



Sonic Star Properties Ltd

**Bristol and West Arcade, 173 – 175 Friar Street and 27 – 32
Market Place, Reading, RG1 1HZ**

Report on Community and Stakeholder Engagement

January 2021

1.0 The purpose of this report

- 1.1. This report details the scope and methods used for the pre-application engagement with local communities and stakeholders regarding the proposals by Sonic Star Properties Ltd for the redevelopment of the Bristol and West Arcade, 173 – 175 Friar Street and 27 – 32 Market Place, Reading, RG1 1HZ.
- 1.2. The report also details of the outcome of the engagement and how the proposal has been influenced through community and stakeholder feedback.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1. This Report on Community and Stakeholder Engagement (RCSE) is submitted to Reading Borough Council, hereafter referred to as 'RBC', on behalf of Sonic Star Properties Ltd.
- 2.2. The proposal for a new hotel replaces the previous retail, residential and office scheme which was granted planning consent in 2019. Research shows that a new hotel close to both Reading station and central Reading is far better suited to market conditions. There was no market interest in the previous office or retail proposal. In contrast there is significant interest in the proposal for a hotel and leisure use. The proposals for 29-32 Market Place are unchanged from the existing consented scheme.
- 2.3. The proposed development comprises several interconnected buildings on Friar Street and Market Place. 173-175 Friar Street is the former Bristol & West office building opposite St. Laurence Church on Town Hall Square. Beneath the building at ground floor, runs the arcade (now boarded-up) to Market Way and Market Place Square. This building would be demolished and rebuilt as an eight-storey hotel with the arcade reinstated as a new, open, and wider thoroughfare featuring the main hotel entrance and a spill-out patio dining area from the hotel restaurant and bar.
- 2.4. The arcade also backs onto the rear of the boarded up listed buildings, 27-32 Market Place (located opposite the NatWest Bank). One of these listed buildings was the Cooper's Arms public house that closed in 2010. These listed buildings will be refurbished in line with the permission granted by Reading Council in 2019 to create a new pub flanked by two shop / flexible commercial on the ground floor with eight residential apartments on the three floors above.
- 2.5. The new hotel and the listed buildings refurbishment are all part of the proposed development by Sonic Star Properties Ltd. who secured the planning consent in 2019.

3.0 The approach to community and stakeholder engagement

- 3.1. The preparation of this planning application follows a process of statutory, stakeholder and community engagement.
- 3.2. Engagement was undertaken for the application in December 2020. Engagement was aimed to be as inclusive as possible, while mindful of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Political engagement

- 3.3. Sonic Star Properties Ltd enlisted the support of Instinctif Partners (henceforth referred to as IP) to support them on their community and political engagement. IP are specialists and best practice community engagement and engaged with relevant elected representatives from RBC throughout the pre application process.
- 3.4. IP contacted key political stakeholders, including ward councillors, councillors from the adjacent wards and relevant senior councillors offering a virtual briefing on the proposals. Councillors were also sent copies of the community newsletter and invited to two public engagement sessions. Councillors, including ward members attended a virtual briefing and Q&A on 16th November 2020. A planning officer from RBC was also present. IP has also responded to enquiries from a range of councillors by phone and email throughout the pre application process.
- 3.5. On 16th December 2020, the project team including the heritage consultant presented to RBC's Arts and Heritage Forum and answered questions.

Public engagement

- 3.6. A variety of best practice engagement methods have been used to inform local stakeholders and residents about the engagement and to encourage them to participate in the process. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic alternatives to traditional in-person events were considered and put in place.
- 3.7. It was decided that the public engagement would consist of a website with feedback survey, a leaflet which was sent to 911 commercial and residential addresses surrounding the site, and two virtual online engagement events (to replace the traditional in person exhibition). Stakeholder organisations were also offered separate private briefings if desired. Some organisations took up the offer of a private briefing whilst others were content to join the public engagement sessions.
- 3.8. It is likely that the project team will also present at future meetings of members of the Conservation Area Advisory Committee and the Civic Society. Representatives of these

organisations have already been met with during the on-line engagement events and the presentation to the Arts and Heritage Forum.

