

## **Statement of Case**

### **Appendix 18**

Heritage Statement of Case – prepared by  
James Weeks of Built Heritage

55 Vastern Road  
Reading RG1 8BU  
Appeal  
Heritage Appendix  
May 2021

**Reading Borough Council Planning Application:**

Planning Application Reference: 200188

*Demolition of existing structures and erection of a series of buildings ranging in height from 1 to 11 storeys, including residential dwellings (C3 use class) and retail floorspace (A3 use class), together with a new north-south pedestrian link, connecting Christchurch Bridge to Vastern Road*

**Client:**

Berkeley Homes (Oxford & Chiltern) Ltd

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## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1. This statement addresses the fifth Reason for Refusal (RfR 5) given by Reading Borough Council in their decision notice of 9 April 2021 following the committee meeting on 31 March 2021, when refusing Application No. 200188/FUL for redevelopment of the site known as 55 Vastern Road, including demolition of the existing structures and erection of a series of buildings from 1 to 11 storeys. RfR 5 states:

*The proposal would result in the complete loss of 55 Vastern Road, a Non- Designated Heritage Asset and building of local significance. The proposal has failed to demonstrate adequately that retention and reuse of the building has been explored fully. In this regard, the benefits of the proposal are not considered to significantly outweigh the harm caused to the asset's identified significance. Therefore, the development is contrary to Policies EN1 and EN4 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (2019) and Section 16 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2019).*

- 1.2. This statement has been written by me, James Weeks, Director of the Built Heritage Consultancy (BHC). I have been a Heritage Consultant for over 17 years, dealing with a wide range of projects from small historic houses to large urban regeneration schemes, for clients including English Heritage, TfL, various developers and a large number of architects and homeowners. I have an MA in Architectural History from the Courtauld Institute of Art and am an Affiliate of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation.
- 1.3. I have been involved in the project since June 2017 when I gave initial pre-purchase advice to Berkeley Homes. This led on to a baseline heritage report begun after April 2018 which informed the development of the scheme, and finally to the full Heritage Statement of November 2019 to support the Application to which this Appeal relates. In this work I was assisted by my colleague Anthony Hoyte MA(RCA) MSc IHBC, an Associate at BHC with extensive relevant experience.
- 1.4. As well as producing the Heritage Statement for the scheme and providing heritage advice to the Appellant, I was also involved in the pre-application discussions held with Reading Borough Council. This involvement included attendance at several pre-application meetings to discuss heritage matters (explained further below).
- 1.5. The scope of my evidence covers:
- the heritage value of the locally listed building;
  - how the scheme was evolved to respond to heritage issues during the pre-application process;
  - the consideration of heritage issues in the Committee Report;
  - the heritage issue that remains outstanding; and
  - an assessment of the scheme in terms of local and national policy relating to locally listed buildings, explaining how these policies are satisfied.

## 2.0 Summary of Scheme Evolution and Application

### Site description: Appraisal of the locally listed building

- 2.1. Early in the project it was recognised that the heritage value of the site, and particularly of the locally listed building at 55 Vastern Road, would need to be fully understood to ensure that the scheme responded suitably to the relevant constraints – both in terms of judging whether any demolition would be justified and also with regard to devising an appropriate design response to the historic context.
- 2.2. To assist with this, Built Heritage Consultancy were commissioned to produce an Initial Heritage Statement to appraise the site’s heritage value, the contents of which were ultimately expanded into a full Heritage Statement submitted with the Application. A brief summary of the full assessment is given here for convenience.
- 2.3. The locally listed building was constructed in circa 1900 as the gate lodge to the Reading Electric Works, with a vehicle arch and lodge/office on the ground floor and accommodation for the site superintendent on the first floor. It has been much altered since, including through the infilling of the archway and office front door, and replacement of the front windows. Although built as the site entrance, the locally listed building long ago ceased to fulfil that function, while the rest of the original industrial complex it was built to serve has been demolished.
- 2.4. The building has some historical interest as a minor work by the office of Albury and Brown, a local architectural firm that designed some notable buildings, some of which are now listed. However it is not known which architect designed No. 55. There is also some historical interest in its role as the entrance lodge and superintendent’s dwelling for the Electric Works, a local power station that was an important aspect of the town’s turn-of-the-century development. The building has a degree of architectural interest as an example of the ‘Flemish Renaissance’ style’s influence on buildings of the 1890s and early 1900s.
- 2.5. However the building’s local heritage value is limited mostly to the front façade while the other parts are plain and utilitarian. It has also been somewhat compromised by detracting modern alterations including the loss of the original lodge front entrance, infilling of the carriage arch, poor quality replacement windows and doors, the loss of key internal features, various accretions to the exterior, and the fire escape stair.
- 2.6. Thus the significance of 55 Vastern Road is somewhat limited in comparison to other locally listed buildings in the Borough, including the example given in section 4.2.2 of the Heritage Statement: No. 3 Craven Road, which is a much more complete building associated with an identified and notable local architect.

