



Land North of Reading Station

STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Prepared by Meeting Place Communications on behalf of Hermes Property Unit Trust - December 2018



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Introduction

This Statement of Community Engagement (SCE) sets out the public and stakeholder engagement undertaken with regard to Hermes Property Unit Trust's plans for the Land North of Reading Station. Currently home to the former Royal Mail depot, Hermes' proposals would see the site transformed into an aspirational mixed use development with new homes, community facilities, retail and office space, in addition to the creation of a tree lined avenue connecting Caversham Road to a newly created landscaped square at the northern entrance of Reading Station.

This document aims to demonstrate that Hermes Property Unit Trust have actively informed and involved the local community about the plans, in accordance with Reading Borough Council's Statement of Community Involvement and national planning guidance.

Hermes Property Unit Trust has demonstrated a commitment to stakeholder engagement and endeavoured to ensure that the community were made aware of the proposed development. Hermes Property Unit Trust welcomed and invited feedback on the proposals to establish if any amendments could be taken on board prior to the submission of a planning application.

This Statement of Community Engagement gives an overview of all consultation activity undertaken prior to the current planning application submission.

Feedback received on Hermes proposals for the Land North of Reading Station has been overwhelmingly positive, 63% of returned feedback forms having the "I support these proposals" box ticked. This is true of comments from both near neighbours and the wider community. The majority of respondents agreed the currently disused brownfield site was well suited to an aspirational mixed-use redevelopment. Residents felt the inclusion of a health centre, community and retail space, in addition to the general improvements to access to and from the station, would greatly benefit residents. Hesitation was most keenly expressed on the perceived lack of parking, not only for residents and visitors, but to service the extra retail space and new facilities.

About

Hermes Property Unit Trust

Hermes Investment Management is one of the largest institutional asset managers in the UK. The group offer actively managed public and private markets solutions to investors across the world and, in Hermes EOS, have one of the world's largest stewardship resources.

Hermes Property Unit Trust invests directly in properties ranging in value from £1.2million to £101.5million. The trust target a wide range of carefully chosen properties – including retail, office and industrial units across the UK with the long-term goal of maintaining a balanced portfolio with the potential to grow sustainably.

Meeting Place Communications

Meeting Place Communications (MPC) was established in 2006 and we are now one of the leading public relations companies specialising in consultation around planning issues. We have worked with a wide range of house builders, retailers and commercial developers. We have experience across England and Wales, and are experts in positively engaging with local residents in planning applications.

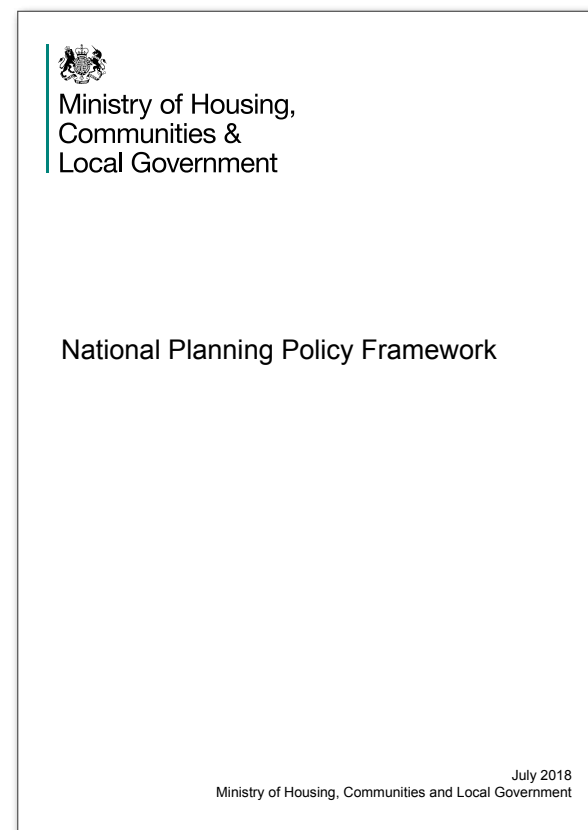
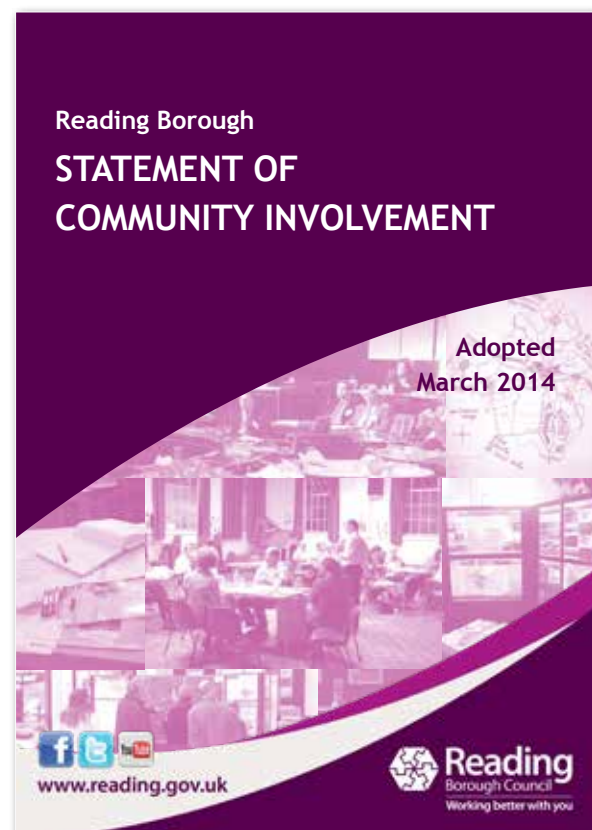
Requirements of the consultation

