

Statement of Case

Appendix 27

Townscape and Visual Impact Assessment –
prepared by Barton Willmore

55 Vastern Road, Reading: Townscape and Visual Impact Assessment

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

January 2020

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1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Barton Willmore LLP, Landscape Planning and Design group were commissioned by Berkeley Homes Ltd in January 2019 to provide Townscape and Visual advice in relation to land at 55 Vastern Road, Reading ('the Site'), in order to determine its suitability in townscape and visual terms for residential and public realm development ('the Proposed Development'); and to provide an assessment of the likely townscape and visual effects arising from the Proposed Development, in the form of a Townscape and Visual Impact Assessment (TVIA).
- 1.2 The overall aim of this TVIA is to assess the likely effects of the Proposed Development on the features and character of the existing townscape (townscape receptors); and on the visual amenity of identified viewers of the Site (visual receptors), which include from locations such as residential or business properties, public buildings, public open spaces, roads and Public Rights of Way (PROW).
- 1.3 In order to explain the potential of the Site to accommodate the Proposed Development, the key objectives of this assessment are to:
 - Appraise the townscape features and character of the Site and its context;
 - Appraise the visibility of the Site from the surrounding area and the nature and quality of existing views;
 - Identify the townscape and visual mitigation by design requirements for the Proposed Development; and
 - Consider the potential townscape and visual effects of the Proposed Development.
- 1.4 The methodology for the townscape and visual appraisal and assessment of potential townscape and visual effects is based on principles of good practice from Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (GLVIA) 3rd Edition¹ and is set out in full in **Appendix 1**.
- 1.5 In summary, the TVIA methodology identifies the value and susceptibility (or vulnerability) of townscape and visual receptors. These factors are combined to provide an assessment of 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.

¹ Landscape Institute and Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment, 2013

2.0 SITE CONTEXT

Site Location

- 2.1 As shown on **Figures 1 and 2**, the Site lies approximately 150 metres (m) north of Reading railway station, 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 the Site and the Site boundary extends around the sub-station to the north and south. An access road and parking associated with the SSE facility extends along the south-eastern boundary of the sub-station and the Site. To the east of the boundary of the SSE facility, which is delineated by metal security fencing and a line of mature poplar trees, are situated a large 3-storey commercial building with parking (Sovereign House), to the south; and a four storey residential block to the north.

Topography and Hydrological Features

- 2.2 As shown on **Figure 3**, Reading is situated within the low-lying valley of the River Thames, at the confluence with the River Kennet which lies at an elevation of approximately 35-40m Above Ordnance Datum (AOD).
- 2.3 The vicinity of the Site is situated on the Thames valley floor and is therefore broadly level at an elevation of approximately 38m AOD. The valley floor extends north of the river before starting to rise northwards from the vicinity of Henley Road, 0.9 kilometres (km) north of the Site. Fry's Island, which is approximately 320m in length and 70m in width, is situated mid-stream of the Thames, immediately to the north of the Site.
- 2.4 To the north, landform rises into the south-eastern edge of the Chiltern Hills. The townscape in this area sits on a localised ridgeline at an approximate elevation of 80-85m AOD, which extends south-west to Balmore Park before steeply falling towards Hemdean Road, which sits in a narrow valley at an elevation of 40m AOD. The topography then rises again to the north-west towards Caversham Heights (70m AOD) and onto Caversham Heath Golf Course (80m AOD).
- 2.5 Two localised elevated landforms separate the Thames Valley from land further to the south and flank the valley of the River Kennet. To the south-west, in the vicinity of Tilehurst Road, land rises to an elevation of approximately 90m AOD; and to the south-east, in the vicinity of Earley, land rises at an elevation of approximately 65-70m AOD.
- 2.6 The urban core of Reading is centred on a slightly elevated area of land between 40-45m AOD lying between the River Thames and River Kennet.

Land Use and Settlement

- 2.7 The slightly elevated land between the valley floors of the Rivers Thames and Kennet forms the basis of the urban area of central Reading and is the location of its historic core, through the centre of which extends the spine of Oxford Road, Broad Street and King Street. The settlement of Caversham lies to the north of the River Thames. It maintains some sense of separate identity from Reading town centre, largely as a result of its less intense land uses and the physical division provided by the broad expanse of the river and open space uses on the valley floor, notably Christchurch Meadow and Hill's Meadow to the north and north-east of the Site and, to the west, a broad expanse of open agricultural land north-west of Richfield Avenue. However, Caversham now forms part of the wider urban area of Reading which extends approximately 4km to the north of the town centre; 6km to the east and west; and 5km to the south.
- 2.8 The east-west route of the Great Western mainline railway, linking London with the west of England and Wales, extends on an embankment along the Thames valley floor to the north of the urban core. To the north, Vastern Road also follows this alignment, as part of the Reading Inner Distribution Road (IDR) circuit. These two substantial transport corridors currently provide physical and perceptual barriers to the ongoing northerly expansion of the town centre of Reading.
- 2.9 Built development on the Thames valley floor in the vicinity of the Site has been less intense than in the urban core to the south/south-east and primarily includes a mixture of industrial/infrastructural, retail and low-medium density residential development extending north and north-west of Reading Station, infilling flat land between the railway line and River Thames. More substantial built form, primarily of office usage, is located in the vicinity of the linkages between Reading and Caversham via Caversham Bridge to the north-west of the Site and Reading Bridge to the east. These bridges are vehicle-dominated routes of three and four lanes.
- 2.10 To the south of Vastern Road, lies the recently-constructed northern entrance of Reading Station, accessed via Trooper Potts Way. Reading station is a key hub on the national rail network and the scale and striking design of the station building reflects this significance. To the east of Trooper Potts Way lies a large multi-storey car park. To the west lies Reading Station Retail Park, which comprises large retail sheds and car parking. Large-scale office uses are also evident along Vastern Road to the east of the Site, including adjoining Norman Place and either side of Reading Bridge. Fry's Island includes small-scale recreational and boating related land uses, including built form. Reading town centre includes extensive commercial, business and transport infrastructure uses.

2.11 Surrounding the industrial/business core, in the expanding extent of which the Site is located, the wider urban area of Reading includes a mix of uses including extensive areas of residential development, institutional and industrial use, interspersed with areas of open space.

Vegetation

- 2.12 In the immediate vicinity of the Site, south of the River Thames, tree planting typically comprises street trees. These include a row of pollarded London Plane trees of approximately 5m in height, flanking Vastern Road to the south of the Site, in addition to other emerging street tree specimens on the paving along the central reservation of Vastern Road. More substantial canopy trees are evident in the vicinity of the Caversham Road roundabout junction to the west. A line of mature non-native poplar trees lies to the east of the SSE site boundary and further sporadic canopy trees are evident in pockets in the curtilages of business and residential blocks further to the east.
- 2.13 To the north of the River Thames, within Christchurch Meadows, tree cover is more notable: wetland species including willow and alder species are present on the riverbank, in addition to specimen trees within the parkland. Fry's Island includes dense canopy tree cover. To the east, a dense belt of non-native poplars flanks George Street, which extends between Reading Bridge and Caversham. Further dense tree cover and vegetation bounds the course of the River Thames eastwards. West of Caversham Bridge, tree cover frequently encloses the riverside. The rear gardens of properties along Lynmouth Road, which immediately abut the western boundary of the Site, include sporadic tree and vegetation cover.

Designations

- 2.14 As shown on **Figures 1 and 5**, the nearest Conservation Area, Market Place/London Street, lies in the urban centre of Reading, approximately 320m to the south-east of the Site and separated from it by Reading railway station. The Conservation Area of St Peter's lies 660m to the north-west of the Site and includes Caversham Bridge. Map 3 of the Conservation Area Appraisal shows that important views from the bridge are directed to the west and north, rather than the east/south-east.
- 2.15 There are no Registered Parks or Gardens of Special Historic Interest (RPGSHI) in the vicinity of the Site. The nearest RPGSHIs are The Forbury Gardens, approximately 460m to the south-east; Caversham Court Gardens, approximately 0.9km to the north-west; and Caversham Park, approximately 2.25km to the north-east. There are no Listed Buildings within the Site, nor do any heritage designations extend across the Site. However, the entrance building to the SSE site was added to the locally important buildings list by RBC in May 2017. There are no listed buildings or scheduled monuments immediately adjacent to the Site, the nearest being the Main Building of Reading General Station (Grade II), 270m to the south and which is separated

from the Site by the recently constructed northern entrance to Reading Station and large retail units on Vastern Road. Further to the south and south-east of Reading Station, clusters of listed buildings are located within the Conservation Areas of Market Place/London Street and St Mary's Butts/Castle Street.

- 2.16 As shown on **Figure 2**, to the north, Christchurch Meadows forms a designated Local Green Space.
- 2.17 The Site lies within the Station Area Boundary as defined in the Reading Station Area Framework (RSAF, 2010). This policy document is considered further under the heading of Planning Policy below, below. The 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 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. Further consideration of the policy implications of this designation is provided under the heading of Planning Policy below.

Rights of Way

- 2.18 Public Right of Way (PRoW) No.1, which forms part of the Thames Path National Trail, extends north-west - south-east following the course of the River Thames and lies immediately adjacent to the northern boundary of the Site. The recently constructed Christchurch Bridge connects the Thames Path to Christchurch Meadows and PRoW No. 24 to the north-east of the Site. Further PRoW and cycle routes extend throughout the urban area of Reading to the south of the Site and to the north within Caversham.

Landscape and Townscape Character

National Level Landscape Character

- 2.19 In terms of Landscape and Townscape Character, the Site lies in the south-eastern part of the National Character Area (NCA) 110: Chilterns, the key characteristics of which, of relevance to the Site, are:

- "..."
- *The River Thames and its flood plain mark a distinctive area in the south. The river is a focus for settlement, abstraction and recreation (...)*
 - *Major transport routes, including motorways, radiate from adjacent Greater London, associated with significant 20th-century development and extensive urban fringe areas"* (p.8).

2.20 There are four Statements of Environmental Opportunity (SEO) for this NCA, of which SEO4 is of relevance, noting the need for enhancement and creation of green infrastructure within existing settlements and through new development, for example through:

- *"...Adapt or remove existing development where to do so would significantly strengthen landscape character, enhance views and address barriers to natural processes and public access to the countryside;*
..."
- *Addressing deficits in greenspace and access links, integrating the public transport and cycle network and creating new or improved multi-user routes and green spaces working across administrative boundaries as necessary;*
..."
- *Maximising the appeal of existing and new green spaces and sustainable transport routes close to people's homes and workplaces, including in the urban fringe where it could also strengthen landscape character;*
..."
- *Enhancing the rural and urban scene by promoting the use of traditional local building materials and vernacular styles and utilising appropriate infrastructure (...)"(p.27).*

County Level Landscape Character

2.21 Within the West Berkshire Landscape Character Assessment, the Site is located within land defined as 'Urban Area' for which no further detail is provided.

Local Level Townscape Character

2.22 Entec Ltd produced the Reading Tall Building Strategy (RTBS) in 2008 on behalf of Reading Borough Council in order to inform the development of a tall buildings policy and specific guidelines for individual sites. As part of the production of RTBS, a townscape assessment was undertaken, and the Reading Central Area divided into townscape character areas. The RTBS was updated in March 2018 and the updates are documented below along with the original 2008 commentary.

2.23 As shown on **Figure 4**, the majority of the Site and its immediate setting fall within Character Area (CA) 22: Vastern Road. The western edge of the 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. It has been agreed with RBC that assessment of the effect of the Proposed Development on character areas will extend to approximately 500m from the Site as beyond this extent, there would be no potential for significant effects. Therefore, only areas within this extent are considered here. The published commentary on all of the relevant character areas is included in **Appendix 2**. The commentary on CA22: Vastern Road and CA12: Caversham Road, is included below for ease of reference.

