

Pushkin House 5a Bloomsbury Square London WC1A 2TA



Submission for Planning Permission and Listed Building Consent to Camden Planning Department on behalf of Pushkin House Trust

March 2022

Introduction

- Pushkin House Trust (registered charity 313111) operates the oldest independent cultural centre in the UK and internationally, focused on promoting Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet culture. We provide a unique meeting point and an intellectually stimulating environment for people with different views and backgrounds united by their interest in Russia's past, present and future.
- Pushkin House Trust acquired 5a Bloomsbury Square (now referred to as 'Pushkin House') in 2006, adapting it for public use as a cultural venue. Due to funding limitations, the renovation works undertaken at the time were basic and limited in scope.
- After 16 years of occupation, which have seen the cultural programme expand in scope with audiences of up to 400 per week pre-Covid, the building and facilities are now in serious need of renovation to ensure long-term suitability as home and venue for Pushkin House Trust. The listed building fabric requires significant repair; the interiors are tiredlooking and do not do justice to the quality of the building's fine decorative features; the facilities suffer from significant functional deficiencies (in terms of access, acoustics, air/climate control, lighting etc.).
- These deficiencies are now a serious obstacle to delivering and expanding Pushkin House Trust's cultural and educational mission and ambitions, along with limiting the organisation's opportunities for rental and other income streams which are key to underpin its financial sustainability as a charity.
- Significant investment will be required to address this in order to achieve a sustainable future for Pushkin House Trust at 5a Bloomsbury Square, and thereby maintain ongoing public access to a fine Grade 2* listed building in the historic centre of Bloomsbury. The ambition is for the venue to continue hosting an expanded, vibrant, year-round cultural programme – attracting significantly larger and diverse audiences.
- In order to do so, and to justify the level of investment, a significant step change needs to be achieved – in particular in relation to physical access, room configuration, sound and climate control, lighting and overall standard of presentation – along with enhanced visibility at street level. The proposals which are the subject for this pre-application submission are critical to achieving this.
- As a charity, Pushkin House Trust will be looking to fund the project through a major capital fundraising campaign. In order to succeed, this will need to demonstrate long-term impact and value for money. The interventions proposed will be central to underpin the project's funding case, by contributing significantly to raising the standards of the venue to the level expected of an organisation of Pushkin House Trust's stature and ambition and comparable to that of its peer group.



Planning and Listed Building Consent Application submission

The proposed works are:

Internal alterations including the removal of partitions, reconfigured basement stair, toilets and kitchen. Installation of platform lift. Installation of mechanical ventilation and cooling to basement, ground and first floor rooms including associated plant in basement vault, roof space and rooftop. Internal joinery items. Secondary glazing. Interior and exterior lighting.

This document includes a description of the design brief and proposals) and concludes with a more detailed analysis of the heritage impact. These have been developed with the input of specialist advice from:

Hara Clark – Lead Designer Donald Insall Associates – Heritage Consultant, Conservation Architect and Historic Building Surveyor Sawyer Fisher – Heritage Cost Consultant Hirst Conservation – Architectural Paint Research Earnscliffe, Making Access Work - Access Consultant David Atkinson Lighting Design - Lighting Designer Steensen Varming - Mechanical and Electrical Engineer Fraser Randall – Specialist Project Managers and Cost Consultants

There are four appendices (Historic Building Report, Access Statement, Mechanical Servicing Strategy and Lighting Design) which set out the analysis and advice received.

The preliminary information on the proposals is included in order to facilitate a dialogue with the statutory consultees. We are seeking advice regarding the acceptability of the proposals and any further detail required for the main application. We also seek confirmation on which aspects of the proposal or building works will not require formal Listed Building Consent approval – so that some work including fabric repairs may be carried out once funding has been secured.

Executive summary of proposals

We have considered in detail various possible internal design solutions, described in the accompanying drawings the preferred solution that achieves the appropriate balance of increasing public benefit through improved access to programming events and expanded



functionality of the premises, enhancing the heritage value while minimising harmful interventions from a heritage perspective, and thus putting Pushkin House Trust on a more sustainable footing to continue its operations as an independent cultural centre from 5a Bloomsbury Square.



