Castle Hill Visitor Centre

Planning Support, Design & Access Statement

08 April 2025 – Revision A

1.00 Introduction

1.01 This Statement accompanies and supports an application for development including a new visitor centre building at Castle Hill, the Scheduled Ancient Monument above Almondbury, Huddersfield.

1.02 What was essentially the same scheme received conditional planning approval in February 2022 (2018/62/93591). The sensitivity and complexity of the scheme meant that it was not possible to discharge all planning conditions and receive Scheduled Monument Consent in time to implement the scheme by the deadline set by the earlier planning approval. Hence the current reapplication, with no significant changes.

1.03 This Statement therefore follows a simple format, comprising:

i. The Significance of the Site
ii. The Proposal
iii. Planning Policy & Impact of the Proposal
iv. Public Benefits to be Delivered
v. Access & Highways
vi. Landscape & Archaeology

1.04 This document is intended to be read in conjunction with the application forms, the scheme drawings and all other associated documentation.

1.05 In 2006 Kirklees Council (KMC) appointed the independent Consultants Atkins to prepare a Conservation Management Plan for the Hill. Atkins later produced a report, the 'Castle Hill Setting Study' and these documents have informed decisions by KMC regarding this most important heritage asset, which it was acknowledged had been ill-served for a long time.

1.06 Key management policies identified by Atkins for Castle Hill have now been formally adopted within KMC's Heritage and Tourism Strategies.

2.00 Significance of Castle Hill

2.01 Castle Hill is the most important heritage asset within Kirklees. It is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and the Victoria Tower, sited on top of the Hill is a listed building. Castle Hill is not just a local attraction; it has the potential to become a flagship heritage site for Kirklees and the wider West Yorkshire region. However, without essential visitor infrastructure, its ability to fulfill this role remains limited. This development would allow Castle Hill to be a key stop in heritage trails linking other historical sites, such as Huddersfield's industrial heritage, Yorkshire's National Parks, and nearby archaeological sites.

2.02 An extract from the listing entry (no. 1009846) explains the Hill's significance as an ancient monument: "*Castle Hill, Almondbury is a good and well-preserved example of a slight univallate hillfort which developed into a small multivallate hillfort. Not only does it lie outside the main distribution (of such monuments), it belongs to an extremely small group of northern single-banked hillforts with an internal area of more than 1ha. It is, in addition, one of the very few small multivallate hillforts datable to the period before 400BC and is unique* in that, during its multi-banked phase, the bivallate interior was surrounded by two outer earthworks set in places more than 30m apart. It also possesses other rare features, including an outwork, and its earliest ramparts preserve the pre-enclosure ground surface contemporary with earlier Prehistoric use of the site.*"

2.03 The Castle Hill Setting Study, referred to above, says at paragraph 4.25: *"The topographical prominence of the hilltop within its setting has been the key factor in its settlement, use and reuse over thousands of years".* This accounts for two further factors that contribute to its significance:

- it can be seen from a great distance in many directions as a prominent feature in the landscape

- views from the site are panoramic and largely unbroken, allowing an appreciation of the landscape rarely possible from other viewpoints.

2.04 Significance is also given by the importance of Castle Hill to local people. Paragraph 4.14 of the Setting Study notes: *"Castle Hill is a treasured and valued place for members of the local communities who consider it to be part of their and the area's identity. The hilltop is significant as an extremely valuable local recreation site, drawing in considerable numbers of people from local and more distant communities every year who come for a range of leisure activities. Castle Hill features strongly in tourism literature as an icon of the area: a distinctive site…….. used by local communities as a place to bring visitors, and former residents of the area to go on their visits home. Such use reflects the strong sense of local pride in the Site as an icon of the wider area. Other intangible significances related to Castle Hill include its infrequent use as an educational resource and study destination by different school groups, its use as a base for events, including celebratory fireworks displays and the use of the beacon, and its use for small scale ritual activity."*

2.05 The historical and archaeological significances of Castle Hill deserve to be more widely understood through the provision of improved education and interpretation resources, and for these to be accessible to all who wish to visit. Since the demolition of the former Castle Hill Hotel there have been no visitor facilities at this iconic venue. KMC acknowledges the latent potential of Castle Hill if suitable visitor facilities could be provided.

3.00 The Proposal

3.01 The proposal is to create a new visitor centre building on top of Castle Hill together with improvements to access, parking etc, to fulfil the Council's aspirations for the site and public benefit, without unacceptable impact on the heritage assets or their setting.