CA22: Vastern Road

- 2.24 The RTBS Townscape Assessment sets out in table form the following descriptions for the character area against ten townscape criteria:

<i>Consideration</i>	<i>Original Tall Buildings Strategy comment</i>	<i>2018 Update</i>
<i>Land Use</i>	<i>Warehouses and retail park</i>	<i>Major land uses remain the same, although the opening of the northern entrance to the station has brought a public transport interchange into the heart of the site.</i>
<i>Historical significance</i>	<i>Railway town and growth of manufacturing and commerce post 1840</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Architectural style</i>	<i>The predominant material is coloured, metal cladding</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Urban grain and townscape scale</i>	<i>The building blocks have a large floor space, although the buildings are not high rise and there is extensive car parking adjacent to the buildings. These features combine to create a medium scale townscape.</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Townscape condition</i>	<i>The large, blank faces of the warehouses create an unexceptional area of townscape which does not respond well to the surrounding residential land use. Although the buildings are occupied and function well for their purpose, their design is unattractive and creates a weak and uninspiring area of townscape.</i>	<i>Although the new entrance to the station and adjacent square have improved the townscape condition of a small part of the site, the surrounding buildings remain unchanged.</i>
<i>Key views within the character area</i>	<i>There are no key views defined for the character area.</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Key views into the character area</i>	<i>Buildings within the character area contribute to the skyline visible from Oxford Road when approaching Reading from the west. From the elevated position of Caversham Park, Balmore Park and Horse Close, built form within the character area contributes to the view of central Reading.</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Landmark structures and existing tall buildings</i>	<i>The large, warehouse structures create a consistent, unexceptional townscape. There are no landmark structures. Although the warehouses create a roofline which is elevated above the</i>	<i>The new northern entrance to the station is a landmark, albeit not particularly high. It will become more prominent as development of surrounding sites allows views of it to open up. The new</i>

	<i>surrounding residential buildings, there is no one structure which is notable as a tall building.</i>	<i>Christchurch Bridge is a landmark on the river, but is currently visually separated from the rest of the area.</i>
<i>Tall buildings planning applications</i>	N/A	<i>Outline planning permission (110024) was granted on the sorting office site for a major mixed use development including residential, office, hotel and retail. The plot adjacent to the station entrance would have been up to 16 commercial storeys or 21 hotel storeys, with heights decreasing to the west. This permission has now expired.</i>
<i>Townscape sensitivity to the inclusion of tall buildings</i>	<i>Low: The large block size which exists within the character area and the absence of any key views or visual focal point makes this an appropriate location for tall buildings. However, it is proposed that tall structures should not be developed along the north and western boundaries of the character area as these boundaries are shared with small scale residential areas. any proposed built form should respond in terms of height and scale to the residential area. The tallest structures should be located to the south of the character area, adjacent to the railway line. In this area the townscape features are larger scale, and adjacent to large scale features outside of the area e.g. existing station buildings, Thames Tower and Western Tower.</i>	<i>Townscape sensitivity remains low, albeit with the caveats expressed in 2008 continuing to apply.</i>

- 2.25 As this character area includes the majority of the Site, the extent to which these considerations are of relevance to the Site is considered below.
- 2.26 In terms of Land Use, the Site is currently industrial/utilitarian, in accordance with the prevailing pattern. With regard to Historical Significance, the Site is specifically referenced as an Electric Works, adjacent to the Thames Bank ironworks on historic OS Six Inch, 1888-1913 mapping, as set out in the Design and Access Statement which also shows the distinctive character of this land use. In relation to Architectural style, the built form on the Site is predominantly brick and render. Grey metal security fencing surrounds the SSE electricity substation. The Vastern Road façade of the existing SSE building is white render with large tinted windows, which contrasts with the brick residential properties along Vastern Road. The office and residential blocks to the east, as well as Clearwater Court and Reading Bridge House also

lie within CA22 and are of different architectural styles, which are not found elsewhere within the CA.

- 2.27 In terms of Urban Grain and Townscape Scale, the Site reflects the assessment, however, within the wider CA22, Clearwater Court and Reading Bridge House are larger in height than surrounding buildings, increasing the sense of scale in the immediate area extending further south-east along Vastern Road. Vastern Road is a dominant vehicle corridor through the CA comprising double carriageways, which increase the perceived grain and sense of scale of this area. Vastern Road acts as a physical and perceptual barrier between the north of the train station and the River Thames. The urban grain to the north of Vastern Road within the CA is varied and incoherent, in contrast to the more regular pattern further west. With regard to Townscape condition, the Site reflects the findings of the assessment, as at present it represents a void in the townscape lying between generally small-scale domestic properties and large-scale commercial built form and is in poor condition due to the dominance of tarmac car parking, unmanaged vegetation growth along the northern boundary and proximity to existing electricity sub-station infrastructure.
- 2.28 In relation to Key Views within the Character Areas, Reading Station Area Framework proposes the view north from the station as a new view to be created. In terms of Key views into the character area, buildings in CA:22 do not readily contribute to the skyline when seen at long distance from Oxford Road, from where The Blade and Thames Tower are the only identifiable buildings on the skyline. With regard to Landmark Structures and Existing Tall Buildings, Reading Bridge House lies within CA:22 and at a height of 36.50m, is a tall building in the terms of the RTBS. It forms a prominent built element, which is identifiable within the central Reading townscape at the Reading Bridge crossing of the Thames. Clearwater Court is also a prominent building within CA:22 but not a tall building as defined in the RTBS. In terms of Townscape Sensitivity to the inclusion of Tall Buildings, it is agreed that this is low, with potential for creating new key views and visual focal points.
- 2.29 Overall, based on this assessment, and in relation to the criteria for townscape value set out in **Appendix 1**, it is considered that the value of the townscape in the vicinity is low, as it comprises inconsequential elements of which there is no apparent recognition of value, albeit the new station entrance provides some positive contribution. The townscape character of CA22 is considered to be of low susceptibility to the type of development proposed as the CA is likely to be able to accommodate this type with little or no consequence for its integrity, there is potential to provide a better transitional relationship between the existing unexceptional townscape of the CA and the adjoining residential townscape, and the type of development proposed provides opportunities for appropriate mitigation. Overall, the sensitivity of the CA to the type of development proposed is low.

CA12: Caversham Road

- 2.30 The RTBS Townscape Assessment sets out in table form the following descriptions for the character area against ten townscape criteria:

<i>Consideration</i>	<i>Original Tall Buildings Strategy comment</i>	<i>2018 Update</i>
<i>Land Use</i>	<i>Residential</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Historical significance</i>	<i>Railway town and growth of manufacturing and commerce post 1840</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Architectural style</i>	<i>Two storey, red brick, terraced housing</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Urban grain and townscape scale</i>	<i>The low rise, terraced housing creates a small scale townscape.</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Townscape condition</i>	<i>The buildings are in good condition. The consistent architectural style create a strong townscape character.</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Key views within the character area</i>	<i>View from Caversham Bridge westwards</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Key views into the character area</i>	<i>From the elevated position of Caversham Park, Balmore Park and Horse Close, built form within the character area contributes to the view of central Reading.</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Landmark structures and existing tall buildings</i>	<i>There are no landmarks structures within the character area.</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Tall buildings planning applications</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Townscape sensitivity to the inclusion of tall buildings</i>	<i>High: There is a low capacity for the development of buildings of this scale due to the low rise, small scale residential character which predominates. Taller buildings would dilute the townscape pattern and would be uncharacteristic. The area is also inappropriate in terms of market demand and transport connections.</i>	<i>Townscape sensitivity remains high.</i>

- 2.31 The assessment of CA12 does not make reference to Great Brighams Mead and Caversham Bridge House, which lie within CA12 and represent larger-scale commercial built form in an otherwise residential character area. Additionally, blocks of four-storey residential apartments have been constructed north of Great Brighams Mead adjacent to the Thames River path, which also contribute to the perceived increase in scale and massing within the character area and near the river. These more substantial elements therefore form an additional characteristic, which create additional legibility of the townscape at key points, including the Caversham Road/Vastern Road junction, Caversham Bridge and adjacent to the River Thames. Whilst the sensitivity of CA12 to tall buildings would be high due to the predominance of low-scale residential properties, sensitivity to larger scale development in the area occupied by the Site would be lower due to the existing presence of larger built elements at key locations within the CA.
- 2.32 Overall, based on this assessment, it is considered that the value of the townscape is medium-low as whilst there is some positive contribution to character from the relatively consistent style and scale of built form, these are common components with limited apparent recognition, including in the CA description. Notwithstanding the prevailing small scale of development in the CA, the susceptibility of character to the type of development proposed, largely in the adjacent CA, is medium, owing to the presence of existing substantial built forms within the CA. Overall, it is considered that the sensitivity of the character of this area to the type of development proposed is medium.

CA23: King's Meadow

- 2.33 The RTBS Townscape Assessment sets out in table form the following descriptions for the character area against ten townscape criteria:

<i>Consideration</i>	<i>Original Tall Buildings Strategy comment</i>	<i>2018 Update</i>
<i>Land Use</i>	<i>Sports ground and river meadows</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Historical significance</i>	-	<i>Kings Meadow Baths, an unused listed Victorian facility at the time of the TBS, has been reopened as Thames Lido.</i>
<i>Architectural style</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Urban grain and townscape scale</i>	<i>The large expanse of open meadows creates a large townscape scale.</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Townscape condition</i>	<i>The meadows are a well maintained recreational resource and contribute positively to</i>	<i>No change.</i>

	<i>the townscape character.</i>	
<i>Key views within the character area</i>	<i>The open views across the meadows to the wooded skyline created by bankside vegetation, has been identified as a key view.</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Key views into the character area</i>	<i>From the elevated position of Caversham Park, Balmore Park and Horse Close, built form within the character area contributes to the view of central Reading.</i>	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Landmark structures and existing tall buildings</i>	-	<i>The Christchurch Bridge, opened in 2015, is a new prominent landmark on the Thames that links Caversham and central Reading. The 39m high bridge support is tall within a local context.</i>
<i>Tall buildings planning applications</i>	-	<i>No change.</i>
<i>Townscape sensitivity to the inclusion of tall buildings</i>	<i>High: The majority of the site is protected open space and therefore inappropriate as a location for tall buildings.</i>	<i>Townscape sensitivity remains high.</i>

2.34 The assessment of CA23 does not account for the extent of substantial built form to the south of the CA, forming part of the expanding town centre, which has an indirect influence on the character of the area. The re-opened Thames Lido has re-introduced the positive influence on the CA of actively-used built form adjoining public realm. The vicinity of the Site is not densely contained by bankside vegetation, although the northern bank of the riverside and Fry's Island, both to the north-west demonstrate this character. The area is not readily appreciated from elevated locations to the north, beyond intervening built form and vegetation.

2.35 Based on the published assessment, the value of this Character Area is considered to be medium-high as it has distinctive components, albeit these are not uncommon; and is designated as open space. Its susceptibility to the type of development proposed is considered to be medium-high as development within the CA would notably affect its integrity, although the CA is subject to indirect influence of substantial built form along its southern edge. Overall, the sensitivity of the character of this area to the type of development proposed is medium-high.

Additional Observations on Townscape Character in the Site vicinity

2.36 In addition to the above published local level commentary, a number of further observations of the townscape character of the vicinity of the Site in the context of the expanding town centre of Reading are noted:

- The River Kennet forms a key feature of the town centre compared with the River Thames, which appears physically and visually separated from central Reading. At present, a series of barriers prevent appreciation from the centre of Reading of the River Thames or even understanding of where it exists, including: the elevated railway corridor and the non-descript built form situated to the north of it including car parks and retail sheds; the dominant vehicle route of Vastern Road and adjoining car parking; the busy, vehicle-dominated routes to road bridges to the north-east and north-west; the lack of a legible signpost close to the town centre that such a significant feature as the river is present; and the absence of a direct physical connection from the key areas of public realm in the vicinity of the station.
- Christchurch Bridge goes some way to addressing this problem by providing a legible form, extending above the townscape. However, as the RTBS sets out, Christchurch Bridge is also visually separated from the area 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 Site, with no clear legibility of the link between the bridge and the town centre. Therefore, whilst the bridge support pier and suspension cables provide strong legibility of the river and the new crossing from Christchurch Meadow and the riverside to the north of the Site, this appears isolated for lack of any further visual waymarkers continuing the progression of the route further into the town centre.
- The utilitarian character of the Site further detracts from any perception of a positive southern landing of the bridge on crossing the Thames from the north.
- In combination, the above factors result in lack of perceived connection between the town centre and the open space of Christchurch Meadow, which has an emerging role as a park to serve the evolving town centre.
- The multi-storey car park and retail sheds flanking Trooper Potts Way detract from the sense of place in the vicinity of the station, notwithstanding the distinctive form of the station overbridge and northern entrance.
- The utilitarian character of the Site detracts from the experience of moving along the riverside Thames Path and the lack of positive, overlooking built form frontage has created a perception of a hidden and unsupervised space between the Site and the bridge ramp and steps.
- In the wider riverscape, there are many examples of built form addressing the river positively in the form of amply glazed frontages of garden rooms/pavilions/villas.
- To the north-west, interfaces of the built form to the riverside are predominantly of late-20th century apartment blocks, of up to 4 storeys (2.5-3 immediately adjacent to the Site) and of limited local distinctiveness. They provide a strong 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 the distinctive character of the riverside. This strong vertical enclosure alongside the river creates anticipation and a 'reveal' of corridor views when progressing along the riverside.

