would provide legible steps in the visual linkage perceived from the wider townscape, between tall buildings in the town centre and the river corridor and echo the role of substantial built forms in signalling the presence of river crossings, as seen elsewhere in Reading and at Reading Bridge and Caversham Bridge (**CGIs** and **Photomontages**).
- Beyond the riverside landscaping, substantial built form and public realm would create visual interest and a positive sense of place. A positive built frontage to the river, including through fenestration and balconies, would allow a perception of human engagement and visual links with the river corridor.
- Reflection of the distinctive industrial heritage of the Appeal Site, including use of the industrial aesthetic for façade and roofline articulation and brick as a façade material, with reference to the detailing of the historic structures on the Appeal Site. Brickwork would also reflect the Thames valley geology. In addition, the glazed rooftop pavilions in the riverside blocks reference riverside pavilions/villas/garden rooms in reflecting the character of the wider Thames corridor, creating a distinct and more leisurely character at the riverside (**CGIs** and **Photomontages**).
- The industrial design aesthetic would contrast positively with the character of residential apartment blocks and offices along the riverside to the north-west and south-east, which lack distinctiveness and a strong sense of place. As such, a strong industrial aesthetic of built form would vary between the more robust and purposeful character at the Vastern Road edge of the Site (**CGI 4** and **Photomontages P4** and **P5**), including the strong patterning of the upper parts of the taller volumes; and the more leisured appearance of the glass pavilions on the riverside blocks (**CGI 3** and **Photomontages**).

6.5 I also note the following points in relation to these views:

- The Proposed Development would focus height on the south-eastern side of the Appeal Site, in keeping with the scale of the Poplar belt to the south-east and away from smaller-scale residential properties on Lynmouth Road to the north-west, from which a progression in scale from the existing 2.5-3 storeys, through 4, 6 and 6+2 (rooftop pavilion) storeys, would be provided.

- The substantial built form would create a strong sense of enclosure on the southern side of the river, in keeping with other built forms creating enclosure along the riverside. Varied façade treatments, on both the horizontal and vertical axis, would break up the perceived massing, assist in creating progression in scale and create visual interest and a stronger sense of place. Such detailing would provide a distinct perception of bottom-middle-top in the taller built forms. The use of windows and balconies creates further variation in façades, as well as a perception of active human usage of the built form. The glazed rooftop pavilions would provide lightness in form and diminish the perceived massing. The setting-back of the rooftop pavilions would diminish the vertical scale of the riverside frontage.
- Cranked (concave angled) building lines in the riverside blocks further soften the scale and massing of built form and contribute to a more relaxed character of built form adjacent to the river.
- Tree planting would soften the frontage of built form to the river, albeit not to such an extent that the sense of connection between the built forms and river is diminished and the dynamism of vertical form of considerable interest as seen elsewhere adjacent to the river is missed. The establishment of this planting over 15 years would provide further softening and anchoring of the built form.
- In views from Christchurch Bridge, the built form and landscape forming the bridge setting and landing would provide a strong spatial invitation from this viewpoint into the expanding town centre and a visually interesting focal point in the view. Whilst the backdrop to the bridge would change, the proposed built form would respect the views from the bridge of the bridge support pier and tracery of the suspension cables above. The built form, by creating a gap in massing between blocks D and E, would maintain the prominence of the bridge pier and complement rather than compete with the vertical patterns. The materiality would form a backdrop allowing the very pale colours of the bridge support pier to remain distinct and prominent.

6.6 On this basis, I consider beneficial effects in these views along the river corridor at year 1 would range from minor to moderate significance. At year 15, the reduction in adverse change through the establishment of riverside planting would result in beneficial effects ranging from minor to moderate-major significance.

6.7 This takes account of the addition of rooftop plant, as part of pre-determination refinements, after the TVIA was submitted, which would very slightly increase the adverse aspects of the change in views from Reading Bridge (receptor location 17), to medium-small at year 1 and small at year 15. However, these limited magnitudes of adverse change would continue to be outweighed by beneficial change of medium magnitude such that on balance, there would be

beneficial effects in this view, of minor significance at year 1 and of minor-moderate significance at year 15.

6.8 In terms of effects on **Townscape Character**, as set out in the TVIA section 5, I consider that there would be beneficial changes in terms of the legibility of the River Thames at the interface with the expanding town centre; the quality of linkage across the river, between the town centre and Christchurch Meadows; and the distinctiveness of the setting. I set out below a summary of the detailed considerations under each of these themes, over and above factors already mentioned above in relation to beneficial changes in view.

6.9 Legibility of the River Thames at the interface with the expanding town centre:

- The Proposed Development would celebrate the presence of the Thames waterside in the expanding Reading town centre where typically, it is hidden or perceived as distant from the town centre.
- The Proposed Development would draw the River Thames into the expanding townscape of Reading town centre, through improved legibility using built forms that complement the role of Christchurch Bridge in signposting the River Thames across the wider townscape; through more inviting and legible connectivity; and through enhanced riverside public realm.
- The Proposed Development would provide a positive landscaped setting to the southern riverbank, avoiding disengagement of the open space from the riverside, as seen in the substantial enclosure of riverside space at Covea to the south-east, by providing naturalistic planting and visual, physical and perceptual permeability (**CGI 3**).
- The perception of the river corridor would be enhanced through a natural planted setting as part of managing the level change to the bridge landing, adding visual interest to the riverside public realm. This vegetation would not prevent the potential for a strong perception of overlooking of the path from the proposed built form (**CGI 3**).
- The link to the river from Vastern Road would hint at the natural qualities of the waterside destination and open space beyond, through a strong influence of planting along the route (**CGIs 1-4**).

6.10 Linkage across the river:

- Signalling a river crossing with substantial built form, as is typical in Reading, albeit to a more accentuated degree than at Caversham Bridge as the Appeal Site is more closely linked to the heart of the town centre and is part of a visionary new route set out in policy aspirations (**CGI 3** and **Photomontages P2, P3** and **P6**).