5a Bloomsbury Square

5, 5a and 6 Bloomsbury Square is a Grade II* listed building. The inclusion of 5 and 6 with 5a in the same listing reflects the origins of the building as a single development and 5 and 5a originally being a single house. The building was constructed in 1744, attributed to Henry Flitcroft. It is a good example of the Palladian domestic architecture of the mid-18th century. The building's highest significance is its original mid-18th century fabric and plan form. The original plan form of the building including to the secondary areas survives in large part. The fine interiors also survive in large part, and most rooms retain historic fabric of some significance.

There has been a long history of changes to the building, which culminated in the subdivision into 5 and 5a thirty years ago. Changes have added little of lasting value to the building notwithstanding that some of the work has been carried out to a high standard. Whilst the plan form and hierarchy of spaces can still be understood, alterations including the stair S.1 (added in 1995) have caused harm.

The presentation of the principal rooms is poor. Ironmongery and lighting are poorly considered and decoration is all in modern synthetic emulsion and oil-based gloss paints, which generally have had a deadening effect on the historic interiors. Light fittings and electrical accessories are generally later 20th century and of basic functional design.

Please refer to Appendix A (Historic Building Report) for more information.

Project Aims

Having occupied the building for 16 years Pushkin House Trust wishes to embark on a project that will:

- Maximise physical access and use to sustain the heritage benefit of the building as a publicly accessible cultural centre into the future.
- Draw out and fully reveal the elegance, inherent character and historic features of the listed building and Georgian architecture, creating a prime venue in terms of quality of experience.
- Address all repairs, maintenance and other issues highlighted from a recent comprehensive building survey.
- Provide equal access for all.
- Enhance the visibility of the cultural centre at street level and from Bloomsbury Square.

- Enhance the building's functionality for all patterns of usage.
- Achieve maximum flexibility for daily/ weekly/seasonal use and ease of operation to accommodate a combination of:
 - Pushkin House Trust cultural programming.
 - Revenue-generating room and event rental activity
- Include a programme of like-for-like repairs (N.B. outside the scope of requirements for statutory consent).
- Achieve a stable financial base to support the above.

Brief

- Provide for equal access to the building in use as a cultural centre (Class D1).
- Improve the standard of accommodation through:
 - Maximising use of basement, ground and first floor accommodation as public spaces. Changes to the room configuration and presentation for enhanced use.
 - Relocation of offices and kitchen to less prominent spaces.
 - Re-organisation of secondary spaces on second and third floors, and representation to have a unity with the rest of Pushkin House.
 - Secondary glazing to provide acoustic insulation to improve the quality of space, in particular for music performance. This will necessitate mechanical ventilation to provide a sufficient rate of air change at basement, ground and first floor levels during events.
 - o Renewal of installed systems and services, including digital solutions.
 - Changes externally comprising new signage (separate application) and lighting to elevate the presence and raise the profile of Pushkin House Trust's activities at 5a Bloomsbury Square and Bloomsbury Way.

Design Principles

The proposed changes to 5a Bloomsbury Square have been designed to have a light touch wherever possible, and not to dominate building sightlines, whilst being robust and adaptable so that they are sustainable in the long term.

Where changes have a short service life, they have been designed to avoid alteration to the building fabric, so that they can be removed or upgraded in future without requiring extensive repairs. This is the case with lighting for example, where there is a rapid turnover of technology.

Alterations to historic fabric are proposed only where changes will have a long service life, where use is unlikely to change in future or where alteration is necessary to sustain significance in the long term. Where this is so, bespoke design solutions will be developed to the very highest standard, with the quality of materials and workmanship specified accordingly.

Design Process

The initial design work options study has been carried out over a period of five months by an integrated team of specialists including Designers, Historic Building Surveyor, Heritage Consultant and Conservation Architect, Access Consultant, Lighting Designer, Mechanical and Electrical Engineers and specialist Cost Consultants.

The proposals have been considered to address deficiencies within the current situation:

- Improve physical access to and within the building.
- Improve toilet facilities.
- Improve acoustics within the galleries.
- Improve comfort cooling and ventilation.
- Maximise the use of rooms as multifunctional galleries for art and cultural programming.
- Improve interior lighting.
- Improve external visibility via lighting and signage.

Physical Access

The design of access measures within the refurbishment proposals has been carefully considered and a reasonable level of accessibility demonstrated, despite working with the restrictions of a Grade II* listed building with significant physical constraints. In order to achieve an acceptable level of accessibility the proposals have been developed and assessed against current legislation, building standards and best practice guidelines.

A number of studies have been undertaken looking at various locations for external and internal lifts.

