

3 Need and Alternatives Considered

Introduction

- 3.1 This chapter of the Environmental Statement (ES) provides a summary of the need for the project and the main alternatives considered by the applicant during the EIA process. It includes a summary of the reasons for the selection of the site, together with a description of the alternative design and layout options that have been considered. Further information is provided in the Planning Statement and Design and Access Statement that accompany the planning application.

Need for the Development

National Policy

- 3.2 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), 2018a) sets out the need for new sustainable housing. Paragraph 60 states that in order to boost the supply of housing the minimum number of homes needed should be informed by a local housing need assessment. The National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) (MHCLG, 2018b) sets out the standard method of identifying the minimum number of homes to be planned for using the projected household growth and historic under supply. Local planning authorities should calculate their local housing need figure at the start of the plan-making process which should be kept under review and revised where appropriate. Local planning authorities are also required to identify and annually update a supply of specific deliverable sites sufficient to promote five years' worth of housing against their housing requirements, with an additional buffer of 5%. This buffer would increase to 20% for local authorities that have a record of persistent under delivery.
- 3.3 In relation to town centres the NPPF states in chapter 7 that local planning authorities should develop a plan which supports the positive growth and diversity of town centres and '*...promote their long-term vitality and viability...*' (paragraph 85). The NPPF also recognises that residential development often plays an important role in the growth of town centres and that planning authorities should '*...encourage residential development on appropriate sites.*' (paragraph 85).

Local Policy Context

Core Strategy

- 3.4 The Reading Borough Council Local Plan consists of the Core Strategy (Reading Borough Council, 2008 updated 2015), the Reading Central Area Action Plan (Reading Borough Council, 2009) and detailed site policies and maps. The council is working on replacing these documents with a new Local Plan. A Pre-submission Draft Local Plan (Reading Borough Council, 2017) was published for consultation between November 2017 and January 2018 and the Submission Draft Local Plan (Reading Borough Council, 2018) was submitted to the Secretary of State on 29 March 2018 and is currently in the process of public examination.
- 3.5 The Core Strategy sets out the key elements of the planning framework for Reading Borough and sets out the spatial vision and strategic objectives for the area. The Proposed Development site is located within policy area RC1: Development in the Station/River Major Opportunity Area and more

specifically occupies part of policy area RC1e in the Reading Central Area Action Plan. The policy states 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 – the areas that also make up part of the primary shopping area and central core will have particular emphasis on delivering much of the identified retail and leisure need;*
- ii) Help facilitate greater pedestrian and cycle permeability, particularly on the key movement corridors. North-south links through the centre and across the railway line IDR and River Thames centred on the new station are of particular importance;*
- ...*
- v) Provide additional areas of open space where possible, including a direct green link between the station and the River Thames;*
- ...*

Development will be in line with the following provisions for each sub-area:

...

RC1e, North of Station: There will retail and leisure development on the ground floor with other uses including residential and offices of upper floors. Provision of retail development is contingent on improved links across the railway. ... An acceptable dry access scheme from the across the site must be part of any development.'

Supplementary Planning Documents

- 3.6 The Reading Station Area Framework (Reading Borough Council, 2010) provides broad development principles covering design considerations, public spaces and transport infrastructure for the area immediately adjacent to the railway station. The framework recognises the need to provide high quality development in the area to the north of the station to include retail, office space and residential.

New Local Plan

- 3.7 The Proposed Development site is shown to be covered by Policy RC11e in the submission draft of the Reading Borough new Local Plan (Reading Borough Council, 2018). This policy reiterates Policy RC1e of the current adopted Core Strategy and goes on to state:

'Development should take account of mitigation required as a result of a Flood Risk Assessment and should consider to open up the culverted Vastern Ditch and enhance it as an ecological feature.'

- 3.8 The Policy also states that the entire RC1e area, which encompasses a larger area than the Proposed Development site, has the potential to host in the region of 640-960 dwellings, 50,000 - 80,000 sq m net gain of office space and 3,000 – 6,000 sq m net gain of retail and leisure, and hotel facilities.