### Scheme development during the pre-application process

- 2.7. The proposal taken forward by the design team for initial pre-application consultation with the Council envisaged the loss of the locally listed building at 55 Vastern Road, to allow optimisation of the scheme’s wider public benefits. This proposal was discussed with the Council at a pre-application meeting on 21 November 2018, before the Initial Heritage Statement had been made available, and thus before the Council had seen meaningful consideration of the heritage issues. Consequently the Council’s pre-application advice letter of 5 December 2018 reflected the conservation officer’s concern over the principle of

demolition of 55 Vastern Road, and advised that options for the locally listed building's retention should be explored.

- 2.8. Prior to the next pre-application discussion of heritage, the Initial Heritage Statement was issued for review by the Council's conservation officer. At the second meeting on 29 January 2019 the conservation officer agreed with our report's assessment that the key part of the locally listed building in heritage terms was its front façade (see Annex A below). The officer also accepted that the rear parts behind the front façade were not of notable value. Notwithstanding his agreement on these points, the conservation officer noted that he was duty bound to object to the principle of demolition under Policy CS33 of the Local Plan. However, in line with paragraph 197 of the National Planning Policy Framework, he acknowledged that this objection could be overridden if the Council were to accept that the public benefits of the scheme as a whole outweighed the harm to heritage. (NB Policy CS33 has now been replaced but the current policies EN1 and EN4 of the Local Plan 2019 have a similar effect as discussed in the Heritage Statement and also below.)
- 2.9. At this second pre-application discussion the conservation officer also requested that the project team carry out further analysis, and advised that he would be prepared to look at façade retention or relocation of the street façade to another part of the scheme, alongside the demolition of the rest of the building, if it were practicable.
- 2.10. Various options for retention of the locally listed building were explored more fully by the architects (as summarised on pp. 36-42 of the Design & Access Statement) before the next pre-application discussion on 27 March 2019. The Council's response in their letter dated 11 April 2019 (extract reproduced below as Annex B – for the full letter see document ref. 10.36) welcomed the further study of these options but particularly the design intention to use the industrial history of the site as a theme for the new development.
- 2.11. At this point in the design development process the scheme was reviewed by the Design Review Panel (Design South East) on 24 April 2019 (reproduced as Annex C below). The Panel commented that the site's industrial past and power station concept should play a larger role in the new design, but also that the loss of the locally listed building was acceptable, terming it 'a remnant lacking meaning' (see top of p.6 of their report) in the wider proposals for the site's redevelopment.
- 2.12. Following these comments the scheme was significantly redesigned to enhance its response to the site's past industrial history. At the next pre-application meeting on 3 October 2019 the Council received this change favourably, and their letter of 7 October (document ref. 10.79) confirmed this would be appropriate in principle.
- 2.13. At the later pre-application meetings the Council continued to accept that the demolition of the locally listed building could be acceptable, subject to the public benefits of the scheme as a whole being sufficient to outweigh the harm to heritage.

