Dear ROYAL HIGH SCHOOL

Following the five workshops and associated meetings held between May and September 2014, the aim of the letter is to update the pre-application planning advice with regard to the proposals to convert and extend the former Royal High School to provide a prestige hotel. The letter also reflects on the workshop process as a mechanism for pre-application discussions and identifies the issues which remain to be considered in the proposed further workshops agreed at the meeting held on 5 November with senior Council officials.

1 Workshop Process

The workshop process has been informative and has developed an understanding of the building and has explored the needs of a prestige hotel on this site. The aim was to explore whether these two elements could be compatible.

For a site of this nature, it is common for the Planning Service to hold a series of pre-application meetings. However, the use of an independent chair to facilitate the discussion was innovative and a positive addition to the process.

A considerable amount of working time was taken up by presentations relating to the alterations to the listed building and the scale of the new development; both of which are critical to the feasibility of the hotel. The discussion time was limited. In that regard, it may have been more useful to involve a smaller range of individual interests and disciplines. At times the number of people present actually restricted the level of meaningful discussion.

However, the general/...
However, the general scale of the hotel was a fixed entity. In this respect, it has to be questioned whether there was scope to reach a consensus during the workshops and whether it could be a truly collaborative process.

The workshops provided an opportunity to assess the various options for the prestige hotel. However, given the remit for the exercise, the workshops did not consider a full options appraisal for the building and its site.

2 Updated Pre-application Advice

Following the workshops, I consider it useful to update previous pre-application advice provided in relation to the re-use of the main listed building and redevelopment of the site:

(a) Nature of the Proposals

There is a requirement for you to explore the potential for a prestige hotel on the site in accordance with your contract with the Council. To achieve a hotel of this nature, it is appreciated and understood that a range of associated facilities are a necessity.

Planning policies are supportive of a new use for building and for a hotel in principle. It is accepted that to accommodate any new use in the listed building, change and alteration will be required.

The key issue is whether the building and the site can accommodate the changes and the quantum of development required for a prestige hotel without detrimental impact on the building, its setting and the wider conservation area, and the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site.

(b) Importance of the Site

The importance of the site has been fully explained and recognised as part of the workshop discussions. The former Royal High school building by Thomas Hamilton is category A listed. It is widely recognised as the finest example of Greek Revival architecture in Scotland. There was much discussion about Hamilton’s concept for the building and certain views.

The relationship of/...
The relationship of the building to its surrounding landscape is fundamental to its setting and its architectural philosophy. The former Royal High School and Calton Hill both sit within the New Town Conservation Area and the buildings within this wider landscape/topographical composition form a significant element of the character and appearance of the conservation area. The landscape character of Calton Hill is significant in its own right, reflected by its SSSI status and its inclusion in the New Town Gardens Historic Garden/Designed Landscape inventory.

The relationship of the building to the landscape in many ways encapsulates the Outstanding Universal Value of The Old and New Towns of Edinburgh World Heritage Site. Alongside other classical buildings on the hill, it forms a set piece that embodies the ‘Athens of the North’ concept.

(c) Appraisal of Proposals

- **Demolition of Buildings**
  Our previous advice stands in regard of Planning policies supporting the demolition of the gymnasium building and the later single storey blocks. This would allow scope for new development within the site. The loss of the gatehouse, whilst not original, would be more contentious and its loss could only be considered where the benefits of the wider scheme outweighed the disbenefits of its loss. The key issue is to demonstrate how the proposed demolitions would be justified in relation to the SHEP tests.

- **Alterations**
  The proposed interventions to the listed building have been outlined over the course of the workshop sessions. It is accepted that alterations will be required for any new use but these have to sensitive and necessary. There was little opportunity to discuss the interventions in detail on the ground and to explore alternatives to the proposals.

  It can only be emphasised that the building will need to evolve and change and it is recognised that some of the interventions would be necessary to improve the circulation and operation of many new uses, including that of a hotel. However, many of the alterations seek to undermine the fundamental special architectural interest of the building. The acknowledged genius of the building lies in the fact that Hamilton successfully adapted the windowless Greek Temple model to a school use. By attempting to impose the requirements of the prestige hotel on the front of the building, such as a grand staircase, window and door openings and conservatories, is to ignore why the building is recognised as Scotland’s finest example of Greek Revival architecture.