Community involvement is at the forefront of national planning policy and is noted in National Planning Policy Framework (published July 2018). The NPPF (paragraph 39) states that “Early engagement has significant potential to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning application system for all parties. Good quality pre-application discussion enables better coordination between public and private resources and improved outcomes for the community.”

Planning Policy Statement 12 (Para 4.21) required local planning authorities to produce a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) as part of their Local Development Frameworks. The principle objective of the SCI is to ensure that all sections of the community, including local groups and organisations, are given an opportunity to engage in the planning process.

Reading Borough Council adopted its current Statement of Community Involvement in March 2014. It applies to both the preparation of local planning policy documents and to planning applications.

Section 7 of the SCI contains information with regard to what is expected of applicants by way of consultation and community engagement for significant planning applications. Section 7 requires developers to consult local communities and councils before submitting their planning application.



“

“Developers should arrange and provide at least one interactive involvement event designed to enable all consultees to attend, receive information, participate and feedback information on their area and its community and their views on possible development or other change in the area. Such an event might take the form of a place check, enquiry by design event, exhibition and workshop, a planning for real exercise, public meeting or similar, facilitated interactive event.”

“Developers should provide a website of relevant information or provide digital images and information (or a suitable document such as a document in .pdf format) that can be put on the planning page of the Reading Borough Council Website.”

“Developers or prospective applicants will be expected to prepare a public report of community involvement for submission with a significant or sensitive planning application (as defined in this SCI), detailing the extent of the community involvement exercise carried out, reporting all views and responses and indicating the actions or changes that have been carried out or that it is proposed are carried out in order to meet the views and concerns raised by the community involvement.”

”

We have responded to this by...

Involving local representatives:

We sought to involve local councillors, groups and organisations in the consultation process and will ensure that this consultation continues beyond submission to help further develop the application;

Involving residents:

An invite was sent to 2,092 addresses around the site explaining the plans and inviting residents to a near neighbour drop-in session held at The New Hope Centre, 95 York Rd on Tuesday 20 November 2018, 15:00 – 19:30. This event was also widely publicised through a press release and media outlets, inviting local residents to the event.

Involving the wider community:

An additional pop up consultation was held at the southern entrance to Reading Station on Thursday 22 November 2018, 12:30 – 18:30. This event was aimed at engaging with people who live and work in Reading, whom might otherwise not attend a traditional public consultation event.

Encouraging feedback:

Feedback forms were distributed at both consultation events, inviting attendees to share their opinions regarding the proposals. The forms could be filled out and returned at the event or returned later via Freepost. In addition, feedback forms could also be submitted via the consultation, website or email. A freephone information line and email address which residents could use to make contact with Hermes Property Unit Trust was also provided on consultation materials;

Engaging online:

A consultation website – **www.readingmet.co.uk** – was set up with information about the proposals. The website was publicised through the consultation invite and visitors were encouraged to submit feedback online.



Involving residents

An invite to our near neighbour consultation was sent out to 2,092 addresses surrounding the site. The letter invited people along to the public near neighbour consultation. The invite presented an overview of the proposals, giving residents a clear idea of Hermes plans for the site.

