

DELEGATED OFFICER REPORT



WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Application Number:	252302
Site Address:	URS Building, Whiteknights Campus, Reading, Shinfield Road
Expiry Date:	31 July 2026
Advert Publication Date:	20 October 2025
Site Notice Date:	22 October 2025
Site Visit Date:	22 July 2025
Proposal: Application to vary condition 2 of Listed Building Consent 243128 for the proposed external and internal refurbishment, repairs and alterations consisting of replacement windows and doors; replacement roofs, including new roof lights, cowls and lanterns; installation of solar panels; concrete repairs; full mechanical and electrical services upgrade; erection of two external staircases; new detached bin and bike store, and hard and soft landscape and accessibility improvements. Condition 2 refers to the approved details, and the variation is for internal alterations.	

PLANNING CONSTRAINTS/STATUS

- Listed building

PLANNING POLICY

National Policy	National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPG)
MDD Local Plan (MDD)	TB24 – Designated Heritage Assets (where site is within a Conservation Area)

PLANNING HISTORY

Application No.	Description	Decision & Date
180220	Full Planning Application for internal and external alterations and extensions existing building and external works including new footpath, landscaping and external working area	Refused 19/12/2018
241743	Full application for proposed internal and external refurbishment, repairs and alterations consisting of replacement windows and doors; replacement roofs including new roof lights, cowls and lanterns and concrete repairs.	Approved 23/10/2024

241744	Listed Building Consent for proposed internal and external refurbishment, repairs and alterations consisting of replacement windows and doors; replacement roofs including new roof lights, cowls and lanterns and concrete repairs.	Approved 23/10/2024
243128	Application for Listed Building consent for proposed external and internal refurbishment, repairs and alterations consisting of replacement windows and doors; replacement roofs, including new roof lights, cowls and lanterns; installation of solar panels; concrete repairs; full mechanical and electrical services upgrade; erection of two external staircases; new detached bin and bike store, and hard and soft landscape and accessibility improvements	Approved 12/03/26
243127	Full application for proposed external and internal refurbishment, repairs and alterations consisting of replacement windows and doors; replacement roofs, including new roof lights, cowls and lanterns; installation of solar panels; concrete repairs; full mechanical and electrical services upgrade; erection of two external staircases; new detached bin and bike store, and hard and soft landscape and accessibility improvements	Approved 12/03/25
252083	Application for submission of details to comply with the following conditions of Listed Building consent 243128 dated 12/03/2025. Condition 3 relates to details of windows / external glazed screen and external doors; 4 to roof lights; 5 to roof cowl lights; 6 to replacement aluminium sheet covering; 7 to roof lantern lights; 11 to louvred vents / intakes, and 12 to louvred openings.	Approved 11/12/25
252302	Application to vary condition 2 of Listed Building Consent 243128 for the proposed external and internal refurbishment, repairs and alterations consisting of replacement windows and doors; replacement roofs, including new roof lights, cowls and lanterns; installation of solar panels; concrete repairs; full mechanical and electrical services upgrade; erection of two external staircases; new detached bin and bike store, and hard and soft landscape and accessibility improvements. Condition 2 refers to the approved details, and the variation is for internal alterations.	Pending consideration

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Internal

WBC Built Heritage Officer – Objection as screens are an intrinsic feature of the building's original form and character. Unconvinced measures to retain the original or to have replacements that faithfully replicate the form and dimensions of the original have not been fully explored. However, the proposal would result in less than substantial harm

External

The Twentieth Century Society – Objection based on:

- Loss of original fabric which holds a high degree of significance
- Alternative fire safety compliance routes should be investigated
- Proposed replacement screen should have 6 bays

REPRESENTATIONS

Earley Town Council raise no objection

APPRAISAL

Site Description:

The URS Building is a Grade II Listed building (designated listed status in 2016) with distinct post and lintel joints. As well as the building, the Listing includes the paved surface of Chancellors Way and raised edges of the ornamental pool. Surrounding the building are other academic buildings, including the newly refurbished Library. A public right of way (EARL6) runs underneath the overhang of the URS building. The majority of Whiteknights Campus is a designated local park and garden.