### Position at the end of pre-application discussions

- 2.14. The final scheme submitted for the Application continued with the proposed loss of the locally listed building at 55 Vastern Road, in the context of a comprehensive redevelopment that provided a number of wider public benefits. These included potential heritage benefits arising from use of design approaches informed by the lost industrial architecture of the site. Such design cues would reflect the history of the wider site and its key role in the local

community during a period of significant urban expansion and renewal at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

- 2.15. I and the rest of the project team understood that the Council's position following the pre-application discussions reflected the Borough's policy on locally listed buildings: they accepted that demolition of 55 Vastern Road could be permitted provided that the public benefits of the scheme were sufficient, when compared with the harm caused.
- 2.16. During these discussions the Council did not confirm the weight they would attach to the harm caused by demolishing the locally listed building. Nor were they willing to confirm whether the public benefits of the proposed scheme were sufficient to outweigh this harm as part of the overall 'planning balance'. Nonetheless it was clear following the pre-application meeting on 3 October 2019 (document ref. 10.79) that the Council's officers welcomed the revised architectural approach to the scheme, which much more strongly referenced the industrial character of the site's history, and that they seemed likely to accept the proposals subject to the details of particular non-heritage aspects of the scheme.

### Points made in the Committee Report

- 2.17. The Council's conservation officer's comments set out in section 4.1 of the Committee Report include the following relevant points:
- 2.18. On the design of the new buildings, and wider heritage impacts:
- 4.1.23 ... The design for these proposed buildings are considered to be good quality, and encompass a variety of local architectural motifs from the Victorian and Edwardian housing and industrial structures in the vicinity. ... All of these features are well designed and harmonised and based on distinctive local features and would help to reduce the bulk and mass of these multi-storey blocks.*
- 4.1.30 ... In conclusion, the bespoke design proposals are considered to be a good quality response to the historic context of the proposed development. Whilst the mass and scale of the buildings is extensive, the historic setting is not especially sensitive to change and the quality of the design would go some way to mitigate these impacts.*
- 2.19. On the discussion of alternative approaches to the locally listed building, and why these options were ultimately ruled out:
- 4.1.29 As part of pre-application meeting it was recommended that options to retain the Locally Listed building were examined together with the re-directed pedestrian link-path. Façade retention was examined and a range of options for façade retention are illustrated in the Design and Access Statement (pp. 34-35 and pp. 40-43). These options were discounted due to the constraints of the site and instead the industrial heritage of the site has been used to inform the scheme design, to be branded as the "Old Power Station".*
- 2.20. On the potential acceptability of demolition of the locally listed building:
- 4.1.34 The proposed justification for the demolition of the locally listed building, therefore, rests on the benefit of the proposals in relation to the wider public benefits of the scheme against the heritage value of the non-designated heritage asset in the planning balance.*

- 2.21. In regard to demolition and the ‘planning balance’ it is also worth noting the comments of the Reading Civic Society, presented in paragraph 1.16 of the Update Report, where they noted:

*The possibility of retaining the run of old buildings along Vastern Road, and the LLB, was explored extensively and repeatedly. We accepted that it was not practical to incorporate the old buildings on Vastern Road into a new building. With considerable reluctance we accepted that the overall benefits of the scheme outweighed the loss of the LLB 55 Vastern Road.*

- 2.22. Reading Civic Society also welcomed the new designs, in paragraph 1.11:

*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.*

- 2.23. The case officer’s assessment of the scheme in paragraphs 6.27-6.42 of the Committee Report contains the following relevant points:

- 2.24. In paragraph 6.35 the case officer notes that the locally listed building is not merely “standard’ as might befit an industrial premises. It appears to have been a bespoke design, drawing from fashionable architectural styles...’. This relative importance and ‘showiness’ as the original entrance to the electric works was acknowledged in the Heritage Statement and taken into account during pre-application discussions. The case officer does not go on to discuss the various detracting alterations made to the building over time, including the loss of important features on its front elevation, which have somewhat diminished its overall significance. The case officer does, however, go on to acknowledge in paragraph 6.36 that ‘In terms of townscape value, the building has a more limited contribution’.

- 2.25. In paragraph 6.41 the case officer states that in principle it might be possible for a scheme of sufficient merit in terms of design and layout to justify the loss of the locally listed building, but that with the current proposed scheme the public benefits ‘have not met the test of being substantial enough, sufficient to outweigh the loss of significance – which in this case is extremely harmful, the total loss of the building – so as to provide a convincing planning balance.’