The invite also identified the website – www.readingmet.co.uk – as an alternative way of getting information and giving feedback.

“ Number of newsletters sent: **2,092** ”

Land north of Reading Station

November 2018

The redundant depot site and buildings.

Hermes Property Unit Trust will shortly be submitting a planning application for the former Royal Mail depot on Caversham Road, adjacent to the northern exit of Reading Station within the Inner Distribution Road (IDR). The land had planning permission in 2012 for a mixed-use scheme of new homes, retail space, offices and community facilities, however this permission has since lapsed. Regeneration of the site will create and open up a vibrant space to the north side of the station for people to live and work.

The scheme would represent a significant investment in Reading. It would see the creation of a new tree lined avenue connecting an extended north station square to Caversham Road. The avenue will enable the regeneration of the surrounding sites, bringing a range of new retail spaces, offices and homes right to the heart of Reading.

You can find out more about the proposals by visiting our website at www.readingmet.co.uk or visiting our drop-in day, which will be held at:

Tuesday 20 November 3pm - 7.30pm

The New Hope Centre, York Road, RG1 8DU

Come along, speak with members of the team if you have more detailed questions and find out how we plan to transform the redundant depot building into a vibrant new northern quarter for Reading.

Our vision

Outline model of the proposals.

Completing and enhancing the north station square The scheme will greatly improve the northern entrance to Reading Station, creating new landscaping lined with office, retail and residential buildings to the west.

Creation of a new avenue As part of the scheme, a new tree lined avenue will run east-west from the new station square to Caversham Road. The avenue will provide new retail spaces and facilitate easy access to the station, contributing to the regeneration of the surrounding area.

Community facilities The proposals have space for various community facilities including a health centre and rooms for residents to have local events and functions, which will improve local services to the immediate area.

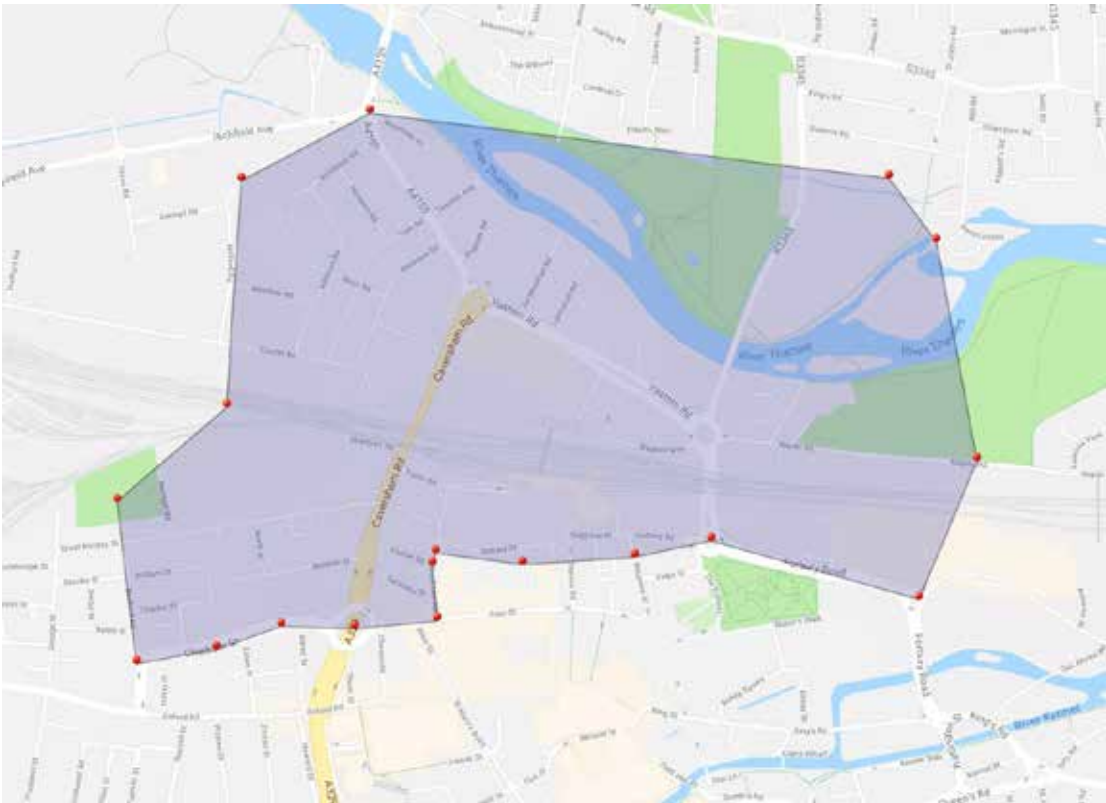
New homes The proposals bring forward a range of new 1, 2 and 3 bedroom apartments within walking distance of the station, town centre, local employment and public transport connections.

