

Application 201734: Rivermead Leisure Complex
Comments by Caversham and District Residents Association (CADRA)

CADRA welcomes this updating of a popular and well-used facility. Our comments concern its impact on views across the river from St Peter's Church, St Peter's Conservation Area and Caversham Court Gardens, and especially its landscaping.

1) The proposed building, while fairly standard for this type of facility, is an improvement on the existing and provides a welcome move of the main structure further from the river. We urge that great care is taken with the selection of external finishes, to avoid either bright colours or reflective surfaces, because of its continued high visibility from the Conservation Area etc. Local Plan Policy EN5 (Protection of Views with Heritage interest) identifies views upstream from Caversham Bridge as worthy of protection. The underpinning Views Study, at para 1.1.11, says that development within or on the fringes of the water meadows should be low rise and *of appropriate non-reflective materials*.

We welcome the statement in the supporting lighting analysis that upward glare will be avoided, and ask that this aim be rigorously pursued.

2) We note that the demountable pool is to remain. This is perhaps the least attractive part of the existing structure and is nearest to the river. The application appears silent on its treatment, and we suggest that low-cost means of reducing its impact (possibly as part of the landscaping) be investigated, unless this is just a temporary structure until the new pool is completed.

3) Our main point, however, concerns landscaping. The tone of the Design and Access Statement is strongly that Richfield Avenue is the 'front' of the development (see sections 4.1, 4.3.1 and 4.3.2, for example) and that the Thames frontage is 'round the back'. We feel the opposite emphasis would be correct: Richfield Avenue is never going to be a beautiful environment, but the Thames path could and should be. Given its proximity to the riverside walk and importance in sensitive cross-river views, landscaping of the northern side should therefore be one of the best-developed aspects of the project. However, the submitted details are scanty and consist of placing excavated spoil on top of existing mounds and planting on top of that, the details of which are largely absent.

We feel this is a serious missed opportunity. This riverside area is potentially of great benefit to Reading as a whole. This application, and the proposed

school just upstream, offer a unique chance to create a joined-up landscape plan for the whole of this riverside meadow area, to which these two proposals plus any subsequent ones can incrementally conform and contribute, along with any other ad hoc resources which might arise. It could also incorporate any essential festival needs, could include enhanced biodiversity, and could investigate flood amelioration through planting. Such potential was partly recognised in the Council's Thames Parks Vision Statement of 2004.

The result would be a great improvement on the current rather barren appearance of this important asset and we urge that this opportunity should not be missed, rather than relying on separate, ad hoc and limited-impact landscaping for each project as it emerges. The Built Heritage, Townscape and Visual Impact Appraisal may well be correct in concluding that the proposals would have limited impact, in the sense of not making things worse, but it fails to identify the potential for making them considerably better. A bolder, more imaginative and above all; comprehensive landscaping strategy for the wider area is the key to this.