- Contributing to a rhythm along the riverbank townscape, where prominent buildings rise up above the adjoining forms at the points where crossings are obtained.
- Enhancing the legibility of the wider green link north-south between Caversham and the town centre as a direct, non-vehicular route by introducing strong human interest in the built form and public realm, including seating, material patterning and soft landscape (**CGIs**).
- Arranging built development and landscape to provide a strong spatial invitation to pedestrians and cyclists crossing the bridge from the north into the expanding town centre (**CGI 3**).
- Providing a continuous ramped link from the raised Christchurch Bridge landing to the level of Vastern Road, which zig-zags at the riverside to manage the level change between street and bridge level in such a way as to slow movement and increase contemplation of the riverside (**CGIs 2 and 3**).
- The zig-zag ramps also provide an open space with café and seating to further enhance the sense of place and leisurely character of the riverside (**CGIs 2 and 3**). Stepped links are available to provide shortcuts in the zig-zag. A further ramp links with the south bank riverside path so that the open space and legible linkages to and from the town centre are readily accessible from the water's edge (**CGI 3**).
- Creating substantial public realm open space adjacent to the riverside, 'owned' by both residents and passers-by, well-animated by movement along the various routes and by a café pavilion and lit by an openness to the south-west, resulting from the lower height of the south-western wing of block D. (**CGI 3**).
- Providing linkage through the Appeal Site defined by a clear hard surfacing treatment and substantial canopy trees, smaller street trees and linear belts of shrub planting, providing a well-vegetated character and strong legibility of the 'green link' route (**CGIs**).
- Providing legible transitions between public and semi-private realm (**CGIs**).
- Enhancing the north-south route of the green link at Vastern Road through positive treatment of the ground floor frontages, including planting to soften the streetscene; a legible and inviting public realm; and a dynamic scale of gateway built form that signals clearly that the pedestrian and cycle route across Vastern Road and on to the river is as important as the vehicular route along the road, in response to RSAF Public Realm Priority 5.
- Identifying the entrance to the green link from Vastern Road with a flared public realm, with surface patterning referencing the historic use of the Appeal Site as rail sidings and potential for a focal public art feature (**CGI 4**).
- Whilst the surface of the green link is clear and legible in itself, marking the course of the route by a series of visual closure points of projecting façades and block ends,

providing: subdivisions reinforcing the human scale and intimacy of the route; incident and interest along the route; the stepped revealing of the route, including glimpses of the pier of Christchurch Bridge, when moving north; and reinforcement of the identity of distinct nodal points along the way (**CGIs**).

- Ensuring residential development has a close perceptual relationship with the public realm, creating a sense that the space is 'owned' by people using and observing it (**CGIs**).

6.11 Distinctiveness of the setting:

- Planting would reinforce a natural influence at the edge of the expanded town centre (**CGI 3**).
- Creation of an open space focal point at the riverside from where the river can be appreciated (**CGI 3**).
- Balancing a riverside location with its immediate setting near the centre of a large, busy urban area which is a key regional communication and transport hub.
- Relating to both the river and the town centre, bringing the life and activity of the town centre to the languor of the Thames.
- Providing anticipation of the riverside on the movement corridor through tight control of spaces, as at Clearwater Court, where substantial built form, public realm and water are juxtaposed in dynamic and exciting fashion, creating visual interest and a positive sense of place.
- Reflecting the aspiration in the (now superseded) Reading Central Area Action Plan for a combination of 'market town intimacy' with 'modern, intensive, well-designed, well connected, highly accessible urban development'. (**CGI 3**).
- Providing access to the elevated bridge landing and reflecting the general north-east – south-west pattern of the adjoining streets to the west.
- At the street scene, softening character and reflecting the intricacy and human interest of domestic character to the west. Use of such a pattern and grain would help knit the Proposed Development into the townscape, even though it would inevitably be of a different scale and character to the domestic terraces to the west.

6.12 A number of mitigation approaches are employed to minimise any potential adverse changes in character arising from the increase in massing in this area, notably:

- progression in scale from residential properties on Lynmouth Road to the west (albeit noting that the utilitarian character of the Appeal Site already constitutes a marked change in character from the residential properties);
- tree planting on the boundary with Lynmouth Road properties;

- variation in roofline and façade articulation and details – of notable relevance on the north-east facing riverside frontages (which will inevitably be shaded much of the day) and north-west facing frontages to Lynmouth Road;
- varied use of balconies and windows;
- visual interest and intimacy in the public realm;
- a strong sense of enclosure on the southern side of the river, in keeping with other development, albeit alleviated by the frontage landscaping and set back of upper storeys of built form;
- the more relaxed massing and articulation in the riverside blocks; and
- a sensitive and complementary relationship with Christchurch Bridge support pier.

6.13 Mindful of the above considerations, as detailed in the TVIA, I consider that there would be beneficial effects on townscape character at an Appeal Site and local level, notably given that the description in the Council's RTBS (2008, updated 2018) of Character Area 22, which includes the majority of the Appeal Site, concludes that it is '*an unexceptional area of townscape which does not respond well to the surrounding residential land use... [building design] is unattractive and creates a weak and uninspiring area of townscape.*' In particular, I consider that there would be beneficial effects on the character of the river corridor, principally as a result of the proposed combination of visually interesting built form and frontage landscaping, contrasted with the existing situation of a fence-topped retaining wall to a car park.

7.0 TOWNSCAPE AND VISUAL RESPONSE TO COUNCIL'S POSITION

7.1 In the light of the above consideration of townscape and visual effects, I consider now the Council's position, as set out in the aspects of the RFRs of relevance to townscape and visual considerations; and consultation comments, as set out in my section 4 above.

RFR 1

'...fails to provide a high quality north-south link through the site by virtue of related public realm, safety and directness concerns, largely due to the alignment of the site and overprovision of proposed buildings...'

7.2 I furthermore note that, as set out in section 4 above, in this respect, the Committee Report references the need for an *'unbroken line of sight'* between the station and the Thames. I therefore consider here *the visual aspects of the north-south link through the Appeal Site*.

7.3 I consider this requirement for a direct visual link misplaced. As paragraph 4.45 of the Committee Report accepts, the retained SSE substation means that this visual link cannot readily be delivered (see **Design Addendum** of November 2020 for illustration of this limitation) and that the focus should therefore be on minimising *'visual fragmentation'* of the route.