New office space Up to seven floors of new office space will be delivered on site. The first phase comprising ground + six storeys will be alongside the station entrance, facing onto the west side of the north station square. The second phase will be located on the south western part of the site on Caversham Road. These spaces will provide high quality office environments close to the station for a range of business types and sizes.

Retail space The scheme will provide new retail space serving the north side of the station, complementing the retail offer of the town centre. The newly created avenue will also provide room for new retail spaces, enlivening the street and surrounding areas.

Connections New pedestrian and cycle routes will run through the site, including a north/south route that creates the opportunity for a new connection to De Montfort Road and onto the River.

Design and style The proposals aim to reflect the character and history of Reading and will use high-quality materials for the new buildings.

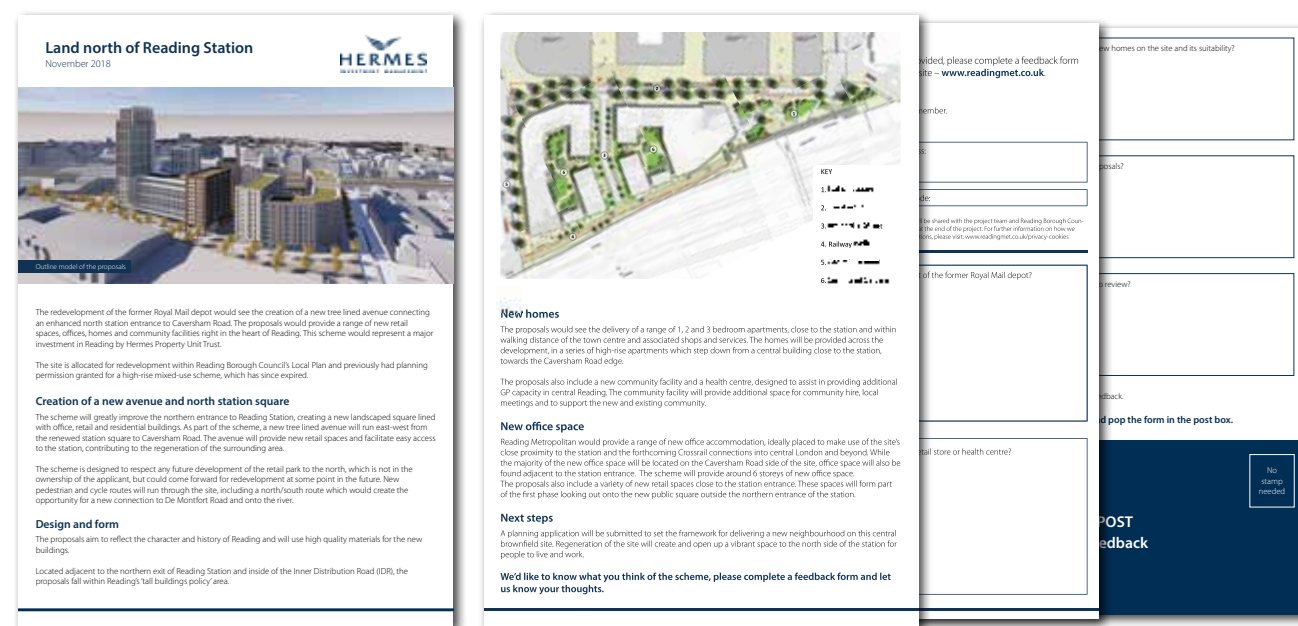


Near Neighbour Exhibition

- Residents around the site were invited to a drop-in session at The New Hope Centre, 95 York Rd, Reading, RG1 8DU on Tuesday 20 November 2018, 15:00 – 19:30.
- The event was also widely publicised through a press release, inviting local residents to the event.
- The exhibitions were held on a weekday and in the evening, to accommodate those who may be busy at the weekend or who wanted to attend after work;
- Local residents were invited to the exhibition via a letter which was sent to 2,092 homes.
- Local political representatives and other interested parties were invited to the consultation by letter, phone and email.
- A feedback form was given to every attendee of the event and they were invited to share their opinions regarding the proposals. The forms could be filled out and returned at the event or returned later via Freepost.
- Five members of the project team were present to answer questions and talk residents through the plans;
- Materials, such as a model and display boards, were on hand to focus and facilitate meaningful conversations.
- All consultation materials were made available online on the day of the exhibition.
- 95 people attended the New Hope Centre event.
- The exhibition was covered extensively in the media, including in Get Reading, Thames Tap and the popular local blog Reading-on-Thames, further facilitating discussion around the project.

“ Number of feedback forms completed: ”
40

“ Number of visitors: ”
95



Involving local representatives

We recognised that it was important to engage local representatives as part of the consultation process. Phone calls were made to key stakeholders inviting them to the near neighbour event and special attention was given by the project team to discuss the proposals in detail with the stakeholders.

- Cllr Karen Rowland (Abbey Ward, Vice-Chair of Planning Applications)