3.02 Establishing the best location for the building was the first concern. After extensive discussion, the site of the former Castle Hill Hotel was chosen for the following reasons:

- it was the area least likely to affect archaeological remains
- it enabled the building to be set into the landscape to achieve minimal impact when viewed from outside the site
- it enabled a beneficial relationship with the entrance road, the car park and the Victoria Tower
- it provided the best opportunity to connect service supplies (from the old hotel) without the need for extensive new trenching

3.03 In relation to the first bullet point above, West Yorkshire Archaeological Services (WYAS) was engaged to undertake site investigation of the area proposed for construction. Their findings concluded that the siting should have no effects on the site's archaeology (see 7.02). Their full report can be made available.

3.04 The most important parts of the building are the education and interpretation facilities. This comprises a suite of three spaces for these purposes at lower ground level, accessed directly from the car park, together with a reception desk, a gift shop and family friendly toilets. All these facilities are free to use.

3.05 Because of the need to create a financially sustainable facility, a range of further accommodation was devised, predominantly at upper ground level with a light, bright cafeteria and servery for daytime use, capable of being transformed into a restaurant and bar for evenings. This can be accessed by stair or lift from the lower ground. See also 3.11-3.13.

3.06 Thanks to the topography of the site there is also direct access to the outside from the upper ground floor, with views of the Hill, the Tower and the landscape beyond.

3.07 For many years the Castle Hill Hotel stood on top of Catle Hill. It was such a popular venue that the applicants applied to extend the building and the larger scheme received planning approval.

3.08 The scale of the new Centre is smaller than the Castle Hill Hotel extension scheme that received planning approval. The total volume of the earlier extended approved scheme was 4,032 cu.m. The total volume of the present scheme is 2,624 cu.m.

Importantly, in terms of visual impact, the entire volume of the earlier approved scheme was above natural ground (car park) level whereas only 800 cu.m. of the presently proposed scheme is above ground.

3.09 The comparison can be seen in drawing no.3287 (0-) 19 which forms part of the application drawing set which shows overlays of the old and new elevations.

3.010 The overall ground floor footprint of the extended approved scheme was 420 sq.m. and the overall ground floor footprint of the present scheme is only 217 sq.m..

3.10 The height and therefore prominence of the application building is far less than the former hotel or the approved extended scheme. The scale has been developed to sit within the context of the Hill and the neighbouring listed Victoria Tower, complementing but not competing with this important feature. This aspect of the design is well illustrated in the application drawing set.

3.11 It is uncommon to find accommodation at heritage sites. At Castle Hill it plays a key role in the site's income streams, ensuring its long-term financial sustainability. Six rooms provide essential revenue that helps subsidise free facilities and services for visitors, including educational programmes, enhanced interpretation, and improved public amenities. This reinforces Castle Hill's role as a cultural and historical asset, providing lasting public benefit beyond its immediate financial contribution.

3.12 Additionally, the accommodation supports the local economy by addressing the shortage of overnight stays in Huddersfield, attracting visitors who contribute to local businesses, restaurants, and the hospitality sector. It also provides a convenient and affordable option for parents visiting students at Huddersfield's universities and schools, helping to ease the demand for accommodation in the area.

3.13 The accommodation is specifically designed as basic overnight lodging and will not be repurposed for any other use. Its sole function is to support the site's financial sustainability while addressing local accommodation needs. Guests staying at Castle Hill will also contribute to the catering revenue. As a key pillar of the site's income

streams, this accommodation is critical to the financial viability of the project. Without it, the site's ability to sustain operations, maintain high-quality visitor experiences, and continue providing free public benefits would be greatly impacted.

3.14 The need to ensure a financially sustainable facility to enable delivery of the public benefits raises the question of site management. Three models were considered:

1. Private Commercial Operation

• A privately run visitor centre could generate profit but would risk appearing to prioritise revenue over heritage conservation and accessibility.

2. Charitable Trust or Foundation

• A registered charity model aligns with heritage and education goals but faces limitations in commercial revenue generation due to restrictions on trading activities.

3. Community Interest Company (CIC).

- This would give a wider range of stakeholders the opportunity to be involved and would avoid queries over private gain for public benefits.

3.15 The essence of the scheme is that Castle Hill Visitor Centre is not a commercial development with public benefits, it is a public benefit-driven project supported by sustainable revenue streams. For this reason the CIC model is our preference for management of the scheme.

3.16 Discussions with Historic England have confirmed that the final, detailed Management Plan, covering site management, traffic control, and landscape maintenance, can be finalised prior to project commencement. HE has agreed such detail is not required for comment at this stage of the application process.

3.17 A brief summary of minor design changes since the previous approval:

- Lower Ground Floor Entrance curved - no straight walls.

