

New Electric Vehicle Chargers proposed for spaces outside the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) building - Heritage Impact Statement

**Planning Inspectorate Ref: To be considered under
existing pre-application Ref 230372/PREAPP**

Reading Borough Council

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1.0

Background

1. As part of the University of Reading's sustainability targets there is a drive to provide new Electric Vehicle Charge Points (EVCPs) across all of the Universities' campuses including the London Road Campus. The proposal which is the subject of this statement is to provide 4 new EVCPs along the Acacia Road side of the MERL building (North side). This will provide 3 new EVCPs for the use of University staff and visitors. The final space will then become an EVCP for use by Co-Wheels, who provide car shares across Reading.
2. An initial site visit was undertaken with the incumbent electrical contractor, Howards on 11th May 2023, to ascertain where the power supply could be taken from to feed the new EVCPs. This visit identified a basement level plant room within the original section of the building to the east side of the property where a suitable supply is available. This is in close proximity to the east elevation and an initial proposed route was considered where the cable route would leave the building cross the hardstanding area to the east, under the original garden wall and then along the front of the building (Acacia Road side).
3. An initial discussion with the Conservation Officer at the time, Bruce Edgar was undertaken on the 31st May 2023. This discussion was under an existing pre-app relating to the Dairy building which sits directly opposite the MERL building (under 230372/PREAPP). During this discussion the original proposed route for the electric cables to supply the new EVCPs was considered unacceptable mainly due to the required excavations under the garden wall and along the front of the Listed building. Following this, a new route was proposed and discussed on this same call. Bruce considered this new proposal to be generally acceptable subject to a suitable heritage statement being provided. This heritage statement was requested to allow Bruce to review and approve formally.
4. This heritage statement was issued to Bruce on the 12th June 2023. Following a review by Bruce, a follow up call was held where this revised route was discussed. Bruce raised issues with the revised route and queried whether the supply could be retained internally without the need to excavate across the courtyard area. Howards then returned to site and have established a viable route for the cabling internally. Details of the original, the revised and the new proposed route are included later in this statement.

2.0

Historic Environment and Context of the Proposals

1. The MERL building contains two sections. The original section is the original Front Block of St Andrew's Hall and Stable Lodge (Formerly East Thorpe) and was constructed in 1880. This building is Grade II Listed. Adjacent to and adjoining this building is an extended section which was built in 2005. A refurbishment of the gallery areas was carried out in 2014 with Heritage Lottery Funding. This newer section of the building is not Listed.
2. There are no other Listed buildings in close proximity. Further to the North (around 220 metres away) is the University Great Hall which is a Grade II Listed building, as are a number of properties along London Road which are a bit further to the North.
3. The site sits within the Kendrick Conservation Area.