- Cllr Mohammed Ayub (Abbey Ward)
- Representatives from Conservation Area Advisory Committee (CAAC)
- Representatives from Bell Tower Community Association
- Representatives from Caversham Globe
- Representatives from Reading Civic Society
- Representatives from Caversham and District Residents Association (CADRA)
- Peter Robinson (author of blog www.readingonthames.com)
- Hugh Ford (Get Reading)
- Alan Bunce (Thames Tap)



Pop-up Exhibition

Complementing the near neighbour consultation, we held a pop up consultation at the southern entrance to Reading Station on Thursday 22 November 2018, 12:30 – 18:30. This event, in a high footfall location, aimed at engaging with local people, living and working in Reading, who might otherwise not attend a traditional public consultation event.

- Materials, such as a model and display boards, were on hand to focus and facilitate meaningful conversations.
- Feedback forms were handed out at the event. The forms could be filled out and returned at the event or returned later via Freepost.
- Three members of the project team were present to answer questions and talk residents through the plans;
- 92 conversations were had at our stand about the proposals, ranging from brief interactions with those too busy to stop, to long and in-depth discussions.

“ Number of conversations at our stand: ”
92



Engaging online

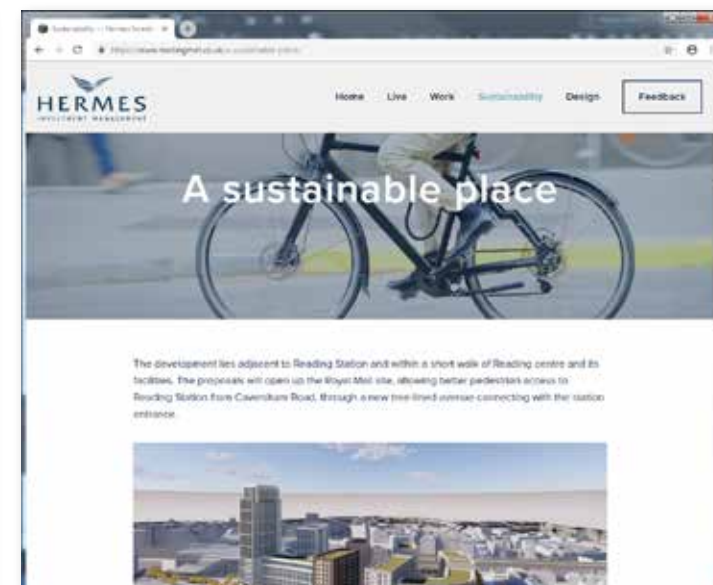
- The dedicated website – www.readingmet.co.uk – was created.
- This website gives details of the proposals and allows visitors to submit feedback electronically and via email.
- The website identifies our free phone number as an alternative source for information and feedback.
- This website will be further developed as the application progresses.

It hosts:

- Layout plans
- An online comment form
- Images of the site

“ Number of visits to the website ”
as of 2018: **XXX**

“ Average length of stay on ”
the website: **XXX**



Feedback

Summary of Feedback

Feedback received on Hermes’ plans for the Land North of Reading Station has been exceptionally positive. Feedback has demonstrated that local residents, and the wider community of Reading, recognise that the brownfield site is underutilised and suitable for aspirational mixed use redevelopment. Furthermore, residents felt the inclusion of a health centre, community and retail space, in addition to the general improvements to access to and from the station, would greatly benefit residents. Hesitation was most keenly expressed on the perceived lack of parking, not only for residents and visitors, but to service the extra retail space and new facilities. Caversham and District Residents Association (CADRA) wrote thanking Hermes for the public exhibition but objecting to the height of the buildings (arguing they were out of character with the local area), the density of the dwellings and the perceived inadequate provision of greenspace.

