Position Statement by Historic England for proposed development by Tunbridge Wells BC affecting Calverley Park.

Historic England accepts that a case might be made by the Council that its current grade-II listed Council offices and theatre (Assembly Hall) do not provide modern format office accommodation or, in the case of the theatre, the facilities necessary to host major touring productions. The alterations that could be necessary to continue using the existing buildings might be both harmful to their significance and disruptive to the continuing provision of services. We wish to continue to discuss how these buildings might need to change to find future uses but we acknowledge that new civic facilities may be the preferred option.

These important listed buildings, however, make a major contribution to the townscape. They must not be left vacant and without a plan for their future. We think that the existing buildings could be reused in a variety of different creative and imaginative ways and we would want these options to be properly considered and implemented as part of any scheme for relocation of their existing functions. Historic England is working with the Council to find an appropriate future for them, whether in or out of Council use.

In parallel, Historic England has been involved in pre-application discussions about a new civic centre and theatre at the western edge of Calverley Park. Calverley Park was laid out from 1828 to 39 by the architect and builder Decimus Burton in the form of a crescent of villas overlooking a pleasure ground. His twenty-four villas are all listed buildings and were designed to command views over the park to their west, which is also on the National Heritage List for England. The western half of the park was bought by the Council in the 1920s and this is where most change has since occurred, such as the introduction of new leisure facilities and a succession of different planting schemes. The western edge of the park has been spoiled by the addition of two car parks, the southern of which is multi-storeyed.

The proposed scheme to replace the two car parks at the western end of the park with a new Council office and theatre provides an opportunity for enhancement of this edge of the park, as well as offering other forms of public benefit. We accept that in order to realise these public benefits the new buildings may need to encroach further into the park than the existing car parks. We would expect the park around any new building to be restored and, wherever possible, enhanced. A detailed landscaping scheme will therefore need to be provided.

The proposed buildings are large in order to accommodate both the proposed uses and car parking, but in our judgment may well be of the high quality required in this location. New buildings here will be viewed, at least in part, against the existing backdrop of the rear elevations of Mount Pleasant Road. We would nonetheless expect the full effects of this scale of buildings to be properly tested in key viewpoints from around the town, both within the park itself and further afield, for example from elevated viewpoints over the town such as Mount Ephraim. We will be commenting further on the full effects of the scheme when this exercise is complete.

This is a cherished part of the town and we acknowledge that there will be some harm caused to the grade II registered Calverley Park. Heritage conservation is all
about weighing competing public interests in the balance. If the harm is minimised and the enhancement of the park maximised, we are prepared to be persuaded that a case for the development can be made. We look forward to continuing our discussions with Tunbridge Wells BC and their advisers.

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