

HISTORIC SCOTLAND BOARD

MAESHOWE VISITOR RECEPTION AND ACCESS PROJECT

Purpose

1. To appraise the board of the findings of the Options Appraisal for new visitor and access facilities for Maeshowe.

Priority

2. The current visitor centre and car park at Tormiston Mill will close due the expiry of the temporary planning consent in November 2013. Detailed proposals need to be developed now in order to have the new facility in operation in time to prevent closure of the monument.

Decisions/Actions required of Historic Scotland Board

3. The Board is invited to note
 - ◆ PIC intend to proceed with the development of the proposals for the preferred option in order to explore potential funding options and gain the necessary approvals

Key information the Board will need to support its decisions/action

4. The Board needs to know
 - ◆ The chambered tomb of Maeshowe on the Mainland of Orkney is one of the greatest architectural achievements of the prehistoric peoples of Scotland. It dates from before 2700 BC and is within the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1999 as a group of six sites deemed to be an outstanding testimony to the cultural achievements of the Neolithic peoples of northern Europe.
 - ◆ From November 2013, Historic Scotland will no longer be able to use the existing facilities at Tormiston Mill as visitor reception for Maeshowe due to expiry of the temporary planning permission for the car park. In order to keep the monument open past this deadline, alternative facilities need to be constructed by the end of 2012.
 - ◆ To identify a suitable solution to this problem, PIC have undertaken an Option Appraisal (see Annexe A) which identifies and assesses four main options for the site:
 - A new building on the site of Overbigging shed
 - Improvements to Tormiston Mill
 - A new facility within Overbigging Farm Steading
 - Various Park and Ride Options

The exercise, which included consultation with local stakeholders, concluded that the new facility within the existing steading buildings at Overbigging Farm was the option that best meets the project's aims and objectives and the policies of Orkney

Islands Council. This recommendation was approved by PIC MG at their November 2008 meeting.

Advice and Conclusions

5. The following processes have been followed to analyse the impact of the development on the site:

Discussions throughout the appraisal process with HSI who concluded:

“HSI is content that the proposals for the new visitor centre and car parking represent a considered approach to development in this location, making optimum use of existing structures, natural topography, landscaping materials and layout to minimise adverse visual impact on the HONO WHS. The Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment appropriately assesses the impact of the proposed development on the individual monuments that comprise the HONO WHS and takes due account of the Atkins setting report. The proposed development includes appropriate mitigation measures in the form of design, materials and layout, to reduce the visual impact on the setting of the HONO WHSC”

Financial Implications

6. The total project cost is currently estimated at £2.89m and under current funding constraints it is unlikely that HS will be able to meet these costs. Consequently initial discussions are taking place with potential funding partners HLF, ERDF and Orkney Islands Council.

JANE RAHIL
PROPERTIES IN CARE
11 August 2009

Annex A – Assessment of Impacts by HSI

Background

1. In July 2008, Historic Scotland Inspectorate (HSI) was consulted by Major Projects on an options appraisal for alternative visitor facilities to serve Maeshowe.
2. As the proposals outlined in the appraisal document lay within the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site (HONO WHS), HSI was concerned with the potential impact of these, both on the individual scheduled monuments that comprise the HONO WHS and on the Outstanding Universal Value of the HONO WHS.

The Site

3. The HONO WHS was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1999 as a group of six sites (Skara Brae, Maeshowe, Stones of Stenness, the Watch Stone, The Barnhouse Stone, and the Ring of Brodgar with its associated monuments) deemed to be an outstanding testimony to the cultural achievements of the Neolithic peoples of northern Europe. The HONO WHS fulfilled four of the six criteria of Outstanding Universal Value for cultural sites, was of sufficient authenticity and integrity, and was deemed to have adequate protection and management mechanisms in place to ensure its conservation. As such, it is a site of recognised universal value to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole.
4. Maeshowe is an iconic monument; it is the finest chambered tomb in NW Europe and is a masterpiece of Neolithic design and stonework construction. The relationship of the monument to other natural and man-made features in the landscape is highly important; there is evidence for an astronomical alignment with the nearby Barnhouse stone and good visual relationships with the Hoy hills and with the stone circles of Brodgar and Stenness.
5. The proposed development site at Overbigging sits within a development buffer zone referred to in the HONO WHS management plan. The intention of a UNESCO-defined buffer zone is to define an area where development may adversely affect the setting of a WHS. This buffer zone has been assessed and described in detail in the Atkins Ltd setting report of 2008. Supplementary Planning Guidance for development in and around the HONO WHS is currently being prepared by Orkney Islands Council which takes account of this report.
6. The site is set in low lying land, fringed by rolling hills, with a strongly rural character and is particularly sensitive to developmental change. It is also part of the Hoy and West Mainland National Scenic Area and the Brodgar Rural Conservation Area.

The Proposal

7. The proposed development will see visitor facilities constructed within an existing agricultural building, with a small extension at the rear to accommodate an education room and offices. Associated car and coach parking is to be located in a natural dip to the side of the agricultural building. A path is intended to run from the visitor centre to Maeshowe, and then on to Stenness and Brodgar.
8. While the development will be located within an existing agricultural complex, the site is visible from the scheduled monuments in the Harray-Stenness basin and, in particular, from Maeshowe itself.

HSI's assessment

9. HSI's initial response to the options appraisal flagged concerns that certain development within the HONO WHS buffer zone could adversely impact on the setting of the WHS and specifically could have a significant visual impact on Maeshowe Chambered Tomb.
10. In August 2008, HSI assessed and commented on the draft Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) for the Overbigging site. It was considered at this stage that, while the visitor centre was to be mostly contained within an existing agricultural complex and would thus have a minimal impact on the HONO WHS, the car / coach park proposed adjacent to the centre could potentially have an adverse impact on the setting of the individual Scheduled Monuments of Maeshowe, Ring of Brodgar and Stones of Stenness.
11. Changes were subsequently made to the LVIA to include additional photomontages and an assessment with monument as receptor, an assessment of impact for the component monuments in the HONO WHS, an assessment of setting issues with regard to the Atkins report on the setting of the HONO WHS and the inclusion of appropriate wireframes. Design changes relating to the layout and capacity of the car park were also made.
12. These comments resulted in a proposal whose impact on the setting of the HONO WHS should be minimal. The only additional visual impact is that the tops of buses will be visible from Maeshowe and Ring of Brodgar but the cars within the car park will not be. As the Ring of Brodgar is some 2km from Overbigging, the likely visual impact from the tops of the buses will be minimal. Maeshowe is very much closer (400m) but the buses will be mostly shielded by topography and existing buildings.
13. The construction materials that have been identified for use in the car park should mitigate the visual impact of the car park layout on the immediate landscape setting, and the design ensures it is sufficiently low in a natural dip to minimise its impact on the wider landscape.
14. Subsequently, the number of bus spaces proposed has been reduced from four, down to two. This should do much to further minimise the visual impact of buses when they are parked on site.