Sample comments:

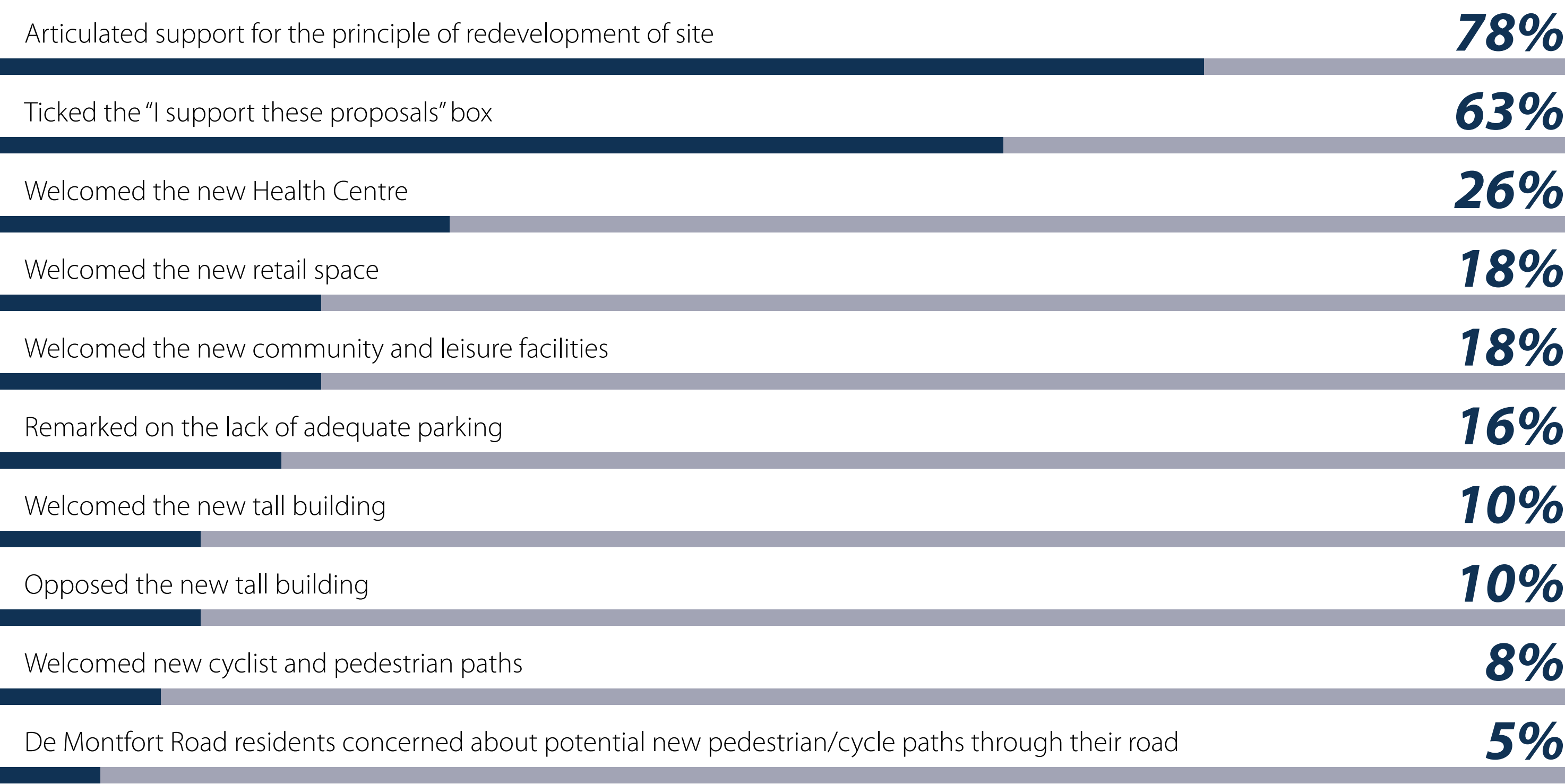
- “Very nice! Needs to be done.”
- “The scheme is fantastic!”
- “This development, together with others in the vicinity, is very timely with Reading ready to become the great town it has always aspired to, but not quite made it.”
- “It’s about time for this area to be redeveloped in order to open up the north station area, bringing back to life the site.”
- “Obviously ideally situated for commuters avoiding London prices and those working in the town.”
- “The Tower will provide a great counter point to Thames Tower to the south of the station”
- “Very positive. The site is probably the most accessible site in Berkshire and currently very underused.”
- “Some of the buildings are quite high but I don’t think it will have a detrimental effect on our area.”
- “Good site for a residential led scheme.”
- “Parking may well be an issue as it is already a problem in the area.”
- “Strongly in favour of the new health centre.”
- “Tower blocks are overpowering.”
- “No car parking space for visitors! Why not?”
- I feel that retail outlets (including coffee shops) are essential to keep the area alive and vibrant”
- “The site is close to my heart as I started work at 80 Caversham Road when it was a British Rail office. I would be pleased to see the site developed rather than left derelict.”
- “This drop in evening was a great idea – more of the same please!”