Website

- 3.9. A dedicated website was created at www.bristol-andwest-arcade-reading.co.uk.
- 3.10. The website was published on the 4th December 2020, featuring information about the scheme images of the proposals and an online questionnaire which invited resident, stakeholders and local businesses to comment directly on the proposals. A screenshot of the website can be found in Appendix 2.
- 3.11. The Website was also highlighted on the on the newsletter sent to just over 900 residential and commercial addresses surrounding the site and was brought to the attention of the councillors and businesses. Stakeholders such as councillors and business groups were encouraged to share and publicise further the website using their own social media platforms. Organisations that helped to share the information included the Local Enterprise Partnership, Property Forum and councillors.
- 3.12. The proposals and engagement process were also publicised by the local media.
- 3.13. The online comment portal on the website was open for 2 weeks, from 4th December 2020 to the 19th of December 2020.
- 3.14. Online feedback from 16 respondents was received by the closing date of 19th December 2020.

Newsletter

- 3.15. To publicise the scheme a newsletter was sent to 911 commercial and residential address surrounding the site. The area was chosen to maximise participation for those affected by the plans and can be seen in appendix 3.
- 3.16. The newsletter was sent out on Saturday 5th December to ensure that it was received during the engagement period.
- 3.17. The newsletter consisted of descriptions of the scheme, CGI images and directions to the website where feedback could be left via the survey and where dates/times and the login details for the virtual online events were advertised.

Online virtual engagement events

- 3.18. It was decided that two video conferences would be held using the Teams platform. The events consisted of a presentation from the project team and then the opportunity for participants to ask questions.
- 3.19. The attendees from the project team included:
- Mayad Rassam – Sonic Star Properties Ltd
 - Peter Carruthers – Union Property Services
 - Mary Fortune – Savills
 - Phillip Blythe – Norr Architects
 - Kelly Edwards – Instinctif Partners
- 3.20. The Teams events were held on the evening of Monday 14th December 2020 and during the Afternoon of Wednesday 16th December 2020. This approach was designed to maximise participation from the local community by offering different opportunities to engage.
- 3.21. The presentation topics included:
- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| • Introduction | • Views of the proposed development from different locations |
| • Overview of the proposal | • Materials and details |
| • Planning status | • Elevations |
| • Benefits of the proposal | • Arcade / courtyard |
| | • Questions |
- 3.22. Seven attendees joined the on-line engagement events in total. They were able to view a presentation then participate in a round table style discussion event and ask questions. Some attendees then submitted written feedback regarding their views. Feedback included general support for the site being redeveloped, enthusiasm for investment in Reading, especially during the current economic climate. In general feedback was supportive for a hotel rather than more offices. There were questions and discussions regarding the details of the design.
- 3.23. In the experience of Instinctif Partners, the seven attendees represent a relatively low number of attendees at such events, given the scale of the proposals, and even considering the events online nature. The relatively low number of attendees suggests the community is broadly accepting of the proposals and did not feel the need to attend.

Local Business engagement

- 3.24. To ensure that the business community who might be impacted by the proposal had the opportunity to engage with the development, further, a number of local businesses groups were identified and contacted by the project team.

3.25. The Following groups were informed verbally and via email of the proposals and notified of the website and opportunity to leave feedback.

- Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce
- Reading and Wokingham Local Chamber Advisory Group
- Reading BID
- Thames Valley LEP
- Thames Valley Growth Hub
- CBI
- Federation of Small Businesses Reading
- Reading Property Federation

3.26. These business groups were also encouraged to share information about the plans, including the upcoming virtual stakeholder engagement events and survey with their members. The businesses had the opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the proposals and were encouraged to provide their own feedback. Some took up the opportunity for a private briefing on the proposal and to share their feedback in a business survey.

3.27. The following anonymised feedback summarises the initial supportive feedback to the scheme we have received from some business representatives:

- *This is an exciting new development.*
- *We support the proposals and are especially interested in the potential for job creation.*
- *This will improve footfall to that area of the town.*
- *Interested to hear more as we are keen to support.*
- *Hotel accommodation can be difficult to find, especially at short notice for business purposes.*
- *Interested to hear about this and would like to be kept informed but do not support/take a view on individual planning applications.*

4.0 Community and stakeholder engagement feedback

4.1. All engagement activity was designed to facilitate and encourage the local community and businesses to provide feedback on the proposals. On the survey feedback form (accessible from the website), respondents were asked their opinions on the proposals. Online feedback from 16 respondents was received by the closing date of 19th December 2020.