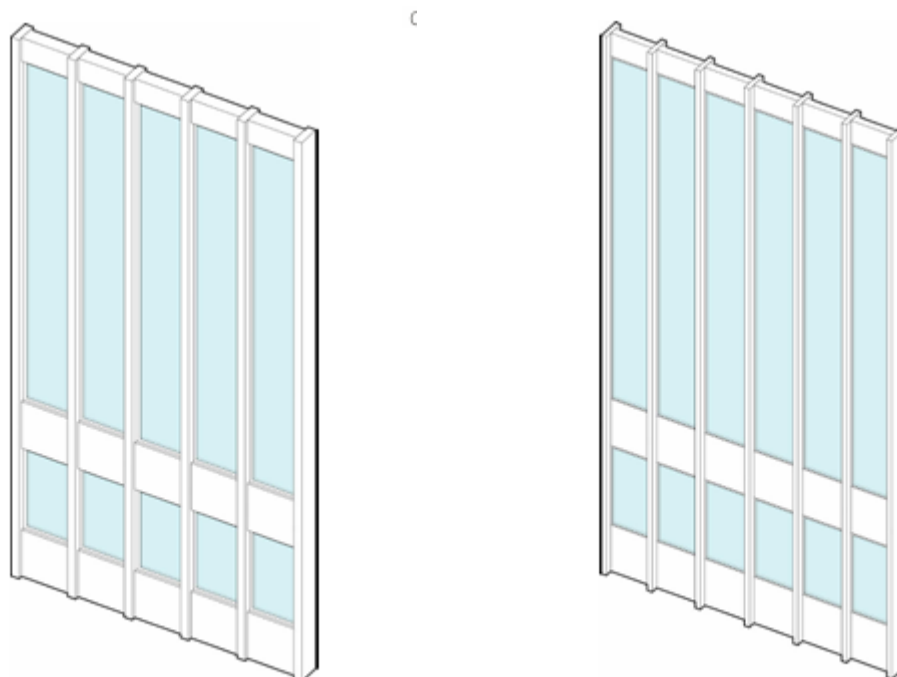
Proposal:

Condition 2 of listed building consent 243128 is sought to be varied. The original consent was for extensive refurbishment works (internal and external) to bring the building back into an educational use after years of non-use. The variation seeks approval for the removal of the internal timber screens on stair cores, lightwells and the level 1 corridor due to the inability to achieve any fire certification required to allow for the use of the building. The existing timber screens comprise of 6 panels, the proposed would comprise of 5 panels.

Examples of screens requiring removal:



Proposed screen replacement (left) and existing screen arrangement (right):



Assessment

Policy TB24 of the MDD states that designated heritage assets (Listed Buildings, Historic Parks and Gardens, Scheduled Ancient Monuments and Conservation Area) should be conserved, or where possible enhanced as a result of development.

The Listing of the building is as follows (interior listing is only relevant to this proposal):

INTERIOR: the building's structure is exposed internally as it is externally, with the beams tapering in depth and forking as the engineering requires. The top-lit stairwells and light-wells are enclosed in timber and glass screens, with fin-like vertical mullions, allowing light through the building, and creating a sense of structural transparency. The timber detailing is in HKPA's consistent style and redolent of simple Japanese-inspired design. The wells have pitched glass lanterns over them, with the exception of one well, which is open to the sky. The dog-leg stairs are self-supporting, with balustrades of painted tubular steel and timber panel. Internal walls are of painted concrete block, and doors are mainly flush-panel or have two glazed panels, although a number are later replacements.

The two first-floor raked lecture theatres are double-height spaces, as is the printing room on the ground floor. Timber and glass screens, matching those used elsewhere, create a partition between the printing room and the offices at first and second floors, again, allowing light and views to travel through the space.

Pursuant to s.1 (5A) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 ('the Act') it is declared that internal, non-structural, party walls between adjacent rooms are not of special architectural or historic interest.

Rationale for removal of timber screens

As can be seen above, the timber and glass screens are referred to in the listing and therefore are deemed of high significance to the building and its internal composition. This is agreed by the applicant and the Council's Built Heritage specialist. The loss of the original fabric will therefore consequently affect the significance of the heritage asset, and the WBC Built Heritage Officer has advised that the level of harm that the proposal would result in would be less than substantial.

