

Ecological Impact Assessment

Acacia Road Entrance Upgrade

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This document has been prepared by Nicholas Pearson Associates (NPA) on behalf of the University of Reading for a Full planning application and Listed Building Consent for proposed public realm and highway improvements to Acacia Road and its junction with Redlands Road, to include the partial demolition of one section of existing wall to enable wider access to MERL, the reconfiguration of parking areas, enhancement of pedestrian routes and associated landscaping at Acacia Road and Redlands Road, Reading.
- 1.2 Proposals are shown on the General Arrangement Plan¹.
- 1.3 To inform the proposals NPA have undertaken a desk study and an extended habitat survey. This report presents the results of the surveys, identifies potential impacts and sets out the proposals to mitigate those potential impacts and provide biodiversity enhancement.

2.0 Legislation and Policy

- 2.1 In carrying out this appraisal relevant legislation, planning policies, development plans and best practice guidelines were consulted.

Legislation

Designated Sites

- 2.2 The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) provide for the designation of both Special Protection Areas (SPA) and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC). The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) provides for the designation of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Species Protection

- 2.3 The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) (also known as the Habitats Regulations) provide strict protection to a small group of species, commonly referred to as 'European Protected Species'. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) provides full and partial protection to species listed in the schedules.

¹ 30013 NPA XX XX DR L 3001 S4 P07_GENERAL ARRANGEMENT PLAN

Biodiversity

- 2.4 Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 places a duty on public authorities to: consider how they can, consistently with proper exercise of its functions, conserve and enhance biodiversity; agree policies and objectives based on that consideration; and act to deliver those policies and objectives. This act also places a duty on the Secretary of State to publish a list of habitats and species of principal importance for the purpose of conserving or enhancing biodiversity.
- 2.5 Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 sets out that every planning permission, subject to some exemptions, is required to deliver at least a 10% biodiversity gain.

Planning Policy

National Planning Policy Framework 2024

- 2.6 The NPPF requires Local Planning Authorities to set out a strategic approach to make sufficient provision for "conservation and enhancement of the natural, built and historic environment, including landscapes and green infrastructure, and planning measure to address climate change mitigation and adaptation (Para 20)". Section 15 of The NPPF includes guidance outlining that policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural local environment by protecting and enhancing sites of biodiversity value, minimising impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity, including establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures and incorporating features which support priority or threatened species such as swifts, bats and hedgehogs. When determining planning applications "if significant harm to biodiversity resulting from a development cannot be avoided (through locating on an alternative site with less harmful impacts), adequately mitigated, or, as a last resort, compensated for, then planning permission should be refused (para 193a)". Opportunities "to improve biodiversity in and around developments should be integrated as part of their design, especially where this can secure measurable net gains for biodiversity or enhance public access to nature where this is appropriate (para 193d).
- 2.7 The Government Circular 06/2005, which is referred to by the NPPF, provides further guidance in respect of statutory obligations for biodiversity and geological conservation and their impact within the planning system.

Local Planning Policy – Reading Borough Council

- 2.8 The Reading Borough Local Plan, adopted in 2019, includes the following policies which relate to biodiversity:

- EN12: Biodiversity and the Green Network
- EN14: Trees, Hedges and Woodland.

2.9 RBC is preparing a Draft Local Plan Partial Update. The draft local plan is under examination and underwent Stage 2 hearings in February 2026. It includes the following relevant policies relating to biodiversity:

- EN12: Biodiversity
- EN14: Trees, hedges and woodlands
- EN19: Urban Greening Factor

3.0 Methods

Desk Study

- 3.1 Records of biological Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), National Nature Reserves, Local nature Reserves (LNRs) within 1km of the Site and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Areas (SPA) and Ramsar Sites within a 2km the Site were retrieved from Natural England's MAGIC website. The SSSI Impact Risk Zone layer was also searched to determine if the proposals were of a type which would give rise to likely impacts on SSSIs.
- 3.2 Online mapping (OS and Google/Bing aerial) was consulted to search for ponds within 250m of the Site.
- 3.3 The Reading Borough Council Local Plan map was reviewed to check for areas of identified biodiversity interest².