External lifts

The main entrance comprises a landing bridge over the lightwell from the street with two steps of 100 and 170mm riser and an 90mm step at the door threshold. Externally a Part M compliant ramp within the existing lightwell is not possible due to the existing fire escape stair from the basement.

Two external lift options were explored:

- a *Sesame* concealed platform / step lift within a rebuilt bridge connection. This would have allowed for step-free access from the street to the ground floor which dealt with both steps and the raised door threshold. This was rejected on fire safety grounds due to the main entrance being the sole means of escape from the ground and upper levels.
- a platform lift in the lightwell to the left of the main entrance. This would have raised up 360mm from the street level to a rebuilt bridge landing, level with the ground floor and could also travel down to the basement level. This was rejected due to a number of entrapment issues by projecting window sills and the bridge itself as the lightwell is not wide enough to allow for a lift shaft enclosure and a platform wide enough to facilitate the 90° turn for a wheelchair. It is also notable that whilst this option would have allowed access to ground and basement levels, it would have required an external journey to access the toilets (which are in the basement).

Internal lifts

Internal lift options were explored in five locations with various levels of benefit and harm. Four were discounted and the only possible location being an open platform lift serving Ground and Basement levels. This requires the S1 basement stair to reverse and run down under the principal stair S2 with associated builders work to form the opening and reconfiguring the current cleaner's store at basement. While this option provides step-free access between Ground and Basement levels only, it has the least impact on historic fabric and does not have a material adverse impact on operational use.

As this lift would only allow step-free access to Basement and Ground floors, not to the Main Function Room +1.1 on the First floor, and because the ceiling in the Basement is low, a suitable space for high profile public events that is wheelchair-accessible can only be created by removing the partition that separates the Ground floor Office and Library rooms, providing a room of similar fine decorations and size (with a slightly lower ceiling) as the main First floor room. This effectively replaces +1.1 as a new Main Function Room. Thus this is the preferred and long-term viable option from an operational perspective.

Toilet facilities

Although two unisex toilet cubicles are currently provided at basement level, neither meet current Part M requirements. The proposal moves the existing kitchen partition to allow one of the cubicles to be compliant, providing a 1500 diameter turning circle in front of the WC pan. It is noted that this cubicle currently has an original fanlight (previously relocated from the adjacent corridor) set back within the opening reveals. The new cubicle door needs to be flush with the opening in order to allow the required 300mm leading edge clearance for Part M. Further consideration is required for this mismatch and that the fanlight only allows for an 1850mm door height.

Please see Appendix B (Access Statement) for additional information.

Rooms for cultural programming

The proposal seeks to maximise the programming use of the three main rooms at Basement, Ground and First floor level. The first floor Main Function Room 1.1 stays as is, with the potential of restoring its original decorative features. The Ground floor Library and Office rooms are to merge into a single large space by the removal of the partition, allowing to offer a full range of programmed events for all to enjoy. The Basement room B.1 currently has a nib which the proposals seek to remove in order to enhance the prime wall space for hanging artworks. All are to receive discrete picture rails to facilitate the exhibition hang without the need to impinge on the historic fabric.

Acoustics

Due to the building's location next to the busy Bloomsbury Way, ingress of traffic noise through the historic sash windows is problematic, particularly for lecture and music recitals. The scheme proposes slimline aluminium sliding sash secondary glazing within the staff beads to allow the shutters to continue to be used. Within the Main Function Room 1.1 at First floor level the staff beads are particularly narrow and further investigation is required to see if the installation of secondary sliding sashes - so that windows can be opened - is possible.

Fresh air and comfort cooling

With windows sealed shut to prevent noise ingress, mechanical ventilation for fresh air is required to meet building regulations within the spaces. A mechanical servicing strategy has been produced which provides for fresh air and cooling to the three main rooms at Basement, Ground and First levels. The existing Basement fresh air duct system is reused to circulate ducted air up through the plain ceiling into the Ground floor. A new system is provided utilising an empty vault for new plant to provide fresh air to the Basement room. In the First Floor Main Function Room +1.1 the new system utilises the fact that the decorative cornice does not return into the alcoves either side of the northern chimney breast – allowing for fresh air to be

ducted down from roof level into new high-level joinery items. The duct needs to pass through the 3rd and 2nd floor rooms above and is to be concealed by new joinery / paneling. Within the roof space a fan unit is to be installed with an intake grille within the inner roof slope. A single historic rafter will need to be temporarily removed to facilitate the plant installation. Relief air path would be via the two existing chimney flues – subject to inspection - which will require internal grilles.

