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PLANNING SUMMARY REPORT

BBC CAVERSHAM PARK

DISPOSAL



CONTENTS

1.0	INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND.....	1
2.0	DUE DILLIGENCE EXERCISE	3
3.0	OTHER MATTERS.....	11
4.0	CONCLUSIONS.....	12

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Lambert Smith Hampton (LSH) has been instructed by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to establish the best value for the sale of Caversham Park (the site) in Reading, Berkshire.
- 1.2 The site covers circa 40 hectares (ha) of land set within the suburb of Caversham to the north of Reading. The site is predominantly bounded (west, north and east) by mid to late twentieth century, low-rise/low density residential development which sets a precedent and context which we believe lends favour to further residential development in this locality, hence our considered optimum and most appropriate development for the land is based on the C3 (Dwellinghouse) residential Use Class.
- 1.3 To progress towards the eventual sale of the land, a due diligence exercise has been undertaken to establish a value of the site based upon what we consider to be a realistic amount and type of development that can be achieved, subject to obtaining the necessary consents.
- 1.4 To establish this position, we have taken design feasibility options through two stages of formal pre-application engagement with the Local Planning Authority (Reading Borough Council) and one round of pre-application engagement with Historic England.
- 1.5 The design work undertaken has been informed and influenced by an assessment of the historical significance of the site which is restrictive towards development under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.
- 1.6 The site contains a range of designated heritage assets, and is subject to a range of heritage designations as listed below:
- Caversham Park (BBC Records) (Grade II);
 - Caversham Park (Grade II Registered Park and Garden);
 - Inner Park Walls at Caversham Park (Grade II);
 - Entrance Gate and Gate Piers to Caversham Park (Grade II);
 - Temple To West of Caversham Park (Grade II)

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- 1.7 These designated heritage assets also relate to a number of other structures associated with the principal listed building, which could conceivably form part of its curtilage or be listed via attachment, even though they are not listed in their own right.
- 1.8 The site is considered to have considerable historic significance attached to the group value these assets share in relation to the entire site and therefore the design options presented to Reading Borough Council have been sensitive towards this reality.

2.0 DUE DILLIGENCE EXERCISE

First Round of Pre-application Engagement with Reading Borough Council

- 2.1 To ensure the design feasibility option submissions presented to the Council were robust, covering the appropriate technical areas of expertise; LSH appointed and managed a cross-disciplinary consultant team to prepare the design scheme option(s) that would be presented for the Council's consideration.
- 2.2 With Lambert Smith Hampton acting on behalf of the BBC; leading on the overall planning and disposal of the site, the Planning team sought fee proposals from a range of consultant firms, with the successfully appointed consultant team comprised of OWAL Architects, Turley Heritage, Aspect Ecology and Systra Transport Consultants (formerly JMP Transport Consultants).
- 2.3 To get to this position where we are comfortable in principle with the development proposed, we have gone through a process of reviewing various development option scenarios. The purpose of this was to deduct the schemes and elements of scheme ideas where our assessments led us to believe that obtaining planning consents for these schemes would be unrealistic or too costly.
- 2.4 In carrying out this exercise we have explored a range of development scenarios for the site, starting with what we considered to be the absolute maximum level of potential development within the bounds of the various planning constraints.
- 2.5 Following an extensive review of a range of potential development options (assessed for the avoidance of doubt), this proposal evolved into the existing scenario that now reaches a level, amount and form of development that we believe is more realistic and achievable.
- 2.6 As part of this exercise, we have discounted some relatively high density development options, comprised of different concentrations of apartments across parts of the site. Our assessments led us to believe that lower density development, suburban in character (larger family sized homes) would be more appropriate for this site and locality.