- 2.26. In respect of this quotation I would note that whilst the loss of the locally listed building does constitute the ‘total loss’ of the heritage asset, paragraph 197 of the National Planning Policy Framework requires us to consider the effect of an application on the *significance* of a non-designated heritage asset, rather than its *fabric*. Thus the actual ‘harm’ caused in heritage terms is proportionate not to the degree of physical loss – total though that may be – but to the degree of significance of the asset. In this case the locally listed building possesses some local historical and architectural interest, but this is relatively modest and does not, for instance, equate to the significance of other locally listed buildings in Reading that are more complete examples of architectural design and have been less detrimentally altered in the past. As noted in the Heritage Statement, the overall harm to significance caused by the loss of this building would be relatively limited. It follows that the harm caused by the loss of the building would itself be relatively limited, in absolute terms.

### 3.0 Outstanding heritage issue

- 3.1. Following the pre-application discussions, it was understood that the only issue remaining was whether the Council accepted that the public benefits of the scheme were sufficient to outweigh the limited harm to heritage caused by the loss of the locally listed building.
- 3.2. This issue is the same one noted by the Council's conservation officer in the Committee Report (paragraph 4.1.34).
- 3.3. I note that neither the Committee Report nor Reason for Refusal 5 state any objection to the Appellant's assessment of the significance of the locally listed building (as contained within the Heritage Statement), nor to the conclusion that the degree of harm to heritage that would be caused by its loss would be limited.
- 3.4. RfR 5 does contend that *'The Proposal has failed to demonstrate adequately that retention and reuse of the building has been explored fully.'* However it is also worth noting that the Council's conservation officer acknowledges in the Committee Report (4.1.29) that *'a range of options'* were discussed but *'were discounted due to the constraints of the site'*. In addition the Reading Civic Society were also content that the reuse of the locally listed building was not practical despite the options being *'explored extensively and repeatedly'* (Update Report paragraph 1.16). The options were indeed fully explored, as set out in the Design and Access Statement at pp 36-42.
- 3.5. I therefore understand the essence of the remaining heritage objection is that the Council do not accept that the public benefits of the scheme as proposed outweigh the harm caused to heritage.

## 4.0 Assessment

- 4.1. In summary, the Appellant's position is that the public benefits of the scheme significantly outweigh the low degree of harm to heritage caused by the loss of the locally listed building.
- 4.2. As noted above, the harm caused to heritage is fundamentally limited due to the relatively low significance of the locally listed building, which has also been much reduced through various detracting alterations over time and the loss of its historic setting including the main power station buildings to which it was ancillary. Indeed it was noted by the Council's conservation officer during the pre-application process (see Annex A) that the remaining heritage value the building possesses relates essentially to its front façade.
- 4.3. Set against this limited harm in the 'planning balance' are certain public benefits arising from the character of the new design, which might be considered to be heritage benefits. These include the scheme's use of a distinctly industrial aesthetic in various parts of the new development, such as brickwork inspired by the stock brick of the original Electric Works buildings and the red brick of 55 Vastern Road, as well as by other industrial architecture of the period. The design's considered inclusion of giant pilasters on the facades, metal cantilevered balconies, 'industrial' window forms and proportions, etc., and also the interpretative role of the signage and public realm features, do convey a sense of the site's unique role in Reading's history to a much better degree than the current buildings and features on the site. In these ways there are heritage benefits from the proposed design. Indeed the Council's conservation officer and Reading Civic Society have stated their approval of the scheme's design approach (see 2.18 and 2.22 above).
- 4.4. Of still more weight in the 'planning balance', however, are the various non-heritage public benefits that are more fully described in other submissions. These include the provision of the north-south route between the railway station / town centre and the river crossing, the high quality design solution, the contribution to local housing supply, and so on.
- 4.5. With respect to the relevant Local Plan Policy EN1, the key point is that this policy allows for the loss of locally listed buildings provided there is *'clear and convincing justification, usually in the form of public benefits'*. Other parts of the Appellant's submission have explained why it would not be possible to retain the locally listed building within a suitable scheme for the site, and have set out in more detail the public benefits referred to above. The Appellant's case, supported by our heritage assessment, is that the public benefits clearly do outweigh the limited harm to heritage.
- 4.6. Regarding Local Plan Policy EN4, this similarly allows for the loss of a locally listed building *'only where it can be demonstrated that the benefits of the development significantly outweigh the asset's significance'*. Therefore as noted above the public benefits of the scheme would allow permission to be granted under this policy. This policy also notes that a *'Replacement building should draw upon heritage elements of the previous design, incorporating historical qualities that made the previous building significant.'* The new scheme is for a much larger site than just the locally listed building, and would fulfil this expectation by drawing upon this wider history of the Electric Works which in its heyday was of much more importance to Reading than the gate lodge at 55 Vastern Road on its own. Such an approach enhances understanding of the industrial heritage and communal value of the entire site and is thus a valid way of sustaining local heritage.