Technical Reports

- 3.9 The Employment Land Review Report (Roger Tym & Partners, 2006) identifies the need for additional office space and other class B employment land within the Reading area. The report states that under different projected housing scenarios the need for office space would increase by approximately 284,000m² to 327,000m² and B-space (business space, comprising office, warehousing and industrial space) by 236,000m² to 299,000m². The planned supply in floor space in Reading is approximately 272,000m² office space and 278,000m² B space resulting in a deficit of up to 55,000m² office space and 21,000m² B space.

Overall Need

- 3.10 It is clear from the allocations in the adopted and draft local planning policy that there is a need for high quality retail, office and residential space in Reading. It is particularly clear that the area around the station should be developed in such a way to create an area of public use and provide pedestrian access from the station to the River Thames to the north.

Alternatives Considered

- 3.11 The EIA Regulations require that an ES should include:

'A description of the reasonable alternatives (for example in terms of development design, technology, location, size and scale) studied by the developer, which are relevant to the proposed project and its specific characteristics, and an indication of the main reasons for selecting the chosen option, including a comparison of the environmental effects' (Schedule 4(2)).

- 3.12 This section therefore sets out the key reasons for the selection of the project site and current layout, taking into account environmental effects.

Site Location

- 3.13 The application site is located in the Reading Town Centre Area, it was previously used by the Royal Mail as a sorting office and distribution centre and as such constitutes a brownfield site. It is located approximately 230m to the south of the River Thames, directly north and adjacent to Reading Station. The site covers an area of approximately 2.2 ha and is bounded to the west by Caversham Road, to the north by Station Shopping Park and Vastern Road (A329), to the east by a multi-storey car park, and to the south by the mainline railway tracks. The site is accessed from Trooper Potts Way and a secondary access is also available off Caversham Road. The site's urban setting, good access, and few ecological constraints are a benefit for the potential development of the site.
- 3.14 The existing site is at an average elevation of approximately 38.0m AOD, with a very slight fall across the car park to the north towards the existing building, before rising to the southern site boundary adjacent to the railway embankment. The site is located in Flood Zone 2 of the River Thames flood plain. There is an existing culvert which under lays the site and local surface water drains serving the existing buildings and hardstanding are understood to currently discharge to the existing culvert.
- 3.15 It is considered that the site location is appropriate and logical for future mixed-use development. The main reasons for this choice include:

- The Proposed Developments location in central Reading means that any businesses within the site would be easily accessible for both customers and employees.
- The Proposed Development is located adjacent to Reading Station and therefore has public transport links to Oxford, Bristol and London.
- The Proposed Development would allow for better pedestrian and cycle links from the town centre and Reading Station North to the River Thames and residential areas.
- The size of the site would allow the provision of 658 residential units; 1,889 m² Gross External Area (GEA) of retail, and food and drink floor space; health facilities; community and leisure facilities; public open space; and a new high highway route (The Avenue) connecting Caversham Road to Trooper Potts Way.
- No part of the site is subject to any statutory designation for nature conservation, landscape/townscape or heritage.
- The site has been previously developed and is therefore a brownfield site, minimising any ecological impacts.

Site Layout and Design

- 3.16 An evaluation of site constraints and opportunities was undertaken to inform the site layout and design. The Proposed Development presents an opportunity to provide the following:
- Public open space;
 - New community facilities;
 - Improve access and connectivity; and
 - Housing.
- 3.17 Constraining factors that affected the project layout and design included:
- Visual and townscape impacts;
 - Traffic and transport;
 - Pedestrian amenity;
 - Railway line noise; and
 - Culverted watercourse beneath the site.
- 3.18 The EIA process has influenced the iterative design process of the project, through the identification of the above constraints, responses during the consultation process, and identification of

environmental effects. Therefore, there have been a number of iterations and refinements to the layout of the project.

3.19 The design evolution for the proposed development sites considered Reading Borough Council's and other statutory consultees' requirements including those relation to public space, pedestrian connectivity, communal space, social infrastructure, and massing, whilst maximising residential potential at the sites. The design evolution for the Proposed Development has included several major stages:

- Work preceding the pre-application meeting;
- Pre-application meeting 1 (January 2018) and further consultation with Reading Borough Council (March 2018);
- 1st D:SE (Design South-East) review (June 2018);
- Pre-application meetings 2 and 3 (August/September 2018);
- Meetings with the Crime Prevention Officer and Network Rail (September 2018);
- 2nd D:SE review (November 2018); and
- Public Consultation (November 2018).

Work preceding the pre-application meeting

3.20 This stage of the work focussed on providing a more holistic scheme to provide appropriate public space massing and appropriate phasing. The design included:

- The retention of Station Square north of Reading Stations and The Avenue, space at the centre of the scheme to maximise the provision of public space;
- Blocks running parallel to each other on a primarily north/south orientation, with a uniform 20 m gap between blocks, and alignment with the connection to De Montfort Road, to facilitate permeability for pedestrians; and
- Non-uniform distribution of block massing to create undulating height.

Pre-application meeting 1 and further consultation with Reading Borough Council

3.21 As a result of pre-application meeting 1 variations were made to the articulation and massing of the blocks to encourage usability of the central square by changing the shadow cast off the blocks, and to facilitate the integration of the Proposed Development in the townscape of Reading.

1st D:SE review

3.22 The key points raised by D:SE include:

- A clearer hierarchy of building heights across the site and the main tower in the east of the site should be more prominent.
- Greater connectivity between the public spaces within the site.
- Greater connectivity between the site and the wider area.
- The service road in the south of site may cause confusion if it does not provide access to the station for members of the public.
- The Proposed Development should reflect the surrounding area of Reading in development pattern, morphology and architecture.
- Noise from the railway.
- Provision of facilities of the local area.

3.23 The design of the project evolved to reflect these points. In order that the Proposed Development sit better within the site location, the eastern tower was redesigned to be slightly taller and realigned, along with other buildings in the Proposed Development, to match the existing street pattern and the orientation of the surrounding buildings. This was also intended to improve connectivity for pedestrians going through the site, while the permeability within the Proposed Development was improved by redesigning the connection between the public spaces provided, and by including further public space in the form of an office forecourt in the south west of the site. The southern service road was redesigned to include further landscaping and gates making it clearer that access to/from the station would not be possible. In addition, space for a health clinic/medical facility as well as a sports facility were included in the design. Noise attenuation to the appropriate standards will be included in the final design.

Pre-application meetings 2 and 3

3.24 Further design development was undertaken as a result of these meetings to better demarcate the public and private realm. It was considered whether public access between The Avenue in the north of the site and the southern service road should be removed creating space within the Proposed Development only accessible to the public. This would have been to prevent pedestrian confusion, and to remove the need for a north/south connection across the site, and place greater emphasis on the key routes and spaces (Caversham Road, The Avenue and Station Square), as well provide secure areas which may help prevent crime/antisocial behaviour. However, this would have the result of reducing permeability across the proposed development. As a result, a north south street connecting The Avenue and the southern access road was retained and gated areas for residents were created.

Meetings with the Crime Prevention Officer and Network Rail

3.25 Consideration of the security on site and the security of the station which was incorporated into the Proposed Development was undertaken. The measures included protection of the station from

vehicular access, the provision of lighting, maintenance of lines of site, and the protection of dwellings from crime.

2nd D:SE review

3.26 The key points raised by D:SE include:

- The presence and design of the north-south street running through the centre of the Proposed Development could be problematic for pedestrians trying to access the station and wider area.
- The height of the Proposed Development on Caversham Road and the Design of the tower block may have a negative impact to the surrounding townscape.

