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PLANNING STATEMENT

DEMOLITION OF EXISTING BUILDINGS AND CONSTRUCTION OF SOUND DESIGN CREATION CENTRE

LAND OFF WINDHILL LANE, STAINCROSS, BARNSLEY

PREPARED FOR: PITSTOP PRODUCTIONS

PREPARED BY: JAMES ROBERTS (MRTPI)

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1. INTRODUCTION

This statement has been prepared to support the submission of an application for full permission for the construction of a sound design creation studio at land off Windhill Lane, Staincross. The proposal includes the demolition of all existing buildings at the site. The scheme is intended to deliver a world-first facility that will attract and retain high quality jobs in the Barnsley area. The scheme will help the expansion of Pitstop Productions, a locally based world leader in the field of sound recordings for the video game industry, and ties in neatly with broader Council objectives aimed at delivering high quality job opportunities.

The scheme would be of high quality design and would involve the removal of visually detracting features from the landscape. The proposal has also been delivered with biodiversity in mind and every effort has been made to mitigate any impacts in this regard.

It is fully acknowledged that LPA will take the view that, in technical terms, the proposal constitutes inappropriate development within the Green Belt. However, and with reference to the economic and visual benefits of the scheme, it will be demonstrated that very special circumstances exist in this case which ensure that the proposal should be deemed acceptable.

This statement should be read in conjunction with the supporting plans and documentation which demonstrate the credentials of the scheme in more detail.

This statement now proceeds to give details of the site. The details of the proposal are then set out. The planning merits of the scheme are then discussed in relation to relevant planning policies contained in the statutory development plan, together with Government guidance principally set out in the NPPF. In particular, it will be demonstrated that whilst the proposal may been seen by the LPA to technically represent inappropriate development in the Green Belt, very special circumstances exist to justify the development. It will also be demonstrated that the proposal would not result in any other harm other than its technical definition as inappropriate development. Finally, the conclusion is reached that planning permission should be granted for the proposed development.

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2. THE SITE AND PROPOSAL

The application site comprises an area of land measuring approximately 1ha to the the northern side of Windhill Lane, Staincross. On the opposite side of Windhill Lane are a row of dwellings whilst all other boundaries abut undeveloped land. The site slopes upwards from front to the rear, and the land behind the site slopes up further. As such the site is not visible in views from the north and west.

The site contains a number of buildings which are of permanent construction. These are accessed by an existing track from Windhill Lane. There is some debate about the lawful use of these buildings but it is understood they have been used for general storage for over 10 years. The buildings are of somewhat ramshackle appearance and are a detracting feature in the landscape. The site is not within a Conservation Area and there are no listed buildings in the vicinity.

Full planning permission is sought for the demolition of all buildings within the site and replacement with a sound design creation centre.

Full design details of the proposed development can be found in the supporting plans and documentation. However, at this stage the main details of the proposal are as follows:

- Demolish all buildings within the site;
- Utilise and enhance existing vehicular entrance point off Windhill Lane;
- Construct two storey sound design creation centre roughly central within the site;
- Parking and turning to be provided to side of building and to include facilities for electric car charging;
- Land to rear of proposed building to be used as external recording areas. These areas will be wired directly into the main building which is a unique feature in this industry;
- The scheme is accompanied by a detailed landscaping plan which provides some screening along with ecological benefits;
- The proposal is intended to deliver a world leading facility and more details on this are set out in the main body of this report.

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3. PLANNING HISTORY, ALLOCATIONS AND POLICIES

The only available planning history for the site is as follows:

- 2019/1198 - Confirmation that the existing structures on the site are lawful and the site is previously developed land - refused 2019.

The planning history does not have any direct impact on the current proposal.

Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires planning applications to be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. In this instance the Development Plan consists of the Local Plan which was adopted in 2019.

Further material considerations exist in the form of national policy and guidance contained within the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which was published on 19 February 2019 and the suite of documents comprising National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG).

National

The NPPF is reflective of the guidance contained within the NPPG. The following sections of the revised NPPF are considered of direct relevance to the current proposal:

Section 2 - Achieving sustainable development

Section 4 - Decision-making

Section 6 - Building a strong, competitive economy

Section 12 - Achieving well-designed places

Section 13 - Protecting Green Belt land

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Allocations

The application site is washed over by the Green Belt in the Local Plan.

Local Plan Policies

The following policies are considered of relevance;

- SD1 - Presumption in favour of sustainable development
- GD1 - General Development
- E1 - Providing Strategic Employment Locations
- E6 - Rural Economy
- T3 - New Development and Sustainable Travel
- T4 - New development and Transport Safety
- D1 - High Quality Design and Place Making
- LC1 - Landscape Character
- GB1 - Protection of Green Belt
- GB2 - Replacement, extension and alteration of existing buildings in the Green Belt

There are also a number of supplementary planning documents which are considered of relevance including those related to biodiversity, sustainable travel and parking.