- 4.7. These Local Plan policies have weight according to their degree of consistency with the National Planning Policy Framework, and so paragraph 197 of the NPPF is also relevant here. That simply stipulates that *'a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset.'* (Unlike Local Plan Policy EN4 this does not require the benefits of the scheme to *significantly* outweigh the asset's significance.) This returns us to the 'planning balance' which as noted above and in the submissions by others would clearly tilt in favour of the proposals.

## 5.0 Conclusion

- 5.1. The Council's Reason for Refusal 5 contends that *'The proposal has failed to demonstrate adequately that retention and reuse of the building has been explored fully. In this regard, the benefits of the proposal are not considered to significantly outweigh the harm caused to the asset's identified significance'*.
- 5.2. Contrary to the first sentence above, the Council's conservation officer and the Reading Civic Society have both noted how the potential for reusing the locally listed building was considered in detail (see 2.19 and 2.21 above).
- 5.3. Regarding the second sentence, my preceding statement has shown that the heritage value of the locally listed building is limited, whilst other submissions on behalf of the Appellant have shown that the public benefits of the proposed scheme are more than sufficient to outweigh the harm caused by its demolition.
- 5.4. The two Local Plan policies cited in RfR 5 are EN1 and EN4, both of which allow for the demolition of 55 Vastern Road, provided that there are sufficient benefits to outweigh the harm in the context of a scheme that reflects the heritage of the site. Whilst Policy EN4 does provide that the benefits should *'significantly outweigh'* the harm to significance, it should be remembered that this policy has weight in decision-making according to its degree of consistency with the NPPF (as noted for example in paragraph 213 of the NPPF). Consequently Policy EN4 should be applied in light of paragraph 197 of the NPPF, which requires simply a 'balanced judgement' rather than for the benefits to 'significantly' outweigh the harm.
- 5.5. In conclusion, given the weight attached by others to the various public benefits of this scheme, and the relatively limited harm to heritage caused by the loss of the locally listed building, the proposed development would satisfy the local and national planning policy – when taken all together – relating to locally listed buildings.

## 6.0 Annex A

### Notes of the second pre-application meeting held on 29 January 2019

(see also the RBC Pre-Application Response dated 15 February 2019 – document ref. 10.6)

#### **Pre-application meeting, 29 January 2019 - notes on built heritage discussion**

##### Attending from Reading Borough Council:

Jonathan Markwell - principal planner  
John Mullis - conservation officer  
Sarah Hanson - landscape and trees officer

##### Project team in attendance:

Katy Walker – Berkeley  
Eve Ladden Timbers – Barton Willmore  
James Cook, Vince Prescott – Broadway Malyan  
Glen MacFarlane – MacFarlane Associates  
[unknown] – Peter Brett Associates  
James Weeks – BHC

#### **John Mullis**

John noted the assessment provided in the Initial Heritage Statement. He agreed that:

- the key part for the Local Listing was the front façade;
- the local listing ‘doesn’t really cover’ the interior;
- the rear parts were not of notable value.

Notwithstanding the above, he noted that due to the Locally Listed Building status under Local Plan policy CS33 he was duty-bound to object in principle to demolition. However he accepted that the public benefits of any scheme might override this objection under NPPF paragraph 197 if Jonathan Markwell was convinced of the wider scheme.

John accepted that retention creates some potential issues but requested more work on the massing option that rose in height from east to west, to test knock-on impacts on Lynmouth Road dwellings.

John’s preference is for the street façade of No. 55 to be retained.