4.2. In addition, the project team have reviewed feedback by email and the conversations they had with the attendees of the virtual public exhibitions and with those who attended stakeholder briefing meetings.

4.3. Overall, we feel it is fair to say that there has been general support for the proposal. Some respondents to the community newsletter raised a concern about the height of the proposed

hotel. However, it should be noted that the hotel is in fact of a lower height than the previously consented scheme. Overall, there was little opposition suggesting that the wider community are satisfied with the proposals.

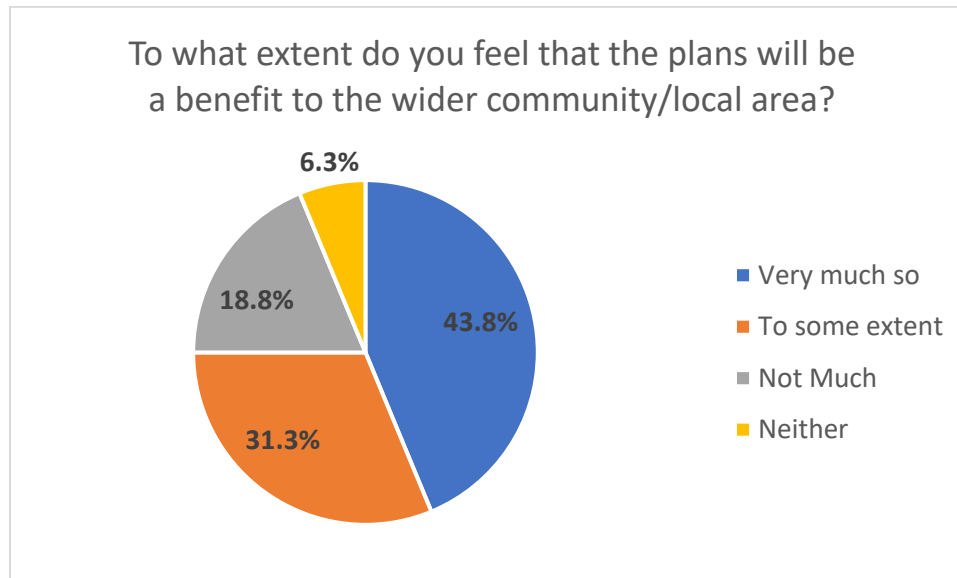
- 4.4. There was some stakeholder feedback relating to the proposed courtyard area of the hotel and a desire to see greenery added to 'soften' this. As a result, the project team have included planning and landscaping to this area. Artist impressions of how this space could appear have also been prepared to demonstrate that the space will be active, green and enjoyable for the public.
- 4.5. One stakeholder suggested including reference to the World War Two bomb that landed by the site such as on a noticeboard or plaque. The applicant will investigate the incorporation of a plaque during the construction phase.
- 4.6. There was much feedback, in particular from the business community that the hotel would be a positive economic boost to the town and would help drive footfall through this part of Reading and some positive quotes and posts on social media regarding this.
- 4.7. Some concerns have been raised by some stakeholders relating to the entrance way to the hotel due to the size of the 'overhang' created to allow access to utilities underground. It should be noted that the project team took pre application feedback from officers into account when designing this feature. Therefore, at this stage the team have not made further changes to this but will discuss it further as part of the post submission process.
- 4.8. Some stakeholders expressed a desire for a higher proportion of terracotta colour brickwork in the design. The applicant's response is that most of the proposal comprises such brickwork already and that there are many examples of lighter stone buildings in the town center which are also reflective of the character of Reading. This site provides a key transition between the two materials and therefore has been retained as per the previous consent.
- 4.9. The applicant also engaged with the local police liaison officer. Following this feedback, the design has been adjusted to include "Secured by Design" principles to improve the security of buildings and their immediate surroundings to provide safe places to live, work, shop and visit.

Community Survey Feedback results

- 4.10. Question 1: To what extent do you feel that the plans will be a benefit to the wider community/local area?