7.4 In this respect, it is of note that the distinctive Christchurch Bridge support pier, which lies near to the northern bank of the river, is not on the same axis as the route shown in the RSAF as a result of the angle of the bridge; and, as demonstrated in section 2 above, massing planned for in the RSAF will screen the bridge support pier from the wider townscape to the south. Therefore, mindful of the obstacle presented by the substation, visibility of the support pier from the south is only likely to be achieved from near distances. In the opposite direction, the substation also means that a direct view of the railway station would not be achievable from the southern end of the bridge.

7.5 Furthermore, the visibility of the River Thames on a direct route, for example along Lynmouth Road or De Montfort Road to the west of the Appeal Site, is limited in any event. The river forms a small and relatively indistinct part of the views north and is not readily appreciated from the southern extents of these roads. As shown below, the river can only just be perceived from approximately half-way along Lynmouth Road, in the centre of the carriageway. From the pavements, views are further constrained.

Figure 13: View from approximately halfway along Lynmouth Road (outside no.13), looking north



- 7.6 In the same way, within the Proposed Development, even if the substation indenting into the eastern edge of the Appeal Site did not prevent a direct north-south route between the station and the river, the river itself would not be readily visible from any route across the Appeal Site until reaching the northern part of the Appeal Site. The cor-ten steel fencing on the bridge ramps/steps and any rising ramp or steps from within the Appeal Site to meet the elevated southern end of the bridge would also combine to interrupt views towards the river.
- 7.7 Therefore, the visual experience and legibility of the north-south link as a route through the townscape and connecting with Christchurch Bridge can only be about the legibility and coherence of the route at short distances in front of the pedestrian/cyclist, rather than views from one end of the route to the other.
- 7.8 I note that routes along which destination points at either end can be seen throughout the route can be successful. However, as well as not being achievable in this location, this requirement is also unjustified: there are many examples of successful routes through the townscape which do not rely on long forward visibility. Gordon Cullen, in his seminal 'The Concise Townscape'¹ explains the well-established principle of 'closure' as '*cutting up of*

¹ Cullen, G.; 'The Concise Townscape' (Routledge/Architectural Press, 1961), p.106

the linear town system (streets, passages etc) into visually digestible and coherent amounts whilst retaining the sense of progression.'

7.9 The author goes on to describe how:

'Closure is effected by some irregularity or asymmetry of layout whereby the path from source to goal is not automatically and inevitably revealed to the eye as in the gridiron plan. The irregularity divides the route into a series of recognisable visual statements, each one effectively and sometimes surprisingly linked to the other, so that progress on foot is rendered interesting by reason of:

- *The subdivisions created, which are human in scale;*
- *The provision of incident;*
- *The sense of unrolling or revealing;*
- *Identification [recognition of landmarks distinguishing the stages of the route]'*

7.10 The Thames Path through central London, for example on the South Bank between Bankside and London Bridge, is an excellent demonstration of a route which is defined by visual interest and variety, frequently turns direction, including away from the waterside, and does not rely on long-distance forward views to invite progress along it.

Figure 14: Thames Path, Bankside to London Bridge



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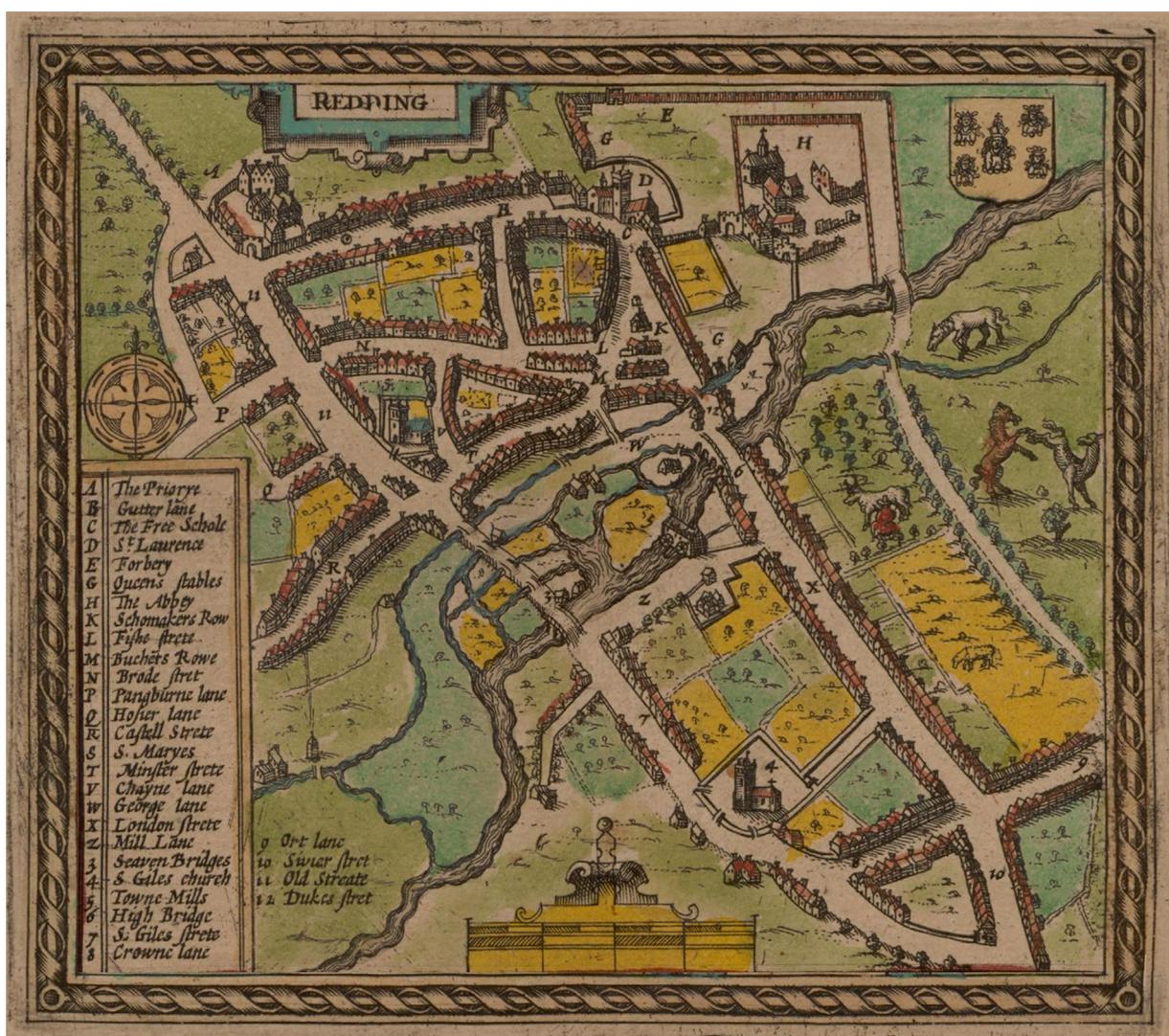
7.11 Other notable public realm corridors that do not rely on long forward visibility include the following renowned examples, shown in **Appendix 1**:

