



Historic England

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Ms Elaine Quigley
London Borough of Camden
Development Control Planning Services
Town Hall
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London
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Direct Dial: 0207 973 3777

Our ref: P00524415

20 September 2016

Dear Ms Quigley

**Arrangements for Handling Heritage Applications Direction 2015 & T&CP (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015
BRITISH MUSEUM, GREAT RUSSELL STREET, LONDON, WC1B 3DG
Application No 2016/2524/P**

Thank you for your letter of 23 August 2016 notifying us of the application for planning permission relating to the above site. We do not wish to comment in detail, but offer the following general observations.

Historic England Advice

Significance

The British Museum is located within the Bloomsbury Conservation Area and is a highly significant grade I listed building designed to accommodate the national collection of historical artefacts from across the world. The proposals affect the Southern Forecourt, which is an area of open space that lies immediately to the south of the iconic principle facade of the Museum. This façade was designed by Sir Robert Smirke in a Greek revivalist style (1827) and provides the main entrance to the Museum. The Southern Forecourt is surrounded by Smirke Museum buildings on the north, east and west sides, which are arranged symmetrically around the central portico. The forecourt area itself is simply laid out and paved with two symmetrically placed grassed areas surrounded by low stone walls (a relatively recent intervention). The boundary treatment to the Great Russell Street comprises robust ornate gates and railings set into a solid granite wall, also by Smirke and grade II* listed. The grand symmetrical design of the Smirke buildings, their arrangement around the the Southern Forecourt and associated boundary treatments all work together to create the appearance of a grand palace composition, which reinforces the status of the Museum as one of the most important public buildings in Britain. Whilst the Southern Forecourt is not a designated heritage asset in its own right, it is integral to the setting of the Museum and the Bloomsbury Conservation Area.



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Impact

The proposals are for the erection of a single storey temporary structure on the west side of the Southern Forecourt, immediately to the east of the West Residence building. The structure would provide security screening to visitors entering the museum. It is noted that the structure has already been erected on site and has metal panelled walls with a tented roof structure over, all coloured white. The current application seeks to secure retrospective planning permission for this structure and for its cladding in a coloured sheet material in order to reduce its visual impact.

Policy

Sections 66 and 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (as amended) set out the obligation on local planning authorities to pay special regard to safeguarding the special interest of listed buildings and their settings, and preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of conservation areas.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out the Government's policies for decision making on development proposals. At the heart of the framework is a presumption in favour of 'sustainable development'. Conserving heritage assets in a manner appropriate to their significance forms one of the 12 core principles that define sustainable development.

Paragraph 131 advises local authorities to take account of the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.

Paragraph 132 gives great weight to conserving heritage assets in a manner appropriate to their significance, noting that significance can be harmed by development within the setting of a heritage asset.

Paragraphs 133 and 134 advise on cases where proposals would lead to substantial or less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset. In both cases, harm needs to be weighed against public benefits, although the tests in 133 for substantial harm are necessarily more rigorous.

Paragraph 137 states that local authorities should look for opportunities for new development within conservation areas and within the setting of heritage assets to enhance or better reveal their significance.

Position of Historic England

The existing temporary structure is located in a highly prominent location within the Southern Forecourt and is considered to cause harm to the setting of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area and the setting of the Museum. The temporary structure is highly distracting in views and is seen to unbalance the symmetrical arrangement of the Museum and the Southern Forecourt in views from Great Russell Street and within the Southern Forecourt. The temporary structure also directly obscures views towards the West Residence and towards the main colonnaded facade of the Museum. Whilst the





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proposals to clad over the building in a coloured sheet material could reduce the extent of this harm, this would have a minor impact and the proposals are still considered to cause a significant amount of harm.

Historic England acknowledges the need to provide security screening to Museum visitors and accepts that security screening could be perceived as a public benefit in terms of weighing up the proposals in accordance with the NPPF. Whilst the consideration of harm weighed against public benefits lies with your authority, we would recommend that if you are minded to grant planning permission that this be for a maximum of 2 years. This would allow adequate time for the Museum to establish its security requirements and to formulate a permanent solution. In respect to a permanent solution, we would encourage the Museum to work with ourselves and your authority to bring forward proposals as soon as possible.

Recommendation

We would urge you to address the above issues, and recommend that the application should be determined in accordance with national and local policy guidance, and on the basis of your specialist conservation advice. It is not necessary for us to be consulted again. However, if you would like further advice, please contact us to explain your request.

Please note that this response relates to historic building and historic area matters only. If there are any archaeological implications to the proposals it is recommended that you contact the Greater London Archaeological Advisory Service for further advice (Tel: 020 7973 3712).

Yours sincerely

Claire Brady

Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas
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