However John is ‘prepared to look at’ façade relocation / reuse. We can talk this through with him further once we have explored the issues. If relocated, he would want the façade to be ‘part of the streetscene’, although he thought reuse in this way would pose practical difficulties. He was more sceptical that reusing individual elements in the new landscaping or buildings would be successful.

#### **Jonathan Markwell**

Jonathan is not yet ready to give a clear view on the likely balance of public benefits vs. harm.

He offered various thoughts on the design of new-build elements [picked up by others].

## 7.0 Annex B

Extract from the Council's feedback from the third pre-application meeting held on 27 March 2019

(the whole feedback letter, dated 11 April 2019, is reproduced as document ref. 10.36)

### Heritage – Loss of the Locally Listed Building 4

It is a welcomed step that you have detailed the process of comparing various possible options for retention (in various forms), which then ultimately led you to your original conclusion that the locally listed building should be demolished. It is also noted you are seeking to incorporate echoes of 'industrial heritage' throughout the proposed redevelopment scheme. Although officer concerns are still raised in relation to the loss of the locally listed building (as outlined in detail previously), this will ultimately form part of the future officer 'planning balance' at the time of the future planning application. It is therefore strongly advised that your justification at application stage for the demolition of the building is thorough and robust. Notwithstanding the above, the general design approach to encapsulate the industrial heritage of the site as a design theme is broadly welcomed.

## 8.0 Annex C

Design Review Panel feedback from the meeting held on 24 April 2019



**SSE site, 53-55 Vastern Road, Reading, Berkshire RG1 8BU**

**Reference: 1191**

Report of Design Review Meeting

Date: 24 April 2019

Location: Reading Civic Centre, Bridge Street, Reading, RG1 2LU

**Panel**

Anthony Hudson (Chair), Architecture, Housing  
Robert Rummey, Landscape Architecture, Urban Design  
James O'Callaghan, Engineering  
Annabel Keegan, Urban Design, Transport Planning  
Murray Smith, Architecture, Public Realm

**Also attending**

Timothy Cantell, Design South East  
Jonathan Markwell, Reading Borough Council  
Katy Walker, Berkeley Homes  
James Cook, Broadway Malyan  
Ioana Nica, Macfarlane and Associates  
Eve Ladden Timbers, Barton Willmore  
Rebecca Marshall, Barton Willmore

**Site visit**

A full site visit was conducted by the panel ahead of the review

This report is confidential as the scheme is not yet the subject of a planning application

## Summary

This scheme shows a keen understanding of the disconnect between town and river – ‘finding the Thames’ - and sets out to resolve it, but has not yet found an effective way of doing so. In this, it is handicapped by having a site with a bite out, since part of the larger area originally allocated for housing is withheld from redevelopment, and as a result the straightforward link south from the new footbridge envisaged earlier is no longer possible.

The panel seeks a rethink of the resultant compromised pedestrian/cycle link through the site to give a clearer and palpably public route to and from the footbridge. The scheme should offer a more legible gateway to the river from Vastern Road, and provide a more inviting route between the two. We see this as a street through the development. The scheme could also do more to relate to the river and should certainly offer a connection at towpath level.

The height and massing are broadly acceptable. The river frontage should be less dominant and more modelling north-south would be helpful, reassessing where the highest blocks are. We doubt that the warehouse typology is set to work well at the height and complexity envisaged; the scheme would better be honest about being residential.

It was good to see this scheme before planning application stage but a review earlier in the process would have made it easier for us to comment on strategic options before detailed work had been undertaken. The panel would be glad to see the scheme again if that was thought helpful.

## Background

This is a proposal for some 193 homes and a cafe. The residential consists of a range of 1, 2 and 3-bed accommodation in a mix of tenures including open market, rented affordable and shared ownership affordable. The application site area is 0.767 hectares resulting in a density of 252 dwellings per hectare.

The site is located to the north of Reading town centre, between Vastern Road to the south and the River Thames to the north. There are two-storey traditional houses to the west and a recent low-rise development of flats facing the river at the north-eastern corner of the site.

Christchurch Bridge, a pedestrian/cycle bridge over the River Thames, has recently been constructed. It connects to Christchurch Meadows and Caversham beyond. Its southern landings, steps and ramp to the towpath, lie immediately north of the centre of the site.

