

WESTMINSTER DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

Date: 18 January 2024

Dear Ms West,

Westminster Design Review Panel – Royal Oak Draft Site Allocation Policy workshop

Please find enclosed the report of the Westminster Design Review Panel following the review of Royal Oak Site Allocation on 13.12.2023. I trust that this information is helpful to you.

On behalf of the panel, I would like to thank you for your participation in the review and offer our ongoing support as the policy develops, should this be required.

Yours sincerely,

Catherine Burd

**Co-Chair
Westminster Design Review Panel**

Cc All meeting attendees

Report of the Westminster Design Review Panel

Project Name and Site Address Royal Oak Draft Site Allocation Policy

Planning Reference N/A

Review Date 13 December 2023

Venue Westbourne Park Baptist Church

Attendees

Panel Catherine Burd (Chair), Sarah Jackson, Kosh Kar, Abigail Batchelor, Lorna Sewell

Westminster City Council Aidan Nyman, Sean Walsh, Ailish Ryan, Tom Burke, Jennie Humphrey, Rupert Handley

Confidentiality - *Please note that until a draft policy is in the public domain, this report must be treated as strictly confidential.*

SUMMARY OF PANEL COMMENTS

Key points:

- Policy should include an overall vision for the site linked to identification of key public benefits that any development here should deliver and set out place-shaping and connectivity aspirations for a larger area.
- The policy itself should be 'light touch' with more limited focus on improving permeability and safe access and creating high quality public realm which also addresses the change in levels.
- A diagram accompanying the policy could focus on connectivity and show a larger area, which includes the stations, and ensures access and connections are tied into the site. Incorporating a route through the centre of the site should be considered, if feasible.
- This is a uniquely challenging site and housing in this location appears problematic and may be inappropriate. If housing were to be considered, innovative high quality bespoke solutions would be needed to achieve residential quality and to address the significant challenges posed by this constrained site.
- Policy should stress the importance of greening and climate resilience, noting the importance of the railway as an ecological corridor.

Report of the Westminster Design Review Panel

1. Summary of the Proposal and Relevant Context

The draft site allocation policy sets out initial proposed high level design parameters for the site.

2. Stage of Proposal

Draft Site Allocation Policy

3. Site Visit and Conflicts of interest

A site visit took place ahead of the review. The review was held in person and the Chair and all panel members present confirmed they had no conflicts of interest in relation to the site. The policy team delivered a presentation, which was followed by a workshop and comments of the panel are set out below.

4. Westminster Design Review Panel Comments

The panel welcomed the presentation by the policy team. Key issues discussed were the vision for the site, access, building heights, site layout and uses, including potential to accommodate housing in this location. Main comments and issues raised by the panel are set out below by theme:

Overall Approach and Vision for the Allocation

The panel noted that this is a uniquely challenging site, with many difficult issues to be addressed, most notably the lack of access, poor safety and personal security, the changes in levels and the significant infrastructure barriers. Given the extent of the challenges, and the noisy and polluted environment, they questioned whether this is an appropriate location for housing.

As with other site allocations discussed, it was suggested the policy could usefully start with a more ambitious vision, which sets out key public benefits the council and local communities would want to see as requirements for any form of development proposed. In this location, the panel felt it could be useful to link this to a wider vision which identifies place shaping aspirations over a larger area, including the Westway, with a focus on improved permeability, public realm and safe access. The vision should note the need for innovative, high quality and bespoke design solutions to address the significant challenges posed by this constrained site.

They suggested that a diagram accompanying the policy could usefully focus more closely on connectivity and should show a larger area which includes the stations, and ensures wider access and connections are tied into considerations for the site itself.

The panel suggested that the policy itself could be relatively light touch with a focus on public realm improvements and improved access and greening for the site.

Permeability and access

The panel noted the junction arrangements to the Westway are a particular challenge for this site and relying on one access for vehicles poses a real issue in terms of accessibility/road safety and permeability, particularly for walking and cycling.

It was suggested the focus of the allocation policy should therefore be on aspirations for what can be improved and emphasising the opportunities to bring public benefits through

Report of the Westminster Design Review Panel

any redevelopment, in particular significantly improving permeability and access and improving road junctions and connections for pedestrians and cyclists, addressing wider connectivity and road safety issues including those caused by the Westway and creating high quality fully accessible public realm. It was noted that there is a need for permeability between the station and Westbourne Green and also across to Westbourne Terrace. Parking, deliveries, and servicing would also need careful consideration as part of any redevelopment.