187 *people were engaged at our consultation events*

41 *feedback forms were completed*

5 *web feedback forms*

Feedback Breakdown



Responding to Feedback

Support for redevelopment

A clear majority of the feedback, at 78%, supported the principle of redeveloping the site, with a large proportion of these, at 68%, indicating outright support for Hermes proposals by ticking the “I support these proposals” box on the feedback form.

One motivation for this support came from the belief that the land is currently being underutilised. It was stated that the land is in an ideal position for the delivery of a mixed-use scheme. 16% of commentators directly remarked on the suitability of the site for such a development. The current site was described as “derelict”, a “wasteland”, an “eyesore” and “underutilised”. Only one commentator strongly questioned the location, suggesting the new residents would be “sandwiched” in between the railway station and the heavily used Caversham Road.

Several responses note their personal connection to the site (for instance previously working at the depot) as the motivation behind their wish to see the plans come forward. Respondents felt the site would benefit from the aspirational and aesthetically pleasing nature of the designs and welcomed the investment in Reading as a sign of the town’s development and growth.

Support for health facilities

26% of feedback directly welcomed the provision of health facilities on site, with one response elaborating how the closure of the Priory Avenue GP has greatly inconvenienced local residents and put pressure on local health infrastructure.

Support for Community and leisure facilities

18% of respondents directly welcomed the new community facility, with the only reservation being a scepticism that they would be delivered. Suggestions were made regarding what the site could additionally include, such as a swimming pool, public toilets, bowling alley, exhibition space or post office.

Applicant’s response

Hermes shares residents’ belief that the central Reading site is suitable for an aspirational mixed use development, which aims to reflect Reading as an emerging metropolitan centre. The proposals Hermes have put forward will reinvigorate the currently disused brown field site and the northern side of the station, creating a community atmosphere, improving access to the station from Caversham Road and providing a range of homes alongside retail / office space and community benefits such as a health centre, community rooms, open space, cycle connectivity and contributions to services in Reading.

Responding to Feedback

Greenery

Five responses expressed appreciation for the greenery planted throughout the proposals. The open spaces were commended, but trepidation was articulated as to whether they would be of suitable quality. Three respondents worried the open spaces, between buildings, would lack sun light. One resident asked for the S106 contributions to go towards upgrading Christchurch Park. One response suggested the green space was inadequate for the number of dwellings included the plans

Applicant’s response

High quality green spaces and vegetation have been strategically allocated throughout the designs to create a pleasant place for people to live and work. The new landscaped avenue and north station square will contribute the rejuvenation of the northern side of Reading Station. The model has undergone significant testing regarding shadowing and the scheme, by having lower buildings on the southern side of the site, seeks to maximise sunlight in the private areas. There are also significant areas for residents on the roof gardens, which will be landscaped for residents to enjoy.

Retail space

18% of feedback forms welcomed the additional retail space. Five responses requested the space be occupied by independent and existing local businesses. One respondent said that more retail space should be included. Two responses questioned if retail was needed, believing retail space to be on the decline. One response questioned the kind of retail which would be using the space, suggesting she would not like to see the area used by nail bars.

Applicant’s response

The ground floor retail outlet is part of the first phase of the proposed development and will be marketed early on in the build process. There has been a high amount of interest in the proposed retail space. Discussions are currently ongoing as to the occupier of the space, with late stage negotiations reached with a major retail outlet to take all the space on offer.