The site is part of the Scottish and Southern Electric (SSE) landholding that derives from the power station here until the mid-20th century. SSE still occupy the eastern part with electrical equipment. The site for development thus has something of a dumbbell shape, with substantial frontages to the river and Vastern Road, but a much narrower neck connecting them – the whole flanked to the east by the retained operational equipment.

The Reading Station Area Framework and the Reading Central Area Action Plan assumed the entire SSE site would come forward at the same time. The location of the bridge was presumably predicated accordingly and an avenue offering a straight connection south

was envisaged. However, it has become clear that part of the site needs to be retained by SSE and such a visibly direct link is frustrated.

The site is allocated by Reading Borough Council for residential use. Requirements include maintaining and enhancing public access along and to the Thames; a high-quality green link from north of the station to the Christchurch Bridge; and development to take account of mitigation required as a result of a Flood Risk Assessment.

There have been no planning applications for this site or the wider landholding in the recent past. The scheme is at pre-planning application stage. Pre-application discussions began in October 2018.

### **Link from Christchurch Bridge**

The panel shares the Council's disappointment that the larger site allocation is not coming forward for redevelopment. We support their insistence on a high-quality link through the site connecting Christchurch Bridge to pedestrian routes to and through the railway station but appreciate the challenge of making this successful on the site currently available.

Even so, we consider the scheme has further to go to meet the need in (a) providing a link legible from Vastern Road; and (b) forming a route that is as attractive and safe as possible within the scheme.

On (a), for someone walking or cycling from the station and reaching Vastern Road, it would be hard to work out where to go next, as the scheme stands. The analysis and aspiration in the scheme to connect the town centre to the river has not yet translated into an effective solution. We call for a bolder approach with a more obvious opening leading into the scheme and on to the footbridge. It should read as a street from Vastern Road, not a minor opening to a courtyard as it appears now. Removing the oversailing units would open views into the scheme and give the route more of a street character.

Bolder use of landscaping especially creating a street-scale volume of trees would give a clue that here is the street/route to take to get to the river. Such a powerful landscaping gesture could continue south to accentuate the route and to fulfil the Council's aspiration for a green route from river to station. The opening on Vastern Road should be seen as a gathering point for people, drawing them in and onward.

On (b), the bifurcation into two parts - one level, one ascending, neither generous - is questionable. The service road tends to recall schemes of the 60s and 70s where vehicular and pedestrian movements were rigorously separated – a concept both outdated and inappropriate here. Safety is pertinent, since a ramped route running south looks likely to encourage cyclists to excessive speed.

We ask for investigation of ways to bring pedestrians and cyclists down to ground level near to the bridge, allowing for a single, level and wider route southward. A single route could be a shared space; or at least its priority made clear.

Servicing of the café would also be somewhat compromised, as delivery vehicles would be required to drop off within the proposed car park, and deliveries transported on foot via the proposed ramp to the café frontage.

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The route should offer at least a glimpse of the river for orientation, not be hemmed in by buildings on the riverside. A direct line of sight to the bridge is not feasible but is to the river.

The way the bridge connection runs through a building tends to make the route seem private. If it ran between buildings, perhaps above riverside trees, with a glimpse of a street beyond, then it would be more legible and encouraging for those going south from the bridge.

A single route could benefit from a stronger relationship to the mews housing. It would help the scheme to reflect the north-south grain of the residential streets to the east, countering the east-west emphasis of the blocks.

A ground-level route could have entrances to blocks on it and hence a more street feel (whereas the ramp shown seems lifeless). Views from the ramp into bedrooms would be avoided. Where undercroft areas persist, they should be given a use if possible, such as workspaces.

Should a single route at ground level not be feasible then we'd seek replacing the heavy-handed ramp with a lightweight structure that as it were extends the bridge. It would need to be more than a ramp.

Where and whatever the route is it needs to have some combination of landscape design, art, active frontage, openings, places to linger and other devices to make it attractive and evidently a public, not a private, route. Water (using run off) could be deployed as an animating device bringing life and movement to the route. It could be coupled to a lighting scheme to aid way-finding at night. And a ground-level route could benefit from a bolder landscape design strategy than a ramp, with substantial trees.