Site Surveys

- 3.4 An extended habitat survey was carried out by an experienced NPA ecologist on the 17th of February 2026. The survey covered most of the application area, including all areas of habitat impact, but did not include an area of hardstanding (viewed from photographs) at the east of the Site behind locked gates for the Museum of English Rural Life..

² Reading Borough Council Local Plan. <https://my.reading.gov.uk/custom/ReadingLocalPlanSolo.html> Accessed 17/03/2026

- 3.5 Habitats and features of ecological value/interest were mapped using the habitat types required for Biodiversity Net Gain³, informed by Version 2.0 of the UK Habitat Classification system⁴.
- 3.6 The scope of the survey was extended to include an assessment of the Site's potential to support protected species. This included a ground level assessment of the trees potential to support roosting bats.

Constraints

- 3.7 As described above the survey covered most of the application area, including all areas of habitat impact, but did not include the gated MERL access. Photos of the area have been reviewed by an ecologist. As proposals in this area comprise only the installation of gates and local kerb adjustment this is not considered a significant constraint.
- 3.8 The survey was conducted in February which is outside of the optimal time for botanical survey. Given the widespread and urban nature of the habitats present on Site this is not considered to be a significant constraint.

4.0 Baseline Ecological Conditions

Designated Sites

Statutory Sites

- 4.1 There are no statutory designated Sites within the area of the search. The proposals do not fall within any of the descriptions of development for the SSSI Impact Risk Zones which overlay the Site.

Areas of identified biodiversity interest

The Site is not within an area of identified biodiversity interest.

Habitats

- 4.2 The Site comprises of parking spaces, a road, areas of planting and trees.
- 4.3 Figure 1 shows the habitats present at the Site. Photographs showing an overview of the Site are shown in Appendix 1.
- 4.4 The Site can be divided into the following habitat types:

³ Statutory biodiversity metric tools and guides - GOV.UK. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/statutory-biodiversity-metric-tools-and-guides>.

⁴ UKHab (2023) *UK Habitat Classification Version 2.0* [Online]. Available at: <https://ukhab.org/>

- Developed Land, Sealed Surface;
- Introduced Shrub;
- Individual Trees;
- Other Neutral Grassland
- Tall forbs

Developed Land; Sealed Surface

- 4.5 The majority of the Site comprises asphalt, compacted gravel and paving.

Introduced Shrub

- 4.6 Planting at the eastern frontage of the MERL building comprises of Forsythia, planted Cotoneaster sp. and a block of regularly trimmed Beech *Fagus sylvatica*. Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* had been planted at the base of the shrubs.

Individual Trees

- 4.7 There are two Norway Maple *Acer platanoides* and one Yew tree *Taxus baccata* in the bank to the east of MERL building.

Other Neutral Grassland

- 4.8 The middle section of the bank to the east of MERL appeared to have been sown with a wildflower mix and planted with Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* and Daffodil *Narcissus* spp., with wildflower species such as Germander Speedwell *Veronica chamaedrys*, Yarrow *Achillea millefolium*, Common Knapweed *Centaurea nigra*, Oxeye Daisy *Leucanthemum vulgare*, Ribwort Plantain *Plantago lanceolata*, Common Sorrel *Rumex acetosa* and Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus corniculatus* being present. Grass species comprised False-oat Grass *Arrhenatherum elatius*, Perennial Rye-grass *Lolium perenne*, Red Fescue *Festuca rubra*, Yorkshire Fog *Holcus lanatus*, Common Bent *Agrostis capillaris* and Cock's-foot Grass *Dactylis glomerata*.

