

10 January 2024



**Reading**  
Borough Council

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<b>Title</b>	<b>PLANNING APPLICATION UPDATE REPORT</b>
<b>Ward</b>	Abbey
<b>Planning Application Reference:</b>	231495
<b>Site Address:</b>	Civic Offices, Bridge Street, Reading
<b>Proposed Development</b>	Proposals to extend the Reading Borough Council Offices on Bridge Street to enable the accommodation of the relocated Reading Central Library function, currently on Kings Road, Reading, and provide an enhanced Customer Services reception. Site is currently Sui Generis use class, proposal to co-locate with library - use class F1.
<b>Applicant</b>	Reading Borough Council
<b>Report author</b>	Richard Eatough, Planning Projects Team Leader
<b>Recommendation</b>	As per main Agenda report
<b>S106 Terms</b>	As per main Agenda report
<b>Conditions</b>	As per main report with additional conditions below: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. No commencement of works above ground level until a feasibility study and/or schedule of works for the installation of the 'Cartwheeling Boys' sculpture has been submitted to and approved in writing</li><li>2. Energy condition: BREEAM Very Good (condition to target and secure achievement)</li><li>3. No occupation of development before completion of all access improvements (steps, ramps, front entrance)</li></ol>
<b>Informatives</b>	As per main Agenda report

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Members of the Committee visited the application site on Thursday 4 January. This update report therefore expands upon matters discussed within the main Agenda report, whilst also responding to various points of clarification requested at the site visit.

## **2. PUBLIC CONSULTATION**

- 2.1 Section 5 (Consultations) of the main Agenda report does not describe the public consultation which the applicant conducted before submission of the planning application. In 2023, various events took place including two public drop-in events at the Central Library on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> August where representatives from the client and design team were there to discuss the project. Also available were the same boards used at this event within the existing customer area at the Civic Offices for a number of months. An online survey ran from 26 June to 11 August which generated 896 responses. A children and young people competition (written and pictures) generated 180 responses. Conversations with residents about the proposals generated 59 responses. In addition, six focus groups were held and four further public consultation events. Overall, officers are satisfied that the above shows a strong commitment to the Local Planning Authority's advice for applicants to engage with the public and other stakeholders in accordance with the Council's published Statement of Community Involvement (SCI).
- 2.2 In relation to this planning application, officers can confirm that no letters of representation have been received.

## **3. LAND USE: LAYOUT AND CIRCULATION/CO-LOCATION OF FACILITIES**

- 3.1 From the member site visit, Councillors sought additional information on the function of the new and altered internal spaces in the proposal. Please refer to the coloured ground floor plan at Appendix 1 for reference.
- 3.2 The blue area is the Customer Services area, which consists of the entrance foyer and greeting area, where the space is still yet to be designed, so at this point, it is not clear whether the layout of this space would include a physical desk and staff sitting behind. Customers would then be directed to the left (south) into the new extension area to access the self-service booths and customer service booths. For the library and associated services, customers will continue past the entrance foyer (ie. westwards) into what is the current Civic Offices Reception area. The relocated library will be a more modern and more responsive library service compared to the current Central Library on Kings Road. Whilst there will be reduced book storage space, this will be supplemented by off-site storage and more responsive borrowing, with books being able to be sourced through other libraries and schools in the Borough.

The library will also provide more in the way of digital connections, with a bank of publicly-accessible PCs near to the entrance. The library will consist of a number of zoned areas, for instance a teens area and a children's area at the rear where more noisy activities, such as; the toddlers' Rhyme Time sessions, will take place. The area which is currently the open square courtyard would be covered and used as a flexible space for activities and this will be able to be sectioned off from the remainder of the library by sliding walls, as required. On the first floor, the library will accommodate quiet study areas, local studies and an activity room for specific events such as crafts. Access between the ground and first floor facilities within the library will be via a new set of stairs. Lift access to the first floor will be via one of the existing lifts in the present lobby area which is likely to be specifically reserved for library access use only.

- 3.3 When turning right (north) in the entrance foyer, customers will enter the Registration Services area which consists of a series of private rooms for the registration of births, marriages and deaths.
- 3.4 In summary, officers are satisfied that subject to detailed management arrangements (which are not considered to be relevant material planning considerations), the various local authority and library-related services can be suitably co-located within the development, as supported by Local Plan Policy OU1 (New and Existing Community Facilities).

#### **4. DESIGN**

- 4.1 To amplify paragraph 7.6 of the main report, the extension would be a contemporary, yet sympathetic extension to the existing building. The main external material would be a buff-coloured precast panelling wall system, with the main public elevation featuring a series of angled windows to the front (left) of the extension. These will add interest and privacy to this area and allow non-direct light penetration. The extension will be flat-roofed, incorporating a large area of 'green roof'. This will be a sedum mix, provided for reasons of rainwater control, ecology, thermal insulation and improved outlook from the first floor. Contrary to the statement in paragraph 3.3 of the main report, the front of the entrance area is not glazed, but proposed to be an open pergola, so as not to create a large overhang area which may otherwise attract anti-social behaviour.
- 4.2 It should also be noted that the applicant intends, subject to funding and feasibility, to include an element of public art into the fabric of the scheme. This would involve the relocation of three acrobatic figures known as the 'Cartwheeling Boys'. This is a metal sculpture which was previously a freestanding piece of art located outside the front entrance of the former Civic Centre, which is currently in storage at the Council's depot and was a gift from Reading's twin town, Düsseldorf. The applicant has advised that this element of the building would need specialist crafting to redesign and relocate the work within the flank wall of the new extension, where the figures could be rearranged and affixed to the walling system and then backlit. These works are considered

to be a welcome addition to this important civic redevelopment project and a planning condition is recommended for submission of a feasibility study and method statement for these works, given their complexity.