- Priors Place (cathedral to transport museum), Coventry;
- The Gold Route (station to Winter Gardens/Peace Gardens), Sheffield;
- Mill Lane-The Hayes-Victoria Place-Working Street/Trinity Street, Cardiff;

- The High Line, Manhattan (below West 18th Street); and
- Strada Nuova to Campo San Bartolomio (one of various key movement routes), Venice.

7.12 Reading's historic town centre, as a settlement built up over many centuries from Anglo-Saxon origins has few long, straight axial view corridors, and key corridors including Broad Street, Friar Street, Minster Street, High Street and Buttermarket are aligned such that they provide only short and/or curving visual corridors. Such routes are therefore characteristic of the town centre, contrary to point a) of Policy CR2 of the Local Plan which refers only to the *'existing grid layout structure of the central area'*.

Figure 15: Historic Map of Reading (1611)²



7.13 The Committee Report paragraphs 4.45 and 4.46 assert the need for visual links to be clear and direct but no justification for this is provided. Paragraph 4.46 that *'Regardless of*

² 'Map of Redding' by John Speed, 1611, sourced from Wikimedia Commons

signage and wayfaring, for the route to be successful, the visual links should be as clear and direct as possible. Without such links, the route will be less attractive and therefore less successful.'

- 7.14 I consider that this assumption is unfounded and not borne out by the reality of many successful pedestrian routes, including those in Reading itself.
- 7.15 I consider that the route from Vastern Road through the Proposed Development provides adequate visual interest to invite progress along it and that the distinct 'visual stages', as set out in paragraph 4.45 of the Committee Report, actually provide: subdivisions reinforcing the human scale and intimacy of the route; incident and interest along the route; the staged revealing of the route, including glimpses of the pier of Christchurch Bridge, when moving north; and reinforcement of the identity of distinct nodal points along the way.
- 7.16 In this respect also I note that, as set out in my section 4 above, Design South East expressed no concern with the nature of visual linkages through the Proposed Development and set out that the public realm should function as **'a sequence of [at least three] spaces'**.
- 7.17 In conclusion on this matter, the direct visual link through the Proposed Development desired by RSAF cannot be achieved (assuming it means that one can see from one end to the other), but I do not consider this in any way weakens the legibility of the route, which does not rely on long forward visibility.
- 7.18 I therefore consider that guidance in the RSAF relating to the directness of the visual link is not only undeliverable, in the context of the substation; but also in townscape and visual terms, in any event unnecessary.

RFR 2

'The combination of the proposed height and proximity of the proposed Blocks D & E to the Thames Path will harm the setting and character of the path and The River Thames'

- 7.19 I note first that the Council's Planning Officer did not express any concern in relation to the character of the Thames corridor in his **email to the Appellant of 22nd October 2020**, in which he notified his intent to complete the Committee Report recommending refusal. The fourth proposed RFR was:

'Insufficient justification on the impact of the height of the proposed buildings fronting onto the River Thames on the river and resultant impact on shading of the Thames, impact on marginal habitats and lack of a sustainable long-term

relationship between the riverside buildings and large canopy trees.'

- 7.20 No mention is made in this paragraph of the effects of the Proposed Development on the setting and character of the Thames Path and River Thames. It is unclear why RFR2 was subsequently introduced by the Council.
- 7.21 As I have set out above, I consider that in townscape and visual terms, there would in fact be an improvement in the character of the river corridor and views across and along it, as a result of the Proposed Development. This is not only as a result of removing the existing utilitarian character of the Appeal Site from the townscape but also by replacing it with a visually-interesting and locally-distinctive arrangement of built form, soft landscape and public realm along the river frontage, as illustrated in the **DAS**, section 3.6.
- 7.22 I consider that this combination of features will provide considerably greater positive contribution to the riverside than other frontages along the southern bank of the river in the vicinity and will provide a balance of a natural vegetated edge to the river corridor with a dynamic and legible gateway to the expanding town centre. The proximity and height of the built form will provide drama at the riverside, as Clearwater Court already successfully achieves, including being closer than the Proposed Development and in part, with no frontage landscape. I also note the typical close proximity of buildings to the riverside on the southern bank of the Thames between Caversham Bridge and Reading Bridge, creating a strong sense of containment by built form.
- 7.23 I note that the commentary in the Committee Report regarding harm to the setting and character of the Thames Path and River Thames makes no reference to this prevailing character of built containment, or the wider context of tall built forms adjacent to the river further south-east and the scale of the emerging town centre, to which this development provides a transition. As the TVIA sets out, the character of this area already includes substantial buildings adjoining the river corridor, notably at crossing points. Such buildings are already part of the character of the river corridor, as is to be expected at the centre of a large, dramatically intensifying urban area.
- 7.24 Notwithstanding the justification for built form of scale in this location, I do not agree with the comments of the Natural Environment officer in paragraph 4.19.15 of the Committee Report: I consider the Proposed Development flanking the river corridor achieves an appropriate progression in scale with adjacent residential blocks to the north-east. I also note that the taller of the riverside blocks (D) is almost exactly the same height as Clearwater Court, at just under 31m above the level of the towpath, contrary to the assertion

of CADRA in paragraph 4.25.3, where it is alleged to be 'substantially higher'. Block D would also be more than 5m lower than Reading Bridge House.