- Lower Ground Floor Entrance layout revised to reconfigure interpretation space, reception, shop, accessible WC and staff cycle store. Bedrooms position adjusted to accommodate.

4.0 Planning Policy and Impact

4.01 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) of December 2024 deals with Conserving & Enhancing the Historic Environment at Section 16, paragraphs 202 to 221. Compliance with this section also goes a long way to ensuring the scheme meets the requirements of Section 13, Protecting Green Belt Land.

4.02 NPPF paragraph 219 notes that LPAs "*should look for opportunities for new development within…..the setting of heritage assets, to enhance or better reveal their significance.*" The entire point of the development is to improve access to this major heritage asset and enhance its significance through education and interpretation, in accordance with KMC policies.

4.03 This dovetails nicely with paragraph 155a of the NPPF where the concept of 'grey belt' land is mentioned, as land within Green Belt that has been previously developed. Development should be considered in such locations where approval would not undermine the other general purposes of Green Belt.

4.04 Locating the new building on the site of the former Castle Hill Hotel fits perfectly into this definition whilst also complying with paragraph 219.

4.05 The building sits into the topography allowing good views out but with minimal impact when looking back into the site. By sitting the scheme down into the top of the hill towards the far side of the site from the car park there is no view of the building from the access road until one emerges into the car park. Views from Ashes Lane, which runs along the base of the hillside, are shielded by the hillside itself. At the top of the hillside the new building is sited to permit views over the wider landscape,

4.06 Thus it is only from a considerable distance that any view of the building can be obtained from outside the site and the form and materials of the scheme have

been chosen to minimise visual impact from such distant views; the Victoria Tower remains the construction that catches the eye. The entrance level and ultimate building height have been reviewed with the LPA and HE before arriving at the current proposal. Visualisations are included in the application documentation that illustrate the development in terms of views from within and without the site. These aid an assessment of the impact of the new scheme on the Hill and the Tower.

4.07 For all these reasons we believe the impact of the development will lead to "less than substantial harm to the significance of a heritage asset" as noted in paragraph 215 of the NPPF. Rather than harming the asset, the scheme is about sustaining and enhancing the asset as noted at paragraph 210a) of the NPPF.

4.08 Paragraph 215 of the NPPF confirms that any perceived harm caused by the proposal must be weighed against the public benefits produced. It is our opinion that any perceived harm by the scheme to the heritage assets is substantially outweighed by the public benefits.

5.0 Public Benefits

5.01 The public benefits of the scheme are numerous and varied, hence the length of this part of the Statement. They may be broadly divided into sections:

- Access to better information about Castle Hill
- Greater promotion of the heritage asset
- Benefits to the local economy
- Shelter, catering and WC provision
- Improved access and security

These broad sections often overlap and are expanded upon below.

5.02 Castle Hill's importance demands that local people, scholars and visitors be given the opportunity fully to understand and appreciate its history and how that history illuminates the story of local life over more than 4,000 years. Visiting the Hill is a visceral experience, where landscape, history and meteorology come together to

provide a memorable encounter. The impact of such an experience is amplified with an awareness and understanding of the history of the hill.

5.03 Access to Castle Hill is presently restricted for many people because of the topography of the site and the absence of welfare facilities that are essential for many visitors: shelter, WC provision, the opportunity for refreshment etc. At present access is only possible by car or for fit ambulant visitors and cyclists. The new scheme will widen access to the non-ambulant, the neurodiverse, hearing and sight impaired, amongst others.

5.04 There will be a first-rate exhibition and interpretation facility on the Hill itself. Existing information boards only scratch the surface. However, any harm to the monument in providing new facilities must be minimal and outweighed by these public benefits.

5.05 Increased awareness of Castle Hill as Kirklees' premier heritage asset and for Kirklees cultural tourism more widely. Free access to the interpretation and engagement spaces – Education Room, Gallery Room and Immersive Room. These will tell the stories of the hill through a range of media and provide learning spaces for educational and special interest groups to provide an immersive learning experience. The visitor centre will be free for everyone to ensure that Castle Hill's heritage is accessible to visitors from all socio-economic groups.

5.06 The interpretation and engagement spaces will be open every day. The visitor centre is seen as a major educational resource and organised school groups will be able to book time in the Education Room for a range of activities. (Refer to the separate interpretation strategy). Booking for these groups is necessary to enable preparation and recording of such visits. These groups will enjoy free refreshments during their visits. As members of the public, school age children are free to visit at any time.

5.07 Greater promotion of the heritage asset locally and beyond with details of the facilities available and linking Castle Hill with other local visitor attractions.

