

Former Leaderboard Golf Centre, Reading

Reading Borough Open Space Review: December 2021

Introduction

1. This Reading Borough Open Space Review has been prepared on behalf of Bowmer + Kirland Building Services ("the Applicant") and the Department for Education in support of a full planning application at the Former Golf Centre, Richfield Avenue, Reading ("the Site") for:

"The demolition of existing driving range structures and the development of a new three-storey 8 form entry school for years 11 – 16, including a 300 place 6th form (total school capacity of 1500 pupils) including the creation of a new access from Richfield Road, new parking area, landscaped areas, external play areas, Multi Use Games Area (MUGA) and sporting pitches." ("the Proposed Development").

2. The Site's former uses, for a golf driving range or clay shooting range were privately managed and public access to the land was strictly limited due to safety reasons.
3. As outlined within the Planning Statement accompanying the planning application, the Proposed Development has been designed to enable out-of-hours community use. The eastern side of the building can be secured and made available by the community out of school hours. Areas of the school which are to be made available to the community are the spaces all of the sports facilities including the main hall, activity studio and changing rooms, along with the hygiene room and accessible changing areas.
4. The proposed community use areas are considered to be of material benefit to the local community and will provide formal public access to the site, where at present no formal access is recognised. Community use will also create synergies with the adjacent leisure centre. Hard and soft landscaping is proposed throughout the Site and the provision of sports and play facilities, including seasonable provision for:
 - (i) A Four Court MUGA
 - (ii) Two 11 a-side football pitches (containing space for two five a-side football pitches)
 - (iii) Cricket pitch and cricket nets
 - (iv) Space for a 400 athletics track, and other athletics areas
5. The total Site area is c. 5.43ha. The buildings and MUGA have a total area of c. 1.1ha. which equates to around 20% of the total Site area.

Planning Policy Context

National Planning Policy Framework

6. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) updated July 2021 outlines (paragraph 92) that planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve healthy, inclusive and safe places that promote social interaction; are safe and accessible; and enable and support healthy lifestyles. To help achieve this, paragraph 93 outlines, amongst other things, that policies and decisions should:
 - Plan positively for the provision and use of shared spaces, community facilities (which includes sports venues and open space) and other services to enhance the sustainability of communities and residential environments.
 - Guard against the unnecessary loss of valued facilities and services, particularly where this would reduce the community's ability to meet its day-to-day needs.
7. With regard to open space and recreation the NPPF outlines (paragraph 98) that access to a network of high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and physical activity is important for the health and well-being of communities, and can deliver wider benefits for nature and support efforts to address climate change.
8. The NPPF outlines (paragraph 99) that existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields should not be built on unless:
 - a) An assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space, buildings or land to be surplus to requirements; or
 - b) The loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location; or
 - (c) The development is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the benefits of which clearly outweigh the loss of the current or former use.
9. The Site is a designated Local Green Space. Local Green Spaces (LGS) are spaces that are reasonably close in proximity to the community it serves; is demonstrably special to a local community; and local in character and is not an extensive tract of land (paragraph 102).

Reading Borough Local Plan

10. The Reading Borough Local Plan was adopted in November 2019. The Site is designated as a Local Green Space (EN7Wp) within Policy EN7: Local Green Space and Public Open Space. EN7Wp relates to a wider 16.83ha. area covering Rivermead and Thameside Promenade.
11. Policy EN7 outlines that Local Green Spaces will be protected from development. Proposal 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.

Reading Open Spaces Strategy

12. The Council prepared an Open Spaces Strategy (OSS) for Reading Borough in 2007. The OSS set out the aims and approaches that the Council will adopt in its role as custodian of Reading's public open space. The OSS was informed by a comprehensive audit assessing the amount, distribution and quality of existing open space, and public consultation.
13. At the time that the OSS was prepared the Site was identified as 'unrestricted access open space'. However, as referred above, in the period since the OSS was prepared the uses on the Site changed which consequentially resulted in the Site having restricted access.
14. In January 2018 the Council published the Reading Open Spaces Strategy Update Note ("the OSS Update") which sought to understand the changes in open space provision that had occurred since the 2008 OSS was published. The overarching conclusions from the OSS Update include:

"Although Reading's total amount of recreational public open space remains broadly in line with the national guidelines, having only slightly increased since the last assessment, it is still unevenly distributed across the town. Residents in and around the town centre are still further away from POS than residents in outer wards. In the town centre, historical development patterns make it difficult to introduce new areas of POS without large-scale redevelopment. Due to the high cost of land in the town centre, the Council is unable to acquire land outright for new POS. Thus, POS is normally achieved as part of wider development proposals.