- To the south-east, there are varying approaches to providing interfaces of built form with the riverside. Clearwater Court continues and accentuates the approach of a strong built form edge to the riverside, creating a dramatic 'reveal' of the river on the public realm approach to the side of Reading Bridge through tight control of spaces, resulting in a strong anticipation of the riverside before reaching it. Intimacy and interest are evident in the visible outdoor spaces; as well as through a strong vertical form, with notable visual interest adjoining the water. 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; and the dark, sealed windows of the Covea Building and associated bland, strongly-fenced and dark open space, which detracts from the perception of positive overlooking and human engagement with the river corridor.
- There is furthermore a notable contrast between the examples of positive built form frontages and the townscape void of the Site. The positive frontages of built form to the river corridor are suggestive of the arrival of the River Thames alongside the centre of a busy, modern urban area, in contrast to the leisurely suburban riverbank of villas and long gardens, as is seen to the north-west of Caversham Bridge, for example. The Site detracts from this interface, all the more so as a result of the obvious lack of any relationship between Christchurch Bridge and the town centre through the Site.
- Substantial built forms are present at the two existing river crossings, most notably at Reading Bridge where the 5 commercial storeys and distinctive roof of Clearwater Court and the 11 commercial storeys of Reading Bridge House provide strong signposting of a key movement route. This massing pattern along the river corridor creates a legible rhythm, albeit this is weakened by the lack of landmark built form at the southern landing of Christchurch Bridge at the Site.
- 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 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 appraising the character of the vicinity, it is noted that a number of taller buildings are present in the surrounding townscape. These include:
 - Thames Tower, commercial use, 15 storeys

- The Blade, commercial use, 14 storeys with a notable vertical accented roofline
 - No.3 Forbury Place, commercial use, 11 storeys
 - Reading Bridge House, commercial use, 11 storeys
- In addition, a number of taller buildings are under, or planned for construction. These are covered in consideration of cumulative effects.

Planning Policy

National Planning Policy

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2019

- 2.37 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was last re-published in February 2019. The NPPF promotes a presumption in favour of sustainable development, defined as "*meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*"
- 2.38 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.*"
- 2.39 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.”

2.40 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 (...)."***

2.41 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."***

2.42 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 ...;***
- ***..."***

National Planning Practice Guidance / National Design Guide

2.43 The Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) was first published online in March 2014 and 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 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.

Local Planning Policy

Reading Borough Local Plan (Adopted, November 2019)

- 2.44 The Local Plan provides the spatial planning strategy for Reading Borough Council up to 2036. The following policies and extracts from policies will be relevant to landscape and visual matters.
- 2.45 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)

2.46 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)

2.47 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)*

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

2.49 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)*

2.50 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)*

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

2.52 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)*

2.53 Policy CR2: Design in Central Reading (which includes the 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)*

2.54 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)*

2.55 Policy CR10: Tall Buildings, states:

"In Reading, tall buildings are defined as 10 storeys of commercial floorspace or 12 storeys of residential (equating to 36 metres tall) or above. Tall buildings will meet all the requirements below;

- i) *Within Reading Borough, tall buildings will only be appropriate within the 'areas of potential for tall buildings' as defined on the Proposals Map. These areas are as follows:*
 - *CR10a Station Area Cluster . ." (p.49)*

2.56 It is noted that the Site currently sits outside the boundary of Policy CR10 to the north of Vastern Road.

2.57 Policy CR10 also lists several requirements for tall building developments, which apply in addition to the area specific requirements:

- *"Enhance Reading's skyline, through a distinctive profile and careful design of the upper and middle sections of the building;*
- *Contribute to a human scale street environment, through paying careful attention to the lower section or base of the building, providing rich architectural detailing and reflecting their surroundings through the definition of any upper storey setback and reinforcing the articulation of the streetscape;*
- *Contribute to high-quality views from distance, views from middle-distance and local views;*
- *Take account of the context within which they sit, including the existing urban grain, streetscape and built form and local architectural style;*
- *Avoid bulky, over-dominant massing;*
- *Preserve and, where appropriate, enhance the setting of conservation areas and listed buildings;*
- *Use high quality materials and finishes;*
- *Create safe, pleasant and attractive spaces around them, and avoid detrimental impacts on the existing public realm (...);"* (p.140)

2.58 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)

- 2.59 In specific relation to the 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. ..."

- 2.60 Figure 5.3 on p.149 shows a Key Movement Route through the 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.

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

- 2.61 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 Site falls within the Station Area Boundary as defined in Figure 2.1 (p.12) of the RSAF.
- 2.62 The delivery of quality public realm within the Station Area is a key consideration of the RSAF, which sets out 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."* (p.24)**

- 2.63 Ten public realm priorities are listed within the RSAF, eight are specific location references and two general themes, of which the Site forms a focal point for 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.

2.64 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)*

2.65 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)*

2.66 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)*

2.67 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)*

2.68 Landscaping is listed as a priority theme for the Station Area public realm. Under the heading of Landscaping, 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)*

2.69 The RSAF sets out guidance on development density, mass and height with the Site 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).

2.70 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)*

2.71 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.

2.72 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)*

2.73 Paragraphs 6.28 and 6.29 make specific recommendations concerning building heights that relate to the 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)*

- 2.74 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 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.
- 2.75 Figure 8.2 shows the Framework Structure and includes a 'Major Path/Pedestrian Link' extending partly through the Site and partly through the substation to the east, between Christchurch Bridge and Vastern Road.
- 2.76 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 Site and partly through the substation to the east. No other reference to this feature is provided within RSAF, nor is any justification for this proposal set out.
- 2.77 Figures 14.1-14.11 illustrate an indicative vision of the Station Area, including landmark buildings at the northern end of the Site, adjoining the riverside (see in particular Figure 14.5); and a broad, tree-lined canal extending through the Site and adjoining substation.

3.0 SITE APPRAISAL

- 3.1 The Site comprises approximately 0.76 hectares (ha). As shown in **Figure 5** and **Site Appraisal Photographs A-D**, this predominantly comprises the existing SSE facility building, small storage buildings and containers, tarmac car parking area, lighting columns and patches of rough grassed areas. It is noted that during the January 2019 site visit several pieces of construction machinery were in use on the Site. Furthermore, since the site visit it is understood that the use of the Site for office space and associated parking has ceased.
- 3.2 The Site is contained to the north-west by a mixture of red brick and wooden fencing boundary treatments associated with the rear gardens of properties along Lynmouth Road. The existing SSE facility building is situated along the southern edge of the Site and separates the rest of the Site from Vastern Road. The northern-eastern boundary of the Site, which immediately abuts the Thames Path, is delineated by a low-level red brick wall with mounted green security fencing. Pioneering plant species, including Buddleja, have established along the northern boundary which consequently appears unmanaged. The eastern boundary of the Site extends to the north and south of the SSE electricity sub-station, which is enclosed by security fencing and is flanked by a continuation of the tarmac access route and car park associated with the SSE site.
- 3.3 The Site is largely devoid of vegetation, although the following on and off-site trees are noted:
- two small trees located in the north-west corner of the Site;
 - a line of mature poplar trees flanking the eastern boundary of the SSE site (off-site);
 - a line of plane trees, lining Vastern Road in front of the SSE facility building (off-site) (these trees have been pollarded to a height of approximately 5m);
 - a small birch tree located in a rear garden of one of the properties along Lynmouth Road (off-site).
- 3.4 The trees within the Site are considered to be of medium value as whilst small, they make some positive contribution to townscape character. They are considered to be of medium susceptibility to the type of development proposed as it may allow potential for retention or, if not, the trees could readily be replaced. Overall, they are of medium sensitivity to the type of development proposed. All other features within the Site are of low value and susceptibility, with the exception of parts of the south-western façade of the eastern wing of the SSE building which have some architectural interest and are therefore of medium-low value. Overall, the non-vegetated features of the Appeal Site are of low sensitivity to the type of development proposed.

- 3.5 The character of the Site is of a utilitarian void in the townscape, detracting from the sense of place of the vicinity, including the riverside and the experience of moving towards central Reading over the recently-constructed Christchurch Bridge. The character of the 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, which acts as a physical and perceptual barrier between the Site (and the wider townscape to the north) and the centre of Reading. The infrastructural, utilitarian character of the Site is in marked contrast to the domesticating influence of smaller-scale residential built form to the west, albeit noting that adjoining the Site on the riverside, apartment blocks within Lynmouth Court reach 2.5-3 storeys. The character of the northern area of the Site also appears in marked contrast to the open expanse of water of the River Thames and its adjoining public realm, notably the open green space of Christchurch Meadows.
- 3.6 The character of the Site is considered to be of very low value as it features inconsequential components and characteristics, that detract from the townscape of the vicinity. The character of the Site is considered to be of low susceptibility to the type of development proposed as it would have no consequence for the character integrity of the Site. Overall, the character of the Site is considered to be of low sensitivity to the type of development proposed.

4.0 VISUAL APPRAISAL

- 4.1 A visual appraisal of the Site and its environs was undertaken through fieldwork between January and April 2019, to determine the relationship of the area with its surroundings, the visibility of the Site within the wider townscape and provide a basis for consideration of the effects that the Proposed Development would have on views and the townscape and visual characteristics of the area.
- 4.2 The visual appraisal was undertaken from publicly-accessible viewpoints, primarily roads, footpaths and public open space, to determine the approximate extent of the area from which the Site is visible from the eye level of a person standing on the ground.
- 4.3 The Visual Appraisal exercise demonstrates that the broadly level topography of the Site and surrounding area in the central area of Reading results in very limited visibility of the Site as it exists, as intervening vegetation and built form in the urban area typically screen views from all but the nearest distances. There is also some visibility from the rising ground in the northern Caversham area of Reading. In any event, during the visual appraisal, account was taken of the likely proposed scale of the Proposed Development within the Site, in terms of the potential visibility of the Site.
- 4.4 In order to represent the nature of identified views, **Site Context Photographs 1–28** were selected from those photographs taken during the visual appraisal fieldwork from near (0-c.250m), middle (c.250-500m) and long (c.501m+) distances.
- 4.5 Being undertaken in winter conditions, the visual appraisal considers the visibility of the Site in the context of least vegetated cover on deciduous trees, resulting in maximum visibility of the Site. The locations from which these photographs were taken from are illustrated on **Figure 6**, which also shows the levels of visibility of the Site from the surrounding area. The extent and nature of views obtained towards the Site are described below, with reference to these views, which are representative of various receptor locations, as well as including specific locations set out in RBC policy and guidance. The viewpoints used were agreed with RBC and are set out in **Table 1** below in relation to the relevant viewpoints identified in RBC policy and character documents (Reading Tall Building Strategy 2008 (updated 2018) (RTBS); and Reading Station Area Framework (2010) (RSAF).

Table 1: Agreed Viewpoint Locations

Location	Long-range views into Reading identified in RTBS	Mid-range views into Reading identified in RTBS	Views within central Reading identified in RTBS	RSAF buildings in station area currently visible – long distance	RSAF buildings in station area not currently visible – long distance	RSAF shorter distance view	RSAF shorter distance view including historic asset	RSAF New view to be created	Baseline Site Context Photograph (visual receptor)
Blagrave Street next to O'Neills						54. Blagrave Street			1
Station Road next to RBS, looking north						58. Station Road			2
Station overbridge							62. Station Square north looking north		3
Vastern Road near to Junction of Trooper Potts Way looking north									4
Norman Place									5
Christchurch Bridge									6
Christchurch Meadows, approach to Christchurch Bridge, looking south-west						43. Christchurch Meadows			7
Christchurch Meadows, vicinity of Elliot's Way, looking south									8
War memorial, Christchurch Meadows, looking south-east						41. War memorial, Christchurch Meadows			9
Caversham Bridge, looking south-east		Viewpoint 6: From Caversham Bridge				40. Caversham Bridge			10
Thames Path at Caversham Wharf, looking south-east									11
Lynmouth Road, looking south-east						45. Lynmouth Road			12
Vastern Road, looking east									13
Vastern Road, looking north-west									14
Napier Road, looking north-west									15
Thames Path at King's Meadow, looking west							49. Kings Meadow		16

Location	Long-range views into Reading identified in RTBS	Mid-range views into Reading identified in RTBS	Views within central Reading identified in RTBS	RSAF buildings in station area currently visible – long distance	RSAF buildings in station area not currently visible – long distance	RSAF shorter distance view	RSAF shorter distance view including historic asset	RSAF New view to be created	Baseline Site Context Photograph (visual receptor)
Reading Bridge, looking north-west		Viewpoint 21: From Reading Bridge				46. Reading Bridge looking west			17
George Street, looking west									18
Henley Road junction with Lower Henley Road				10. Junction of Henley Road and Lower Henley Road					19
Junction of Prospect Street and Peppard Road, looking south				6. Junction of Prospect Street and Peppard Road					20
The Horse Close, looking south-west	Viewpoint 13: From 'The Horse Close', Caversham			7. Horse Close					21
Balmore Park, looking south	Viewpoint 14: View from Balmore Park			5. Balmore Walk					22
Caversham Court Gardens		Viewpoint 28: View towards Reading and Caversham Bridge from Caversham Gardens		3. Caversham Court Gardens					23
Oxford Road, junction with Wigmore Road									24
A33 near water treatment works	Viewpoint 26: View along the A33, towards Reading			14. A33 near water treatment works					25
Junction of Mount Pleasant and Southampton Street, looking north-west		Viewpoint 5: From the A327, south of central Reading		12. Junction of Mount Pleasant and Southampton Street					26
Junction of Wokingham Road and Green Road		Viewpoint 2: From the A329, south west of central Reading		23. Junction of Wokingham Road and Green Road					27
A4 at Shepherd's Hill, Earley				11. A4 at Shepherd's Hill, Earley					28

4.6 There would be glimpsed views of the Site encompassing the scale of the Proposed Development from isolated locations within the urban centre to the south and south-east of

the Site, dependent on the alignment of road/open space corridors towards the Site and the level of intervening built form and vegetation. Locations from where views would potentially be obtained include from the vicinity of Blagrave Street near Reading Museum (**Site Context Photograph 1**); and Station Road south of Reading Station (**Site Context Photograph 2**). Where the Site encompassing the scale of the Proposed Development is seen, it is in the context of large-scale built forms in the central Reading area visible on the skyline, notably No.3 Forbury Road, Apex Plaza and Thames Tower.