Comments on tall buildings and local character

Four feedback responses articulated support for the inclusion of tall buildings on site. One commentator articulated that they did not feel tall buildings were inappropriate next to a railway. One response praised the “restrained” nature of the designs, noting that he feared the site (under different proposals) may be “packed” with unsightly tall buildings. Five commentators said the building near the station was too tall and suggested the town houses would be overshadowed by the surrounding buildings. Respondents asked for the buildings to be made from “multicoloured bricks of Reading’s Victorian heritage”. One commentator explicitly worried the designs were out of character with the surrounding houses.

Applicant’s response

The proposals aim to reflect the character and history of Reading. The tallest building, which is located next to the station, will be 26 storeys high. The building reflects its proximity to the station entrance and distance from existing residential properties. It creates a landmark feature close to the station, reflecting similar building heights being delivered on the south side of the station. The heights of the buildings in Hermes proposals aim to become an aspirational piece of the town’s skyline, welcoming those arriving into Reading by train.

Responding to Feedback

Lack of parking

A theme in feedback (around 16%) was the perceived lack of adequate parking provision. 80 spaces was not seen as enough to accommodate the amount of homes on the site. One respondent commented that many residents drive to amenities and services outside of the town centre. Two feedback forms questioned if parking would be provided for those using the onsite retail or community facilities. The idea that family, or visitors to the new residents, would need parking was also raised.

It should be noted, although not recorded in the written feedback, during consultation residents vocally supported the notion that there should be fewer cars on the roads. Residents remarked the lack of a personal motor vehicle was a lifestyle choice, of those who choose to live in a town centre close to the train station. Only two respondents to our feedback worried that Hermes' proposals would generate more congestion on the roads.

Applicant's response

The development is positioned extremely close to Reading Station, the town centre and employment sites / new offices within the town centre and the development itself. It will be designed to cater for those who don't wish to own a car and prefer to use public transport and deliveries.

Proposals include a mix of on street parking for service vehicles and disabled parking spaces for the retail units and offices. The first phase, closest to the station, will provide up to 80 parking spaces which will be for the new apartments and 28 on grade for retail and offices. Future phases of the development will be provided with no spaces, which is an approach already used on other central Reading schemes given the access to the station, lower car ownership levels in the town centre, home shopping services, buses and local healthcare services.

Car club vehicles will be available for hire on site, to cater for journeys where a car is required.

Affordability and new homes

There was general support for new homes in feedback; one response welcomed the new homes and "high density" of the plans. Three responses worried the new dwellings would be unaffordable. One feedback form suggested the office space should be used for new homes, another asked for housing designed for the over 60s. Concern was expressed that social housing could be reduced from 35%. One person worried that the town houses would look onto the railway line.

Applicant's response

Reading Borough Council is working on producing a new Local Plan, which will replace their current development plans (the Core Strategy, Reading Central Area Action Plan and Sites and Detailed Policies Document) with a new plan setting out how Reading will develop up to 2036. The Plan estimates that 658 homes will need to be provided in the Borough each year, with around 50% in central Reading. Hermes proposals may contribute to the delivery of these new homes. The proposals aid in the reduction of need for Reading residents to travel by car. The Local Plan requires 18-20% of the properties to be affordable homes. This can be achieved by either provision on site or contributions towards provision off site. This would be subject to a viability assessment and a final mix of properties has yet to be determined.

Access, pedestrian and cycle lanes

Feedback recognised that the new avenue connecting Caversham Road to the Station would greatly improve access for residents to the station. One commentator welcomed the thought which had gone in to making the avenue safe at night.

The inclusion of provision for cyclists was also welcomed in the feedback. One respondent asked for more cycle provision, both north to the "sub-station site" (SSE building) and south to the centre (with the particular inclusion of a cycle lane in the tunnel under the railway line). Opening up access to the river was identified in the feedback as a potential benefit of the site.

Applicant's response

The development would be accessed from Caversham Road. A new tree lined avenue would connect Caversham Road to the enhanced northern entrance to Reading Station. This will significantly increase access to the station for the surrounding residents. In addition, new pedestrian and cycle routes will run north south through the site. These routes will be designed to be integrated into future developments, outside of the applicant's control, which may come forward to the north of the site, allowing for future connections onto the river.

This report was designed by:

