



Review of PL/24/0958 Development Proposals against RBC Town Centre Public Realm Strategy, adopted April 2026.

The following document has been produced further to an Officer request to assess the current development proposals in light of the relatively recent adoption of the Town Centre Public Realm Strategy SPD (TCPRSS), April 2026.

It is important to note that the Public Realm Strategy is dated April 2026, whereas the submissions made to Reading Borough Council (the Council) generally pre-date this. As such, the detail included within this note is best understood as a retrospective alignment assessment, rather than evidence that the scheme was expressly designed in response to the adopted Strategy.

Alignment against the Strategy's 10 key objectives

The TCPRSS identifies ten overarching objectives: unifying public-realm design; pedestrian/cycle infrastructure; green and blue infrastructure; sustainable and inclusive town centre; addressing vehicular dominance; heritage; activation; decluttering; high-quality materials; and temporary/flexible uses. Taking each in turn, we identify the scheme's performance against each, below:

Public Realm Strategy objective	Assessment of Norman Place
1. Unifying the public realm design	The scheme uses a common architectural/plinth language, coordinated materials and landscaping and deliberately seeks to connect the hardscaped Vastern Road environment with the softer riverside.
2. Improving pedestrian & cycle infrastructure	The wider Norman Place footway, improved access, cycle parking, connection to the Thames Path/NCN Route 5 and enhanced local pedestrian/cycle routes are all directly aligned to the TCPRSS.
3. Enhancing green & blue infrastructure	Enhanced river frontage, increased public open space, additional tree planting, replacement Thames corridor trees, green/brown roofs, rain gardens, hydro tree pits and BNG uplift all strongly support this principle.
4. Promoting a Sustainable & inclusive town centre	Almost entirely step-free building access, ramped access, directional signage, cycle provision, car club, Travel Plan and public space all support this.
5. Addressing vehicular dominance	The scheme prioritises pedestrian/cycle movement in several respects. Whilst Norman Place remains a vehicular access route, the development helps to provide more formalised and visible non-vehicular routes from the station to the river.



Public Realm Strategy objective

Assessment of Norman Place

6. Highlighting Reading's heritage

The use of brick, local architectural references and contextual detailing is positive. It is considered that provision of a relevant public art strategy will contribute to this to provide strong wayfinding and opportunity for heritage references.

7. Activating public spaces

The proposals offer 947 sqm of riverside public open space and event/performance use for up to 12 days a year, alongside Class E uses, public art and wayfinding to provide a very good fit against this objective.

8. Decluttering the streets

The design improves visibility, circulation and access. Use of planning conditions post-consent will allow for a coordinated furniture/signage/paving approach, as envisaged by the Strategy, to come forward in sufficient detail.

9. Integrating high- quality materials

The proposals identify robust, high-quality, hard-wearing materials, with a predominantly brick palette and tactile elements.

10. Encouraging Temporary & flexible uses

The riverside space is specifically intended for events/performance, with Class E uses providing further flexibility and activation. It is proposed within the s106 HoTs to provide discounted rates for local businesses.

The Strategy itself makes clear that its purpose is to create an attractive, memorable and vibrant town centre and that major developments are expected to contribute positively to the public realm, which it is considered has been achieved by the development.

The relationship with the Thames

The TCPRSS identifies Reading's rivers as a major but under-utilised asset. It recognises that the Thames and Kennet provide a network of pedestrian and cycle routes but that access to river walks is often difficult and inconsistent. It specifically identifies the need to improve access, openness and amenity around the waterways.

The development proposals respond directly to this and the October 2025 Planning Addendum describes the development as including *"a public open space adjacent to the river"*, which will transform the river frontage through enhanced public realm, performance space and improved footpath/cycle-path connectivity.

Walking, cycling and Healthy Streets

The TCPRSS requires future development to create safe, legible, comfortable pedestrian and cycle routes, improve permeability and address severance. It also



identifies better connections along the rivers as an important opportunity. The scheme proposals respond positively in several ways, as following:

Norman Place widening

One of the key design changes is to make the Norman Place footpath 1m wider. This is important because in context of the TCPRSS, which is explicit in its direction about shifting the balance towards pedestrians and creating more comfortable streets.