Interpretation and educational materials managed, reviewed and improved on a regular basis will feed into the promotional initiatives and online engagement.

5.08 Increased knowledge about and understanding of the asset will engender a greater sense of value and care in the public. An active, community-led space fosters local responsibility for preserving Castle Hill.

5.09 Volunteer programs could train local residents as site guides, conservation helpers, and eventcoordinators, embedding public ownership of the site's future. Without these facilities, Castle Hill risks remaining a passive landmark rather than a living, community-driven heritage site.

5.10 Free access to high-quality WC facilities maintained, cleaned and monitored by the management at all times that the building is open. There will be full disability access plus baby changing facilities and it is not necessary to engage with the broader centre to use the WCs.

5.11 Shelter for visitors to the Hill during inclement weather both externally and internally; internal spaces are heated.

5.12 Availability of hot and cold refreshments from simple hot and cold beverages to full hot meals. Café during the day; bar and restaurant in the evening. Fresh locally sourced meals and ingredients. Indoor and outdoor seating with scenic views and all budgets catered for including grab-and-go snacks.

5.13 Detailed, high-quality educational and interpretation materials across the site, internally and externally, in formats accessible to all, regularly reviewed covering Castle Hill, its history, flora and fauna etc all monitored as part of the ongoing management of the site. External material would of course be available at all times and inclusivity is fundamental to the scheme: wheelchair accessibility; neurodivergent friendly spaces; braille signage; audio-guided tours; multilingual interpretation.

5.14 Unlike many other heritage sites, this project actively improves green space management, wildlife protection, and habitat restoration. Dedicated cycle storage

to encourage green travel; electric vehicle charging points for sustainable transport; improved pedestrian access to reduce reliance on cars. All these help to reduce the site's carbon footprint.

5.15 Opportunities for promotion of the heritage asset locally, across the region and beyond to raise awareness of the monument and the improved visitor facilities available, raising the visitor profile of Kirklees. Digital access and remote engagement through website and online resources will include educational and research materials, virtual tours and expert led webinars plus the opportunity to buy shop merchandise online.

5.16 Whilst the entire scheme is to be used to convey information about Castle Hill, a concise history of Castle Hill will be available within the interpretation and engagement spaces. This will encourage exploration of the site itself to help understand the landforms, how and when they were created, and why.

5.17 Information boards will explain and interpret Castle Hill in situ, meaning visitors can experience the impact of history immediately. This will include the WW2 gun emplacements just a stone's throw from the hill. During the development phase of the scheme schools outreach programmes will be considered including input from the relevant departments of the local authority.

5.18 The management team is acutely aware of the educational opportunities for schoolchildren that the scheme represents. These can start even before completion. Such opportunities mean there will be an awareness of and eagerness to visit the centre as soon as it opens. The visitor centre will provide permanent educational resources, offering free learning programmes, workshops, and interactive experiences. Partnerships with Huddersfield University, local schools, and historical societies could be formed to facilitate research and community engagement.

5.19 One easily overlooked public benefit of this development is the creation of a space that serves local communities as much as tourists. The Centre is a perfect venue to host talks, exhibitions, and community-led activities, making Castle Hill a living part

of local culture rather than just a static historical site. Seasonal and themed programming (e.g., archaeology days, heritage festivals, nighttime astronomy sessions) would broaden engagement beyond typical daytime visitors.

5.20 A 24 hr/365 days a year supervisory presence on the Hill. This will include video surveillance (recorded) and a night porter service to discourage antisocial behaviour, theft, vandalism, substance abuse etc. This commitment to security can only enhance the visitor experience, reduce the need for police intervention and provide long-term site integrity. Non-polluting lighting of the exterior will further discourage antisocial behaviour.

5.21 Improved access for all and improved parking with designated disability parking spaces, electric vehicle charging points and secure bicycle storage. Access road and parking improvements will not impinge on the archaeology of the site. Incentives will be given for pedestrian, cycle and public transport access. Management will make information on public transport, foot and cycle access routes available throughout the local area.

5.22 There will be new employment opportunities in the short and longer terms during both the construction and operational phases. Commitment to creating a sustainable development means that the new employment opportunities will be for the long-term, not merely short part-time positions. There will be 30 to 35 permanent roles to be filled in hospitality, visitor services, maintenance and security.

5.23 Many heritage sites actively contribute to local economies. Without proper infrastructure, Castle Hill is missing opportunities to support local tourism, education, and hospitality sectors. The Castle Hill Visitor Centre would provide a much needed significant economic boost to Huddersfield, generating an estimated £5–10 million annually through increased tourism, local business growth, and job creation. Higher visitor numbers would drive spending in hospitality, retail, and accommodation, benefiting the town's economy and long-term development.

