



Historic England

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Our ref: PA01137905  
Your ref: 31550/A3/LK/SO

8 November 2021

Dear [REDACTED]

## Request for Pre-application Advice

### SITES SOUTH AND SOUTH-WEST OF SHORTSTOWN, BEDFORDSHIRE

Thank you for contacting us regarding your proposals for the above site. The proposal in question concerns the laying out of public open space – also referred to as Shortstown Discovery Park, on the former airfield that lies to the south/south-west of the grade II\* airship hangars. You have provided us with an annotated indicative drawing of the park and an auxiliary note to the existing heritage Statement to help explain and support the proposal for which we are grateful. We have also discussed the proposal with you briefly in person. We understand that the current scheme has come forward following comments that we made concerning an earlier scheme and to which we raised a number of concerns.

#### *Significance/impact*

We have previously highlighted the importance of the airfield as a key part of the grade II\* listed buildings' setting, the essential character and appearance of which, remains largely unchanged. As such the historic functional relationship between the hangars and former airfield is still clearly discernible and contributes to the experience and appreciation that one has of this remarkable heritage asset, as also noted by you in your report at paragraph 5.3.

The proposal seeks to re-order the former airfield by incorporating various hard and soft landscape features so that it can be used as a public park/leisure space. The proposal would result in some change to the appearance and physical structure of the land and we accept that some intervention maybe necessary in order to provide a certain level of enhanced amenity value. However, this must be carefully considered and designed to respect and be in sympathy with the historic character of the former airfield.



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Please note that Historic England operates an access to information policy.

Correspondence or information which you send us may therefore become publicly available.





Your report identifies the specific sensitivities and essence of the airfield setting, in particular the openness of the space to the south and west and the surviving remnants of various features leftover from when the airfield was operational.

We note that the concept drawing indicates that, other than the proposed amphitheatre, much of the existing grassland area would remain as existing - particularly that to the west of the hangars so that the existing uninterrupted views can be retained as well the scale and character of the former airfield, and we therefore welcome this approach.

We note that various other landscape features are proposed, which will have varying levels of impact.

## Path/signage

A path runs along the western edge of the site and then curves gently through the eastern section to link up with the residential area. This is a hard landscape feature that would not be out of place on an airfield and subject to agreeing a suitable material and detailing we would have no objection.

We have no objection in principle to signage and recognise that it can help to orientate and inform users of the park. We suggest that signage is kept to a strict minimum and that its design rationale, detailing and materials draws inspiration from archive material that relates directly to the hangars and its aviation heritage as appropriate. Maybe the signage post for example could be based on historic runway markers?

## Viewing Tower

This feature has the potential to bring an element of visual interest to the park and we have no objection in principle. The integrity of its design, choice of materials and method of construction will be paramount in ensuring that it is a high-quality feature that has a certain level of authenticity, and is worthy of its historic context. Its design should draw upon carefully researched archive material, such as architectural drawings and photographs of similar historic structures as appropriate. The height and scale of the tower also needs to be carefully considered relative to the hangars and we note that the thumbnail suggests that it might be around 8-9 metres in height? Whilst the tower is unlikely to compete with the hangars themselves, care should nevertheless be taken to ensure that it does not become too much of a 'distraction' that draws the eye.

## Amphitheatre

This is not a typical feature that is usually associated with airfields, and the creation of such would result in a fairly significant change to the historic landscape form of the site. The drawing makes reference to - *a very slightly sunken grass*





*amphitheatre...carefully integrated into the landscape...* We understand that the feature would occupy a relatively small proportion of the park, and we suggest that in order for it to read as a subtle landscape feature it should not be cut too deeply below the existing ground levels.

We accept that this feature would retain the sense of openness and would in turn ensure that key views of the hangars remain uninterrupted, and we welcome this. Whilst the visual effect may be low-key, as claimed, a sectional drawing might help to better understand the full effect from ground level.

The excavation works may also impact upon below ground archaeological remains and we recommend that you seek the expert guidance of the County archaeological staff to advise on avoidance/mitigation.

### Heritage Play Area

We have no objection in principle to this feature. We believe that it is possible to incorporate this into the landscape in a low-key way with minimal structural elements so that it would have minimal impact upon the setting of the hangars. Again, the success of this feature depends very much upon having a high quality of design and materials. We suggest that play equipment is kept to a minimum with a few well-designed bespoke pieces that reference the airfield's heritage rather than a proliferation of generic 'off the peg' play equipment.

### Planting

We note that the majority of the site would remain as open grassland which is reflective of the former airfield character, but would also include some areas of woodland pasture and wild flower meadows. We consider this to be an appropriate approach as it strikes a balance between retention of the historic airfield character with the creation of an attractive and pleasant leisure space. We recommend that planting should not be too formal in character but should be reflective of the sort of landscaping that is typical of military airfields in terms of its scale, tree species and layout.

### *Policy context*

The importance attached to setting is recognised by the Government's National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and in guidance, including GPA3 *The Setting of Heritage Assets 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (published by Historic England on behalf of the Historic Environment Forum, December 2017).

The NPPF defines the setting of a heritage asset as, *'The surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. Its extent is not fixed and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve. Elements of a setting may make a positive or negative*





*contribution to the significance of an asset, may affect the ability to appreciate that significance or may be neutral' (Annex 2).*

Paragraph 200 makes clear that any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or **from development within its setting**), should require clear and convincing justification.

### *Historic England's position*

We recognise that the site provides an opportunity to bring the immediate setting of the historic hangars into a new beneficial use that celebrates their importance, and we are supportive of this in principle. We are pleased to see that the design concept has taken account of and has been informed by the historic form and features of the former airfield.

The scheme that has been presented to us appears overall to preserve the setting of the highly graded heritage assets without it involving significant alteration or intervention. We accept however that the creation of the proposed park will involve some degree of change to the setting in its current form, and we conclude that any harm to significance that would arise from these changes, would be slight and therefore less than substantial in NPPF terms. We acknowledge that the creation of a community park would deliver public benefit, and therefore in accordance with paragraph 2020 of the NPPF it would fall to the local planning authority to weigh the harm against the benefit.

We hope that these comments will be of use to you. We would be happy to comment further as the scheme develops.

Yours sincerely

[Redacted signature]

Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas

[Redacted contact information]

## **SITES SOUTH AND SOUTHWEST OF SHORTSTOWN, BEDFORDSHIRE Request for Pre-application Advice**