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- 2.7 Our end proposal takes into consideration the Berkshire (including South Bucks) Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) as the interim assessment. It was felt that due to the Borough Council's ongoing preparation of their own Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA), the SHMA would give a solid indication of the housing types (larger family sized units) that are in particular shortfall and demand in Reading.
- 2.8 Across our property, planning, architectural and heritage opinions, our professional considerations concluded that any development to the south of the main house would be too contentious to realistically be achievable. This being in the most part due to the widely recognised sweeping vista views up towards the Principal Listed building/the main house and across the Capability Brown landscaped gardens (from the south and south east).
- 2.9 It was consensus across the professional team that any development visible from the south of the site would be unacceptable to the Council.
- 2.10 The proposals therefore focused on the northern parts of the site that are largely out of site from public viewpoints and enjoy less significance in respect to the settings of the main house and Registered Park and Garden.
- 2.11 The project team agreed on a development option that was ambitious; testing the boundaries of what might be achievable development. However, it was important to strike a balance, ensuring the proposal was not so ambitious that it would antagonise the Council into a position that might jeopardise future negotiations concerning development on the site. The first design option was issued to Reading Borough Council on 1st November 2016.
- 2.12 Subsequent to receipt of the submission, on 17th November 2016, Reading Borough Council made an area Tree Preservation Order (TPO) covering the entirety of the site. The Order was made because the Council believed it was expedient to do so in order to ensure the preservation of the trees on the site, in light of the knowledge that the site would be coming forward for future development.
- 2.13 On 5th December 2016 the Council's Planning Officer(s), Ecology Officer and Tree Officer visited the site.

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- 2.14 In response to the Area TPO, Aspect Arboriculture were instructed to lodge an objection to the form (not the principle) of the TPO, with the aim of opening a collaborative (not confrontational) dialog with the Council to address their concerns in relation to the loss or harm to trees that would result from development.
- 2.15 The first Pre-application meeting took place on 19th December 2016. The attendees are listed below:

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL ATTENDEES:

- Susanna Bedford – Principal Planner;
- Lynette Baker – Area Team Leader;
- Sarah Hanson – Natural Environment Officer;
- Giles Sutton – Ecologist

BBC PROJECT TEAM ATTENDEES:

- Paul Smith (BBC) – Head of Estates Management;
- Nigel Philp (LSH) – Director London, BBC Client Director;
- Mark Dodds (LSH) – National Head of Planning & Development Consultancy;
- Thaddaeus Jackson-Browne (LSH) – Senior Planner, London Office;
- Phillip Hunter (LSH) – Director, Reading Office;
- Toby Wincer (OWAL Architects) – Director of Architecture & Design

- 2.16 The initial design proposal was presented to the Council's Officers, setting out the BBC's business position and estate strategy as the background to this exercise.
- 2.17 Officers commented on the proposal, largely focusing around the level of development proposed, explaining that the layout was considered by Officers to be over-development and would cause unacceptable levels of harm to the settings of the principal Listed Building and the Registered Park and Garden as well as an unacceptable level of loss of trees.
- 2.18 Particular concern was raised over the proposal to develop new homes along the access into the site on the grounds that this would be inappropriate to have the entrance into the historic park and garden lined with homes and it was agreed that the proposal would be revised to address this. Likewise, it was agreed to remove new homes from being located over where the existing orchard is located adjacent to the access into the site.

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- 2.19 The amount of development along the northern boundary of the site was also noted as a concern to the Council and as such the BBC team agreed to reduce the amount of development in a manner that would allow for greater retention of trees.
- 2.20 The Council welcomed the news that we had instructed Aspect Arboriculture to carry out a detailed Tree Survey (to inform tree protection and retention), following which they would meet with the Council on site to agree /reassess the Area TPO and prepare an Arboricultural Impact Assessment in relation to the next revision to the proposal.
- 2.21 Officers at the meeting suggested that whilst appropriate habitat mitigation could likely be secured as part of the development, the necessary surveys would need to be undertaken in advance of an application being lodged in order to establish where (if any) the habitats of value are located and to understand which species would be at risk.
- 2.22 The Council's Ecology Officer stated that an Ecological Management Plan would be required for any scheme going forward and that a grazing area on the meadows (with public access) would be suitable as the best outcome.
- 2.23 The team was asked to reassess the ecological assessment undertaken to ensure that the ecological value of the woodland areas was not played down.
- 2.24 Minutes were circulated picking up the comments and questions raised, along with the agreed next courses of action.

Second Round of Pre-application Engagement with Reading Borough Council

- 2.25 Resultant from this site meeting and the Council's making of an Area TPO on the site, Aspect Arboriculture undertook the site-wide tree survey and prepared an Arboricultural Impact Assessment (AIA) relating to the development proposed.
- 2.26 The purpose of this exercise was to establish which trees were of the greatest value (worthy of Category A status and retention on this basis), which trees were of a veteran age (also to be retained) and which trees were of lesser value (more likely could be removed and potentially replaced/replanted elsewhere).