- 4.3 Paragraphs 7.11 and 8.1-8.2 of the main report discuss disabled persons' access and further discussion is required.
- 4.4 An important design decision taken by the applicant is that the front entrance of the building would feature a large, revolving door. Officers and members have questioned whether this design is suitable for providing equality of access. The applicant advises that the large revolving door would be powered, therefore it would be suitable for most people and its size has been dictated by the anticipated visitor numbers. For those who have mobility impairments (wheelchair users, those with double-buggies, etc.) there is a side access door with push-button powered opening, as an alternative. The applicant advises that this is a good compromise between minimising heat losses from the entrance foyer area and providing suitable access for all. The provision of a side door is considered to comply with the Building Regulations. The Council's Access Officer and access groups have also advised that they are content with this arrangement.
- 4.5 It should be noted that the plans also indicate the recladding of the main disabled switchback ramp and external front steps. These improvements are considered to be necessary in order to deal with anticipated increase in pedestrian flows. An additional condition is therefore recommended that these improvements are delivered before use of the proposal.
- 4.6 There are two further proposed at-grade pedestrian entrances. Within the Customer Services area, there would be a direct access to the Visitors' parking area. There would also be a temporary visitor access provided on the Simmonds Street frontage, required to maintain public access to the Civic Offices whilst the redevelopment works are underway. Regarding equality of access, the proposal is considered, overall, to involve an improvement in access to these public service facilities and comply with Policy CC7.
- 4.7 Regarding energy, the applicant advises that the project is committing to achieve a BREEAM Very Good rating, which is considered to comply with Policy CS2 of the Local Plan. Notwithstanding this, the applicant is hoping to achieve a BREEAM Excellent rating. Officers advise that given the nature and size of the build/change of use, BREEAM Very Good is the suitable level and (a) condition(s) should be applied accordingly. With the discussion above regarding the front entrance door, it should also be noted that the updated NPPF (December 2023) at paragraph 164 puts much greater emphasis on the weight to be given to proposals which involve improvements to energy efficiency.

## **5. TREES AND ECOLOGY**

- 5.1 The main Agenda report including the Recommendation, advises that a s106 legal agreement will be necessary to secure additional off-site street tree planting to achieve the required biodiversity net gain of 12.8%. In the intervening time available between the publication of the report and this Update report, it has not been possible for to identify a suitable and deliverable location for this. Officers have therefore advised the applicant to consider on-site solutions.
- 5.2 At the time of writing, the applicant is considering the siting of six trees in the north-western corner of the Civic Offices site, ie. in the area of the Simmonds Street corner, near the public walkway from Simmonds Street through to Bridge Street. This is involving discussions between the applicant and various officers, with the principal concerns being in relation to deliverability and sub-surface services. A verbal update on this matter will be provided at your meeting.
- 5.3 Otherwise, the proposal is considered to be suitable in terms of hard and soft landscape and will produce a suitable enhancement to the setting of the building.

## **6. TRANSPORT AND PARKING**

- 6.1 The Highway Authority confirms their understanding that the present visitor parking spaces to the south of the building (Fobney Street side) shall be retained for visitors of the Civic Offices function of the building.
- 6.2 For clarification, the proposed plans show reconfigured visitor cycle parking in three areas: the existing cycle racks (covered) near Fobney Street/Simmonds Street, additional Sheffield Stands towards the corner of the new extension (Fobney Street/Bridge Street corner) and another set which would be covered as they are to be under the front entrance canopy. These are considered to provide good facilities for those cycling to the site.

## **7. CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS**

- 7.1 With regard to paragraph 2.1 of the main report, Riverside House on Fobney Street is not a Listed Building. The report should have referred to the former Simmonds Malthouse (later the Loch Fyne restaurant) which is Grade II Listed and for clarity, its setting is not considered to be adversely affected.
- 7.2 Section 6 in mentioning the NPPF incorrectly refers to Section 5 (Delivering a sufficient supply of homes), this is not relevant to the assessment of this planning application.

- 7.3 Section 6 should also refer to the Local Planning Authority's obligations under the Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas Act 1990, to consider the impact on the setting of nearby Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas, although no further commentary is considered to be needed.
- 7.4 With regard to paragraph 7.2, the applicant has advised that the proposal is *part* funded via the Government's Levelling Up Fund (LUF).
- 7.5 Officers confirm that all pre-commencement conditions in this report and in the main report have been agreed with the applicant.
- 7.6 Members requested clarification of the proposed opening hours for the library. The applicant has advised as follows:  
Mon 10-5, Tue 10-7, Wed closed, Thu 10-7, Fri 10-5, Sat 10-3
- 7.7 At this point, the applicant would wish to retain the potential opportunity to open on Wednesdays as well. Officers advise that there would be no objection to this from a planning perspective and with no obvious harm to amenity or other implications, there is not considered to be a need for a planning condition in this instance.

**Case officer:** Richard Eatough

# APPENDIX 1 Ground floor layout