3.0 The proposals and consultation to date

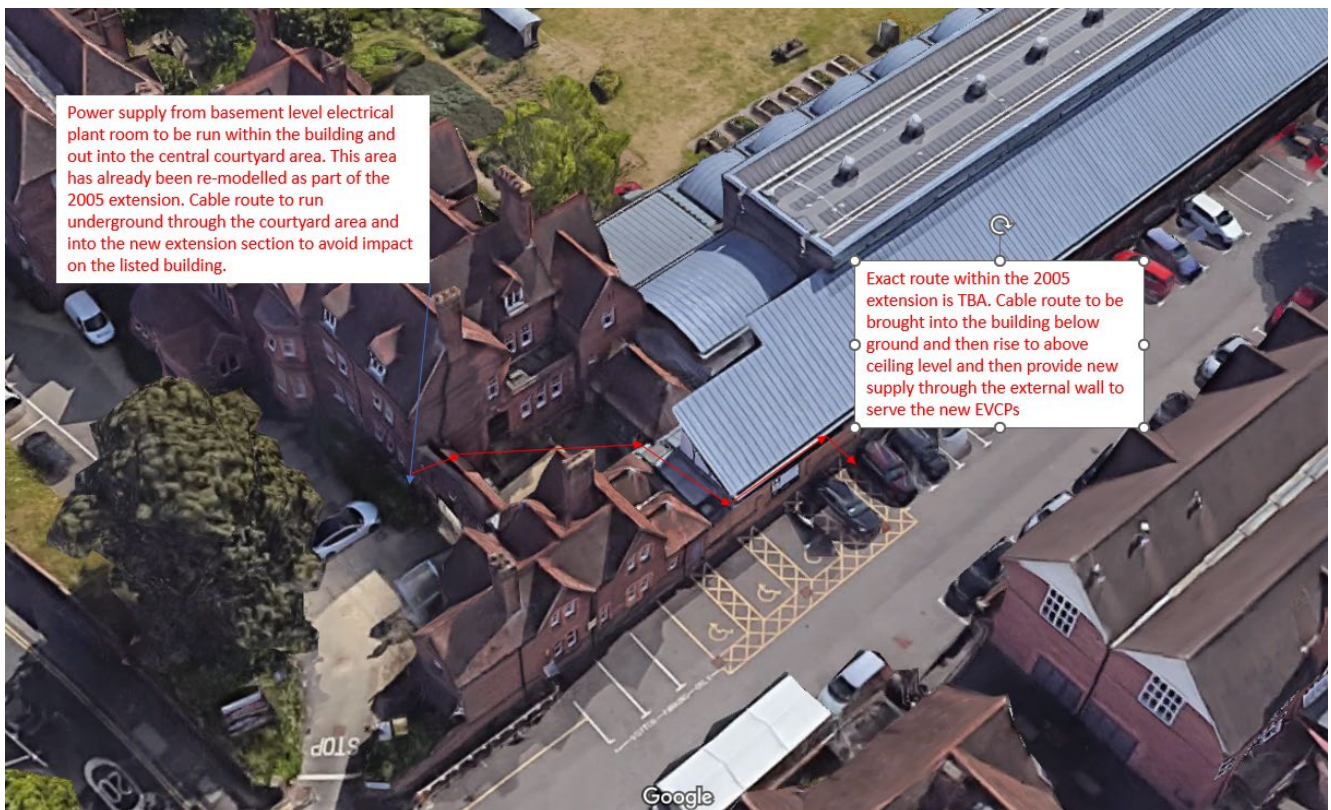
1. On the 11th May a meeting was held with the University and then the electrical designers to ascertain the requirements of the client and then locate a suitable route for the power supply to serve the new ECVPs. This initial route is shown in Images 1 and 2 below.
2. Under an existing pre-application for the adjacent Dairy Building (230372/PREAPP), liaison with Bruce Edgar was possible to determine a new route which was likely to be more acceptable and less impactful on the Listed building. This consultation was held between Tom Dewhurst working on behalf of the University of Reading and Bruce Edgar on behalf of Reading Borough Council on 31st May 2023. This new route is shown in Images 2 and 3 below. A follow up call was held with Bruce on 14th June 2023 to review this new route following the issue of the original revision of this Heritage Statement. Due to concerns with excavating the courtyard area and the impact on the building Bruce queried whether a route for the cabling could be contained internally. Howards re-visited site and have designed this new revised route which involves the cabling running internally. This new route is shown in Image 5 below.
3. Image 1 – The original proposals which were developed following a site meeting with the client and the electrical designer.



