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Planning Development

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## **Planning Statement: Trek Group Ltd, Sheephouse Wood, Stocksbridge**

### Introduction

The application site (the former Fox's steel wire works) is located north west of Stocksbridge with direct access from the A616 Stocksbridge Bypass. The site currently comprises of one large industrial building and one smaller industrial building, access roads and parking areas. The site is surrounded by woodland and is situated directly north of the Underbank Reservoir.

The site currently comprises a sloping area of grass with a scattering of peripheral, largely semi-mature trees. An existing parking area lies immediately to the west of the application site, while circulation areas and access roads are situated to the south, east and north.

This application seeks planning permission for the formation two additional areas of hardstanding for staff parking, stock holding for new manufacture, and also parking for finished / part built vehicles. The two areas would accommodate either 75 standard car parking spaces, or 53 standard car parking spaces and 16 chassis / trailers.

The new parking areas would be situated immediately to the north-east and east of the existing principal site building and the larger area would involve engineering operations to cut into the slope to form a single level parking / access area with stone filled gabion baskets to act as retaining structures. The parking bays would be surfaced in Grasscrete.

### Background to the proposals

Planning permission was applied for in 2019 (LPA ref: 2019/1160) for the erection of a fabrication workshop building and the formation of a new parking area to accommodate 71 spaces for horse boxes and chassis', and 32 additional spaces for staff parking. As a result of concerns raised during the assessment of the application regarding the impact of the development on the area of former ancient (replanted) woodland, this application was withdrawn.

However, as highlighted within this withdrawn planning application and at a site meeting with the Council representatives on 17<sup>th</sup> January this year, the problems the applicant has in terms of insufficient external parking and storage capacity remain. As such, a medium to long-term solution that does not necessitate another major move for the company to other premises, needs to be achieved.



**Photograph of application site facing west**

As highlighted previously within the supporting planning statement <sup>1</sup>, the company specifically purchased the premises at Sheephouse Wood in order to consolidate all operations on one site and to move from leasehold to freehold status in order to provide better security for the company in the longer term and allow for future development / expansion plans. Grant aid was secured through Barnsley Council from the Leeds City Region and this helped purchase and begin to renovate the site, which had been derelict for a number of years.

As a result of the plans for the desired (larger) new parking and storage area not receiving support from the Council at the present time, an alternative, smaller and shorter-term solution is urgently required to enable the business to operate efficiently and safely.

The reasons for this requirement are as follows:

- 1) Staff parking is hazardous as a result of insufficient space.
- 2) Additional storage of finished vehicles before dispatch is required.
- 3) Additional storage of new chassis (prior to manufacturing process) is required
- 4) Storage for service vehicles is required.
- 5) A larger area for the storage of raw materials is required.
- 6) Additional storage / parking areas will help reduce incidents of damaged stock as result of external areas currently being too cramped and congested.

This proposal will not provide the site capacity required by the business in the medium to long-term, as proposed within the withdrawn application, and is not therefore a complete substitute for the larger proposed storage / parking area. However, it would represent a reasonable compromise as an immediate and short-term solution.

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<sup>1</sup> Planning application ref: 2019/1160

## Assessment of the proposals

### **Green Belt**

Paragraph 146 in the NPPF states that, 'Certain other forms of development are also not inappropriate in the Green Belt provided they preserve its openness and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it.' These include, b) engineering operations and e) material changes in the use of land.

The formation of the additional parking / storage areas together with the changes in levels needed (including retaining works) are considered to fall within these two categories (b and e).

The question then turns to the matter of impact on Green Belt openness. It is acknowledged that as a result of the new parking and storage areas, together with other engineering operations, the openness of the Green Belt would undoubtedly be affected to some extent. This would be tempered by the fact that the proposed uses are for open storage / parking areas, as opposed to installing permanent buildings.

It is also considered that the visual impact of the proposals would be mitigated by the fact the land in question is difficult to see from any public vantage points – being surrounded by woodland on three sides.

Nevertheless, the Council may arrive at the conclusion that openness may not be preserved as a result of these proposals and so 'very special circumstances' may need to be demonstrated.

