

## READING CIVIC SOCIETY

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Registered Charity 263959

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### **Planning Application 200188 55 Vastern Road**

Dear Chair

My apologies about the lateness of this comment. The Planning Application has indeed been some time in processing and we had rather lost track of the position. In the circumstances the comments below seek to focus on the key points.

#### **Summary**

1. The developers' community engagement was an exemplar which others should follow.
2. We welcome development of the site. Whilst individual elements may benefit from refinement we rated the design of the overall proposal very highly.
3. We believe on balance that it deals with the constraints imposed by the SSE equipment as well as is practical.
4. The delivery of 209 homes in a central location, 20% being affordable is a significant benefit. That these will on site and "tenure blind" is in line with good practice.
5. It seems unlikely that the Substation/ SSE equipment will be removed unless RBC is able to exercise due influence. A pragmatic approach must be taken with the vision for the clear line of sight whilst also seeking a good scheme for Reading.
6. We understand from discussions with Berkeley Homes that the economics of the site are tight and do not give them the ability to significantly reduce the height on the Thames or remove a unit in the centre of the site.
7. With reluctance we judged that the loss of the Locally Listed Building is acceptable given the wider benefits of the proposed development. We recommended that the key stones from the building be incorporated into the Café building.
8. If not this then what is the alternative? If the vision continues to be "straight line" then we have the stalemate of an irresistible force meeting an immovable object and the site will continue to be undeveloped.
9. The lack of a Design Guide covering the 3 neighbouring sites has not been helpful.

### **The Planning Application**

#### **Consultation**

Members of Reading Civic Society Committee have been regularly engaged by Berkeley Homes, and their Communications consultants, since November 2018 about

plans for this site. We have seen, and had the opportunity to participate in, the evolution of the design. We gained some understanding of the challenges faced and the constraints of the site. Other groups we know were similarly engaged in small groups. There were at least 2 well publicised, well-staffed and well attended Public Exhibitions at suitable hours. We know that many of our members took the trouble to take part. Overall it was an exemplar of good community engagement and consultation which other developers should take on board.

### **Design and proposals for the site**

Overall the Committee rated the final design very highly and felt it was one of the best we had seen for some time. We consider this to be a high-quality proposal which delivers significant housing benefits.

We felt that the progressive refinements in design had sought to responded to concerns about the impact on the Thames, the concerns of neighbours and the constraints imposed by the SSE equipment remaining.

### **The Direct Link / Clear line of sight.**

We were given to understand in our first discussion with Berkeley Homes that they had initially believed the substation could be moved. When this was tested senior SSE management would not consider it because of cost and logistics. .

The aim of a direct link in the Station Area Framework and RCAAP was understandable, and supported by us. However it did not consider the practicality of the straight line on the plan being drawn directly over a significant piece of infrastructure. Unless RBC is able to convince SSE to the contrary it seems that this ambition needs to be refined and that the judgement of this planning application should be set against what is practical and achievable.

We understand that PO's comment that "***this is a one-off opportunity to secure a truly highquality link through the site to be seized***". The layout of the site means that this opportunity does not exist in the simple way set out in the Local Plan. We do not agree that the proposed route is not high quality, though discussions should continue to take all ideas and options into consideration.

### **The pedestrian and cycleway.**

Pedestrians and cyclists currently face an indirect and weaving route from this side of the Thames to the station. Some might say that adds to the interest. These routes will still exist post development. The proposed route through the site does mix pedestrians and cyclists. The proposed route may not deliver an unimpeded and fast route some cyclists might seek. We recall however the complaints from Cycle groups that the width of Christchurch Bridge was simply inadequate and that it would not work. If some cyclists find it impedes then then they will have the option of using existing routes and a balance of flow will be struck.

Should at any time the SSE equipment be up for removal then the possibility of the more direct route would still be a possibility.

## Removal of units

In the conclusions of the Officer's report it is stated that "**Officers believe that a different layout with fewer blocks would allow the north-south route to be provided directly and to the quality that the local plan policy allocation aspires to.**" Understandably this focuses on the content of the Local Plan.

Looked at in isolation the comment is probably correct. Taken to a ridiculous degree if there are no buildings on site an unimpeded route could be established.

It was clear in our discussions with Berkeley's that the balance of economics on the site was tight. It would seem inevitable that loss of the units caused by reduced height on the Thames and removal of a block in the centre of the site would challenge the development's viability significantly. "Well they would say that would they not?" True but if the economics are tight then it is important to understand the implications of such proposals e.g. on affordable housing provision.

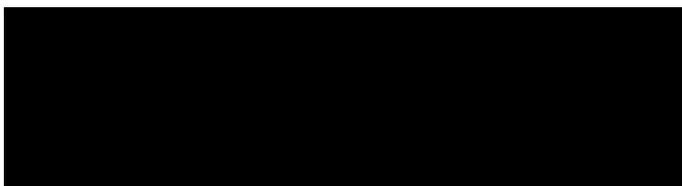
## Locally Listed Building

The possibility of retaining the run of old buildings along Vastern Road, and the LLB, was explored extensively and repeatedly. We accepted that it was not practical to incorporate the old buildings on Vastern Road into a new building. With considerable reluctance we accepted that the overall benefits of the scheme outweighed the loss of the LLB 55 Vastern Road. We suggested that the key stones from the building should be incorporated into the site, ideally into the proposed café building.

## A wider strategic view.

We have been in discussion with CADRA and have seen, and support, their updated comment (email 26 March) highlighting the importance of developing a holistic Urban Design guide and Public Realm brief covering; the SSE, Aviva and Hermes sites as this would assist the co-ordination of the planning of public realm and the potential for some coherent vision and be helpful for all 3 site owners. We recall this being raised by the communications team supporting the Berkeley Homes site during discussions in 2019.

Yours sincerely



Richard Bennett

Chairman

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