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- 2.27 Upon receipt of the Tree Survey data, with the tree categories along with their respective shading arcs and Root Protection Areas (RPAs) marked and annotated on to a Tree Constraints Plan; the proposal was revised.
- 2.28 To address the Council's concerns, it was proposed new homes were to be placed outside the RPAs of all of the Category (A) trees and all of the Veteran Trees. Taking on board comments raised by the Planning Officer and in demonstrating considerations in the interest of the residential amenity of future occupiers, homes were also moved outside of the shading arcs of those trees that would be retained.
- 2.29 The first pre-application provided a good foundation to build upon, having tested an ambitious design feasibility option with the Council. We now had a clearer understanding of the Council's outlook on the site and their principal concerns in relation to development on the land; namely, heritage impacts, residential amenity (linked with quality of design and layouts/garden separation distances), harm to existing trees and ecology.
- 2.30 Whilst transport matters were discussed at the meeting, there were no material impacts in relation to highways and transport matters that were of any noteworthy concern to the Council. Instead, some minor clarifications on parking numbers were sought and provided in follow-up correspondence.
- 2.31 Following on from this, with a greater understanding of the Council's position, a process of considerable design revision was undertaken to address these aforementioned impacts.
- 2.32 The project team carried out workshops to agree on the revised proposal. The result was a reduction in the number of homes, a greater separation between new homes and retained trees and increasing the distance between the development and the principal Listed Building and entrance gate into the site (also Grade II Listed).
- 2.33 On 10th March 2017 the revised design feasibility development proposal was lodged as the second pre-application submission. The second meeting took place on 29th March 2017.
- 2.34 Given that the design had come a considerable way since the first pre-application meeting and had evolved into a much more informed proposal that took into consideration the wide range of issues the Council were concerned with, a wider team of consultants attended this second meeting to address their respective areas of expertise in detail.

2.35 The attendees of the second pre-application meeting are listed below:

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL ATTENDEES:

- Susanna Bedford – Principal Planner;
- Sarah Hanson – Natural Environment Officer;
- Darren Cook – Transport & Highways Officer

BBC PROJECT TEAM ATTENDEES:

- Paul Smith (BBC) – Head of Estates Management;
- Nigel Philp (LSH) – Director London, BBC Client Director;
- Mark Dodds (LSH) – National Head of Planning & Development Consultancy;
- Thaddaeus Jackson-Browne (LSH) – Senior Planner, London Office;
- Phillip Hunter (LSH) – Director, Reading Office;
- Tim Hook (LSH) – Senior Surveyor, London Office;
- Toby Wincer (OWAL Architects) – Director of Architecture & Design;
- Marc Timlin (Turley Heritage) – Associate Director;
- Richard Curtis (Aspect Arboriculture) – Associate Director;
- Andrew Holyoak (Aspect Ecology) – Principal Ecologist;
- David Fletcher (Systra Ltd) – Principal Transport Planner

2.36 The BBC team explained the considerable amount of work that has been undertaken following on from the discussions that took place at the first pre-application meeting (held 19/12/2016) and in response to the follow-up correspondence between the Council and the team.

2.37 Particular emphasis was placed on the significantly reduced density of development proposed. The intent was to reveal how the proposal minimised any impact on the character and setting of the Registered Park and Gardens as well as the listed historic assets. Further emphasis was placed on the considerable retention of dense tree areas that would now screen new development and a revision that no longer proposed the loss of the cricket pitch (in relation to late comments from the Council's Sport & Leisure Officer and Sport England both resisting the first proposal to do so).

2.38 In addition it was confirmed to the Council that application for pre-application engagement with Historic England had been lodged in response to the Council's advice.

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- 2.39 The Council's Officers acknowledged that the new proposal had a significant reduction in visual impact, when viewed on the comparison plans and visualisations provided by OWAL Architects.
- 2.40 Officers still raised limited concern over some specific housing plots where gardens appeared to be small and where there were potentially strained relationships with existing tree shading arcs and overhanging branches. The Architect suggested that this could be addressed by providing an amenity schedule clarifying whether or not gardens would meet the Council's standards.
- 2.41 In response to concerns over the relationships of new homes with retained trees, Aspect Arboriculture pointed out that whilst some shading arcs might seem to impact some gardens, the reality is that most of these are inconsequential. It was held that there would be no justification for tree removals from new residents, who would themselves require consents to carry out any works or removals of trees under the site's TPO.
- 2.42 Focusing on the proposed change of use to C3 (Dwellinghouse) for the main house/principal Listed Building including renovations that would be subject to Listed Building Consents, the Council acknowledged that the principal of restoration and change back to the building's original residential use would be supported.
- 2.43 The Council accepted that the building had been severely altered, with large areas of the building no longer in a state of historic merit, therefore change and considerable internal alterations would need to focus on these parts of the building.
- 2.44 Turning to the proposed removal of the existing utilitarian (post-war) outbuildings to the west of the main house, the Council agreed that their built form offers no heritage interest and therefore demolition to be replaced with new buildings consolidating the massing of buildings here (in a manner subservient to the main house) would be welcomed.
- 2.45 With regards to ecology, it was reiterated that development on the land presents a great opportunity to invigorate and improve the habitats on the site. It was agreed that further surveys for protected species (bats, reptiles and amphibians) were not necessary at this stage as this would all be done as part of a full planning application.
- 2.46 It was also agreed that should there happen to be established habitats, this would not form an overarching constraint over development given that mitigation and remediation would also be secured as part of a full application.