The rationale and need for the proposals are summarised as follows:

- a) The site was identified as a suitable alternative manufacturing site that could fulfil the needs of the business operations, allowing consolidation of production under one roof. Support was provided by the Council who, with the aid of a Leeds City Region grant, helped secure the site and the process of renovation of what was an empty, increasingly derelict major brownfield site in the borough.
- b) Significant investment has been made in the building to renovate and turn it into a bespoke facility, which provides a valuable manufacturing and employment business for the borough.
- c) Significant investment has been made in specialist machinery for the operation and expansion of the business and the company has invested in manufacturing skills training in local labour force.
- d) Equi-Trek have a commitment under the Leeds City Region grant to increase employment levels before 2020 to an agreed target.
- e) The continued success and expansion of Equi-Trek will help retain a steel manufacturing skills base in the area.
- f) The site currently employs 141 people, the majority of which are from the local areas of Barnsley, Stocksbridge and Penistone. If the company is unable to expand / continue to operate safely and efficiently, there would be significant practical and financial consequences for the business – it has invested far too much in this premises to move yet again.

- g) Numerous practical and operational reasons for the parking / storage areas have been outlined above, and it must again be remembered that for its size, the premises have a very low ratio of outdoor space compared with indoor space, when comparing with modern manufacturing facilities.

Finally, it is noted that ordinarily hard surfaces for industrial premises are able to be installed within the established curtilage (which the application site is) under Part 7, Class J of the GPDO 2015. As such, it is only the 'cut and fill' engineering operations that require planning permission in essence, and engineering operations (subject to the openness test) fall within the last of appropriate development in the green Belt under NPPF paragraph 146.

Paragraph 80 in the NPPF states, *'Planning policies and decisions should help create the conditions in which businesses can invest, expand and adapt. Significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth and productivity, taking into account both local business needs and wider opportunities for development.'*

Supporting growth and productivity also forms part of the Government's economic objective towards achieving sustainable development (NPPF paragraph 8a) and is highlighted in Local Plan policy E4 which states that, 'Land or premises currently or last used for employment purposes will be retained to safeguard existing or potential jobs.'

The application site was originally purchased and developed by Fox's steel wire works in 1963 and was later taken over by Bridon Wire. The site is a large complex comprising of one main building and one smaller building with a total floor area measuring over 17,000 sq.m. The large size of the site and the condition that the buildings were left in would have presented too many challenges for most businesses to take on. With significant investment however, the applicant has managed to bring the site back into beneficial use, renovating and utilising the existing buildings on site for their business operations. If the applicant had not taken on the site, it is our view that the site would have been left vacant for a much longer period of time, leading to further degradation. <sup>2</sup>

Given the reasons outlined earlier, the proposed parking / storage areas are considered to be an essential short-term requirement in order to secure the ongoing safety and efficiency of the business, and which ultimately helps reduce costs and maintain the success of the business going forward. It is therefore considered that 'very special circumstances' exist in this case and as such should be given due weight and consideration.

### **Design and Visual Amenity**

The access / circulation areas to the proposed parking / storage area would be laid out in concrete however the parking spaces themselves would be surfaced with porous Grasscrete materials in order to blend in better with the natural site surroundings. The retaining walls would be gabion baskets filled with stone. Please refer to the images below.

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<sup>2</sup> NPPF paragraph 141 – 'local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance their (Green Belts) beneficial use, such as looking for opportunities to improve damaged and derelict land.'



### **Ecology / Trees**

The application site itself lies outside the ancient (replanted) woodland area and so this area of habitat would not be affected by the proposals.

The biodiversity interest of the application site is very limited as a result of it essentially being a grass / turfed area (as per the photo above). The silver birch trees to the west of the site proposed to be removed are semi-mature and of limited value. A small clump of trees (including a couple of more mature specimens) would need to be removed in the south-east corner of the site.

However, the retention of parts of the existing surrounding embankment would allow for other existing trees to be kept, whilst replacement native trees are proposed to be planted for the low numbers of trees to be lost. The details of such a planting scheme could be the subject of a suitable worded planning condition.

### **Conclusion**

The applicant is committed to continue making the existing Trek Group businesses a success. This application is considered to be a relatively minor proposal in the context of material planning considerations and the scale of existing operations on the site as a whole.

The proposals would provide a short-term solution to the current storage and parking problems on site and would therefore help the business operate more safely and efficiently, which in turn will help the company continue to bring economic and social benefits to the Barnsley borough.

We therefore respectfully request that the application is approved.

**Robert Halstead Chartered Surveyors & Town Planners**

**April 2020**