- 4.7 From the elevated overbridge/concourse of Reading Station, the Site can be seen to the north of the retail sheds of Reading Station Retail Park (**Site Photograph 3**). The existing SSE building creates a blank frontage to Vastern Road. From Vastern Road the 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 roofline at Great Brighams Mead (**Site Photographs 3, 4, 13 and 14**). Immediately to the east of the Site, views are largely obscured by substantial built form on Norman Place, and filtered by poplar trees on the eastern boundary of the Site (**Site Context Photograph 5**).
- 4.8 There are near-distance frontal and oblique views of the Site from Christchurch Bridge and Christchurch Meadows to the north (**Site Context Photographs 6 and 7**), from where the 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 properties to the west; and in the town centre beyond. From these locations, the Site in its current state, forms a utilitarian void in the townscape and detracts from views towards central Reading. Oblique views of the Site from the north-west of Christchurch Meadows are densely filtered by intervening vegetation along the riverbank and the mature trees on Fry's Island (**Site Context Photographs 8 and 9**) and, where available, are seen in the context of the development along the southern bank of the river and in the town centre.
- 4.9 There would be partial views of the Site, encompassing the scale of the Proposed Development, from Caversham Bridge (**Site Context Photograph 10**), from where the upper part of the Proposed Development would be visible set beyond the existing residential development along the southern bank of the river. From this location, the Proposed Development would be seen in the context of other large-scale buildings within the central Reading area (The Blade, No.3 Forbury Place, SSE and Reading Bridge House).
- 4.10 From the southern bank of the River Thames along the Thames Path, opposite the War Memorial to the north of the river, heading eastwards, central Reading is largely imperceptible set beyond residential built form to the south of the river which presents a strong containment of the river corridor and juxtaposition of vertical scale of built form alongside the watercourse.

The Site encompassing the Proposed Development would be largely obscured by existing four-storey apartments and is seen in the context of existing substantial built form including Reading Bridge House and built form under construction on Napier Road (**Site Context Photograph 11**).

- 4.11 From the northern end of Lynmouth Road, accessed from the Thames Path, glimpsed views of tall buildings in central Reading become available and begin to reinforce the approach to the urban centre in contrast to the domestic-scale properties flanking Lynmouth Road. The Site encompassing the Proposed Development is visible set beyond the residential properties and currently includes utilitarian built form (**Site Context Photograph 12**).
- 4.12 There are oblique glimpsed views towards the Site from King's Meadow Road/Napier Road, to the east of the junction with Vastern Road (**Site Context Photograph 15**). In this view, it is only the existing SSE facility building, forming the southern area of the Site, which is visible. The Site is perceived amid the context of larger built forms to the south and east.
- 4.13 Further to the east along the Thames Path, glimpsed views that are available towards the Site, encompassing the scale of the Proposed Development, from Kings Meadow (**Site Context Photograph 16**) or further along the river near Thames Valley Park, are heavily filtered or screened altogether by the dense intervening riverside tree cover. Moreover, the meandering course of the River Thames strongly contributes to the physical and visual separation of the observer and the Site as direct views along the river are obstructed by dense intervening vegetation and landscape features that protrude above the water level, such as De Bohun and View Island. Similarly, views from further west along the Thames Path towards the Site are curtailed by dense intervening vegetation and the broadly level topography (**Site Context Photograph 23**).
- 4.14 On Reading Bridge, the Site encompassing the Proposed Development is partially visible set beyond the existing riverside built form, as well as a belt of Poplar trees (**Site Context Photograph 17**). From further along George Street looking south-west towards central Reading, the support pier of Christchurch Bridge, to the north of the river, is seen juxtaposed against residential built form immediately to the south of the river (**Site Context Photograph 18**).
- 4.15 There are partial long range views of the Site encompassing the scale of the Proposed Development from isolated positions on the elevated land in the northern area of Reading, dependent on the alignment of road/open space corridors towards the Site and the level of intervening built form and vegetation. Locations from where views would potentially be obtained include from Henley Road (**Site Context Photograph 19**); Junction of Peppard Road and Prospect Street (**Site Context Photograph 20**); The Horse Close (**Site Context**

Photograph 21); and Balmore Park (**Site Context Photograph 22**). Where the Site encompassing the scale of the Proposed Development is seen, it is in the context of larger scale built forms in the central Reading area visible on the skyline, notably The Blade, Thames Tower and Reading Bridge House. No views of the Site will be possible from further south, south-west or south-east of the urban centre along the A33, A327, Wokingham Road and Oxford Road, due to intervening substantial built form occupying slightly elevated land within the urban centre and vegetation bounding the transport corridors (**Site Photographs 24-28**).

- 4.16 In summary, visibility of the Site, including encompassing the scale of the Proposed Development, is generally limited to near-distance views. There are glimpsed views of the Site from specific locations within the urban centre to the south and south-east, dependent on the alignment of river/road/open space corridors towards the Site and the level of intervening built form and vegetation. Similarly, partial longer-range views may be possible from isolated positions on the elevated land to the north of Reading, however from further south there will be no views of the Site. Where the Site is seen, it is typically in the context of existing large-scale built forms within central Reading and along the riverside. Where visible, the Site appears as a utilitarian void in the townscape, detracting from views.

5.0 TOWNSCAPE AND VISUAL OPTIMISATION/MITIGATION BY DESIGN

- 5.1 With reference to the baseline townscape and visual appraisal and review of policy and character documents, a number of Townscape and Visual Opportunities and Constraints were determined. These guided the design evolution of the Proposed Development and thereby aim to mitigate by design any adverse effects on townscape and visual sensitivities arising. They are also intended to optimise the townscape and visual potential of the Proposed Development.
- 5.2 The Proposed Development is illustrated in the submitted design package. In addition, the **Verified Photomontages** illustrate the appearance of the scheme from the surrounding area and **Computer Generated Images (CGIs) 1-4**, included for ease of reference as **Appendix 5**, are particularly clear in illustrating the character of key parts of the proposed public realm within the Site. The CGIs provide an impression of how the scheme could look, including for potential public art features. Such features are not part of the application, but it is noted that there is potential to provide them and concept illustration is therefore shown in the CGIs.
- 5.3 Both the Verified Photomontages and the CGIs were prepared by Realm Communications.
- 5.4 In summary, the Proposed Development comprises a broadly north-south green link culminating at open spaces/public realm at the northern and southern ends of the Site, framed by built development, of the following scale:
- 6 (Block A), 4, 11 and 9 (B) storeys on the elevation facing Vastern Road (north-west to south-east);
 - 4, 6+2 (rooftop pavilion) (E), undercroft+5+pitched roof and undercroft+7+2 (rooftop pavilion) (D) storeys on the elevation facing the riverside (north-west to south-east);
 - 4 (6+2, including rooftop pavilion beyond), 6+2 (including rooftop pavilion) (E), 1 (3+pitched roof beyond), 2+pitched roof (F and G), 3.5+pitched roof (C), 4 (B) and 6 (2 set back beyond frontage) (A) storeys on the elevation facing Lynmouth Road (north-east to south-west); and
 - Undercroft+7+2 (rooftop pavilion), undercroft+5+pitched roof (D), 3.5+pitched roof (C), 4 and 9 (11 beyond) (B) storeys on the elevation facing the retained SSE substation (north-east to south-west).
- 5.5 Having been incorporated into the scheme wherever feasible, the townscape and visual optimisation/mitigation by design principles are set out below in terms of Beneficial Changes and Adverse Changes/Mitigating Factors.

Potential Beneficial Changes

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

- 5.6 The Proposed Development would, as a core design principle, 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.
- 5.7 The Proposed Development provides the potential to draw the River Thames into the expanding townscape of Reading town centre, through improved legibility using built form signposts of notable visual interest 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.
- 5.8 The Proposed Development would replace the existing utilitarian townscape of the Site, which forms a void in the urban grain and is a negative influence on character, with a strong sense of place at the point where at a human, pedestrian level the evolving town centre meets the Thames.
- 5.9 The Proposed Development would complement the role of Christchurch Bridge as the interface and physical link between the expanding town centre and the emerging role of Christchurch Meadows as a park for the urban area, by providing a more positive townscape frontage on the southern riverbank to the bridge and park, 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 (**CGI 3**).
- 5.10 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 and perceptual permeability (**CGI 3**).
- 5.11 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 path. This vegetation would not prevent the potential for a strong perception of overlooking of the path from the proposed built form (**CGI 3**).
- 5.12 Conversely, the bridge landing public realm would enable contemplation of an intense urban setting to the riverside on arrival across the bridge, before proceeding into the town centre (**CGI 3**).

- 5.13 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**).

Linkage across the river:

- 5.14 Taller elements at the riverside and alongside Vastern Road would have potential to complement the bridge as legible steps in the visual linkage perceived from the wider townscape, between tall buildings in the town centre, the river corridor, the open space at Christchurch Meadows and Caversham beyond; and the same progression in reverse (**CGIs** and **Photomontages**).
- 5.15 The Proposed Development would echo the role of substantial built forms in signalling the presence of river crossings at Caversham Bridge and Reading Bridge, albeit to a more accentuated degree as the 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**).
- 5.16 In this way, the Proposed Development would contribute to a rhythm of built form as it is perceived along the riverbank, where prominent buildings rise up above the adjoining forms at the points where crossings are obtained.
- 5.17 At a more local scale, the Proposed Development would enhance 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**).
- 5.18 The Proposed Development would provide a more direct, legible and coherent immediate linkage of the bridge towards the town centre, notably by providing a new southern landing of the bridge as part of a continuous rather than the current disjointed corridor.
- 5.19 The Proposed Development would arrange 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**).
- 5.20 The Proposed Development would provide 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**).
- 5.21 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**).

- 5.22 The overall composition of ramps and incidental spaces between the residential blocks, creates a perception of substantial public realm open space adjacent to the riverside, owned by both residents and passers-by. The whole space will be well-animated by movement along the various routes and by a café pavilion, echoing the architectural style of the other larger blocks. The space will be lit by an openness to the south-west, resulting from the lower height of the south-western wing of block D. (**CGI 3**).
- 5.23 A green link through the Site is defined by a clear hard surfacing treatment and by substantial canopy trees, smaller street trees and linear belts of shrub planting, providing a well-vegetated character and strong legibility of the route (**CGIs**).
- 5.24 Nodal points are provided along the route where access into the residential properties is obtained. These provide legible transitions between public and semi-private realm (**CGIs**).
- 5.25 The Proposed Development would enhance the legibility of the route and sense of place and identity through distinctive roofline profile and detailing, potentially referencing the industrial heritage of the Site, including providing clearly-defined and visually-interesting tops to the built forms (**CGIs and Photomontages**).
- 5.26 The Proposed Development would enhance the north-south route of the green link at the Vastern Road section of the Internal Distributor Road through a combination of human interest at street level, notably through positive treatment of the ground floor frontages, including planting to soften the streetscene, and 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 it, in response to RSAF Public Realm Priority 5. The entrance to the green link from Vastern Road is identified with a flared public realm, with surface patterning referencing the historic use of the Site as rail sidings and potential for a focal public art feature (**CGI 4**).
- 5.27 Whilst the surface of the green link is clear and legible in itself, the course of the route is marked 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**). Visual closure is a recognised approach to generating interesting and invitation along routes through the townscape, successfully demonstrated in the Thames Path

through the South Bank area of London for example, where routes between buildings are alluring and provide shade, intimacy of scale and visual interest.

- 5.28 The Proposed Development would ensure 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**).