- 7.25 I note that the set back of the proposed riverside blocks is greater than nearby developments to the north-west and to the south-east. **Mr Taylor's Appendix A** provides details of these set-backs.
- 7.26 I finally note that DSE expressed no concern in November 2019 as to the height and massing of the Proposed Development.

'harm the quality of the public realm in this area'

- 7.27 For the reasons given, I consider that the public realm along the riverside frontage and linking with it would be considerably enhanced as a result of the Proposed Development. This would be achieved through an enhancement of the physical environment, in the form of hard landscape and new planting, also to be managed; an enhanced animation of the routes and spaces, through active human interest on building frontages and associated with the café and other seating; and enhanced passive surveillance from adjoining buildings.
- 7.28 I consider such enhancements would represent a notable improvement from the existing fence-topped retaining wall flanking the Thames Path and the lack of linkage from the bridge and Thames Path through to the station area. In this respect I consider the Planning Officer's comments in paragraph 6.13 of the Committee Report, suggesting that passers-by currently *'enjoy... buildings set so far back from the tow path that they do not compete with the character and appearance being dominated by the river'* wholly unfounded in the reality of the situation at the Appeal Site and the public realm enhancements the scheme would provide.
- 7.29 These benefits would in part arise from the frontage of built form onto existing and proposed public realm, providing visual interest, in accordance with Policy CR11.

'to the detriment of the value of this part of the Thames'

- 7.30 I consider in turn that the Proposed Development would in fact add to the value of this part of the River Thames corridor. In particular, it would complement the striking scale and appearance of Christchurch Bridge in signposting arrival alongside the centre of the urban area, which is notably distinct in character from the wider, more suburban reaches of the river.
- 7.31 I therefore consider that the Proposed Development would deliver the requirements of Policies CR4, for adding to the setting and character of the Thames; CR11v, for additional areas of open space; and CR11g, for enhancing public access along and to the Thames. The

Proposed Development would accord with guidance within Priorities 4 and 8 of the RSAF, through the proposed riverside open space which constitutes a 'pocket park' complementing the Thames. The Proposed Development would also respond positively to Policies CC7, CR2, CR3 and EN11, through enhancing public realm and character, including linkages along and to the river, helping to diversify the character of the town centre, as set out in Policy CR2.

7.32 In relation to the criteria of Policy EN11, the Proposed Development would enhance the relationship of built forms, spaces and routes to the watercourse, including through creation of distinctive, visually-interesting public realm; contribute positively to the distinct character and landscape of the watercourse; and reinforce the role of the Thames as an important watercourse adjoining the expanding town centre.

7.33 The Proposed Development would result in enhancement, rather than erosion of the quality of the nearby Christchurch Meadow, in accordance with Policy EN7.

'the Thames, an identified Major Landscape Feature'

7.34 I furthermore note that Local Plan Policy EN13 isn't cited in RFR2, notwithstanding this being the policy that relates to Major Landscape Features, stating that:

'Planning permission will not be granted for any development that would detract from the character or appearance of a Major Landscape Feature.'

7.35 On this basis, the Council does not appear to be consistent in considering whether or not the Proposed Development would detract from the Major Landscape Feature of the River Thames. I consider that it would not detract from the Major Landscape Feature but instead contribute positively to it.

RFR 3

7.36 I note that the evidence of Mr Corbyn deals with the ecological implications of the Proposed Development on the River Thames and its marginal habitats. I consider here the point in the RFR that:

'There would also not be sufficient space within the riverside buffer for a sustainable long-term relationship between the riverside buildings and the required large canopy trees.'

7.37 In this respect, I note that the Council's Tree Strategy does not specify that large canopy trees must be provided along the Thames 'Treed Corridor', simply that Treed Corridors are a priority for planting to provide a green corridor. Furthermore, the Tree Strategy does not

'require' the provision of large canopy trees within developments but states that it will '*aim to secure space*' for them in general, not just in 'Treed Corridors'.

- 7.38 In this instance, I note that the character of the riverside, whilst well-treed, including numerous canopy specimens to the north, in Christchurch Meadow and on Fry's Island, includes very limited canopy tree planting on the north-facing southern bank of the river. The proposed riverside planting includes oak, lime, hornbeam, field maple and birch species, all of which have potential to provide a robust and well-treed character to the river frontage in this vicinity, where currently there is little canopy vegetation on the southern side of the river. These trees have potential to create substantial canopies, whilst noting that the hornbeam and lime specimens are proposed as fastigate cultivars with narrower canopies. I furthermore note that this planting is set appropriately within a landscaped zone adjoining the buildings and that the largest tree, an oak, is proposed in the gap between blocks D and E.
- 7.39 In response to the Natural Environment officer's comments at paragraph 4.19.15 of the Committee Report, I consider that the proposed planting would provide significant canopy-level vegetation to the benefit of the character of the river corridor. It would also soften and anchor the proposed built form into the riverside townscape, whilst not preventing the influence of strong built frontage to the river, which approach already provides a positive and dramatic sense of place at the riverside at Clearwater Court.
- 7.40 I also note that Greengage Arboriculture have set out a detailed consideration of the feasibility of the proposed tree planting on the river frontage (submitted as a separate statement in support of this Appeal) and they conclude that this planting is sustainable in terms of maintenance, in line with how trees in urban settings are routinely managed.
- 7.41 Finally, I note that the Council do not refer to any of the paragraphs of the NPPF in relation to design in RFRs 1-3.