Tall forbs

- 4.9 Shaded areas under trees were dominated by Ivy *Hedra helix*. Where shade was not total, other species such as Lesser Periwinkle *Vinca minor* and planted Bluebell were present.

Species

Bats

- 4.1 None of the trees on Site were considered suitable to support roosting bats.

- 4.2 Given the urban context bat activity at the Site is likely to be limited to foraging/commuting by non-light-shy bat species.

Birds

- 4.3 Shrubs and trees provided suitable habitat for nesting birds, though suitability of the shrub planting was very limited in the smaller planting areas due to the high levels of public access nearby. The Cotoneaster shrub to be removed to enable works (Photo 3) appears unsuitable for nesting birds.

Other Protected Species

- 4.4 There was no evidence of Badger on or adjacent to the Site.
- 4.5 No ponds are shown on mapping within 250m of the Site. Due to the very limited habitat present on Site and the poor habitat connectivity it is highly unlikely that protected amphibians or other protected species would be present.

5.0 Biodiversity Net Gain

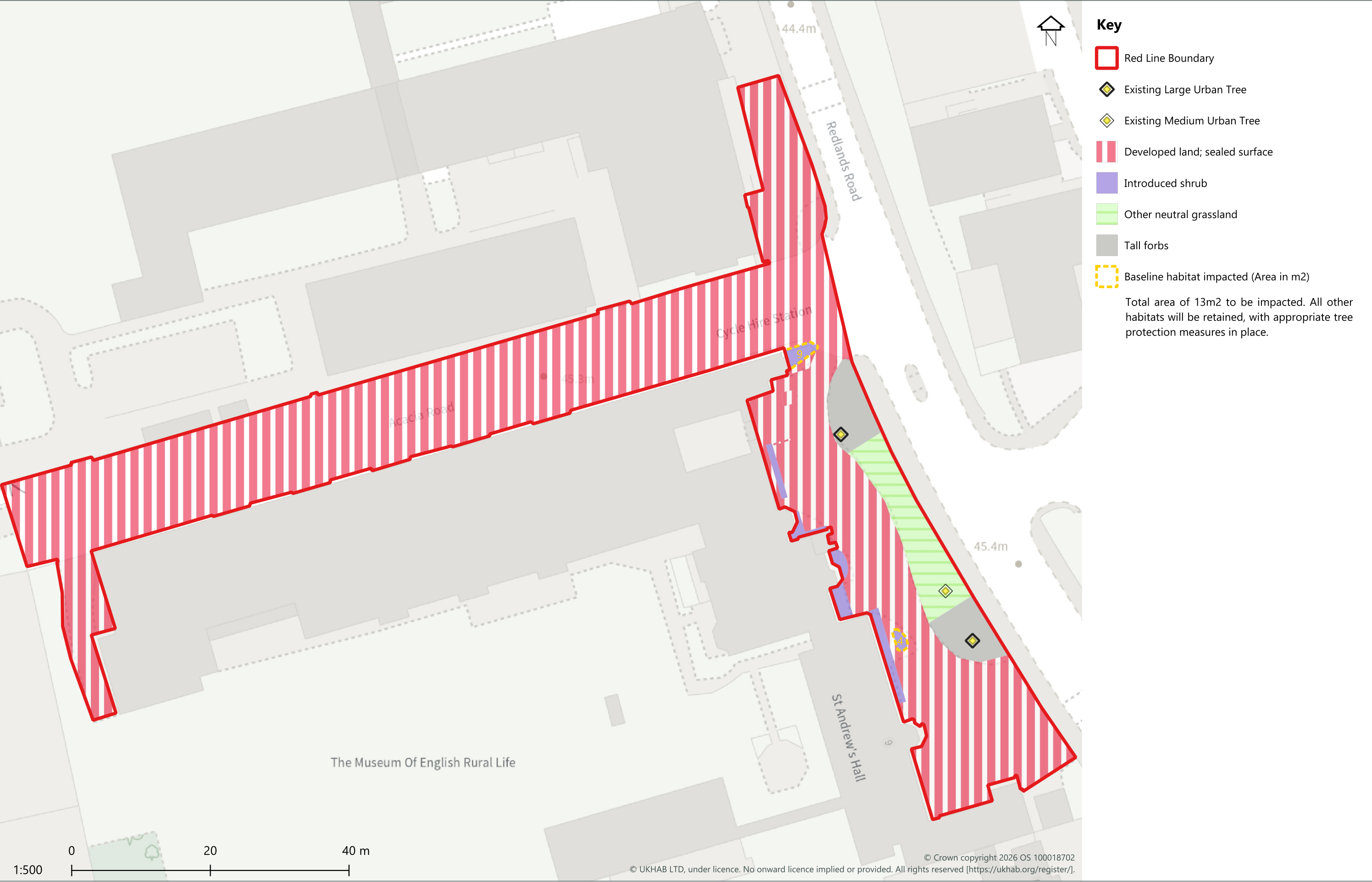
- 5.1 The majority of habitats present within the Site will be unimpacted and are only included within the Red Line boundary due being associated with the curtilages of the listed building. Two areas of habitat will be directly impacted by the works – a 4m² area of Cotoneaster (introduced shrub) (Photo 3) which will be lost and a 9m² block of Forsythia (introduced shrub, photo 4) where existing shrubs will be removed and then re-planted.
- 5.2 No Priority Habitats are present within the Site. No irreplaceable habitats are present.
- 5.3 As only 13m² of habitat is being impacted by the work, the Site is exempt from statutory Biodiversity Net Gain.
- 5.4 As such no metric calculation is provided with the application.