Distinctiveness of the setting:

- 5.29 The Proposed Development, both built and landscaped, would be sufficiently visually interesting and distinctive to its setting that it is clearly of the river and of the wider Thames Valley – brick is used as a façade material to reflect the valley floor geological setting.
- 5.30 The immediate setting of the riverside would include planting of locally-appropriate wetland species which reinforce the underlying riverside character of the setting, as well as reinforcing a natural influence at the edge of the expanded town centre (**CGI 3**).
- 5.31 Open space, in combination with the elevated bridge landing and provision of a link with the riverside path, would create a focal point at the riverside from where the river can be appreciated (**CGI 3**).
- 5.32 Whilst located at the riverside, the character of the Proposed Development would also respond to its immediate setting near the centre of a large busy urban area which is a key communication and transport hub.
- 5.33 The character of the Proposed Development would therefore relate to both the river and the town centre and, at the point where they meet, bring the life and activity of the town to the languor of the Thames. This includes anticipation of the riverside on the movement corridor through tight control of spaces, as seen in the distinct character of the public realm of the emerging town centre riverside, notably at Clearwater Court, where tall built form, public realm and water are juxtaposed in dynamic and exciting fashion, creating visual interest and a positive sense of place. The Proposed Development would reflect 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’.
- 5.34 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 (**CGI 3**).
- 5.35 As part of this urban character of the riverside, the Proposed Development would reflect the distinctive industrial heritage of the 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 Site. There is also potential to reference the glazing of riverside

pavilions/villas/garden rooms in reflecting the character of the wider Thames corridor. This would contrast positively with the character of residential apartment blocks and offices along the riverside to the north-west and south-east, which lack local distinctiveness. 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**).

- 5.36 The Proposed Development would provide direct, non-stepped access to the elevated bridge landing and reflect the north-east – south-west pattern of the adjoining streets to the west, which have a fine grain and assist in legibility of the riverside, as opposed to the meandering and vehicle-dominated route of Norman Place to the east. Extending public realm access to this pattern would soften the perception of the alienating scale and utilitarian character of the dual carriageway roadway of Vastern Road and the car parking and retail sheds opposite the Site and would provide a positive contrast to this openness and lack of intimacy. The street scene level of the Proposed Development would soften character and reflect 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.

Potential Adverse Changes and Mitigating Factors

- 5.37 Townscape and visual constraints to the Proposed Development, to avoid or minimise adverse changes, primarily relate to the need for sensitive interfaces with adjoining areas and are set out below.
- 5.38 Whilst providing the visual stepping stones at Vastern Road and at the riverside between the town centre and Christchurch Meadows, the Proposed Development would avoid taller built forms in the centre of the Site, to accentuate the legibility of the taller elements at either end of the link; and avoid perception of a mass of built form extending north-south across the Site and reduce the scale of built development appearing in views from residential receptors on Lynmouth Road.
- 5.39 Within these massing clusters, the Proposed Development would focus height on the south-eastern side of the Site, away from small scale residential properties to the north-west (**CGI 3**), noting the presence of a belt of poplar trees to the east which provides an interface with larger-scale massing of commercial and residential development.
- 5.40 The Proposed Development would provide a transition between the requisite height of the legible townscape; and the intimate domestic scale of existing two-storey terraced residential development to the west. This would include progression in scale (although not too obviously

stepped); as well as using varied roof articulation (including pitched roofs and rooftop pavilions) and articulation of upper parts of the proposed built form, to create lightness of form, break up vertical faces and diminish the perception of a uniform approach to height (which would otherwise exacerbate it). The variation between pitched and flat roofs and brick and glass skylines also creates a variety across the proposed built forms which engenders a perception of harmonious difference, which softens and integrates the character of the scheme, rather than a uniform imposition of style and massing which dominates the townscape (**CGIs** and **Photomontages**).

- 5.41 Tree planting on the boundary with the Lynmouth Road properties would soften the appearance of façades within the Proposed Development, as well as providing a progression in scale.
- 5.42 Varied façade treatments, on both the horizontal and vertical axis, 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 (**CGIs** and **Photomontages**).
- 5.43 The varied use of windows and balconies creates further interest in the façades, as well as a perception of active human usage of the built form (**CGIs** and **Photomontages**).
- 5.44 The Proposed Development would create visual interest and an intimacy in the public realm to focus attention at street level and soften the scale of adjoining built form. Shrub planting on the Vastern Road frontage softens the interface between the ground plane and vertical façades and create a more human scale and visually interesting street-scene (**CGI 4** and **Photomontages P4 and P5**).
- 5.45 In managing the positive and dynamic contrast in character between the open and well-managed meadows to the north and the urban centre to the south, the Proposed Development would include tree planting to 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 were diminished and the dynamism of vertical form of considerable interest as seen elsewhere adjacent to the river is missed.
- 5.46 The substantial built form would create a strong sense of enclosure on the southern side of the river, albeit this would be in keeping with other built forms creating enclosure along the riverside. This would be alleviated by the range of factors relating to façade design and character of the built form, as set out above, as well as the setting-back of the rooftop pavilions, which diminishes the vertical scale of the riverside frontage.

- 5.47 Cranked 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 (**Photomontages P2, P6 and P6A**).
- 5.48 In relation to the bridge itself, 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 would complement rather than compete with the vertical patterns and the materiality should form a backdrop allowing the very pale colours of the bridge support pier to remain distinct and prominent (**Photomontage P2**).
- 5.49 The retained SSE sub-station infrastructure would be comprehensively screened from the public realm.
- 5.50 In addition to the policy constraint that the Site lies outwith a tall building zone, built form would complement and remain subservient to the emerging clusters of taller built form within Reading town centre in longer distance views. Gestures within the built form massing would reinforce the role and prominence of the more central built forms of the town centre, to ally the Proposed Development with them, rather than compete and clash.

6.0 CONSIDERATION OF TOWNSCAPE AND VISUAL EFFECTS

- 6.1 This section includes an assessment of the townscape and visual effects of the Proposed Development which has been undertaken with consideration to Year 1 and at Year 15, the latter taking into account the ongoing establishment of the planting proposals.
- 6.2 It is acknowledged that the construction phase will also result in a number of alterations to the townscape and visual amenity through the loss of townscape components and the addition of large scale plant and machinery. In this regard the effects that will occur will typically be of a greater significance than those effects described in this section owing to the transient, shifting and infrastructural appearance, in contrast to the more settled appearance of completed built form and landscape planting, albeit these effects will be temporary in nature.

Effects on Townscape Features

- 6.3 There would be a substantial number of trees planted as part of the Proposed Development (approximately 70no.) which, planted at advanced sizes at year 1 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. Whilst the existing 2 no. trees would be lost, there would on balance be a large magnitude of beneficial change in terms of vegetation as townscape features. This would result in beneficial effect at year 1 of moderate significance. At year 15, through the establishment of tree and shrub planting, there would be beneficial effects on vegetation of major significance.
- 6.4 There would be beneficial effects of major significance on hard surfacing within the Site as a result of the replacement of the existing bitumen macadam car parking with a comprehensive, legible and visually interesting range of hard surface materials.

Visual Effects

- 6.5 Consideration has been given to the visual effects that will occur with respect to the identified representative visual receptor viewpoint locations (as shown in **Site Context Photographs 1-28**). The assessment is based on the highest sensitivity of receptor at each viewpoint location (for example, pedestrian rather than vehicle user, where applicable). The assessment is based on the winter views illustrated in the baseline, thereby constituting the maximum likely visibility of the change resulting from the Proposed Development. In summer conditions with leaves on deciduous trees, the magnitude of change and significance of effect would be less than that noted here (set out below, where summer photomontages have been taken to assist in describing the effects in these conditions).

6.6 The appearance of the Proposed Development in a number of views has been illustrated in verifiable **Photomontages 1-10**, shown in **Appendix 3**. These viewpoints were agreed with RBC in March 2019. The photomontage images show the Proposed Development at year 15 in winter conditions of no leaf cover on deciduous trees. A number of the photomontages, where vegetation was considered to be likely to make a notable difference to visibility, have also been shown in summer conditions at year 15, to demonstrate the integration of the proposed built form into the townscape by the proposed planting. As part of the iterative process, the summer view for **Photomontage 6**, from Reading Bridge, was micro-sited further north to better show the riverside facades, resulting in the additional **Photomontage 6A**. The slightly different view also reflects the dynamic experience of walking across the bridge.

6.7 As set out in **Appendix 3**, the photomontage images should be viewed at the recommended viewing distance for the size of paper on which they are printed, to give a scale of view if held at a comfortable arm's length most closely replicating that experienced in reality.

6.8 Assessment of visual effects at year 1 and year 15 is set out in **Appendix 4**.

6.9 Overall, considering the potential beneficial changes, as well as potential adverse changes and the approaches to mitigating them, it is considered that there would be, on balance, predominantly beneficial visual effects as a result of the Proposed Development.

Riverside corridor including Christchurch Meadows

6.10 As set out in **Appendix 4**, in views from the **riverside corridor including Christchurch meadows** (receptor numbers 6-11, 16-18) receptors would typically experience the following in terms of beneficial changes:

- The Proposed Development would create a strong reinforcement of sense of place in the view, by replacing the existing utilitarian townscape of the 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.
- The Proposed Development would introduce a positive townscape frontage on the southern riverbank to Christchurch Bridge and park, 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.
- The Proposed Development would provide 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.
- 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.
- The Proposed Development would reflect the distinctive industrial heritage of the 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 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.

6.11 Adverse change and mitigating factors experienced in these views include:

- The Proposed Development would focus height on the south-eastern side of the Site, in keeping with the scale of the Poplar belt to the south-east and away from smaller-scale residential properties 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, albeit this is 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 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 were 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.

6.12 Overall, beneficial effects 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, the latter experienced from Christchurch Bridge.

Vastern Road corridor

6.13 As set out in **Appendix 4**, in views from the **Vastern Road corridor** (receptor numbers 4 and 13-15), receptors would typically experience the following in terms of beneficial changes:

- The built form 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 echoes the role of substantial built forms in signalling the presence of river crossings.
- The Proposed Development would enhance the north-south route of the green link at the Vastern Road section of the Internal Distributor Road through a combination of human interest at street level, notably through positive treatment of the ground floor frontages, including planting to soften the streetscene, and 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 it. In combination with the active, human usage of the built form, these features would offset the negative effect on the townscape of the Vastern Road dual carriageway and the large warehouse sheds of the Reading Station Retail Park.
- Enhancement in sense of place in this view would be experienced through replacing the existing void in the townscape with built form which reflects the distinctive industrial heritage of the 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 Site. Brickwork would also reflect the Thames valley geology. In addition, the glazed rooftop pavilions in the riverside blocks, where visible in close

proximity to the Site, 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.

6.14 Adverse change and mitigating factors experienced in these views include:

- There would be a marked increase in massing adjacent to the roadway, creating a strong sense of enclosure, albeit this would be softened by façade detailing, creating visual interest and a distinct perception of bottom-middle-top in the built form.
- The perceived progression in scale from smaller-scale residential development to the west of the Site and from substantial commercial development to the east of the Site would be softened by a stepping up of height and the advanced stock canopy tree planting flanking Vastern Road. The establishment of this planting over 15 years would provide further softening and anchoring of the built form.
- The perceived scale of built form massing fronting Vastern Road would be further broken up by the split in massing to enable the green link, the varied façade treatment in brick detailing and the perception of active human usage of the built form, notably on balconies.

6.15 Overall, at year 1 there would typically be a slightly higher magnitude of beneficial change than adverse change, resulting in beneficial effects ranging from minor to minor-moderate significance. Through the establishment of the roadside planting by year 15, there would be a slight decrease in adverse change, resulting overall in beneficial effects ranging from minor-moderate to moderate significance.

Views from Lynmouth Road

6.16 As set out in **Appendix 4**, in views from **residential properties on Lynmouth Road**, (receptor number 12) beneficial changes would arise from the following:

- The proposed built form would replace views of the SSE substation and existing car park. The Proposed Development would create a strong reinforcement of sense of place in the view, by replacing the existing utilitarian townscape of the Site, which forms a void in the urban grain and is a negative influence on character, at the point where at a human, pedestrian level the evolving town centre meets the Thames.
- The built form 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.
- Enhancement in sense of place in this view would be experienced through built form which reflects the distinctive industrial heritage of the 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 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. These features would soften the existing infrastructural character of the view.

6.17 Adverse change and mitigating factors experienced in these views include:

- It is noted that at the southern end of Lynmouth Road, the existing SSE building already creates a sense of enclosure but in this area there would be a marked increase in the perception of massing within the Site, creating a stronger sense of enclosure which would constitute an adverse change. However, this would be softened by the façade detailing, fenestration, and variation on the skyline.
- The perceived progression in scale from residential development would be softened by the range of heights and roofline treatments: 4 (6+2, including rooftop pavilion beyond), 6+2 (including rooftop pavilion) (E), 1 (3+pitched roof beyond), 2+pitched roof (F and G), 3.5+pitched roof (C), 4 (B) and 6 (2 set back beyond frontage) (A) storeys Road (north-east to south-west). The 2-storey set back behind the frontage of block A will in particular soften the scale of built form perceived in these views.
- The avoidance of taller built forms in the centre of the Site, would accentuate the legibility of the taller elements at either end of the link; and avoid perception of a mass of built form extending north-south across the Site.
- 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 variation between pitched and flat roofs and brick and glass skylines also creates a variety across the proposed built forms which engenders a perception of harmonious difference, which softens and integrates the character of the scheme, rather than a uniform imposition of style and massing which dominates the townscape.
- Tree planting on the boundary with the Lynmouth Road properties would soften the appearance of façades within the Proposed Development, as well as providing a progression in scale. The establishment of this planting over 15 years would provide further softening of the built form and progression in scale.

