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BBC Caversham Park

Follow-up (2nd) Pre-application Meeting (held 29th March 2017) – Minutes

Dear Susanna,

Please find below the minutes I took away from the follow-up (2nd) Pre-application Meeting with regards to the BBC's Caversham Park revised development proposals which took place on 29th March 2017.

Reading Borough Council Attendees:

- Susanna Bedford (SB) – Principal Planner;
- Sara Hanson (SH) – Trees & Landscape Officer;
- Darren Cook (DC) – Transport & Highways Officer

Applicant Team Attendees:

- Paul Smith (BBC Workplace) – 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

1.0 INTRODUCTIONS

1.1 LSH confirmed new BBC Team attendants at the meeting to cover specialist areas of arboriculture, ecology, heritage and transport.

2.0 BBC REVISED PROPOSAL PRESENTED BY MARK DODDS (LSH) AND TOBY WINCER (OWAL ARCHITECTS)

2.1 MD explained the considerable amount of work that has been undertaken following on from the discussions that took place at the first scoping meeting (held 19/12/2016) with Officers and in response to the follow-up written correspondence.

2.2 MD explained TW will explain in greater detail where changes have been made in each development character zone, but pointed out the key points of the revised scheme as:

- Significantly reduced amount of new development proposed;
- Significantly reduced density of new development to minimise impacts on the character of the Registered Park and Garden as well as the setting of the principal Grade II Listed house;
- Revised scheme no longer proposes loss of the cricket pitch, which not only addresses the Council and Sport England's concerns over the loss of recreational space, but also helps to further reduce previously identified harm to the significance of the principal Listed house building and the Registered Park and Garden;
- Aspect Arboriculture commissioned to carry out full tree survey and prepare Arboricultural Impact Assessment to inform layout of new development. The purpose of which was to remove encroachments from Category A tree Root Protection Areas and to reduce instances of tree shading arcs that would affect residential amenity;
- Revised scheme retains dense tree areas that would now screen new development;
- No development proposed for the southern parts of the site, which includes the remains of the parkland laid out by Capability Brown;

- 2.2 MD confirmed that a pre-application submission has been lodged with Historic England and we will update SB once we understand timescales for a formal response.
- 2.3 MD handed over to TW (OWAL Architects) to talk through the revised layout from an architectural and design point of view.
- 2.4 TW re-emphasised the reduced visual impacts and the rationale behind not proposing any development to the south east of the principal Listed Building.
- 2.5 TW pointed out where the layout now proposes new homes pulled further away from the northern boundary of the site and where the internal road would now meander through the site to allow for better tree retention in response to the tree survey and Arboricultural Impact Assessment.
- 2.6 TW showed comparison plans which clearly demonstrate the revised proposal as offering a significantly less dense development to that of the first proposal. This is typified by the revised proposal now comprising pockets of three, four or five houses much more interspersed with trees.
- 2.7 SB expressed concern with specific housing plots where gardens appeared to be small and where these could have potentially strained relationships with existing tree shading arcs and overhanging branches. TW offered to provide an amenity schedule to clarify whether or not gardens would meet the Council's standards.
- 2.8 SB also questioned back to back distances and the separations of houses.
- 2.9 SB challenged the quality of accommodation (at the Caversham Drive character zone) where residential dwelling gardens back onto the car park area for the sports pavilion with respect to noise and light pollution. SB questioned the relationship between new homes proposed at Gateway character zone very close to the traditional gate entrance into the parkland estate.

- 2.10 MD pointed out that whilst large private gardens would be nice, the reality is that the homes are set within and amongst large open space and parkland settings, which should be taken into consideration when the Council assess access to open space (private and public).
- 2.11 SB still took a view that garden spaces were “tight”. TW explained again that an amenity schedule would be useful as it is hard to judge the scale of the gardens relative to the vast scale of the surrounding park and gardens.
- 2.12 SB confirmed that regardless to agreeing on acceptable garden and private amenity space standards, a response to our pre-application consultation with Historic England needs to be reviewed before the Council can advise whether new development in the Registered Park and Garden would be acceptable in principle.
- 2.13 SB confirmed that the revised layout for the Archive Court character zone was an improvement to the previous scheme. SB agreed that the new scheme for Archive Court looks acceptable in principle. Likewise, SB agreed that the proposed development of retirement accommodation (type to be confirmed) was acceptable in principle.

3.0 ARBORICULTURAL IMPACTS - TREES

- 3.10 MD and RC (Aspect Arboriculture) introduced the tree survey and Arboricultural Impact Assessment work undertaken; demonstrating the vast improvement to the relationships between new homes proposed and trees that can be retained.
- 3.11 SH acknowledged a massive improvement to the scheme, particularly as existing root protection areas and shading arcs have been taken into consideration in the revised layout. However, SH pointed out there should be an allowance for future growth, suggesting larger separation distances ‘should’ be provided. RC pointed out we have been cautious and provided improved root protection sizes.

3.12 TW noted that the orchard would now be retained and showed how development on the Caversham Drive character zone was more pocket formed than before, allowing for a far better arrangement for tree retention.

3.16 RC stated that whilst some shading arcs might seem to impact some gardens, the reality is that most of these are inconsequential. RC holds the option 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 Tree Preservation Order.

3.17 RC pointed out we have taken a cautious approach, factoring in the TPO and the test of reasonableness that applies in this instance.

3.18 TW further summarised that development has been pulled away from the site boundaries along the north of the site, with reduced numbers and sizes of homes proposed. This has allowed for a natural footpath to be accommodated around the inside of the boundary and space for tree protection around the veteran trees.