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- 2.47 Whilst some questions and concerns were raised in relation to residential individual plots, the overall response was far more positive towards the principal of the revised proposal and the work done to address issues raised at the first pre-application meeting was welcomed by the Officers present.
- 2.48 Officers reiterated that the response from Historic England would carry considerable weight towards the Council's position in relation to whether or not development in the Registered Park and Garden would be acceptable in principle.
- 2.49 The BBC team, led by the advice from Turley Heritage, summarised that the development proposed has been pulled away from the site boundaries along the north of the site, all of which help to reduce the harm to the significance of the heritage assets on the sites to what we consider to be 'less than significant harm'.
- 2.50 The Council concluded and agreed that the second pre-application proposal was a considerable improvement to the first scheme. Their principle concern was that more work would need to be done to safeguard certain individual trees (all of which would be provided as part of a full application).
- 2.51 Officers pointed out that any eventual planning application would need to be fully compliant with policy and guidance in all other regards, in so far as is possible and that any final scheme would need to be exemplary in every respect in order to shift the planning balance more positively and favourably.

3.0 OTHER MATTERS

- 3.1 Development proposals for the site have now been taken through two stages of pre-application engagement with Reading Borough Council as the Local Planning Authority that will determine any planning applications related to the land.
- 3.2 The consultation with Historic England includes submission of the same material presented to Reading Borough Council and a site visit (which took place on 8th May 2017) with three HE Inspectors covering Listed Buildings and Landscape matters.
- 3.3 Historic England's response (received 24th May 2017) which is included as part of the marketing information recognizes that the both the main house and gardens have been significantly altered and degraded in historic significance.
- 3.4 The advice note questions whether multi-occupancy residential use is the optimum viable use, therefore recommending that an options appraisal be undertaken to explore a variety of potential uses.
- 3.5 The advice note also supports consolidation and redevelopment focused around the area around and to the west of the stables, but takes a different view from our own on the impacts of development in the northern parts of the grounds.
- 3.6 Our own view is that harm to the settings of the Registered Park and Garden as well as to the settings of the principal Listed Building would be "less than substantial" and can be justified by the overall planning balance, which is contrary to Historic England's consideration that development would entail a high degree of harm.
- 3.7 Any future planning application(s) for development that includes new built form within the northern part of the grounds would therefore require a Heritage Impact Assessment to rebut Historic England's assessment and to set out the justifications of development based around planning balance.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Planning

Following review of policy and consultation with the Council, the BBC professional team is of the view the conversion of the house and adjacent buildings to residential use alongside sympathetic residential development in selected parts of the northern area of the site offers a sustainable and much needed development solution.

4.2 Heritage

Turley Heritage's advice is that the proposal will would result in "less than substantial harm" to the historic significance of the site. Further discussions will be required with HE and the Council on this, however, BBC's professional team is of a view that sensitive development of the house and the site for residential purposes is achievable from a heritage perspective.

4.3 Arboriculture

A general agreement was established over which trees should be retained and which trees could be removed in relation to the Area TPO placed on the site. Despite limited concerns over some of the relationships between retained trees and specific housing plots, with specific regard to tree shading arcs and overhanging branches, BBC professional team is of a view that these are inconsequential. Any concerns can be addressed by providing an amenity schedule in order to clarify whether or not new gardens would meet the Council's standards.

4.4 Ecology

It was agreed with the Council that development on the land presents a great opportunity to invigorate and improve the habitats on the site. Further surveys will be required as part of a full planning application, but should any established habitats be discovered as part of this exercise, this would not form an overarching constraint.

4.5 Transport

There were no material impacts in relation to highways and transport matters that were of any noteworthy concern to the Council.