6.18 Overall, it is considered that at year 1, for residential properties at the northern and southern ends of Lynmouth Road, beneficial change of medium-small magnitude would partly offset adverse change of large magnitude, resulting on balance in adverse change of medium magnitude and adverse effects of moderate-major significance. Through the establishment

over 15 years of tree planting along the boundary with the Site, there would be a slight reduction in adverse change, to medium-large adverse, resulting in an on-balance adverse change of medium-small magnitude and adverse effects of moderate significance. These are the only receptor group anticipated to experience on-balance adverse visual effects of the Proposed Development.

- 6.19 For residential properties in the central area of Lynmouth Road, there would be a slightly lesser magnitude of adverse change, resulting from the lower built forms in the centre of the Site, such that these receptors would experience adverse effects of moderate significance at year 1 and minor-moderate significance at year 15.

Views from townscape on rising land to the north

- 6.20 As set out in **Appendix 4**, in the limited publicly-accessible locations in the **townscape on rising land to the north** from which views of the Site are obtained (receptor numbers 19-23), where visible, beneficial change would arise primarily from the proposed riverside built form which would provide signposts of notable visual interest that would identify the River Thames across the wider townscape, notably at a crossing point, as well as the visual linkage between buildings in the town centre and the river corridor. The design detailing would enhance the sense of place at the riverside. Beneficial effects at year 1 and year 15 would be of negligible to minor significance.

Views from town centre to the south

- 6.21 As set out in **Appendix 4**, in views from the **town centre to the south** (receptors 1-3), typically the built form would barely be perceived, resulting in limited beneficial effects. In the view from the station overbridge, whilst the Vastern Road blocks would provide focal points and enhance the sense of place, they would also partially obscure the wooded skyline and the support pier of Christchurch Bridge. This would result on balance in a beneficial effect of negligible significance. The re-development of the Reading Station Retail Park would largely obscure this view in any event.

Views from wider townscape to the south

- 6.22 As set out in **Appendix 4**, there would typically be no visibility of the Proposed Development in views from the wider townscape to the south across the existing town centre.

Effects on Townscape Character

Effects on Site character

- 6.23 The Proposed Development would replace the existing utilitarian void in the townscape, with residential built development, reflecting land uses to the north-west but referencing the previous industrial use of the Site in terms of design approach. The Proposed Development would create a positive riverside setting of planting and public realm, overlooked by new residential built form. The public realm at the riverside and through the Site would enable legibility of the green link between the town centre and the river corridor, whilst controlling the pace of movement on a shared surface allowing contemplation of the route and spaces; anticipation through the use of closure along the route; and animation, notably at the riverside, including through the focal role of the proposed café.
- 6.24 Planting of trees and shrubs throughout the Proposed Development would provide legibility, progression in scale, shade, visual interest and a sense of tranquillity amid the busy townscape.
- 6.25 A strong but varied industrial aesthetic of built form would vary between the more robust and purposeful character at the Vastern Road edge of the Site, 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. Progression in scale is achieved through the use of varying heights of blocks to provide more sympathetic reference to adjoining properties, notably those on Lynmouth Road to the north-west. Stronger edges are provided to the retained industrial use to the east which is also contained by the line of poplar trees. Massing and height are focused at either end of the Proposed Development, providing legibility to the green link as part of the progression across the townscape between the evolving town centre and the river corridor, but also reducing height in the vicinity of adjacent residential properties to the north-west.
- 6.26 The active human usage of the Proposed Development in terms of both residential accommodation and public realm would animate the townscape and enhance the character of the key route provided through it.
- 6.27 On the basis of these points, it is considered that at year 1, there would be a large magnitude of beneficial change to the low sensitivity character of the Site, resulting in beneficial effects of moderate significance. Through the establishment of the proposed planting by year 15, there would be beneficial effects of moderate-major significance.

Effects on Reading Tall Building Strategy Character Area 22: Vastern Road

- 6.28 The Proposed Development would enhance the character of this area, by creating more animated land use of active human interest, in contrast to the existing warehouse uses and

vehicle-dominated corridor of Vastern Road. The Proposed Development would provide landmark structures, where currently there are none, on Vastern Road and on the riverside. The visual influence of these buildings would provide legible steps in the visual linkage perceived from the wider townscape, between tall buildings in the town centre, the river corridor, the open space at Christchurch Meadows and Caversham beyond; and the same progression in reverse. The Proposed Development would also contribute to a rhythm of substantial built forms along the riverside signalling the presence of river crossings, notably at a point where the crossing is closely linked to the heart of the town centre and is part of a visionary new route set out in policy aspirations.

- 6.29 The Proposed Development would provide a positive, legible and visually interesting public realm route through the Site. This would culminate to the north in an accessible, varied, well-contained and visually interesting open space creating a strong sense of place by the riverside and linkage to Christchurch Bridge, where currently there is none. A positive townscape frontage on the southern riverbank to the bridge and park, including built form of a scale reflecting this notable interface, would affirm the closer relationship of Christchurch Meadows with the town centre and herald the urban character of the town centre to the south. In doing so, it would provide a strong invitation to cross the river and complement the elegant form of Christchurch Bridge.
- 6.30 To the south, the Proposed Development would enhance the character of the Vastern Road corridor through a combination of human interest at street level, notably through positive treatment of the ground floor frontages, including planting to soften the streetscene, and a legible and inviting public realm, potentially including a public art feature; 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 it.
- 6.31 The Proposed Development would create a positive new identity for this part of the Character Area, by reflecting the distinctive industrial heritage of the Site in façade and roofline articulation and brick as a façade material, as well as reflecting the character of riverside pavilions/villas/garden rooms in the wider Thames corridor in the glazing of the riverside rooftop pavilions. This would contrast positively with the character of residential apartment blocks and offices along the riverside to the north-west and south-east, which lack local distinctiveness. The Proposed Development would also extend the characteristic north-south grain of the townscape to the west into this area.
- 6.32 Built form detailing using a range of approaches would create visual interest and diminish the perception of scale of the taller volumes which are focused at either end of the Site to maximise townscape legibility benefits, whilst providing smaller built form adjacent to existing residential properties to the north-west to help manage the character transition. Canopy and street tree

planting would also assist in integrating the built form into the townscape. The proposed built forms are not tall buildings by RBC policy standards and would lie outside the tall building cluster. The proposed built forms would gesture to the tall buildings to the south, notably as perceived from the wider townscape to the north; and would remain subservient to them.

- 6.33 Overall at year 1, it is considered that there would be a medium magnitude of beneficial change in Character Area 22 arising from the Proposed Development, resulting in beneficial effects on this low sensitivity townscape of minor-moderate significance. At year 15, through the establishment of the proposed planting, it is considered that a slightly higher magnitude of beneficial change would result in beneficial effects of moderate significance

Effects on Reading Tall Building Strategy Character Area 12: Caversham Road

- 6.34 The Proposed Development would introduce built form of a substantial scale at the south-eastern edge of this character area, which would inevitably contrast to some degree with the prevailing smaller scale of residential properties although this pattern is already disrupted by large scale development, including at Great Brighams Mead. The Proposed Development would, through its accessibility and strong character references to previous use and the Thames riverside, provide a stronger sense of place adjacent to the residential development than does Great Brighams Mead.
- 6.35 The influence of substantial built form would be softened by the distribution of taller massing to either end of the Site, such that it reads as part of the Thames and Vastern Road corridors rather than an imposition on the Character Area; the progression in scale of built form up from this area to the taller massing; the varied roof articulation (including pitched roofs) and articulation of upper parts of the proposed built form, to break up vertical faces and diminish the perception of a uniform approach to height; and tree planting on the boundary to Lynmouth Road properties.
- 6.36 The Proposed Development would replace the current utilitarian townscape void which currently has a detracting influence on this edge of the Character Area.
- 6.37 It is therefore considered that at year 1, there would be a medium magnitude of adverse change to the character of this area, predominantly formed of the indirect influence of the Proposed Development, almost all of the built form massing of which lies beyond the character area. There would be a medium-small magnitude of beneficial change from the influence of the enhanced sense of place and townscape legibility in the scheme. As a result, at year 1, there would be adverse change of very small magnitude, resulting in adverse effects on this medium sensitivity townscape of minor-negligible significance. By year 15, through the establishment of canopy tree planting, adverse change would be slightly reduced such that

adverse effects would be of negligible significance and neutral effects would prevail with further tree growth over a greater time period.

Effects on Reading Tall Building Strategy Character Area 23: King's Meadow

- 6.38 There would be no direct change to the character of the area as a result of the Proposed Development but there would be indirect influence of the proposed built forms of substantial scale in the southern setting of this Character Area. There would inevitably be a degree of adverse change in the contrast to the open character of the land to the north of the river. However, the Proposed Development would replace an existing utilitarian void in the townscape that blocks the route between this character area and the town centre, notwithstanding the role of the bridge in connecting towards it from Christchurch Meadows.
- 6.39 Taller elements at the riverside and alongside Vastern Road would complement the bridge as legible steps in the visual linkage perceived from the wider townscape, between tall buildings in the town centre, the river corridor, the open space at Christchurch Meadows and Caversham beyond; and the same progression in reverse. In particular, the Proposed Development would enhance the perceived connection between the town centre and the open space of Christchurch Meadow, which has an emerging role as a park to serve the evolving townscape.
- 6.40 The Proposed Development would echo the existing role of substantial built forms in signalling the presence of river crossings at Caversham Bridge and Reading Bridge, albeit to a more accentuated degree as the 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.
- 6.41 In this way, the Proposed Development would contribute to a rhythm of built form as it is perceived along the riverbank perceived from this Character Area, where prominent buildings rise up above the adjoining forms at the points where crossings are obtained.
- 6.42 At a more local scale, the Proposed Development would enhance 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.
- 6.43 The Proposed Development would provide a more direct, legible and coherent immediate linkage of the bridge towards the town centre, notably by providing a new southern landing of the bridge as part of a continuous rather than the current disjointed corridor. The Proposed Development would arrange 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.

6.44 These factors would complement the role of Character Area 23 in providing a strong public realm linkage with the town centre. In addition, the Proposed Development would enhance the southern riverside setting with visually interesting built form referencing local character as well as planting and public realm. The vertical scale of built form adjacent to the river would be softened by the progression in scale of massing; the set back and lighter appearance of the rooftop pavilions; the substantial space between the riverside blocks; the cranked alignments and varied façades of the riverside blocks; the perception of active human usage of the built forms and public realm; and the proposed planting.

6.45 As a result, it is considered that the indirect influence of the Proposed Development would lead to a beneficial change in character of medium-small significance. It is considered that there would be a small magnitude of adverse change, resulting on balance, at year 1 in a beneficial change of very small magnitude. This would result in beneficial effects on the character of this area of minor-moderate significance. It is considered that through the establishment of the proposed planting, by year 15, there would, on balance be beneficial change of small magnitude, resulting in a beneficial effect of moderate significance.

Effects on other Character Areas

6.46 Owing to the lack of visibility of the Proposed Development from wider areas of the townscape to the south, there would be no material effect on the character of these areas from the Proposed Development.

Effects on National Level Landscape Character

6.47 The effects of the Proposed Development are not assessed in relation to the very broad area of National Character Area (NCA) 110: Chilterns, but a positive response to the guidance within the NCA profile is noted, in the form of the creation of green space and trees incorporated within the Site design as well as the enhancement of footpath connections between central Reading and the River Thames and Christchurch Meadows.

Consideration of Cumulative Schemes

6.48 The cumulative schemes considered in this assessment are the following, which have been incorporated into the photomontages shown in **Appendix 3**, as agreed with RBC.

- Former BMW site, King's Meadow/Napier Road (application ref. 162166): part 12 storey, part 23 storey residential.
- 29 Station Road (ref. 181930): 22 storey hotel, offices and retail.
- Plot E and Telecom House, Station Hill (ref. 151426): mixed uses, up to 85m AOD.
- Former sorting office, 80 Caversham Road (ref. 182252): mixed uses, up to 123m AOD.

6.49 In addition, whilst an application has not yet been submitted, consideration is also taken of the proposed development scheme of the Site of Reading Station Retail Park to the south of Vastern Road, based on recent exhibition boards. This includes mixed use, predominantly residential, built form up to approximately 20 storeys in height near to Reading Station and a series of built forms of approximately 4-10 storeys fronting Vastern Road.