The panel considered, however, that unless the impact of the Westway can be addressed, improving permeability through the site may have limited benefits in terms of sustainable and active travel. Panel members suggested that it could therefore be beneficial to link this policy to a strategy/vision for a larger area and multiple sites around the Westway, which seeks solutions to resolve the severance issues and address the impact of the Westway on the wider area. This could for example seek to create a Green Spine along the Westway, as well as addressing junctions and vehicular access routes. Panel members pointed to the example of a plan for development through Brentford, as a possible model for a vision for how road infrastructure can be perceived in terms of built environment. It was also noted that there is a Westminster place-shaping project called Paddington Places, which is looking at nodes and trying to improve connectivity – and the panel suggested the site allocation could link more closely to this with a policy diagram included which provides more information on aspirations in terms of permeability and allowing pedestrians and cyclists to navigate through the area and beyond.

The panel suggested that in terms of layout of the site, the best option appears to be to create a joined-up route which cuts through the middle of site, with development to either side and activated ground floors. However, it was noted that site levels and the depth of the plot means this could be challenging as well as constraints associated with accessing the edge of railway. Servicing of the railway by Network Rail requires a buffer which will reduce available development area, which further increases the challenge and the need to maintain this buffer should be noted in the policy.

Building heights and layout

In terms of height and townscape, the panel agreed the site could take some height, given the mixed nature of the surrounding context and proximity of the opportunity area. It was noted that the relationship with the Westway as a linear strip will be important in terms of height treatment and will determine building typologies selected. It was suggested that rather than being overly specific and showing a particular approach, such as height rising towards the Opportunity Area, it may be more appropriate to have blocks at the same height. However, the panel considered that the allocation policy should focus more on the critical issues of connectivity and layout, as set out above, rather than be overly specific on height, given existing policy on where higher building are appropriate in principle. The allocation could instead require applicants to demonstrate the impact of and justify proposed heights and massing, in line with existing City Plan policy.

It was noted that there can be opportunities for new development to provide a ‘front’ onto infrastructure, which improves the environment and there is potential for something to be a ‘positive’ face to infrastructure. A key issue in determining the layout and heights will be how to successfully address the differing levels and how to address the level difference from the station to the site. It may be possible to design a podium with park/ public realm at elevation that starts to create greening at level across and underneath the Westway. The policy should clearly stress the need for development to deliver public realm as a benefit both at the higher and lower-level grade.

Report of the Westminster Design Review Panel

Work carried out to date on behalf of the council on building heights takes a narrow focus of looking at the impact of various theoretical building heights on a range of views. As this is only one factor when considering potential building heights, and the study does not fully consider how the site functions as whole, or the relationship between buildings, it is not considered to provide robust support for the inclusion of guidance on what heights are appropriate within the site allocation. It is therefore recommended that work is either supplemented to provide a more thorough assessment of the full range of impacts of different heights across the site, or in the absence of this, policy does not set out parameters for building heights.

Uses

The panel questioned, given the number of constraints, whether this is an appropriate place for homes. If housing is pursued, this would require a highly imaginative approach to providing safe and fully accessible access, and noise, vibration and pollution are also very significant issues which need to be addressed through design. Any development would need to carefully consider what building typologies to use in order to fully optimise residential quality and provide dual aspect. The panel stressed that if housing is to be considered on this site, the policy should clearly promote the need to deliver, and not compromise, on good housing standards. It was also noted that delivering quality on this site will depend on the solution for how it is accessed and that without addressing access there is potential to create gated isolated, hostile housing squeezed between aggressive infrastructure.

It was suggested that there may be a solution with mild mannered, well-designed housing if quality can be delivered and access issues can be addressed - but a standardised 'cookie cutter' housing solution is not appropriate on this site. In order to deliver residential quality, the decision on location of the front door to the housing will be an important consideration, and the ability to accommodate a route through the centre of the site and not at upper level will be key. If housing is considered appropriate and a solution can be found, the panel felt that affordable housing should be delivered on the site.

Overall, the panel considered a more modest, light touch allocation for this site would be preferable, and a policy which focused on access and public realm improvements would be most appropriate.

Climate resilience and Urban Greening

The panel noted that given the levels of noise and pollution, greening on this site should be a key design parameter. The panel noted the importance of the railway as an ecological corridor and that it needs to continue to perform that function which would require retention of space or significant soil volumes.

Promoting climate resilience is also a key issue for the area and ensuring highest standards of sustainable design and ensuring climate resilience is addressed should be clearer priorities within the allocation policy and vision.

Next Steps

The panel thanked the policy team for their comprehensive presentation and contributions to the discussion and is available to review the policy again or discuss more widely with applicants/ TfL, if requested by WCC.