4. Image 2 – Parking space locations for original route



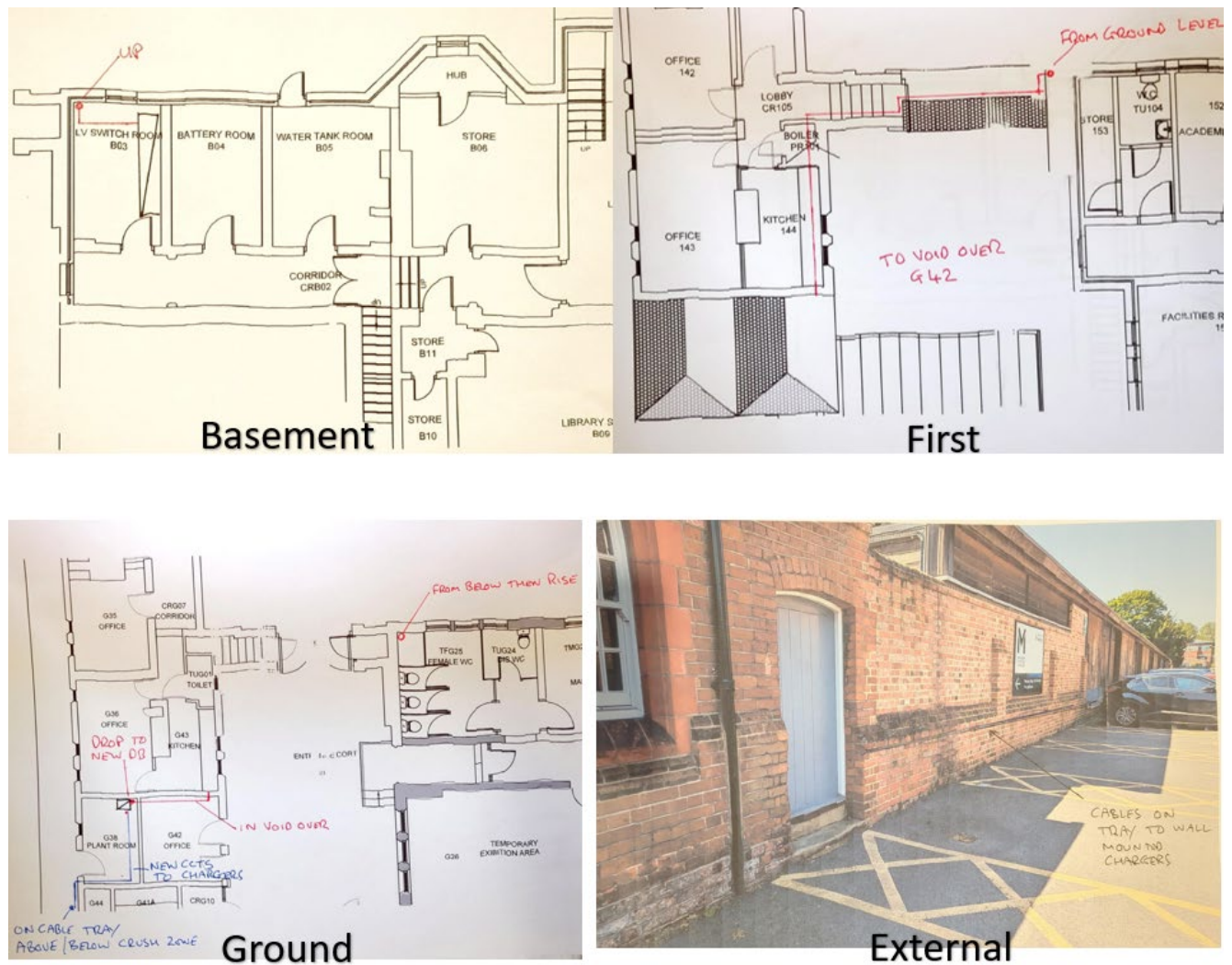
5. Image 3 – New proposed route following consultation with Bruce Edgar



6. Image 4 – New route parking space locations (Applicable to the revised route and the final route shown in Image 5 below)



7. Image 5 – New proposed route with cabling running internally;



4.0 Methodology for Addressing Impact

1. Historic England has produced three key pieces of guidance which are relevant to the assessment of heritage impact:
 - Managing Significance in Decision-Taking in the Historic Environment (GPA2) 2015
 - The Setting of Heritage Assets (GPA3) 2017
 - Statements of Heritage Significance (HEAN12) 2019
2. GPA2 makes it clear that a thorough understanding of the nature, extent and level of significance of each heritage asset is the basis for understanding how a development might affect that significance. Reflecting the definition within the NPPF, Historic England defines “*the significance of a heritage asset [as] the sum of its archaeological, architectural, historic, and artistic interest*”.
3. GPA3 recommends the following staged process for addressing issues of setting.
 - *Identify which heritage assets and their settings are affected*
 - *Assess the degree to which these settings make a contribution to the significance of the heritage asset(s) or allow significance to be appreciated*
 - *Assess the effects of the proposed development, whether beneficial or harmful, on that significance or on the ability to appreciate it*
 - *Explore ways to maximise enhancement and avoid or minimise harm*
 - *Make and document the decision and monitor outcomes*
4. The final stage is generally undertaken once consents are in place and works commence.
5. Generally the above guidance is more applicable to large developments. The proposals which are the subject of this document are minor in nature, however that does not negate the need to consider the impact of the proposals on the Grade II Listed building. For that reason, early consultation has been sought from the Conservation Officer (CO). Following this consultation two new routes were considered and proposed to the CO. These new routes are less impactful on the building and respond directly to the concerns raised by the CO on the original routes. This new route was generally considered acceptable following the second consultation with Bruce Edgar on the 14th June 2023.
6. The proposal now avoids the need to excavate under or near to the external wall which is part of the Listed building, nor does it require a section of trenching and underground cabling along the front of the Listed building in close proximity to the external wall. The proposed route is now solely within the building up until the point at which the cabling runs through the external wall to serve the new chargers. The majority of the route internally is within the new 2005 extension which is not part of the Listed property. All of the above mean the impact of the proposals are greatly reduced on the Listed building. The proposals will allow the University to meet their sustainability requirements whilst also carefully considering the impact of any proposals on the surrounding area and Grade II Listed building.