8.0 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

- 8.1 The Appeal Site lies between the River Thames and the rapidly expanding and intensifying centre of Reading, approximately 150m to the north-east of the station, an important junction in the national rail network. The Appeal Site is the principal location at which the evolving town centre reaches the river corridor, as set out in policy documents. This location has additional significance as it is also the south-western landing point of Christchurch Bridge, which provides a non-vehicular crossing of the river.
- 8.2 In terms of townscape character, the Council's assessment notes that the character area in which the majority of the Appeal Site lies is: ***'an unexceptional area of townscape which does not respond well to the surrounding residential land use... [building design] is unattractive and creates a weak and uninspiring area of townscape.'***
- 8.3 I have further considered townscape character in the area and note in particular that:
- The utilitarian character of the Appeal Site including a car park; a retaining wall topped by fencing; and the adjacent SSE substation, which currently blocks the direct route between the bridge and station, detracts from any perception of a positive southern landing of the bridge on crossing the Thames from the north and from the experience of moving along the Thames Path.
 - In this vicinity on the southern bank of the River Thames, there is a strong influence of substantial built form in close proximity to the river and there is limited vegetation along the north-facing southern bank of the river.
 - The positive frontages of built form to the river corridor on the southern bank in the vicinity of the Appeal Site are suggestive of the arrival of the River Thames alongside the centre of a busy, modern urban area, in contrast to the leisurely suburban riverbanks of villas and long gardens, as is seen further to the north-west and north-east of the town centre. The Appeal Site detracts from this impression by presenting a utilitarian void in the townscape as well as by preventing any relationship between Christchurch Bridge and the town centre through the Appeal Site.
 - As is found at water crossings throughout Reading town centre, Caversham Bridge and, in particular, Reading Bridge are marked by built form of substantial massing and/or height, creating drama and interest in the townscape. This approach to massing in relation to water, when perceived along the Thames corridor creates a legible rhythm of taller built form at bridging points, albeit this rhythm is weakened by the lack of landmark built form at the southern landing of Christchurch Bridge at the Appeal Site.

- 8.4 The Appeal Site, where visible beyond vegetation and built form, is seen in the context of the built form that extends along the southern bank of the River Thames, both large-scale office and residential buildings to the east and residential blocks to the west; and in the town centre.
- 8.5 The Council does not appear to have obtained specialist townscape and visual advice in refusing the application but did consult Design South East who noted that *'the panel broadly supports the scheme and has no major issues with use, quantum, height and massing'* (Committee Report). DSE also endorsed the segmented public realm extending through the Proposed Development. The Planning Officer made misleading comments in respect of the massing of built form adjacent to the riverside in the vicinity and ignored the current utilitarian and poorly over-looked character of the Thames Path adjoining the Appeal Site. Whilst noting that blocks A and B are acceptable in scale and design, the officer concluded that riverside built form would result in harm to the experience of pedestrians on the tow path.
- 8.6 I consider that the Proposed Development would result in beneficial effects on townscape features, particularly through a substantial increase in the number of trees on the Appeal Site. I consider that there would be beneficial effects on views from all locations, with the exception of immediately adjacent residential properties on Lynmouth Road, for which a range of mitigation measures limit the potential adverse effects.
- 8.7 In terms of townscape character, I consider that there would be a range of beneficial changes, relating to themes including:
- the legibility of the Thames at the interface with the expanding town centre, in particular a positive landscaped and built form riverside edge, and height and massing denoting a key interface of the town centre with the riverside (I note that the Proposed Development is not of a scale to qualify as Tall Buildings as defined in Policy CR10);
 - linkage across the river, notably including contributing to the rhythm of prominent built form at crossing points and creating positive public realm at the riverside; and
 - distinctiveness, by providing visually interesting built form and landscape, distinctive to its setting that is clearly of the river and of the wider Thames Valley, as well as reflecting the distinctive industrial heritage of the Appeal Site.
- 8.8 I therefore consider that the Proposed Development would result in beneficial effects on townscape character at an Appeal Site and local level.

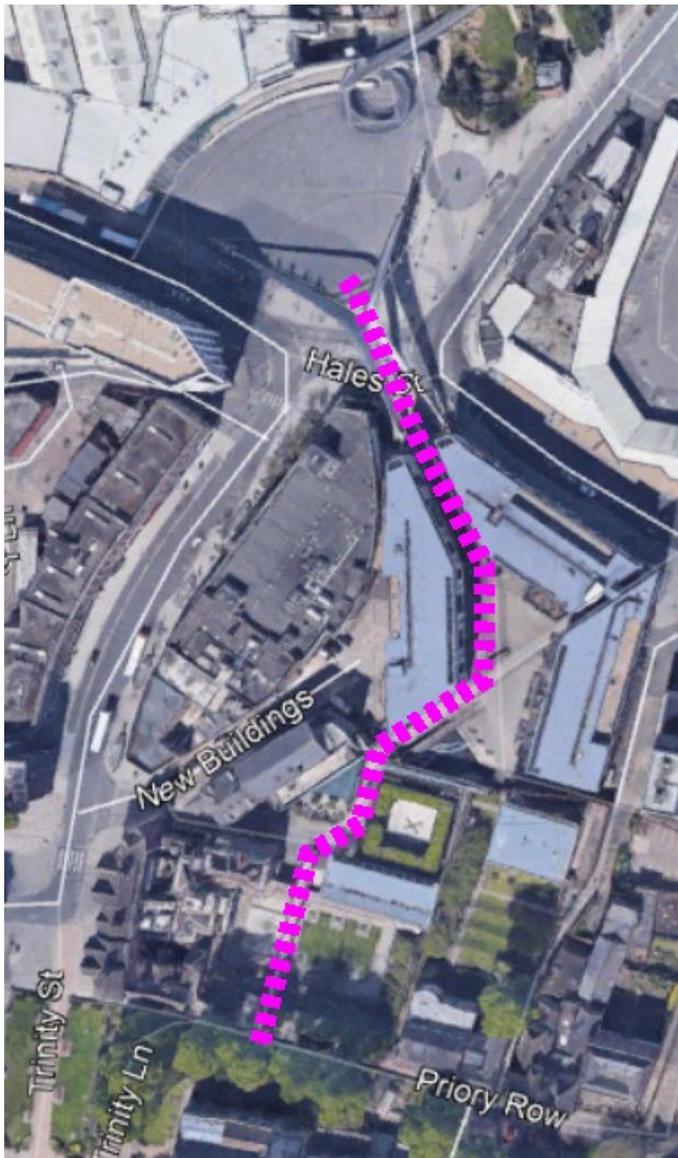
- 8.9 In relation to RFR1, I note that the direct visual link through the Proposed Development desired by RSAF (assuming it means that one can see from one end to the other) cannot be achieved, owing to the ongoing use of the substation, but I do not consider this in any way weakens the legibility of the route, which, like many other successful examples, does not rely on long forward visibility. I consider the proposed route would function effectively through a staged revealing of the route, among other qualities.
- 8.10 In relation to RFR2, as my assessment of visual and character effects concludes, I consider that there would be an improvement in the character of the river corridor and views across and along it, as a result of the Proposed Development. In particular, there would be a clear enhancement in the quality of riverside public realm from the existing situation.
- 8.11 In relation to RFR3, I consider that the proposed planting would provide significant canopy-level vegetation to the benefit of the character of the river corridor; as well as softening and anchoring the proposed built form into the riverside townscape, whilst not preventing the influence of strong built frontage to the river, which approach already provides a positive and dramatic sense of place at Clearwater Court. I note that a specialist arboriculturist has confirmed the sustainability of the proposed tree planting at the riverside.
- 8.12 In conclusion, I consider that the Proposed Development provides a positive change in terms of built form and public realm adjacent to the River Thames; and the public realm corridor between Vastern Road and the River Thames. I do not consider that the Council's reasons for refusal are justified on townscape and visual grounds.