  The key issue/...
The key issue is whether the proposed alterations are essential for the operation of a prestige hotel and how they can be justified contrary to both Planning and Historic Scotland’s advice. To date, the proposed alterations in themselves demonstrate that a hotel of this nature cannot be accommodated in the building without significant and potentially adverse impact on its architectural interest.

- **Scale of Development**
  In addition to the alterations to the listed building, the scheme involves new development within the site.

  We recognise that the design is still developing and the workshop series considered only key principles. The former Royal High School is a monumental composition based on a temple, lesser temple and colonnade; this was deliberate to reinforce the similarities between Calton Hill and the Acropolis - reinforcing Edinburgh as the Athens of the North. The introduction of any new development within the site has to understand and respect this composition and the gymnasium block and later single storey blocks arguably manage to achieve this. The key issue is how the building, its setting and views are considered literally in the round as part of Calton Hill.

  A number of options were explored during the course of the workshop sessions but the difficulty for Planning has been that the required floor area has been a constant. Rather than considering the potential capacity of the site to absorb new development in a sympathetic manner, the workshops have focussed on reconfiguring a minimum floor area. With this requirement, it was difficult to reach a consensus.

  The site is not large and the location for any new development is restricted with no scope to push development significantly back from the listed building. Any development would therefore be visible and as such, the setting and architectural composition of the listed building are key considerations.

  The options demonstrated that, in whatever way the development was reconfigured, it could not be respectful of the listed building and there were adverse impacts on the composition of the listed building, its landscape setting and key views. The options explored in the workshops have served to convince us that the quantum of development required by a hotel of this nature is unlikely to be accommodated on the site in a manner consistent with planning policies.

  Whilst other options/...
Whilst other options were discussed, the proposal presented in workshop 5 came back round to ‘notional symmetry’ for the design of the extensions. Your original proposal also involved symmetrical extensions and Planning’s letter dated 10 July 2010 clearly questioned the validity of the approach.

The symmetrical approach is persuasive, but only compared to other options tabled. The two wing extensions are still significant in size; each one effectively matches the footprint of the existing building and, in part, they are higher. They would not be subservient to the listed building, undermining its primacy within the site. Planning also remains of the view that attempting to add to the existing composition of the existing building in this symmetrical way competes with its architectural significance.

The key issue is whether an alternative design approach can accommodate the scale of development required for the prestige hotel proposal in a manner that can be supported by planning policies.

3 Conclusions

The options to accommodate a prestige hotel of the scale which you have specified have been fully explored in the workshops to date. Planning is concerned that, as presented so far, the combined and cumulative impacts of both the alterations to the listed building and the new development would have a clear detrimental impact on the special architectural and historic interest of the listed building and its setting, the character and appearance of the conservation area and the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site.

The issues to be addressed in the proposed further workshops have been detailed above and can be summarised as:

- The quantum of development which the building and site can accommodate without detrimental impact on the building, its setting and the wider conservation area, and the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site.
- How the building, its setting and views are considered in the round as part of Calton Hill.
- How the proposed demolitions on site could be justified in relation to the SHEP tests.
- How the necessary/...
How the necessary alterations to the main building can be accommodated.
Whether an alternative design approach can accommodate the scale of development required for the prestige hotel proposal in a manner likely to be supported by planning policies.

In preparing for further workshops, it is important that detailed agendas are prepared to address these issues and that plans and supporting information are provided to the workshop participants by an agreed date before each workshop. This will provide opportunity for detailed consideration and assist in focussing workshop discussions on the resolution of differences.

I am copying this letter to [redacted] and to [redacted], Historic Scotland, to assist in the preparations for the workshops.

You can be assured of the Planning Service’s continued participation in further workshops to explore the key issues prior to commencing formal pre-application discussions.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]
Acting Head of Planning and Building Standards

Copy: [redacted] Economic Development
[redacted], Historic Scotland