Supporting information from the applicant's fire specialist confirms the removal and replacements of the screens are necessary from a fire safety perspective. The existing screens form part of the protected escape routes and therefore perform a critical life-safety function. The applicant has explored whether the existing timber screens could be retained, tested, upgraded, or replicated exactly. However, advice from the applicant's fire specialists confirms that this is not a viable route to compliance. Adding sprinklers, as suggested by the Twentieth Century Society, is also not possible as the applicant's fire specialist has advised that these are not recognised in regulatory terms as a direct substitute for the physical integrity of fire compartmentation. In addition, their installation would require substantial intervention throughout the building, including tanks, pumps, control valves and extensive pipework. That intervention would be highly harmful in heritage terms.

Stantec, as the applicant's fire engineer, confirms that destructive testing of the existing timber frames is not considered appropriate, as suggested by the Twentieth Century Society. This is because aged timber is inherently variable, the results of isolated testing could not reliably be extrapolated across the remaining frames, and the level of testing required to achieve meaningful certainty would risk destroying the very historic fabric that the project is seeking to conserve.

The applicant's consultant also explains why simply inserting fire-rated glass into the existing frames, or into exact replica softwood frames, would not achieve compliance. Fire performance is assessed on the basis of a tested and certified assembly as a whole, including the glass, timber frame, beads, fixings, seals and fire stopping. The existing thin timber profiles cannot be certified to provide the required fire and smoke resistance.

The proposed removal and replacement is therefore not an aesthetic preference, but a necessary response to the statutory fire safety requirements.

The LPA do not have evidence from an equally qualified fire specialist to refute the applicant's position and therefore it is accepted.

Proposed replacement screens

The proposed replacement timber screens would have 5 bays whereas the existing has 6. As such, the proposed screens are not a complete like-for-like replacement. However, the wooden frames would be 'chunkier' and so the amount of glazing would be reduced compared to the existing situation if a 6 bay were proposed. Whilst one less panel, the 5 bay replacement would allow for the form and visual appearance of the timber screens to be retained generally whilst at the same time would allow for a similar level of glazing and light into spaces. As such, on the whole, the proposed replacement screens would suitably retain some key features and qualities of the

existing arrangement but acknowledged to not be a full like-for-like substitution. Whilst it is noted that the Twentieth Century Society's preference of a 6 bay screens and the WBC Built Heritage Officer also raises a degree of concern that not all options have been explored, the LPA do not see grounds to resist the applicant's proposal of a 5 bay screen based on the above assessment.

Heritage balance

As discussed, less than substantial harm to the Listed Building has been identified through the loss of original fabric that holds a high level of significance to the building. As such, paragraph 215 of the NPPF is applicable which states:

"Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use"

The primary public benefit of this scheme is bringing this building back into an optimum use for the continued success of the University and members of that community. However, there are benefits of securing the optimum use in relation to heritage also. The building at present is in a poor state, having remained empty for many years. As well as having public benefits; notably for staff, students and the wider community attending the university and using its facilities it would also bring the Listed building into a functional building where the elements of the significance of the asset can be conserved rather than falling into further disrepair. With the timber screens remaining in situ, the refurbished building as a whole would be unable to comply with Building Regulations, Part B for Fire Safety. As such the proposed alterations to the timber screens are required to ensure that the refurbishment of the building can progress as a whole and to get back to its optimum and most viable use.

As such, the recommendation is to grant the variation to condition 2 (approved plans)

Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL):

When planning permission is granted for a development that is CIL liable, the Council will issue a liability notice as soon as practicable after the day on which the planning permission first permits development. Completing the assumption of liability notice is a statutory requirement to be completed for all CIL liable applications.

The Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010):

In determining this application the Council is required to have due regard to its obligations under the Equality Act 2010. The key equalities protected characteristics include age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation. There is no indication or evidence (including from consultation on the application) that persons with protected characteristics as identified by the Act have or will have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities in relation to this particular planning application and there would be no significant adverse impacts as a result of the development.

RECOMMENDATION	
Conditions agreed:	Yes
Recommendation:	Grant subject to variation to condition 2. All other conditions (but updated as per discharge of condition application – see planning history)
Date:	13 July 2026
Earliest date for decision:	11 November 2025

Recommendation agreed by: (Authorised Officer)	
Date:	13/07/26