APPENDIX 1:

Figures A1.1-A1.5 Notable public realm corridors that do not rely on long forward visibility

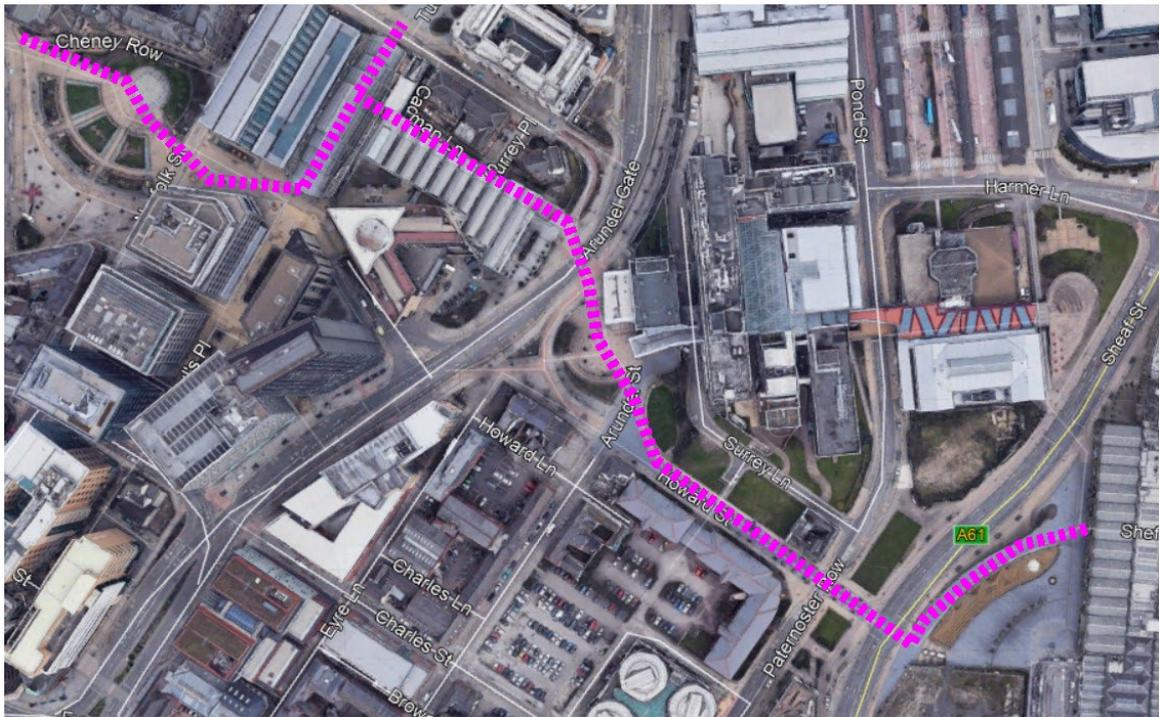
(not to scale)