The council have also recently prepared an Economic Renewal Action Plan which focusses on the promotion and delivery of high skilled and high-tech jobs throughout the local area:

https://www.barnsley.gov.uk/media/18274/20210325-economic-renewal-action-plan-final.pdf

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4. ASSESSMENT

Having considered the nature of the proposal, and the content of relevant policies and guidance, it is considered the following are the key areas of consideration:

1. Green Belt
2. Design
3. Landscape/ Ecology
4. Residential amenity
5. Highways

There is then the need to undertake a planning balance exercise.

Green Belt

Policy position

The proposal would result in the construction of a new building and associated paraphernalia within the Green Belt. Whilst the proposal would result in the demolition/ removal of existing buildings at the site it must be fully acknowledged that the proposal constitutes an inappropriate form of development within the Green Belt.

The NPPF (paragraph 144) states:

"When considering any planning application, local planning authorities should ensure that substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt. 'Very special circumstances' will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm resulting from the proposal, is clearly outweighed by other considerations."

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It is therefore incumbent on the applicant to demonstrate very special circumstances to justify the proposal. It is necessary to demonstrate that the harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm resulting from the proposal, is clearly outweighed by other considerations.

Before turning to the issue of very special circumstances it is considered important to note that the proposed scheme would result in no other harm other than by technical definition as inappropriate development.

Whilst the position of inappropriate development being harmful by definition is fully acknowledged, it must also be acknowledged that the extent of harm to the Green Belt in this instance is relatively minor. The proposal is for a single building, and associated infrastructure, to replace a number of run-down and unattractive buildings within the site. There would be some impact on openness through the additional built form but this would be relatively limited. As such, the threshold at which the harm can be considered to have been clearly outweighed is low.

In addition, it is considered clear that very special circumstances do exist to justify the proposal.

Very special circumstances

Both national and local policy is focussed on the delivery of highly skilled jobs in technology based industries. Indeed, the recently published Barnsley Economic Renewal Action Plan makes it clear that Barnsley has lagged behind national trends in terms of job creation, job retention and general employment rates. Furthermore, the documentation makes it clear that the council considers the promotion of high quality jobs, including skilled positions in the digital economy, as crucial to plans to renew Barnsley in economic terms.

The applicants in this case, Pitstop Productions, have supplied supporting documentation with this application which sets out the commercial and technological justification for the scheme. Some of the key points from this are as follows:

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- Founded in 1997, Pitstop Productions provides audio image services to the entertainment industry with a large bulk of its work concentrated in the video games sector.

- The company currently employs total of 45 staff, 26 of which are employed on full-time, permanent contracts.The business has an excellent record of retaining staff with the vast majority remaining with the company for a period in excess of three years. The current workforce is also largely locally based and the business has been able to attract people into the area due to the high quality of jobs on offer. The average age of the workforce is also relatively low with the vast majority of employees being under the age of 40.

- In the past three years, Pitstop has significantly grown. For the 6 months of trading this year. The company has seen sales increase by 122% and a net profit increase of 375%. Despite the Covid pandemic the company has displayed resilience and this is due to the way it has structured its departments and also its position in the games and digital market. Moving forward the business intends to expand into one of the leading game audio production companies in the UK and the world whilst attracting and supporting job creation in Barnsley.

- The proposed facility would result in an innovative and unique design which would enable sounds to be recorded outside and then to immediately have the recording heard in situ in the game. The external cabling from the external pods back into the building is what makes this possible and unique.

- The proposed facility will be a one-step sound design facility which allows an efficient creative process for sounds to be made and recorded.

- With the Sound Design Creation Centre realised, the business is confident in creating a further 15 new jobs within a year of its completion. Over the next 5 years, through expansion of services, it plans to create a further 50 jobs. This would give the company a workforce population just shy of 100.

- The company knows that a Sound Design Creation Centre would firmly establish the business and help establish its Barnsley location as an audio niche location on the games industry world map.

- The uniqueness of Pitstop is that it can serve as a one stop solution for games industry audio. Bigger clients much prefer to work with this type of service as it is time effective and, more importantly, the process of blending music, voice and sound design is a process that can significantly improve the quality of the game. Therefore a client visiting Pitstop for these services

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will spend time in each of the company's departments formulating the creative strategy for the game. It is therefore considered important that the sound design creation centre is located within an acceptable distance of the companies other sites. Pitstop have undertaken a detailed appraisal of other sites in the area and a detailed sequential assessment of these is provided with the application.

- The proposal is supported by a number of independent trade bodies linked to the video game and technology sector these are set out in full in the accompanying documentation.

- In reality, there is no specific need why the company needs to stay within the Barnsley area. However the company would like to be part of the economic renewal of Barnsley and it is considered that the proposal provides the applicant and the Council with the potential to make a positive contribution to the same.

The proposed development would therefore deliver significant benefits to the company, the local economy, and would tie in with broader Council objectives relating to job creation and retention. The proposal provides the council with the opportunity to secure a world leading facility which could act as a hub for future investment within Barnsley.