Answer	Percentage
Very much so	43.8%

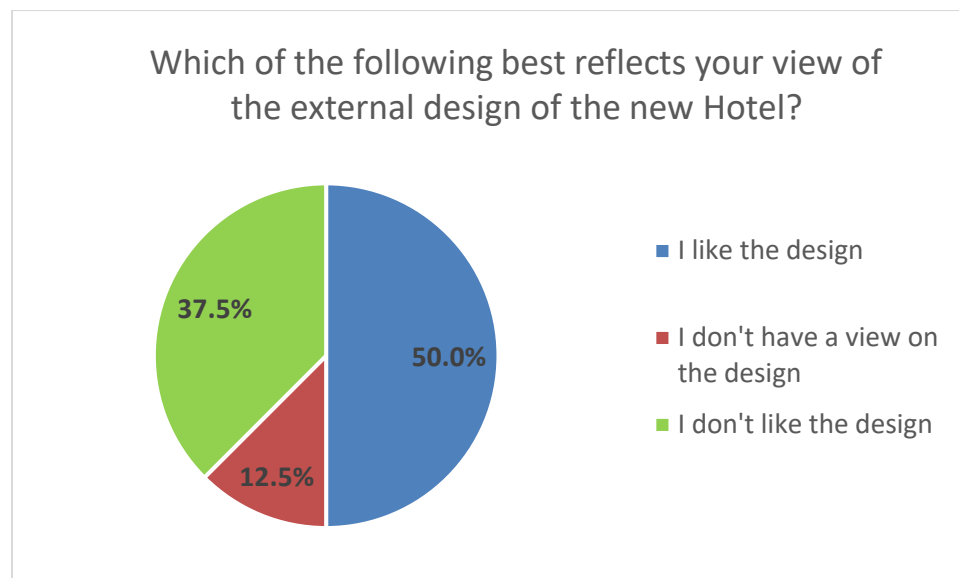
To some extent	31.3%
Not Much	18.8%
Neither	6.3%



4.11. There was strong consensus that the proposal would be of benefit to the wider community with over three quarters of respondents very much or to some extent agreeing. Only 18.8% did not feel that the proposal would bring benefits.

4.12. **Question 2:** Which of the following best reflects your view of the external design of the new Hotel? (Select one)

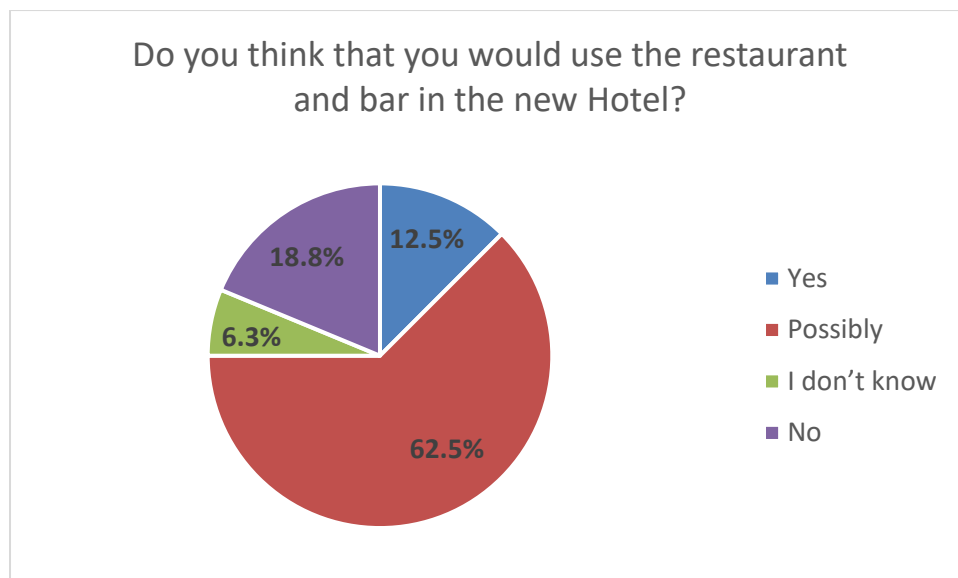
Answer	Percentage
I like the design	50.0%
I don't have a view on the design	12.5%
I don't like the design	37.5%