Figure A1.1: Priory Place (cathedral to transport museum), Coventry



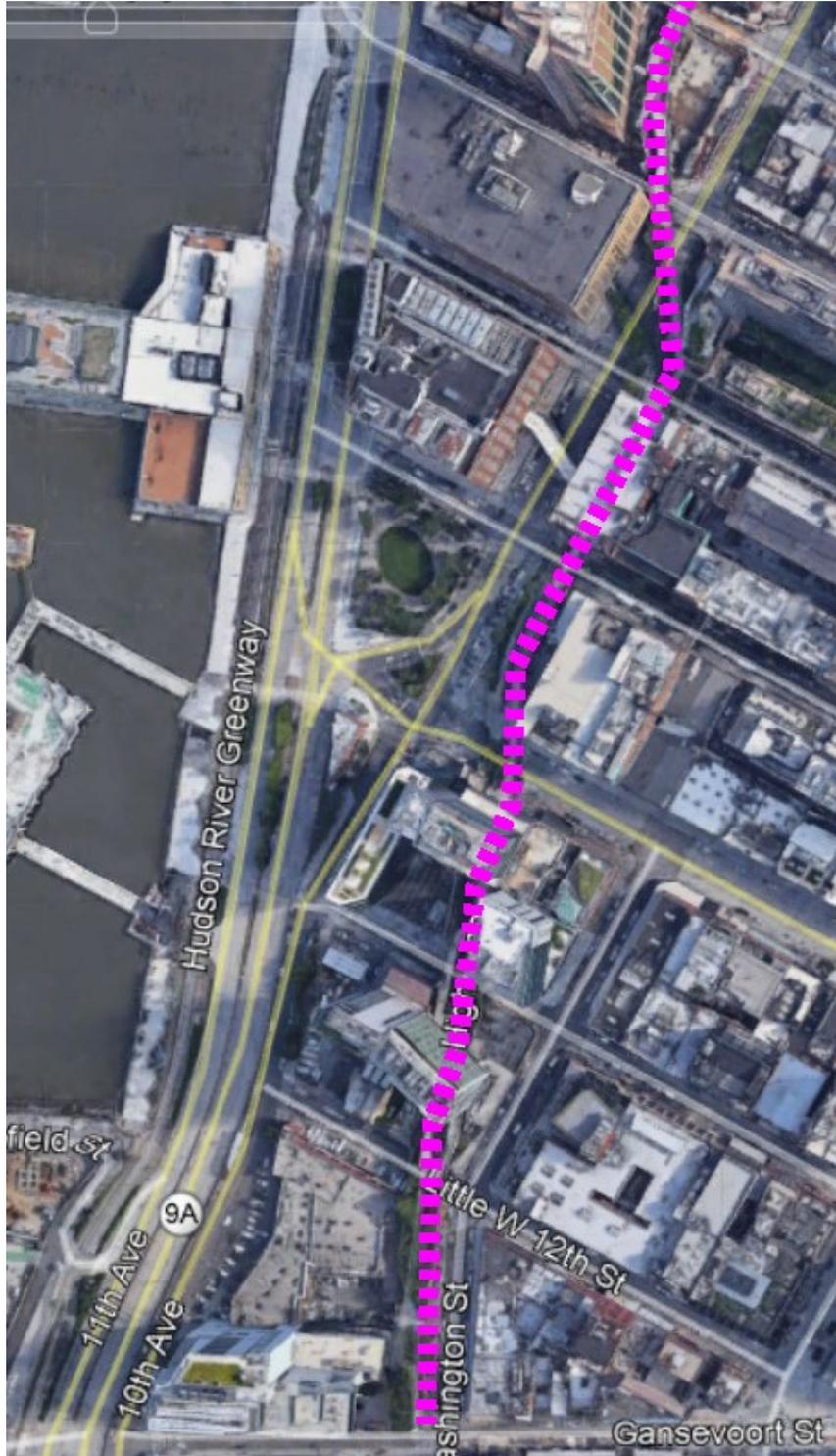
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Figure A1.2: The Gold Route (station to Winter Gardens/Peace Gardens), Sheffield



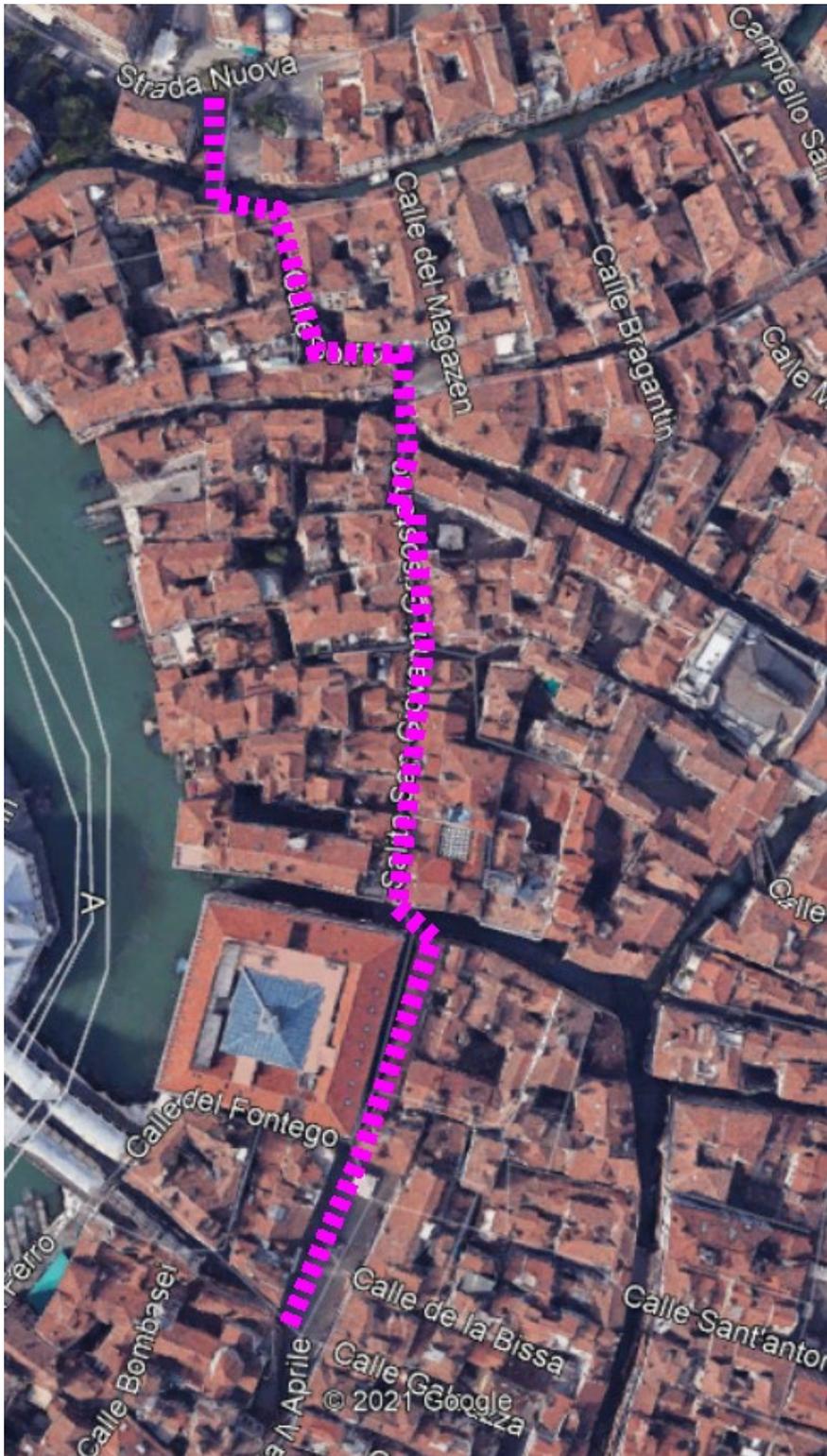
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Figure A1.4: The High Line, Manhattan (below West 18th Street)



© 2021 Google (route annotation by BW)

Figure A1.5: Strada Nuova to Campo San Bartolomio (one of various key movement routes), Venice



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