While the total provision is adequate, the main issues for Reading remain as identified in the 2007 Strategy:

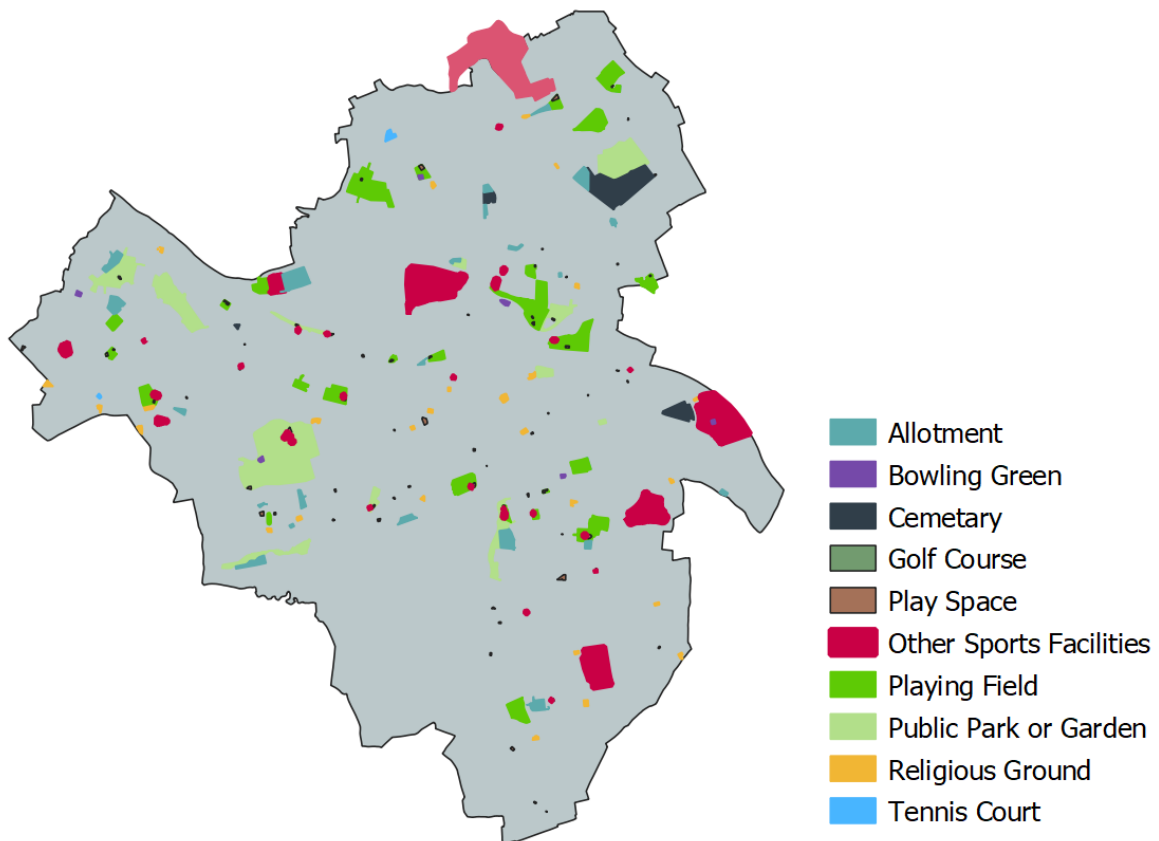
- *Access: the distribution of POS leaves some areas underprovided. In central Reading, POS is where residents are not. Areas immediately to the west, northwest, south and east of the town centre are amongst the most poorly supplied in the Borough and the problem is exacerbated by very dense housing.*
- *Quality: some existing parks and open spaces are of poor quality.*
- *Green links: open spaces are fragmented and wildlife corridors are incomplete.*

Many of these issues are common to urban areas in the UK. This suggests that the current amount of recreational POS needs to be protected and access needs to be expanded."

15. The Update Note outlined (paragraph 8.3) that in some areas, open space is privately owned and has limited access (such as the Site). Should these areas become available for conversion or redevelopment, the council aims to establish public access.

Reading Borough Open Space Typologies

16. As illustrated below, the Site is defined as an 'Other Sports Facility' within the Ordnance Survey (OS) defined open space typologies. Within the Borough there are 37 defined Other Sport Facility areas of defined open space. Other Sport Facilities include, but not limited to, gyms, leisure centres, sports parks, and artificial pitches etc...



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Proposed Development Analysis

17. Although the proposed school buildings and the MUGA would result in the reduction of 1.1ha. land associated with a defined LGS / Other Sports Facilities open space typology the reduction only represents 6.6% of the total defined LGS / open space typology site area (16.8ha.)
18. Without the Proposed Development access to the Site would remain as restricted access public open space with limited recreational, amenity and health benefits to the local community. However, in accordance with national policy, the 4.3ha. of hard and soft landscaping and sports and play facilities provided as part of the Proposed Development would be accessible to the local community out of school hours and would provide significantly better quality open space and sports facilities to that currently provided. The benefit of which would demonstrably outweigh the small loss of land associated with the school buildings and MUGA.

19. The Proposed Development broadly aligns with Policy EN7 of the adopted Local Plan as providing public access to the proposed hard and soft public open space and sports facilities would demonstrably increase the public and local community's enjoyment of the defined LGS.
20. The Proposed Development also aligns with the objectives of the Council's OSS Update given that Proposed Development results in privately owned and poor quality open space, with limited access becoming significantly higher quality and more accessible. The Site's relatively central location within the Borough also helps to enhance provision within an area identified within the OSS Update as having lower quality and quantity of open space provision.
21. In view of the above it is clear that the Proposed Development would have clear and demonstrable public open space and sports facility benefits that would demonstrably outweigh the small reduction in existing open space land area that is associated with the new school buildings and MUGA. However, where appropriate this Open Space review will be supplemented to further quantify the public LGS, public open space and sports facility benefits associated with the Proposed Development.