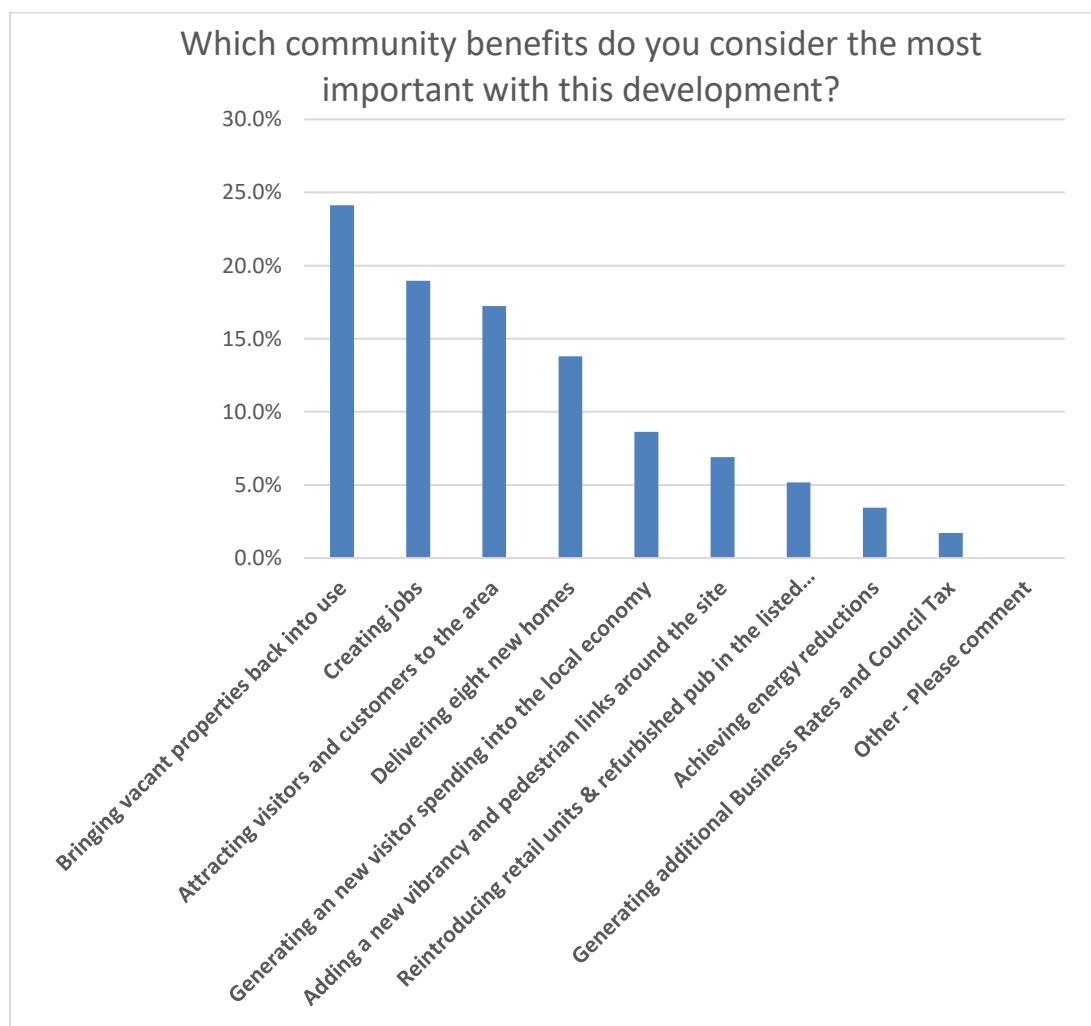
4.13. The most frequent answer to this question was that people liked the design. However, a minority of people did not like the design, even if there were supportive of the principle of development.

4.14. **Question 3:** As a local resident or working in the area, do you think that you would use the restaurant and bar in the new Hotel?

Answer	Percentage
Yes	12.5%
Possibly	62.5%
I don't know	6.3%
No	18.8%



4.15. Question 4: Which community benefits do you consider the most important with this development? (Select top three)



4.16. Bringing vacant properties back into use was seen as the most important benefit of the scheme, followed by creating jobs and attracting visitors and customers to the area,

Free Comments

Examples of written feedback included:

- *Get it built.*
- *A welcome proposal with an aesthetically pleasing design.*
- *Would prefer a more historic facade to the hotel.*
- *The double-height entrance and white part of the proposal facing the Town Hall is not in keeping with the listed Georgian buildings adjacent.*
- *I would like to see the original facade/archway of the much-decayed Bristol & West building incorporated into the design, even if this is just as part of the hotel's 'outer shell'.*
- *Some feedback received focused on a preference for 'terracotta' colour brick to be used. The applicant's response is that most of the proposal comprises such brickwork and that there are many examples of lighter stone buildings in the town center which are also reflective of the character of Reading. This site provides a key transition between the two materials and therefore has been retained as per the previous consent.*
- *There was a question/concern raised about would the light parts of the building discolour or go grey or yellow. The applicant's response is that whilst of course the building will age and change appearance slightly this will not involve stonework turning grey or yellow. Instead, it is felt that the aging process will allow it to integrate into the street-scene of this part of the town center and positively contribution and reflect the established character.*