4.0 ECOLOGY

4.1 AH noted that this revised proposal would create a much greener site than the initial scheme, retaining the priority habitat orchard (noted as not of high value in ecological terms) along with other areas of vegetation and greenery.

4.2 The scheme presents a great opportunity to invigorate and improve the habitats on the site.

4.3 As per TW's earlier comments, the green (tree) buffer along the northern boundary of the site retaining far more trees than before.

- 4.4 AH confirmed that at this pre-application stage, it was not necessary to undertake surveys for protected species (bats, reptiles and amphibians), as this would all be done as part of a full application. Even so, it was pointed out that we understand there are negligible conditions for established habitats due to the lack of intensive management and the lack of established habitats.
- 4.5 Should there happen to be established habitats, it was agreed this would not form an overarching constraint over development given that mitigation and remediation (example of providing larger sward[s] of grassland elsewhere on the site) would be secured as part of a full application.

5.0 TRANSPORT AND HIGHWAYS

- 5.1 DC questioned trip generation assumptions used in the first Transport Statement for the first proposed scheme. DF confirmed that an updated Transport Statement had been submitted with this revised scheme addressing DC's initial comments.
- 5.2 The revised Transport Statement includes recommended comparison sites to address trip generation concerns. It was agreed that the BBC's current use of the site is not typical of a normal office site and the trips are therefore not typical.
- 5.3 DF noted we have used worst-case scenarios from TRICS Database for the care home / retirement homes scheme proposed on the site by using the TRICS site with the highest trip generation. Whilst this site is not considered a representative estimate of the likely trip generation of the proposed care home / retirement homes, it provides a robust assessment of the likely trip generation. DC welcomed this.
- 5.4 DF agreed to issue latest Transport Statement to DC to agree trip rates. It was agreed that by using the worst case assumptions, the development could result in a reduction in peaks, but a slight overall increase over the entire day. Overall though, the reduced number of residential units proposed would create lesser impact than the scheme already deemed to be broadly acceptable in transport and highways terms.

- 5.5 The exact parking numbers would be agreed at detailed application stage.
- 5.6 DC requested clarification on access route(s) for pedestrians to the north of the site due to buses and amenities at Emmer Green. DF explained the situation with the ransom strip which prevents new access from being provided. Despite this, DF further stated the main pedestrian desire lines would be towards the frequent bus stops on the B481 and the local centre.

6.0 HERITAGE (INCLUDING RESTORATION OF MAIN HOUSE)

- 6.1 SB confirmed the biggest constraints affecting the Council's ability to support the scheme revolve around heritage matters. SB acknowledged that arboricultural/tree matters, ecological and transport/highway issues can be resolved or solutions can be engineered into whichever proposal comes forward for full planning consents.
- 6.2 In terms of the proposal to create care home accommodation, SB welcomed the removal of the existing utilitarian outbuildings to accommodate this as their built form offer no heritage interest. The consolidation of the the massing of these buildings is welcomed as they do not offer any historic value.
- 6.3 MT described the site as layered in historic terms and acknowledged that the Council (and Historic England) would need to assess direct impacts of development and indirect impacts.
- 6.4 Conversion of the main house was agreed to be the most straightforward element of the scheme, with MT explaining that the building had been heavily altered. As such, any resulting change would need focus on these parts.
- 6.5 It was accepted the ground floor principal rooms and spaces, which have been kept largely intact, or been restored in good keeping with the historic character of the building would need to be retained and sensitively restored where appropriate to maintain and enhance the historic significance where possible.

- 6.6 TW re-affirmed that we assessed the hierarchy of spaces when devising the layout of the internal spaces for the restoration and change of use for the main house. This assessment influenced the number of units and layouts and we do not consider the proposal to be 'over-development'.
- 6.7 Overall, it was agreed that the level of impact of the scheme has been reduced when considering the relative sensitivity of the site. Looking at the proposal on a spectrum, MT explained that the harm that would arise from the proposal is now considered to be 'less than substantial' However, recognises that we need to understand Historic England's position and the Council's heritage assessment of this revised scheme.
- 6.8 The overall planning balance needs to be carefully considered, with the level of heritage harm to be considered against the public benefits of the scheme. These could include (but are not limited to) landscape enhancements, habitat and ecological enhancements, delivery of housing (unit types and sizes) identified to be needed; and restoration of the house and grounds with the potential to improve public access/enjoyment.

7.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS

- 7.1 RBC and BBC Team agree on the issues and all agreed that the scheme presented for this second round of pre-application engagement is a considerable improvement to the first scheme.
- 7.2 SH accepted that with further details of safeguarding measures for certain individual trees (that would be expected to be provided as part of a full application), the scheme could be acceptable in arboricultural terms.
- 7.3 SH and SB accepted that in ecological terms, further work would need to be undertaken (but as part of a full application, not at this pre-application stage), the proposal would be acceptable in principle, whilst also presenting an opportunity to enhance the site in ecological value.

7.4 SB pointed out that any eventual planning application proposal would need to be fully compliant with policy and guidance in all other regards, in so far as this is possible. Any final scheme would need to be exemplary in every respect in order to shift the planning balance more positively and favourably.

7.5 SB acknowledged that it was unlikely the BBC would take the scheme much further beyond this point, but agreed the development and refining of the scheme presented a far more appropriate proposal for the site which ideally would not be lost in the disposal of the site.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'TJB', written in a cursive style.

Thaddaeus Jackson-Browne MRTPI

Senior Planning Consultant

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