

Wiltshire Council Planning Consultation Response

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Officer's Title: Planning Officer

Application No: PL/2026/01093
Erection of a 2-metre-high fence to the South, East and West perimeters with the construction of a concrete ramp to provide wheelchair access.
Bowls Club, MELKSHAM HOUSE, 27 MARKET PLACE, MELKSHAM

Please find following comments in respect of the above application(s).

Recommendations:

☐	No comment
☐	Support in principle subject to amendments to the scheme (as set out below)
☐	Support subject to comments and conditions (as set out below)
☒	Object (for reasons set out below)
☐	No objections

Scope of comments: the following comments relate to the built historic environment.

National Policy and guidance: From the point of view of the historic environment the main statutory tests are set out within the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. Section 66 (PP) requires that **special regard** be given to the desirability of preserving or enhancing listed buildings, their settings or any features of special architectural or historic interest which they possess.

Section 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 also requires the Council to pay **special attention** to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of designated Conservation Areas.

The NPPF outlines government policy, including its policy in respect of the historic environment. Section 16 of the NPPF 'Conserving and enhancing the historic environment' sets out the Government's high-level policies concerning heritage and sustainable development. Paragraphs 214-16 of the NPPF require a balanced approach with any harm which would be caused being weighed against the potential public benefits which might be achieved. Paragraph 210 requires local planning authorities should take account of the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.

Local Policy: The Council's Core Strategy Policy CP58 'Ensuring the conservation of the historic environment' requires that "designated heritage assets and their settings will be conserved, and where appropriate enhanced, in a manner appropriate to their significance."

Wiltshire Council's Core Strategy Policy CP57 'Ensuring high quality design and place shaping': A high standard of design is required in all new developments, including extensions, alterations, and changes of use of existing buildings. Development is expected to create a strong sense of place through drawing on the local context and being complementary to the locality.

Proposal: the construction of a ramp to access the clubhouse and 2 m high boundary fences.

Relevant planning history: 19/02519/PREAPP – Proposed fencing to bowls green.
PL/2025/06042 - Clubhouse for tennis players and boundary fence as shown

Issues: The heritage assets which will be affected by the proposals include the designated conservation area and the setting of listed buildings surrounding the site including Melksham House itself, the grade II* Church of St Michael, The Grove and St Michael's Court. Issues include the impact on the setting of the listed building, impact on the setting of neighbouring listed buildings, impact on the conservation area.

Information considered/provided: Paragraph 207 requires that applicants describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting. This should include sufficient information to provide a clear understanding of the significance of the heritage asset and its setting and the potential impact of any proposals on that significance.

In this case, the applications are accompanied by a "Planning Statement" which simply notes the presence of the listed building and states that the proposals will have no impact on it. The documents fails to provide any objective assessment of contribution that the surrounding land makes to the setting of the house or of the impact of the proposals on this or the significance of the conservation area. As a result, it fails to meet the requirements of the NPPF.

However, paragraph 208 also provides for the local planning authority to make its own assessment of impact and, given the proposals are easily understood, the following heritage recommendations are offered on this basis.

Significance of assets and contribution of setting (as appropriate): The NPPF defines significance as the "value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. The interest may be **archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic**. Significance derives not only from a heritage asset's physical presence, but also from its setting." Historic England assesses significance in a similar manner, referring to evidential, historic, aesthetic and communal values of a place.

Melksham House was constructed in the 18th century as a dwelling and is listed as a good example of such. It retains significance in its historic fabric and architecture - its form, layout and architectural expression/detailing and use of high-quality design materials which have significant aesthetic and architectural interest and which contribute to the character of the conservation area. A postcard from the turn of the century suggests that elaborately planted designed gardens surrounded the house.

After a short period of occupation by the Red Cross as a hospital in the early 20th century Melksham House was acquired by the Avon Rubber Company to house their sports and social clubs. It has remained in this use until recently, including housing bowls, football, rugby, cricket and tennis clubs within the grounds, and the association with leisure and recreation is an established part of the building's history and of some communal value. Melksham House is now in use as a special educational facility, while the wider site continues to house leisure facilities, including a new sports centre. The approach to the house, however, remains largely unchanged and is via an attractive landscaped and planted drive which reflects its former domestic use.

Assessment: The application refers to an area to the side of Melksham House, between the house and the church and between the bowls and cricket facilities. The bowls club has been established in this location since the early days of the Avon Company's ownership and is in a zone adjacent to the tennis courts.

At present, without formal enclosure, the bowling green appears as an extension of the formal lawns surrounding the house and the character of an historic high-status house with associated leisure areas remains strongly in evidence. Erecting a fence around the area will disrupt this impression of a garden setting and cause a level of harm to this character, which contributes to the special interest of Melksham House and the other assets.

At pre-application stage however, we noted the potential security issues for a facility such as this on a site which has full public access, also that the surface of the bowling green is sensitive to even quite minor damage from unauthorised access. Accordingly, we agreed in principle at pre-application stage to the erection of a boundary treatment, taking into account that the grounds have been used for sports facilities for a significant part of the building's history and that the bowls club represents a long-term use. It was noted that the modest level of harm that would result from the installation of an appropriately designed and quality fence would potentially be considered to be offset by the public benefits to be gained from securing the sports facilities available to the local population. However, in providing this advice, we also noted that the 1.8m high security mesh fencing which was then being proposed was an inappropriately harsh modern/functional solution for this sensitive historic location and we suggested that a 1.2m high traditional railing would be the maximum which we would consider to be acceptable. I also note that we required a new section of fence at the adjacent tennis clubhouse to be restricted to 1.2m high on the basis that the proliferation of fencing and other clutter (both authorised and unauthorised) in the area was having a detrimental impact on the character of the area and setting of Melksham House.

The current proposals are for standard wire mesh 2m high fences on the east, west and south boundaries. As we have previously advised, this is an inappropriately harsh modern/functional solution for this prominent and sensitive historic location immediately adjacent to the listed house, within the context of its principal elevations. The proposals add to the visual clutter in the area and will contribute to the gradual erosion of the setting of Melksham House, other adjacent assets and the conservation area.

The proposed ramp, however, is tucked close to the existing clubhouse and separated from the listed Melksham House by other boundaries. There is no objection to this element.

Summary & conclusion: The NPPF confirms that when considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). It makes clear that any harm to a designated heritage asset requires clear and convincing justification.

The ramp is uncontroversial but the proposed fencing will result in harm to the setting of the listed house and adjacent assets and to the conservation area via the inappropriate specification which will add to poor quality visual clutter within the area and contribute to the incremental erosion of its character.

Whilst the fencing relates to only a small part of the wider site and can therefore be considered as causing 'less than substantial harm' for the purposes of interpreting the NPPF, the wording of the NPPF and the 'special regard' by Section 66 of the Act requires that any level harm caused should be taken seriously.

Paragraph 215 allows that a level of harm may be offset by public benefits, which could include conservation benefits, but in this case no objective justification has been provided for the works and it has not been demonstrated that the works will result in any public benefit that could not be achieved by more appropriate means. As a result, the proposals fail to meet with the requirements of current conservation legislation, policy or guidance and I therefore object.