Commentary on cumulative effects on landscape features

6.50 It is noted that these proposals contain varying degrees of public realm and green infrastructure. Most notably however, the Reading Station Retail Park scheme to the south of Vastern Road includes the southern part of the proposed green link between the station and Christchurch Bridge. In combination with the green infrastructure proposed along the route and at the riverside within the Site, there is potential for a marked enhancement of green infrastructure in the vicinity.

Commentary on cumulative visual effects

6.51 In combination with the Proposed Development, the cumulative schemes, including as shown in the photomontages in **Appendix 3**, provide a strong sense of place in the evolving town centre. They are part of a dramatic intensification of the area, including height which will fundamentally reinforce the legibility of the centre of Reading from the wider townscape. In this context, the Proposed Development remains subservient to these taller buildings which are located in Tall Buildings Clusters.

6.52 As noted in **Appendix 4**, there is potential from the cumulative schemes, for increased perception of enclosure but also enhanced public realm and sense of place along Vastern Road. In the context of the intensification of the town centre, the Proposed Development would provide a more relaxed, smaller-scale interface with the Thames corridor, albeit would also provide a positive townscape frontage, befitting the meeting of the town centre and the river. This would notably be perceived in views from the wider townscape to the north. In those views where the cumulative schemes would be seen, there would be some additional perception of intensification and mass on the skyline. However, the relationship of the Proposed Development with these schemes would remain subservient and a logical and harmonious hierarchy of scale would be presented, in accordance with planning documents which have guided the wider evolution of Reading town centre.

6.53 It is therefore considered that overall, the visual effects of the Proposed Development with the wider cumulative schemes would be broadly balanced and not materially alter the assessment for the Proposed Development.

Commentary on cumulative character effects

- 6.54 The cumulative schemes to the south of Vastern Road and on King's Meadow Road would further reinforce the regeneration of Character Area 22 Vastern Road. This would lead to more significant beneficial effects on the character of this area, of up to moderate-major significance.
- 6.55 The cumulative schemes to the south of Vastern Road would inevitably increase the indirect influence of building scale on Character Area 12: Caversham Road which lies adjacent to the evolving town centre of Reading. Whilst there is some progression in scale illustrated in the Aviva scheme at Reading Station Retail Park and it would replace an area of car parking and retail sheds, which does nothing for local distinctiveness, it would create a marked contrast with Character Area 12. As a result, there would be a slight increase in year 1 adverse effects on the character of this area, to minor significance. By year 15, through the establishment of planting to soften and integrate the scale of built form, there would be a slight reduction in this effect.
- 6.56 As perceived from the wider townscape, the combination of the Proposed Development and cumulative schemes would reinforce the legibility of the town centre such that whilst there may be some adverse effects of this influence on the wider townscape, it would be balanced by the urban legibility benefits.

Response to Policy Directions

- 6.57 In relation to the NPPF paragraph 127, the Proposed Development would represent a sympathetic approach to local character, by referencing historic land use and the riverside character of the Thames corridor, as well as mitigating by design the scale of built form through approaches such as layout, progression in scale, materials, façade articulation and the set-back massing of roof pavilions. In accordance with paragraph 130, the design takes into account the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of the area.
- 6.58 In terms of the PPG and NDG, the design responds positively to the characteristics of: Context, through creating a strong sense of place, well integrated into the surroundings; Identity, notably through reinforcement of the distinctive landscaped and built form character adjacent to the River Thames and the strong reference to the industrial heritage of the Site; Built form, through a compact, walkable neighbourhood where open spaces are tightly defined by buildings; Movement, through the provision of the green link as well as access to and from the riverside; Nature through extensive planting in a variety of landscape spaces; and Public Spaces, which are well-provided throughout the Proposed Development.

- 6.59 At a local level, the Proposed Development responds positively to policy on Design and the Public Realm (CC7), notably through reinforcement of local character and distinctiveness, among meeting other design criteria. The Proposed Development would safeguard amenity (Policy CC8) through a sensitive approach to mitigation by design of substantial massing; and whilst introducing substantial massing adjacent to the Thames corridor and Christchurch Meadows Local Green Space, would preserve and enhance the sense of connection between this area and the evolving town centre (Policy EN7).
- 6.60 Similarly, in terms of Policy EN11, there would on balance be an enhancement to the character of the Thames watercourse, through the introduction of built form and public realm that: enhance the relationship of the evolving town centre to the river, including through buildings, spaces and routes; enhance the character of the Site and its riverside vicinity; reinforce the importance of the riverscape as a landscape feature and recreation opportunity in the evolving town centre; enable access to and from the river and Christchurch Bridge; and sets buildings back 10m from the watercourse. In terms of Policy EN14, the Proposed Development would provide extensive new tree planting.
- 6.61 In relation to Policy CR2, the Proposed Development would extend the prevailing grid layout structure; include appropriate and well-designed public realm; include extensive Green infrastructure; and reference to existing distinctive character precedents in materiality and details. The Proposed Development would respond positively to Policy CR3, by making a notable positive contribution to public realm including enhanced access to and from the river and bridge and providing active interesting elevations to the waterway. With regard to Policy CR10, the Proposed Development comes under the threshold for a tall building in Reading but nevertheless enhances the skyline, contributes to a human scale street environment, contributes positively to near, middle and long distance views; takes account of context; and provides a variety of massing, based on the industrial aesthetic drawn from the history of the Site.
- 6.62 With regard to Policy CR11, the Proposed Development would contribute to a high density mix of uses, including creating a riverside destination open space with café facility. The Proposed Development would provide greater pedestrian and cycle permeability, including as part of the link from the station across the IDR to the river. The Proposed Development would provide visually interesting frontages to the proposed pedestrian route through the Site, as well as onto the riverside and Vastern Road. The Proposed Development provides a visually interesting open space at the riverside as part of a landscaped link between the station and River Thames, albeit noting that the continued use of the sub-station to the east impinges on the direct route envisaged in Local Plan Figure 5.3. The Proposed Development provides transition in scale to adjacent low and medium density residential uses. In terms of sub-area CR11g: Riverside, the Proposed Development provides the link and riverside open space required and provides

predominantly residential use, with small-scale leisure provision in the form of the riverside café.

- 6.63 In relation to RSAF, the Proposed Development responds to the RSAF public realm requirements, including the 'stitching' together of the townscape; providing a busy, overlooked and safe environment; contributing to character and identity including bridging the character transition between the Thames corridor and the expanding town centre; and enhancing walking and cycling opportunities.
- 6.64 The Proposed Development would deliver part of Public Realm Priority 3: the Kennet-Thames Spine, between Vastern Road and Christchurch Bridge, albeit noting that the continued use of the sub-station to the east impinges on the route envisaged in RSAF Figure 8.2; and provide a new riverside open space providing amenity for new residents as well as pedestrians and cyclists on the green link and the riverside routes. Buildings in the Proposed Development would face onto the spine rather than away from it, as required.
- 6.65 In relation to Priority 4: Riverside Path and Water Spines, the Proposed Development would provide marked improvement to the riverside path along the south side of the Thames in the form of landscape planting and open space as part of the envisaged extension and enhancement of the routes leading into the Station Area from the river.
- 6.66 In relation to Priority 5: Vastern Road, the Proposed Development would provide shrub and tree planting on the fringes of the roadway corridor to assist in softening the character of the route and re-asserting the pre-eminence of pedestrian public realm within the town centre.
- 6.67 In relation to Priority 8: Riverside Open space, the Proposed Development would provide an area of high quality public realm at the junction of the green link and the Thames. The space would be active, visually interesting, manage the pace of movement and accessible to all.
- 6.68 In relation to the Public Realm theme of 'Landscaping', the Proposed Development would provide extensive new tree planting as part of a comprehensive landscape approach.
- 6.69 The Proposed Development modifies upwards the Benchmark Heights for this area, on the basis that this can be mitigated appropriately through a range of approaches, as set out above, including compact forms of development adjacent to residential development on Lynmouth Road (as indicated in RSAF paragraphs 6.23 and 6.28-29) as well as other mitigation strategies.
- 6.70 The Proposed Development does not attempt to provide the 'ingress of creek' proposed in RSAF Figure 8.3, noting that this proposal is made in the RSAF without any justification. In the context of the constraint of the substation to the east of the Site, the Proposed Development would provide an attractive, intimate, interesting corridor, in positive contrast to the straight,

vehicle-dominated and monotonous movement corridors existing in the area. This approach would also provide a stronger sense of place, rooted in the history of the Site, than the generic tree-lined canal and elliptical landmark buildings shown at the riverside in the RSAF Illustrative Proposals. Whilst providing the landmark qualities of the riverside buildings shown in RSAF, the Proposed Development would also reflect in the public realm linkage through the Site the intimacy of the streetscene in Lynmouth Road to the west. In any event, owing to the construction of the bridge at an angle to the green link envisaged in the RSAF, which follows the grid prevailing to the west of the Site, the possibility for a broad visual corridor looking north to the bridge support pier is effectively removed.

7.0 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

- 7.1 The Site lies on the interface between the evolving town centre of Reading and the Thames riverside. Beyond the river corridor, which includes the Thames Path adjacent to the Site, and the open space of Christchurch Meadow to the north, lies the residential area of Caversham which has been subsumed into the wider urban area. The vicinity of the Site includes a mixture of uses including office, retail, residential and infrastructural. The Site lies within the Reading Station Area Framework boundary but outside the Tall Buildings policy area.
- 7.2 Townscape character has been considered in most detail at a local level in the Reading Tall Buildings Strategy which notes for Character Area 22, which includes the majority of the 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 Site lies within Character Area 12, which, although it has a prevailing residential character and small scale, is already subject to the influence of some larger built forms.
- 7.3 In addition to the published local level commentary, a number of further observations of the townscape character of the vicinity of the Site in the context of the expanding town centre of Reading are noted:
- The River Kennet forms a key feature of the town centre compared with the River Thames, which appears physically and visually separated from central Reading. At present, a series of barriers prevent appreciation from the centre of Reading of the River Thames or even understanding of where it exists, including: the elevated railway corridor and the non-descript built form situated to the north of it including car parks and retail sheds; the dominant vehicle route of Vastern Road and adjoining car parking; the busy vehicle-dominated routes to road bridges to the north-east and north-west; the lack of a legible signpost close to the town centre that such a significant feature as the river is present; and the absence of a direct physical connection from the key areas of public realm in the vicinity of the station.
 - Christchurch Bridge goes some way to addressing this problem by providing a legible form, extending above the townscape. However, as the RTBS sets out, Christchurch Bridge is also visually separated from the area 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 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 from Christchurch Meadow and the riverside to the north of the Site,

- this appears isolated for lack of any further visual waymarkers continuing the progression of the route further into the town centre.
- The utilitarian character of the Site further detracts from any perception of a positive southern landing of the bridge on crossing the Thames from the north.
 - In combination, the above factors result in lack of perceived connection between the town centre and the open space of Christchurch Meadow, which has an emerging role as a park to serve the evolving town centre.
 - The multi-storey car park and retail sheds flanking Trooper Potts Way detract from the sense of place in the vicinity of the station, notwithstanding the distinctive form of the station overbridge and northern entrance.
 - The utilitarian character of the Site detracts from the experience of moving along the riverside Thames Path and the lack of positive, overlooking built form frontage has created a perception of a hidden and unsupervised space between the Site and the bridge ramp and steps.
 - In the wider riverscape, there are many examples of built form addressing the river positively in the form of amply glazed frontages of garden rooms/pavilions/villas.
 - To the north-west, interfaces of the built form to the riverside are predominantly of late-20th century apartment blocks, of up to 4 storeys (2.5-3 immediately adjacent to the Site) and of limited local distinctiveness. They provide a strong 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 the distinctive character of the riverside. This strong vertical enclosure alongside the river creates anticipation and a 'reveal' of corridor views when progressing along the riverside.
 - To the south-east, there are varying approaches to providing interfaces of built form with the riverside. Clearwater Court continues and accentuates the approach of a strong built form edge to the riverside, creating a dramatic 'reveal' of the river on the public realm approach to the side of Reading Bridge through tight control of spaces, resulting in a strong anticipation of the riverside before reaching it. Intimacy and interest are evident in the visible outdoor spaces; as well as through a strong vertical form, with notable visual interest adjoining the water. 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; and the dark, sealed windows of the Covea Building and associated bland, strongly-fenced and dark open space, which detracts from the perception of positive overlooking and human engagement with the river corridor.
 - There is furthermore a notable contrast between the examples of positive built form frontages and the townscape void of the Site. The positive frontages of built form to

the river corridor are suggestive of the arrival of the River Thames alongside the centre of a busy, modern urban area, in contrast to the leisurely suburban riverbank of villas and long gardens, as is seen to the north-west of Caversham Bridge, for example. The Site detracts from this interface, all the more so as a result of the obvious lack of any relationship between Christchurch Bridge and the town centre through the Site.