Demographic Data or survey respondents

4.17. Age

Age	Frequency	Percentage
Under 24	0	0.0%
25-34	3	18.8%
35-44	5	31.3%
45-54	1	6.3%
55-64	5	31.3%
65-74	2	12.5%
Over 75	0	0.0%

4.18. Employment status

Employment status	Percentage
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Employed	50.0%
Retired	31.3%
Prefer not to say	12.5%
Self-employed	6.3%

4.19. Relationship with Reading

Relationship with Reading	Frequency	Percentage
Neither live nor work in Reading	1	6.3%
live in Reading only	6	37.5%
Work in Reading only	1	6.3%
Both live and work in Reading	8	50.0%

5.0 Next steps

- 5.1. Following submission of the planning application, RBC will consult interested parties including local residents. The applicant will continue to liaise with the Planning Authority, RBC councillors, stakeholders and local businesses throughout the planning application process.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Online Survey Questions

Appendix 2 – Screenshot from the website

Appendix 3 – Mailing area for the leaflet

Appendix 4 – Leaflet

Appendix 1 – Online Community Survey

ABOUT THE PROPOSED SCHEME

- 1. Having reviewed the outline plans for a new hotel on Friar Street and a refurbishment of the listed buildings on Market Place, to what extent do you feel that the plans will be a benefit to the wider community/local area?**

- ☐ Very much so
- ☐ To some extent
- ☐ Neither
- ☐ Not much
- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Don't know

- 2. Which of the following best reflects your view of the external design of the new Hotel?**

- ☐ I like the design
- ☐ I like the design, but I have some comments (please add comments below)
- ☐ I don't like the design
- ☐ I don't have a view on the design
- ☐ Comments on design.....

- 3. As a local resident or working in the area, do you think that you would use the restaurant and bar in the new Hotel?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Possibly
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

- 4. Which community benefits do you consider the most important with this development? (Select top three)**

- ☐ Bringing these long-vacant and derelict properties back into viable uses
- ☐ Creating jobs
- ☐ Attracting visitors and customers to this prime town-centre location
- ☐ Delivering eight new homes
- ☐ Generating an annual £3,900,000 of new visitor spending into the local economy
- ☐ Adding a new vibrancy and pedestrian links around Town Hall Square and Market Place Square
- ☐ Reintroducing new retail units and a refurbished pub in the listed buildings

- ☐ Achieving energy reductions, a BREEAM rating of Very Good and include sustainable drainage and green roofs
- ☐ Generating annual revenues of £555,000 of Business Rates and £15,000 of Council Tax
- ☐ Other

5. General comments about the proposals

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ABOUT YOU

6. What is your gender identity?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to say

7. What is your age?

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ 65-74
- ☐ 75+

8. Which of these best describes what you're doing at present?

- ☐ Employed
- ☐ Self-employed
- ☐ Unemployed
- ☐ Retired
- ☐ Home maker / carer
- ☐ Full time student
- ☐ Prefer not to say

9. Do you? (Select either or both)

- ☐ Live in Reading
- ☐ Work in Reading

Closing date for feedback is Friday 19th December 2020.

Appendix 2 – Screenshot from the website

Plans to redevelop the former Bristol & West Arcade building on Friar Street in the heart of Reading and build a new hotel are to be submitted to Reading Borough Council in January 2021.

The new scheme which replaces the previous plans for offices, flats and shops that was granted planning consent in 2019 is being brought forward because of lack of demand for new office and retail space in this part of Reading. Research shows that a new hotel here, close to both Reading station and the business heart of central Reading would also create new jobs for local people, a substantial level of income for Reading and allow the site to be brought back into active use.