Thames Path and NCN Route 5

The latest Landscape Proposals Ground Floor Plan confirms that the provision of publicly-accessible Sheffield stands, 5 of which are now to be located within the public open space, with 3 additional stands on Vastern Road. These changes also ensure that visibility has been reviewed so that the stands do not obstruct cyclists using NCN Route 5.

The TCPRSS specifically identifies secure cycle parking, improved cycle routes, safe passage and better signage as important components of the future town-centre network.

Accessibility

The TCPRSS requires spaces to be inclusive by design and explicitly refers to people with disabilities, neurodiverse users and visually impaired users. The scheme in this manner accepts that the most direct route from the towpath is stepped, but provides a ramped alternative via Norman Place and commits to directional signage from the towpath.

Green and blue infrastructure

The TCPRSS' guiding principles advocate maximisation of urban greening by encouraging tree planting, support for biodiversity and incorporation of SuDS wherever practicable.

The scheme goes considerably beyond this by providing significant areas of biodiverse green and brown roof and rain garden planting with interconnected tree-pit cell voids, hydro tree pits and replacement tree planting to provide 20%+ biodiversity net gain.

The Council has requested further improvements on-site to increase green roof provision on the western block, for which the applicant team will provide an additional response in due course. Notwithstanding this, the TCPRSS specifically advocates rain gardens, tree planting and biodiversity as mechanisms for improving public spaces and managing water and it is therefore considered that the proposals therefore strongly accord with policy requirements.



Creating a place where people wish to dwell

A central principle of the TCPRSS Strategy is that it should provide opportunities to stop, dwell, meet, socialise and spend time. Its Healthy Streets approach includes *"places to stop and rest"*, *"things to see and do"*, people feeling relaxed and people choosing to walk and/or cycle. As the proposal provides a new riverside public square, 947 sqm of public open space which can be utilised, commercial activity and private amenity spaces, including a podium garden and a roof terrace, these latter spaces assisting surveillance of the public areas. It is contended that the public and private spaces are consistent with the strategy's objective of creating spaces where people choose to stay rather than simply pass through.

In addition, the TCPRSS requires more play and leisure provision, including informal play. The scheme in this regard has private amenity/play space allowing for inclusive play equipment to be incorporated. Whilst the public riverside space does not appear to have a specific play function it is located opposite substantial provision at Christchurch Meadows and within the updated s106 HoTs, dated 29th July 2026 it is proposed to provide £125,000 contributions towards reinforcement/enhancement of local open spaces, play facilities and leisure centre improvements.

Heritage

The architectural response provides brick, tonal variation, local architectural references and detailing all help establish local identity. The most recent DAS Addendum specifically identifies how the material palette reflects the character of the area.

The TCPRSS seeks to use public realm, interpretation and public art to celebrate Reading's heritage. It is proposed to condition the proposed Community and Public Art Strategy and it is considered that this could address this through discussions with Officers and relevant community groups.

Conclusions

Having considered the TCPRSS, it is notable that the proposed development aligns strongly with SPD aspirations, particularly in relation to the river frontage, walking and cycling, green/blue infrastructure, public-space activation and creation of a stronger sense of place.

The proposals identify that there is a compelling argument that the scheme delivers many of the outcomes the TCPRSS is seeking from major development sites and the strongest areas of alignment are:

- Opening up and activating the Thames frontage;
- Creating a new public square/public open space;



- Improving pedestrian and cycle connectivity to the Thames Path/NCN Route 5;
- Increasing tree planting, biodiversity and SuDS/green infrastructure;
- Creating space capable of hosting events and performance;
- Introducing active Class E uses at ground floor;
- Using high-quality, durable materials and a coherent architectural palette;
- Creating a landmark/wayfinding element at the Vastern Road/Norman Place corner;
- Improving surveillance and activity in an area currently affected by building vacancy and anti-social behaviour.

It is considered that use of planning conditions will allow for further design detail to come forward post-consent in respect of public-realm materials, maintenance provisions, community/public art and wayfinding, and lighting.