Comfort cooling to each of the rooms is to be provided by fan coil units concealed within low level joinery items. An existing condenser unit in the basement lightwell will be reused and a new unit mounted at roof level.

Existing heating is by central heating boiler and pressed metal panel radiators. It is proposed that these are replaced with cast iron column radiators.

Please refer to Appendix C (Mechanical Servicing Strategy document) for additional information.

Lighting

Internally, a new lighting scheme is proposed to enhance the historic interiors and provide flexible lighting for the main rooms for exhibitions and other events programming.

Externally, a simple lighting scheme is proposed to subtly illuminate the window reveals at night to suggest the building 'in use', with light 'naturally' emanating from within, rather than artificially floodlighting the façade.

Please refer to Appendix D (Lighting Design document) and Drawing 0032 for additional information.

Heritage impact Assessment

- 1. The proposed changes sustain the listed building in use as an independent cultural centre open to the public.
- 2. There would be some loss of significance associated with removal of the nib wall, part of a previous partition in basement area B.1. This is considered to be at the lower level of 'less than substantial harm'.
- 3. Removal of the modern partition separating second floor rooms 2.1 and 2.2 would be without harm to heritage significance.

- 4. New secondary glazing has been designed to be without harm to heritage significance (N.B. existing secondary glazing at basement level would be replaced).
- 5. Ducted fresh air supply to ground floor and principal floor rooms G.2, G.3 and 1.1 would require local alterations to historic fabric and new joinery but would have minimal impact on surviving features of the fine interiors of these rooms. These changes are considered to be without harm to heritage significance.
- 6. Alterations to basement vaults and in the roof space necessary to accommodate new and re-ordered air handling plant has been designed without harm to heritage significance.
- 7. Proposed air duct risers at basement level and changes in the basement area would have minimal impact on historic fabric of the building. These changes are considered to be without harm to heritage significance.
- 8. New air duct risers at second and third floor levels would pass through historic secondary rooms 2.1 and 3.1 and would require changes to some localised areas of floors, panelling, cornices and ceilings. Local components of these features would be salvaged and re-configured with new components to match the new geometry of the room. The harm to heritage significance that this would cause is considered to be at the lower level of 'less than substantial harm'.
- 9. The removal of the modern timber staircase S.1 from ground floor entrance hall G.1 to the basement would be without harm.
- 10. The new platform lift would provide equal access to the Basement of Pushkin House, providing a public benefit.
- 11. The new staircase from entrance hall G.1 to the Basement would require removal of the modern masonry at Ground and Basement level supporting the bottom flight of the principal stair S.2, removal of part of the surviving Basement vault to room B.6 and of the historic masonry partition separating B.6 from foyer B.5. These changes would be at the lower end of 'less than substantial harm'.
- 12. Removal of the partition separating Ground floor rooms G.2 and G.3 would allow to make full use of the resulting space for public events which currently take place in First floor room 1.1. Access to these events would be step-free. From investigation of historic decorative schemes carried out by Hirst Conservation, the library partition is now known to be an alteration after 1830. Whilst its removal would cause some, less than substantial, harm to heritage significance this change would therefore provide public benefit.

It is considered that any harm caused by removal of the Ground floor partition separating Ground floor rooms G.2 and G.3 would be outweighed by the heritage benefits of this scheme,



principally that the changes would sustain the listed building in use as a cultural venue, in which use it would be open to the public.

It is also considered that the proposal will provide the public benefit of equal access to the cultural programmes and activities at Pushkin House.

External Lighting

The scheme has been designed to suggest light reflected from inside the building, with the quantity and colour of light is used to enhance the overall experience. Lighting has been designed with a minimum number of very small luminaires, to avoid impact on daytime sightlines.

The new external lighting has been designed to enhance the presentation of the building and its surroundings and would therefore be a heritage benefit.

Appendices

- Appendix A: Historic Building Report by Donald Insall Associates
- Appendix B: Access Statement by Earnscliffe, Making Access Work
- Appendix C: Mechanical Servicing Strategy by Steensen Varming
- Appendix D: Lighting Design by David Atkinson Lighting Design
- Appendix E: Architectural Paint Research by Hirst Conservation