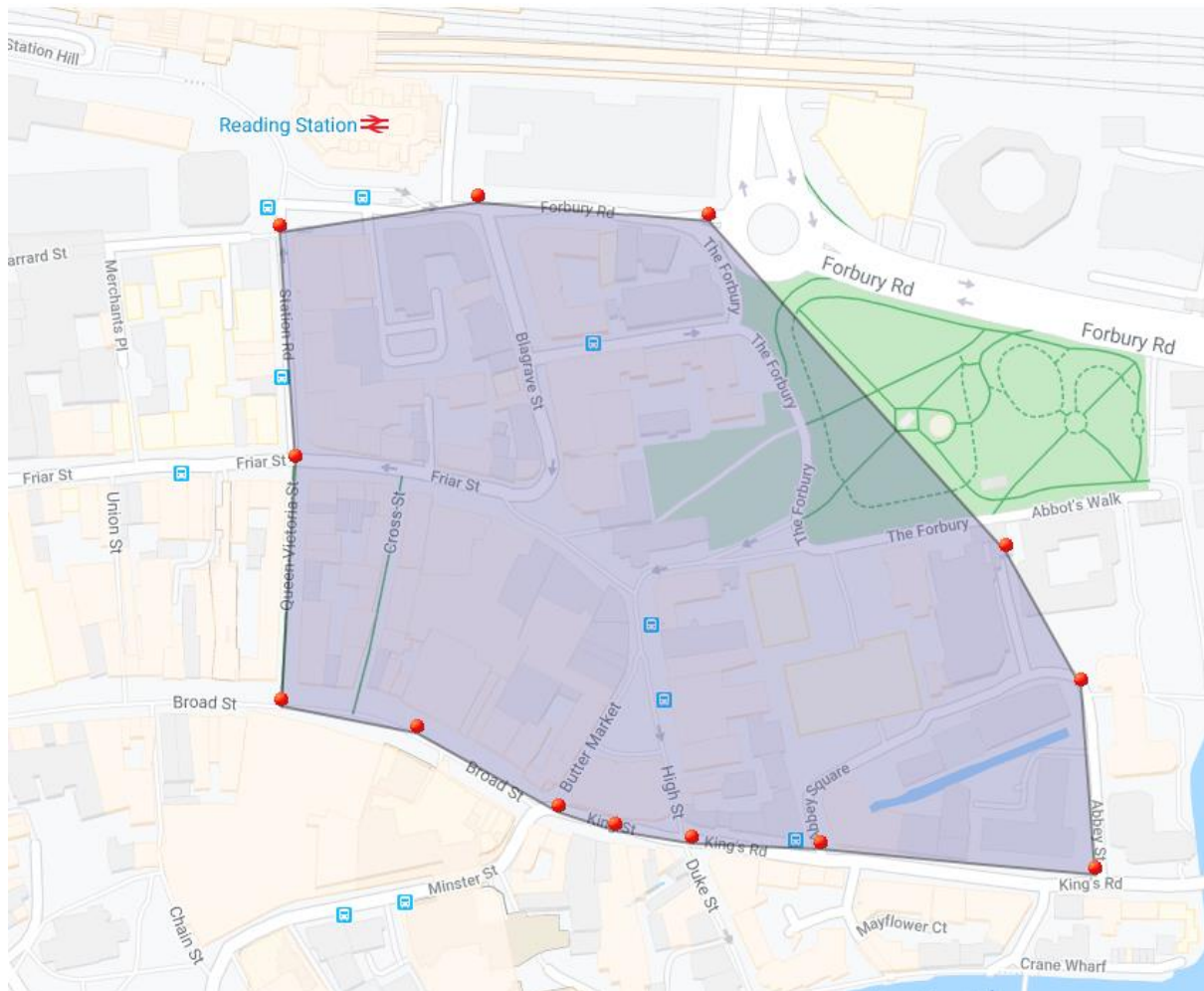
Early discussions are taking place with several UK and international hotels groups interested in operating a 4-star hotel in this well-located central Reading site. The new hotel will have up to 186 rooms, a gym and a bar and restaurant fronting Friar Street that is open to the public. It is expected that the hotel will create up to 60 new jobs once opened.

Part of the proposals, the listed buildings on Market Place, will be included in the application to be brought forward exactly as it was consented in 2019 for commercial units, a pub and residential apartments above.



Hotel façade at dusk

Appendix 3 – Mailing zone for the leaflet



Appendix 4 – Leaflet

December 2020

Former Bristol & West Arcade building set to become 4-star hotel



New hotel planned for Friar Street, Reading

Plans to redevelop the former Bristol & West Arcade office building on Friar Street in the heart of Reading and build a new hotel are to be submitted to Reading Borough Council in the New Year.