6.0 Impacts and mitigation

While the Site is of overall low ecological value, ecological receptors have been identified. Table 6.1 below identifies the potential impacts for each of these receptors and incorporates mitigation measures to avoid and reduce these impacts. In addition, it sets out additional ecological enhancements

Table 6.1: Potential Impacts and Mitigation

Ecological Receptor	Potential Impact	Design response/ Mitigation / Enhancement Measures	Residual Effects
Designated sites	No impacts to statutory designated sites anticipated	N/A	N/A
Habitats	4m² of introduced shrub lost - Potential for negative impacts to trees adjacent to work areas.	- A new 4m² area of mixed planting will be provided as part of the proposals to mitigate for the lost area of vegetation/provide no net loss. - To provide ecological enhancements an existing area of planting will be replanted. New planters will also be provided. The new areas of planting will be more diverse than the baseline areas and will provide a mixture of species with wildlife value, including an aim to provide pollinators an extended period of resources. - The Arboricultural Impact Assessment (AIA) and Arboricultural Method Statement (AMS) will provide details of measures to protect trees. - Cotoneaster, where removed, will be disposed of appropriately so as to not cause potential spread in the wild.	Not significant
Bats	No impact to bats anticipated.	n/a – no changes to lighting or foraging habitat, no impacts to trees or other potential roosting features	n/a
Birds	Potential harm to nesting birds in shrub during vegetation clearance for enhancement / replanting (area shown in Photo 4).	Removal of shrubs in the area to be replanted will either be avoided during the nesting bird season (March-August) or be checked for nesting birds immediately prior to clearance works. If a nesting bird is found to be present then the nest would be protected until nesting is complete/chicks have fledged.	Not significant



Appendix 1: Photographs

Number	Photograph
1	 View of the eastern side of the MERL building, parking area, shrub planting and mature tree on vegetated bank.
2	 View along Acacia Road

3



Area of introduced shrub planting which will be lost as part of the proposals.

4



Area of introduced shrub planting which will be improved as part of the proposals, to include a wider range of species of benefit to wildlife.

5	 Location of proposed new gates to be installed at the Western end of MERL building.
6	 Retained grassland on bank to east of MERL building.

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