The public realm issues could be analysed and explained better with some wider site connectivity drawings.

### **Riverside place**

The relationship between scheme and river, we suggest, misses the full potential of the site.

We are aware that ground-level access between riverside and scheme is hindered by the change of level, but ask that ways are found for the two to connect, without having to ascend to the bridge and down again.

The scheme could enjoy the river by engaging more with the water, giving places where people could watch the activity on the river and enjoy the views – celebrating the glorious Thames-side setting.

The café overlooking the river is a good step in this direction; but there is some way to go to make a place here at the conjunction of towpath, bridge and scheme.

## Scale and massing

Generally, the height, scale and massing of the scheme did not trouble the panel, but we have some comments nonetheless.

The way the scheme addresses the river – picking up the point just made – seems heavy and abrupt. It obliterates views south from the bridge. We've already mentioned a visual link north-south. We hope this frontage could be less cliff-like, and more relaxed and interactive with its setting.

Arranging the substantial quantum in a series of blocks makes sense but we felt the modelling was predominantly east-west, and more variety north-south would be helpful. The tallest element might work better in the middle of the site. It should be given a coherent design approach, losing the box at the top (that makes it seem taller) in favour of something less heavy. Possibly, the tallest tower could exceed 11 storeys, provided the design was of very high quality, becoming a slender and elegant landmark, pre-eminent in the scheme, not peeping a mere storey or two above its neighbours. By increasing accommodation, this might offer relief to the riverside.

The scheme will need to be assessed in terms of both short-range and long-range views. We would stress the views from the town centre, from Christchurch Meadows and obliquely along the river, including Reading bridge.

## Architecture

The panel was not wholly convinced by the warehouse typology. If reference is to be made to the site's industrial past, then a power station has more logic (and the words are shown on the riverside front): at least the large brick blocks might be complemented by some smaller, lighter buildings with more glazing. If the warehouse reference is adhered to, then it would work best in lower blocks on the river frontage, with simpler detailing (currently it feels elaborate for warehousing) and more apt materials.

On balance, it is probably better for the scheme to find its own language. It is very hard to make a typology that works at one level of scale to succeed at this complexity of heights. The extreme verticality of the blocks and the awkwardness of the pitches atop tall blocks make this point. These are apartments and might as well look like apartments.

We did not see elevations for the east of site which would be very visible from the town. This relates to consideration of the future incorporation of the SSE site if it ever becomes available, a possibility not really responded to in the scheme.

Sun and wind studies were not presented, but clearly these are important considerations. Among matters to ponder are the shading of the north-facing public space by the café, the impact of the mews on the existing terrace, and the mews itself from the blocks to the south.

The mews are diminutive for a reason, but the internal elevational height of the mews buildings could potentially be slightly increased, to improve the balance of the site massing, subject to daylighting. We would favour a vigorous vertical rhythm that would help bind the mews into the rest of the scheme.

The panel could accept the loss of the locally listed building: a remnant lacking meaning.

### **Environmental sustainability**

The energy strategy was under-played in the presentation. We heard some suitable aspirations but would have hoped for low energy by design to be more prominent and integrated from the outset. Relying on experts to sort out issues later is not the ideal approach. It was not clear how over-heating of south facing units was to be tackled, for instance. We hope the issue of climate change will impinge on the design in many ways, including the selection of low-carbon materials. Water-source heat pumps would be worth examining.

The number of north-facing units, especially when also single-aspect, is a concern – though we realise some of these will enjoy fine views.

We commend the low parking ratio and consider this to be appropriate for such a central and well-connected location, near to the railway station.

This review was commissioned by Berkeley Homes Western Ltd with the knowledge of Reading Borough Council.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Since the scheme was not the subject of a planning application when it came to the panel, this report is offered in confidence to the addressee and those listed as being sent copies. There is no objection to the report being shared within respective practices/organisations. DSE reserves the right to make the guidance known should the views contained in this report be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). Unless previously agreed to remain confidential, this report will be publicly available if the scheme becomes the subject of a planning application and to any public inquiry concerning the scheme. DSE also reserves the right to make guidance available to another design review panel should the scheme go before them. If you do not require this report to be kept confidential, please let us know.

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