The new scheme which replaces the previous plans for offices, flats and shops that was granted planning consent in 2019 is being brought forward because of lack of demand for new office and retail space in this part of Reading. Research shows that a new hotel here, close to both Reading station and the business heart of central Reading would not only be a better use of the site, but would also create new jobs for local people.

Early discussions are taking place with several UK and international hotel groups interested in operating a 4-star hotel in this well-located central Reading site. The new hotel will have 186 rooms, a gym and a bar and restaurant fronting Friar Street. It is expected that the hotel will create up to 60 new jobs.

The development

The proposed development comprises several interconnected buildings on Friar Street and Market Place. 173-175 Friar Street is the former Bristol & West office building opposite St. Laurence Church on Town Hall Square. Beneath the building runs the arcade (now boarded-up) to Market Way and Market Place Square. This building would be demolished and rebuilt as an eight-storey hotel (including existing basement) with the arcade reinstated as an open and wider public thoroughfare featuring the main hotel entrance and a spill-out patio dining area from the hotel restaurant and bar.

The arcade also backs onto the rear of the boarded up listed buildings, 27-32 Market Place (located opposite the NatWest Bank). One of these listed buildings was the Cooper's Arms public house that closed in 2010. These listed buildings will be refurbished in line with the permission granted by Reading Council in 2019 to create a new pub flanked by two shops on the ground floor with eight residential apartments on the three floors above.

The new hotel and the listed buildings refurbishment are all part of the proposed development by Sonic Star Properties Ltd, who secured the planning consent in 2019.

Scheme benefits

- Bringing these long-vacant and derelict properties on Friar Street and Market Place back into viable uses
- Creating an initial 100 construction jobs and around 100 new job opportunities in the hotel, the shop units and the refurbished pub
- Attracting visitors and customers to the hotel, restaurant, pub and new shops in this prime town-centre location close to Reading station
- Delivering eight new homes
- Generating an annual £3,900,000 of hotel visitor spending into the local economy
- Adding a new vibrancy and pedestrian links around Town Hall Square and Market Place Square.
- Reintroducing two new retail or commercial units and a refurbished pub in the listed buildings
- Achieving energy reductions, a BREEAM rating of Very Good and include sustainable drainage and green roofs.
- Generating in excess of £555,000 per annum of Business Rates from the new hotel, retail units and restored pub, and £15,000 per annum of Council Tax from the new flats.

Former Bristol & West Arcade building set to become 4-star hotel

History

The Bristol & West Arcade buildings on Friar Street were closed in 2007 and have remained vacant since along with the listed buildings on Market Place. Since that time, a number of redevelopment schemes for the site have been proposed but were never built. The buildings and particularly the arcade have become derelict and in very poor condition. Sonic Star Properties acquired the site and the buildings in 2017 and immediately boarded and secured the arcade for health & safety reasons.

In 2017 and 2018 plans for 43 apartments, three storeys of office space, seven ground floor shop units and the refurbishment of the public house were prepared following consultation with the local community and with Ward Councillors and Borough Council officers. The scheme was granted planning permission in January 2019.

However, due to a lack of demand for new offices and more retail shops in Reading, the plans for the Friar Street building have now been revised to create an alternative commercial use as an hotel. And key to this change of use has been the retention of the building heights, mass and design principles of the approved 2019 scheme.



Public consultation and next steps

This newsletter is part of Sonic Star Properties' consultation about the hotel plans with local residents and businesses in the area.

The planning application, which will be submitted to Reading Borough Council in January 2021, will be accompanied by detailed technical reports and assessments on every aspect of the proposed hotel development including building design, access and transport, environment and the day-to-day operation of the hotel. The application will include a comparison of

the building design with the approved 2019 scheme.

A consultation website has been set up with more details about the proposed development scheme and a feedback section to capture community views. To find out more and give your views, please visit the website www.bristol-and-west-arcade-reading.co.uk.

Feedback will be reviewed and analysed as part of the planning application.

An online community engagement session is also being organised in December; please go to the website for more details and to register for the session.

Determination of the planning application by Reading Councillors could be in the Spring of 2021 and if approved, work could start in the summer with the hotel opening during the latter part of 2022.