5.24 Heritage sites that fail to respond to change risk becoming disconnected from modern audiences. Conservation is an active, not passive process. Simply

maintaining Castle Hill in its current form does not address the accessibility and security challenges that continue to impact the site.

5.25 Other Scheduled Monuments have responded successfully to similar challenges. Sites like Stonehenge, Tintagel, and Hadrian's Wall have all introduced visitor infrastructure whilst protecting historical integrity. This proposal gives Castle Hill a long-term future as a valuable cultural asset for Kirklees.

6.00 Access and Highways

6.01 Access and highways matters have been a major consideration in developing the application scheme. Following appointment of an independent Highways Consultant, both HE and KMC Highways department were consulted on proposals to improve access without impinging on the heritage asset. After discussion, HE and KMC Highways agreed the principle of a proposal to create three strategically located passing places on the access road. These were designed in detail and site investigation was undertaken to prove the viability of the proposals.

6.02 The topography of the site demanded that the passing bays should be on the upper, monument, side of the road, so careful design was needed to ensure no that no harm to the heritage asset would result. This has to be the case for engineering reasons and involves minimal work to create them, thus minimising any risk to the archaeology. Investigation has shown that the portions of hillside that will be affected in the creation of the passing places do not impinge on areas of archaeological interest. It must also be understood that at the time the access road was built, an area far in excess of that required to form the passing places would have been disturbed for the road construction. New work will therefore only be within previously disturbed ground.

6.03 Traffic management will form part of the detailed Management Plan, which has been drafted in key terms. Details will be agreed at a later date.

6.04 General landscape maintenance etc on the Hill will also form part of the detailed Management Plan. Landscape maintenance within the building curtilage again must

await agreement of the management vehicle for the scheme, which will determine the final Management Plan.

7.00 Landscape & Archaeology

7.01 Regarding landscape, the scheme aims to make minimal impact on the existing landscape of the Hill. This is clearly paramount for the protection of the archaeology of the site. An impact assessment of the scheme on the site's ecology has been undertaken by an independent consultant and submitted to the authority's ecological officer. We understand that the officer is satisfied with the report.

7.02 By restricting proposed works to the area occupied by the earlier hotel, investigation by WYAS has shown that this will not impact adversely on the archaeology of the hill. *Archaeological evaluation by trial trenching as part of the current development proposals was carried out in 2018 to record the extent of 19th to 21st-century disturbance of earlier deposits. The three trenches excavated revealed demolition deposits relating to the previous hotel, surviving remains of the hotel cellar and buried services. Only one linear feature, on a similar alignment to the bank, may be of note, but it produced no dateable finds. On the basis of this evaluation, and previous trial trenching in 1998 and 2001, the impact of development within the immediate footprint of the former hotel and its extensions is considered to be low. Elsewhere, the impact of development works on the scheduled monument is likely to be low to moderate where ground disturbance is minimal (e.g. modifications to the car park) and high where ground disturbance is significant. WYAS Report.*

7.03 The building will be blended into the site with bermed areas planted with a grassland species mix already present on the Hill. There are small areas of hard landscaping for the service yard and external terrace on the upper ground floor overlooking the car park. No further landscaping works are required nor envisaged although the site plan shows a logical relationship between existing footpaths on the Hill and new footpaths around the building. These aim to combine 'desire lines' with guidance towards building entrances.

7.04 A minimal but effective signage programme will be agreed to aid visitors without impacting on this sensitive site.

7.05 Lighting for the car park has been mentioned during scheme development. Hill visitors are presently used to the fact that the car park is unlit and the aim is to reduce to a minimum light 'pollution' on the Hill. Exceptions, for example, occasional decorative lighting of the Tower, as presently happens, would be retained.

7.06 Furthermore, cabling trenches for a lighting installation could impact on the archaeology of the site. Our proposal is to provide minimal downward facing lighting only to the perimeter of the scheme which can be fed from cabling run within the new construction and thus not encroaching into undisturbed ground.

7.07 On the subject of service trenching and its possible detrimental effect on site archaeology, the service feeds to the old hotel were not removed at the time of demolition. As the new building sits within the original hotel area the existing service feed locations can be reused. Even if the capacity of the service feeds needs to be increased, new services can be fed through the existing ducting, obviating the need for new trenching which could be detrimental to the archaeology of the site.

7.08 Similarly, minor improvements are proposed to the access road, including the creation of passing places (see above).

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Rev A – Addition of WYAS report summary in section 7.02