3.27 The north-south street has been included as part of the Proposed Development to increase permeability through the site. Entrances to the street have been narrowed to encourage the use of the main route to and from the station (The Avenue), and the inclusion of landscaping along the street emphasises it is subsidiary to The Avenue, while providing public space. Finally, the Proposed Developments has been designed to be appropriate to the context of the Townscape given that the immediate area is likely to evolve.

Public Consultation

3.28 The main issues raised by local people as a result of public consultation are provided below:

- Car parking – residents considered that the 80 spaces provided would not be adequate to accommodate the amount of homes and visitors to the retail or community facilities included in the Proposed Development. It was also raised that the Proposed Development may increase congestion.
- Affordability and new homes – new homes were welcomed although concerns were raised that they may not be affordable, that there should be a large provision of social housing.
- Access for pedestrian and cyclist – new access via the Avenue was welcomed, as well as any future cycle connectivity.

3.29 The Proposed Development includes 28 spaces for retail and offices, and 80 for resident. However, the Proposed Development is located in the centre of Reading where services can be accessed by public transport or by foot. In terms of new homes, the Proposed Development may contribute to meeting the Reading Borough Councils housing provision aspirations, around 50% of which are to be provided in central Reading. Lastly, as well as the Avenue 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.

Final Design

3.30 The final indicative layout of the Proposes Development is provided in Figure 2.1 of this ES. As outlined above, environmental constraints and opportunities have been taken into consideration during the design process and are summarised in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Application Site Considerations and Constraints

Topic/Issue	Specific constraint	Change in design
Townscape and Visual Resources	The proposed development is located near the centre of Reading as a such would be located in an area with an existing townscape.	The Proposed Development has been oriented to match the existing street pattern and orientation of the surrounding buildings.
	The location of the scheme in Reading means that the design the proposed scheme and resultant massing is import in order to avoid a feeling on enclosure or dominance in the surrounding area.	Iterations of the scheme have been have included changes in the design to reduce massing. These include the reduction in height of the smaller block elements and the increase in height of the eastern tower element to reduce the perceived width of scheme from a distance.
Traffic and Transport	Pedestrians from the town centre and the Reading Station may need to pass through the Proposed Development.	The Proposed Development provides new routes to pedestrians accessing destination north of the site, including the River Thames.
	Parking in central Reading, where the scheme is located, is limited.	Parking spaces have been provided as part of the design of the Proposed Development and the site location provides access to public transport.
Noise and Vibration	The scheme is located in the vicinity of the railway.	Appropriate noise attenuation will be provided as part of the scheme.
Community and Socio-economics	Location the of the proposed development in Reading town centre may result in not commonly used areas may attract antisocial behaviour.	The connection of the southern boundary service road and station square has been designed to provide lines of lines of sight, and lighting has been included to discourage such behaviour, as well as gated areas for residents.
	The location of the scheme in centre of Reading means community services like health centres, community gathering spaces, elderly and child care etc., are likely to be well subscribed.	The design evolution has included the addition of health facilities, and community and leisure facilities.

Conclusion

- 3.31 This chapter outlines the main alternatives considered during the design evolution of the Proposed Development. In addition, it sets out the main reasons for the selection of some of the key elements of the Proposed Development, which have taken into account environmental effects. The design of the project has been an iterative process and has also taken into account feedback from statutory and non-statutory consultees and the findings of the EIA process.
- 3.32 The design process has led to revisions in terms of the site layout; changes in the building appearance, including the building heights; the provision of health facilities, and community and leisure facilities; and how new pedestrian and road links would be delivered.

References

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) (2018) National Planning Policy Framework

Reading Borough Council (2008) Reading Borough Local Development Framework. Core Strategy. With Alteration Adopted 27th January 2015)

Reading Borough Council (2009) Reading Borough Local Development Framework. Reading Central Area Action Plan to 2026

Reading Borough Council (2010) Reading Station Area Framework

Reading Borough Council (2017) Pre-Submission Draft Reading Borough Local Plan

Reading Borough Council (2018) Submission Draft Reading Borough Local Plan

Roger Tym and Partners (2006) Reading Borough Council. Reading Employment Land Review