Consultation Response from Deborah Marsland, KC Museums and Galleries
2024/93494 Victoria Tower, Castle Hill, Lumb Lane, Almondbury, Huddersfield, HD4 6TA
Erection of restaurant/café/bar, six guest rooms, exhibition/interpretation room, WCs, terrace, car parking and ancillary accommodation
Date Responded: Responding Officer: Responding Ref:

Kirklees COUNCIL

RESPONSE FROM KIRKLEES MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES
Application number 2024/93494
Location Victoria Tower, Lumb Lane, Castle Hill, Almondbury, Huddersfield, HD4 6TA

The nature of this historic site is of overwhelming importance as a Scheduled Ancient Monument also accommodating a Grade II listed building. Castle Hill is Kirklees' most important heritage site and a unique and much loved symbol of the town and its identity.

We therefore concur with the comments previously submitted in response to a similar planning application made in 2019 from other consultees representing the heritage sector, such as Historic England stating that the preservation and protection of the site must be of the highest priority so that Kirklees residents will be able to enjoy Castle Hill for generations to come. In addition, Historic England stated "In addition, Castle Hill contributes to the importance of the Green Belt in this area and any proposal will require very special circumstances to be established in support of any development. We do not consider that the uncertain nature of the visitor facilities provides these necessary public benefits and circumstances". Although further information has been provided as part of this subsequent planning application about the nature of the facilities, there does not seem to be a detailed management plan or business plan of the level necessary to remove uncertainties about the future success of the proposal.

It is important that the site is managed as part of a strategic plan for heritage across Kirklees as set out in the Council's Heritage Strategy https://www.kirklees.gov.uk/beta/culture-strategy/heritage-strategy.aspx which was published in 2024. A long term strategic plan will ensure that Castle Hill's future is sustained, that public learning and enjoyment is enhanced, and that risks relating to the site are minimised and appropriately managed.

Although providing public access, visitor facilities and information is very important, this must be balanced with conservation of a Scheduled Ancient Monument, and other ways could be considered to deliver these outcomes. Some examples of these are providing new interpretation in the Jubilee Tower which is already a popular heritage attraction, providing new outdoor heritage interpretation panels, the use of mobile digital heritage interpretation and providing toilets and pop up high quality food facilities lower down the hill, but adjacent to the historic site. Providing flexible facilities away from the immediate vicinity of the Scheduled Ancient Monument would also minimise the risk of traffic congestion, emissions, erosion of the archaeological site and improve visitor safety and the ambience of the site.

The proposal does include a heritage interpretation space, and some information has been supplied as to what form this would take and what would be included. However the application has not been accompanied by a heritage interpretation plan for the facility determining which audiences would be provided for and how. There is no evidence of public consultation about the provision of heritage interpretation.

The document "Castle Hill Visitor Centre - Background, Vision and Management" sets out the proposal as follows:
"Developer and local authority are committed to a strong collaborative partnership to develop a comprehensive management plan for Castle Hill. The CIC Board can then take advantage of other expertise and experience available to them. A full range of talents can thus contribute to joint decision-making in the development, implementation, and oversight of the Castle Hill management plan."
However, until a formal agreement with Kirklees Council of this nature is in place, this section cannot be considered as wholly relevant to the application.

In addition, there is a lack business plan information available which would determine whether the heritage interpretation facility and the Visitor Centre as a whole, could be sustained or whether this service could be withdrawn by the operators due to lack of financial stability.

Tolson Museum which is managed by Kirklees Museums and Galleries, currently covers the story of Castle Hill in a first floor gallery, which contains a model of the site, collections from the archaeological excavations at Castle Hill and a range of interpretation information. The gallery is set in the historic context of the history of Huddersfield from early settlers through to the development of Ramsden's town. It is very likely that the Museum and Gallery in development as part of town centre Our Cultural Heart Home - Our Cultural Heart, will tell a comprehensive story of Castle Hill, the town's most iconic and significant heritage site, ensuring that visitors and residents would be able to access the information and collections readily and be encouraged to visit Castle Hill. Similarly visitors to the Hill would be encouraged to visit the museum to find out more and to be able to view collections.