- Substantial built forms are present at the two existing river crossings, most notably at Reading Bridge where the 5 commercial storeys and distinctive roof of Clearwater Court and the 11 commercial storeys of Reading Bridge House provide strong signposting of a key movement route. This massing pattern along the river corridor creates a legible rhythm, albeit this is weakened by the lack of landmark built form at the southern landing of Christchurch Bridge at the Site.
- 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 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 appraising the character of the vicinity, it is noted that a number of taller buildings are present in the surrounding townscape. In addition, a number of taller buildings are under, or planned for construction.

7.4 Planning policy requirements focus on the creation of locally-characteristic design, creating a strong sense of place; emphasis on the quality of public realm and landscape; enhancement of the character and function of the Thames corridor as part of the green infrastructure network within Reading; linkage of the evolving town centre with Christchurch Meadows to the north, through the Site and the adjacent substation; and the mitigation of building height in relation to residential development to the north-west of the Site.

7.5 The character of the Site is of a utilitarian void in the townscape, detracting from the sense of place in the vicinity, including the riverside and the experience of moving towards central Reading over the recently-constructed Christchurch Bridge. The character of the 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 Site is in marked contrast to the domesticating influence of smaller-scale residential built form to the west, albeit noting that adjoining the Site on the riverside, apartment blocks within Lynmouth Court reach 2.5-3 storeys. The character of the northern area of the Site also appears in marked contrast to the open expanse of water of the River Thames and its adjoining public realm, notably the open green space of Christchurch Meadows.

- 7.6 In terms of views of the Site, there are glimpsed views of the Site encompassing the scale of the Proposed Development from isolated locations within the urban centre to the south and south-east of the Site, dependent on the alignment of road/open space corridors towards the Site and the level of intervening built form and vegetation. From Vastern Road the 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.
- 7.7 From the river corridor, where visible beyond riverside vegetation and built form, the 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 properties to the west; and in the town centre beyond. The Site in its current state, forms a utilitarian void in the townscape in these views and detracts from views towards central Reading. There are partial long range views of the Site encompassing the scale of the Proposed Development from isolated positions on the elevated land in the northern area of Reading, dependent on the alignment of road/open space corridors towards the Site and the level of intervening built form and vegetation.
- 7.8 The design of the Proposed Development has been informed by townscape and visual considerations. Having been incorporated into the scheme wherever feasible, the townscape and visual optimisation/mitigation by design principles are set out below in terms of Beneficial Changes and Adverse Changes/Mitigating Factors.

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

- 7.9 The Proposed Development would, as a core design principle, 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.
- 7.10 The Proposed Development provides the potential to draw the River Thames into the expanding townscape of Reading town centre, through improved legibility using built form signposts of notable visual interest 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.
- 7.11 The Proposed Development would replace the existing utilitarian townscape of the Site, which forms a void in the urban grain and is a negative influence on character, with a strong sense of place at the point where at a human, pedestrian level the evolving town centre meets the Thames.

- 7.12 The Proposed Development would complement the role of Christchurch Bridge as the interface and physical link between the expanding town centre and the emerging role of Christchurch Meadows as a park for the urban area, by providing a more positive townscape frontage on the southern riverbank to the bridge and park, 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.
- 7.13 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 and perceptual permeability.
- 7.14 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 path. This vegetation would not prevent the potential for a strong perception of overlooking of the path from the proposed built form.
- 7.15 Conversely, the bridge landing public realm would enable contemplation of an intense urban setting to the riverside on arrival across the bridge, before proceeding into the town centre.
- 7.16 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.

Linkage across the river:

- 7.17 Taller elements at the riverside and alongside Vastern Road would have potential to complement the bridge as legible steps in the visual linkage perceived from the wider townscape, between tall buildings in the town centre, the river corridor, the open space at Christchurch Meadows and Caversham beyond; and the same progression in reverse.
- 7.18 The Proposed Development would echo the role of substantial built forms in signalling the presence of river crossings at Caversham Bridge and Reading Bridge, albeit to a more accentuated degree as the 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.
- 7.19 In this way, the Proposed Development would contribute to a rhythm of built form as it is perceived along the riverbank, where prominent buildings rise up above the adjoining forms at the points where crossings are obtained.
- 7.20 At a more local scale, the Proposed Development would enhance 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.

- 7.21 The Proposed Development would provide a more direct, legible and coherent immediate linkage of the bridge towards the town centre, notably by providing a new southern landing of the bridge as part of a continuous rather than the current disjointed corridor.
- 7.22 The Proposed Development would arrange 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.
- 7.23 The Proposed Development would provide 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.
- 7.24 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. 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.
- 7.25 The overall composition of ramps and incidental spaces between the residential blocks, creates a perception of substantial public realm open space adjacent to the riverside, owned by both residents and passers-by. The whole space will be well-animated by movement along the various routes and by a café pavilion, echoing the architectural style of the other larger blocks. The space will be lit by an openness to the south-west, resulting from the lower height of the south-western wing of block D.
- 7.26 A green link through the Site is defined by a clear hard surfacing treatment and by substantial canopy trees, smaller street trees and linear belts of shrub planting, providing a well-vegetated character and strong legibility of the route.
- 7.27 Nodal points are provided along the route where access into the residential properties is obtained. These provide legible transitions between public and semi-private realm.
- 7.28 The Proposed Development would enhance the legibility of the route and sense of place and identity through distinctive roofline profile and detailing, potentially referencing the industrial heritage of the Site, including providing clearly-defined and visually-interesting tops to the built forms.

- 7.29 The Proposed Development would enhance the north-south route of the green link at the Vastern Road section of the Internal Distributor Road through a combination of human interest at street level, notably through positive treatment of the ground floor frontages, including planting to soften the streetscene, and 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 it, in response to RSAF Public Realm Priority 5. The entrance to the green link from Vastern Road is identified with a flared public realm, with surface patterning referencing the historic use of the Site as rail sidings and potential for a focal public art feature.
- 7.30 Whilst the surface of the green link is clear and legible in itself, the course of the route is marked 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. Visual closure is a recognised approach to generating interesting and invitation along routes through the townscape, successfully demonstrated in the Thames Path through the South Bank area of London for example, where routes between buildings are alluring and provide shade, intimacy of scale and visual interest.
- 7.31 The Proposed Development would ensure 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.

Distinctiveness of the setting:

- 7.32 The Proposed Development, both built and landscaped, would be sufficiently visually interesting and distinctive to its setting that it is clearly of the river and of the wider Thames Valley – brick is used as a façade material to reflect the valley floor geological setting.
- 7.33 The immediate setting of the riverside would include planting of locally-appropriate wetland species which reinforce the underlying riverside character of the setting, as well as reinforcing a natural influence at the edge of the expanded town centre.
- 7.34 Open space, in combination with the elevated bridge landing and provision of a link with the riverside path, would create a focal point at the riverside from where the river can be appreciated.
- 7.35 Whilst located at the riverside, the character of the Proposed Development would also respond to its immediate setting near the centre of a large busy urban area which is a key communication and transport hub.

- 7.36 The character of the Proposed Development would therefore relate to both the river and the town centre and, at the point where they meet, bring the life and activity of the town to the languor of the Thames. This includes anticipation of the riverside on the movement corridor through tight control of spaces, as seen in the distinct character of the public realm of the emerging town centre riverside, notably at Clearwater Court, where tall built form, public realm and water are juxtaposed in dynamic and exciting fashion, creating visual interest and a positive sense of place. The Proposed Development would reflect 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'.
- 7.37 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.
- 7.38 As part of this urban character of the riverside, the Proposed Development would reflect the distinctive industrial heritage of the 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 Site. There is also potential to reference the glazing of riverside pavilions/villas/garden rooms in reflecting the character of the wider Thames corridor. This would contrast positively with the character of residential apartment blocks and offices along the riverside to the north-west and south-east, which lack local distinctiveness. 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, 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.
- 7.39 The Proposed Development would provide direct, non-stepped access to the elevated bridge landing and reflect the north-east – south-west pattern of the adjoining streets to the west, which have a fine grain and assist in legibility of the riverside, as opposed to the meandering and vehicle-dominated route of Norman Place to the east. Extending public realm access to this pattern would soften the perception of the alienating scale and utilitarian character of the dual carriageway roadway of Vastern Road and the car parking and retail sheds opposite the Site and would provide a positive contrast to this openness and lack of intimacy. The street scene level of the Proposed Development would soften character and reflect 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.

Potential Adverse Changes and Mitigating Factors

- 7.40 Townscape and visual constraints to the Proposed Development, to avoid or minimise adverse changes, primarily relate to the need for sensitive interfaces with adjoining areas and are set out below.
- 7.41 Whilst providing the visual stepping stones at Vastern Road and at the riverside between the town centre and Christchurch Meadows, the Proposed Development would avoid taller built forms in the centre of the Site, to accentuate the legibility of the taller elements at either end of the link; and avoid perception of a mass of built form extending north-south across the Site and reduce the scale of built development appearing in views from residential receptors on Lynmouth Road.
- 7.42 Within these massing clusters, the Proposed Development would focus height on the south-eastern side of the Site, away from small scale residential properties to the north-west, noting the presence of a belt of poplar trees to the east which provides an interface with larger-scale massing of commercial and residential development.
- 7.43 The Proposed Development would provide a transition between the requisite height of the legible townscape; and the intimate domestic scale of existing two-storey terraced residential development to the west. This would include progression in scale (although not too obviously stepped); as well as using varied roof articulation (including pitched roofs and rooftop pavilions) and articulation of upper parts of the proposed built form, to create lightness of form, break up vertical faces and diminish the perception of a uniform approach to height (which would otherwise exacerbate it). The variation between pitched and flat roofs and brick and glass skylines also creates a variety across the proposed built forms which engenders a perception of harmonious difference, which softens and integrates the character of the scheme, rather than a uniform imposition of style and massing which dominates the townscape.
- 7.44 Tree planting on the boundary with the Lynmouth Road properties would soften the appearance of façades within the Proposed Development, as well as providing a progression in scale.
- 7.45 Varied façade treatments, on both the horizontal and vertical axis, 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.
- 7.46 The varied use of windows and balconies creates further interest in the façades, as well as a perception of active human usage of the built form.

- 7.47 The Proposed Development would create visual interest and an intimacy in the public realm to focus attention at street level and soften the scale of adjoining built form. Shrub planting on the Vastern Road frontage softens the interface between the ground plane and vertical façades and create a more human scale and visually interesting street-scene.
- 7.48 In managing the positive and dynamic contrast in character between the open and well-managed meadows to the north and the urban centre to the south, the Proposed Development would include tree planting to 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 were diminished and the dynamism of vertical form of considerable interest as seen elsewhere adjacent to the river is missed.
- 7.49 The substantial built form would create a strong sense of enclosure on the southern side of the river, albeit this would be in keeping with other built forms creating enclosure along the riverside. This would be alleviated by the range of factors relating to façade design and character of the built form, as set out above, as well as the setting-back of the rooftop pavilions, which diminishes the vertical scale of the riverside frontage.
- 7.50 Cranked 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.
- 7.51 In relation to the bridge itself, 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 would complement rather than compete with the vertical patterns and the materiality should form a backdrop allowing the very pale colours of the bridge support pier to remain distinct and prominent.
- 7.52 The retained SSE sub-station infrastructure would be comprehensively screened from the public realm.
- 7.53 In addition to the policy constraint that the Site lies outwith a tall building zone, built form would complement and remain subservient to the emerging clusters of taller built form within Reading town centre in longer distance views. Gestures within the built form massing would reinforce the role and prominence of the more central built forms of the town centre, to ally the Proposed Development with them, rather than compete and clash.
- 7.54 As a result of these factors, it is considered that, accounting for the establishment by year 15 of the Proposed Planting within the scheme, 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. The single exception to the latter would be residential properties on Lynmouth Road, where inevitably,

despite the strong enhancement in the sense of place and visual interest in the view, as well as the many mitigation approaches inherent in the design, there is potential for a marked increase in the sense of enclosure in these views.

- 7.55 The cumulative schemes are likely to result in further potential for enhancement of townscape features and character, albeit they would contribute to fundamentally changing the context of the residential area to the west. Considering the increased sense of enclosure and intensification in views of the townscape with a logical and harmonious hierarchy of scale, in accordance with planning documents which have guided the wider evolution of Reading town centre, the visual effects of the Proposed Development with the wider cumulative schemes would be broadly balanced and not materially alter the assessment for the Proposed Development.
- 7.56 For these reasons, it is considered that the Proposed Development would respond positively to policy directions, notably in relation to creation of a distinctive sense of place; enhancement of public realm, notably the linkage between the evolving town centre, riverside and Christchurch Meadow; enhancement of the character of the Thames corridor; and the sensitive mitigation by design of the scale of built form through approaches such as layout, progression in scale, materials, façade articulation and the set-back massing of roof pavilions.