It will also be noted that the proposal would result in the removal of all existing buildings and structures within the site. At present the site detract from the character of the area due to the poor quality, ramshackle appearance of the existing buildings in this relatively prominent location. The site has attracted theft and vandalism recent times and it is considered clear that the proposed development would result in visual betterment when compared to the existing situation. The proposed building has been deliberately designed to have an agricultural type appearance which would be appropriate to this edge of settlement location.

The proposal would also result in ecological enhancements at the site as will be set out in more detail below.

It is considered that the economic, visual and ecological benefits of the scheme clearly outweigh the inherent harm relating to inappropriate development and amount to very special circumstances in this case.

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Green Belt conclusion

To conclude, it is considered clear that the proposed development constitutes inappropriate development within the Green Belt. However, and with reference to economic, visual and ecological benefits of the scheme, it is considered clear that very special circumstances exist in this case which outweigh the inherent harm caused by inappropriate development. It is therefore considered that the proposal accords with adopted planning policy and guidance relating to development within the Green Belt.

Design

Policies GB2 and D1 require high quality design. The NPPF states:

"Permission should be refused for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions, taking into account any local design standards or style guides in plans or supplementary planning documents. Conversely, where the design of a development accords with clear expectations in plan policies, design should not be used by the decision-maker as a valid reason to object to development. Local planning authorities should also seek to ensure that the quality of approved development is not materially diminished between permission and completion, as a result of changes being made to the permitted scheme (for example through changes to approved details such as the materials used)."

As set out above, and not with standing the impact on the openness of the Green Belt, it is considered clear that the proposed development would result in visual betterment at the site. The current scheme detracts from the quality of the area and has become a magnet for theft and vandalism. The proposed design would retain an agricultural feel which would sit comfortably in this location and the applicant will be happy to accept a condition relating to external materials.

The scheme is entirely policy compliant in this regard.

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Landscape/ Ecology

The application is accompanied by a landscaping specification and preliminary ecological appraisal. The landscaping scheme has been developed in conjunction with the relevant ecologist to ensure ecological enhancements are delivered at the site. Indeed, the application is also accompanied by a biodiversity metric which demonstrates that the post-development site will have an ecological value of 3.95 Habitat Units, resulting in an increase of 0.35 Habitat Units on site (+ 9.72% net gain). Also,1.58 hedgerow units will be gained.

The landscaping specification has been developed to strike the appropriate balance between ecological enhancements and screening/ visual softening to ensure the proposal sits comfortably within the local landscape.

The proposal should therefore be considered policy compliant in relation to landscape and ecology impacts.

Residential amenity

The proposed building would be located a significant distance from any neighbouring residential property. Whilst the proposed building will be larger than the existing, the distances and relationship with neighbouring properties would ensure that there will be no harmful impacts in terms of overlooking or overshadowing.

Whilst the intention is to use the land to the rear of the building for the recording of sounds, such activities would be intermittent in nature and would be contained within the proposed pod areas. Furthermore, the external recording areas would be located in excess of 80m of any neighbouring dwelling and would be largely screened by the proposed building. It is therefore considered clear that the proposed development would not result in an acceptable increase in noise or disturbance at any neighbouring dwelling.

The proposal would not therefore have an unacceptable impact on living conditions at any neighbouring dwelling.

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Highways

The proposed development would include the continued use of the existing vehicular access point at the site. This access point would be enhanced to ensure it complies with current standards and acceptable levels of visibility would be achieved in both directions.

It is the intention of the applicant to provide a fleet of electric vehicles on site along with charging points. The provision of this fleet will allow staff and clients to travel between the sites operated by the applicant in a sustainable manner. The applicant is open to providing further details in relation to this matter if required.

Given the nature and location of the proposed development it is considered clear that the scheme would not result in an acceptable increased vehicle movements and would not result in harm to vehicular or pedestrian safety.

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5. CONCLUSION/ PLANNING BALANCE

It is accepted that the proposal can be technically classed as an inappropriate form of development within the Green Belt. However, there is no other harm arising from the proposed development and it is considered that very special circumstances have been demonstrated to outweigh the inherent harm.

The proposal would provide ecological enhancements at the site, would improve the character of the site and surrounding area, and would not harm residential amenity. Furthermore, there would be no adverse impacts in relation to highways safety.

Crucially, the proposed development would allow for the expansion of a successful local business in a high-tech, digital sector. The proposal would secure investment and promote job creation within Barnsley and is precisely the type of scheme that the council's economic strategy is focused on supporting.

The proposed development represents a sustainable form of development that would not have any unacceptable impact for the reasons set out above. It is considered that the planning balance is weighted heavily in favour of the grant of planning permission. The proposal would sufficiently accord with adopted planning policy and guidance and the LPA are respectfully urged to grant permission for the scheme.

The Applicant is willing to discuss any issues that may arise during the consideration of the proposal with the LPA.

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