

## HEARING STATEMENT

Matter 5 – *Economic Growth and Development*

Prepared on behalf of

Oyster Capital Industrial Ltd  
Respondent ID: 0406

July 2022

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. This Hearing Statement has been prepared by Grimster Planning Ltd on behalf of Oyster Capital Industrial Ltd (Respondent ID: 0406).
- 1.2. It is prepared in response to the Inspector's Matters, Issues and Questions on Matter 5 – *Economic Growth and Development*.
- 1.3. It should be read alongside the detailed representations made to the PSVLP by Oyster Capital Industrial Ltd.

## 2 RESPONSE TO INSPECTOR'S QUESTIONS

### **1. Is the Economic Development Needs Assessment 2021 justified in basing the need for employment land on historic take up rates rather than jobs growth forecasts?**

- 2.1. No comments.

### **2. What effect has the development of the Omega site had on past take up rates and is it justified to assume such take up rates will continue over the plan period?**

- 2.2. The Omega development has successfully attracted a number of logistics operators over the past 10-15 years, generating a number of new employment opportunities within the Borough of Warrington. The strategic location of Omega on the M62 provides excellent access to a local workforce, and connectivity to the strategic highway network. There is no sign of demand reducing for this location, and no evidence to suggest that take-up rates will not continue similar to previous levels. The road and other service infrastructure is already in place to accommodate and support the continued growth of the Omega development subject to a policy change (i.e release of land from the Green Belt). This includes the land interests being promoted by Oyster Capital Industrial Ltd located adjacent to Omega North, details of which are included in their November 2021 PSVLP representation.

### **3. Will the supply of employment land from site allocations and planning permissions in neighbouring authorities and the wider area affect demand for employment land in Warrington?**

- 2.3. No. By virtue of its strategic location, accessible from the M62, M6 and M56 motorway networks, Warrington is a key employment hub at a regional and sub-regional level and remains a continued focus area/location for logistics operators. It is reasonable to concluded that the location of the existing Omega development on the M62 strategic corridor will continue to attract new operator demand over the Plan period, particularly in the logistics and R&D sectors. Whilst a consideration, it

is not considered that the availability of alternative employment land in neighbouring authorities will diminish the demand for employment land take-up in Warrington, particularly along the M62 corridor.

#### 4. What is the basis for including a three-year buffer and is this justified?

- 2.4. The Addendum prepared by BE Group in February 2022 makes reference to the fact that a buffer of up to five years additional supply has been used by BE Group in our 65 employment land studies since 2006. This includes neighbouring authorities to Warrington.
- 2.5. The Addendum identifies the “*desire to limit the impact on local Green Belt*” as one of the reasons for the 3-year buffer. The plan-making process provides the opportunity to amend Green Belt boundaries, and in doing so should endure beyond the Plan period consistent with paragraph 140 of the NPPF. The exceptional circumstances for Green Belt release have already been accepted by the Council; accordingly, there is no reason not to apply a five-year buffer, involving the release of more land from the Green Belt to meet employment needs as part of that buffer, including the allocation of safeguarded land for employment uses beyond the Plan period (with a policy mechanism to allow for early release during the Plan period in the event of a delivery/supply shortfall). This would ensure that the provisions of paragraph 140 of the NPPF are met. As is stands, the Plan fails to ensure that the Green Belt can endure over the long-term and avoid the need for a further Green Belt review beyond the Plan period (or indeed sooner as part of an early Review).
- 2.6. Further, there is a lack of robust evidence to substantiate the claim that the large-scale changes of use of employment premises outside of Central Warrington are “*unlikely*” during the Plan period. The Council should provide details of the employment land and premises located outside of Central Warrington (i.e older stock), from which an assessment of their potential alternative use during the Plan period can be interrogated (or has been undertaken). Given the change in working patterns/methods that have and continue to evolve following the Covid-19 pandemic, there may now be more existing employment premises for which an alternative change of use could be sought over the next 15 years, in particular those with an active B1 use in and outside of existing employment areas. Policy DEV4, part 9, is written such that there is an allowance (and expectation) for such a scenario.

#### 5. What is the basis for including the allowance for business displacement and is this justified?

- 2.7. No comments.

#### 6. Is it reasonable to rely on two substantial allocations to meet most employment needs?

- 2.8. No. The Plan is heavily reliant on the delivery of employment land in South East Warrington at Appleton, and Fiddlers Ferry Power Station, delivering 237 hectares of employment land.
- 2.9. Both sites are subject to infrastructure constraints which could seriously undermine their delivery, and in the very least, the rate of delivery.
- 2.10. Fiddlers Ferry was only allocated at a very late stage in the plan-making process; it is not even in the Council's SHLAA despite its part housing allocation. The inclusion of Fiddlers Ferry in the PSVLP has effectively replaced the previously proposed South West Urban Extension allocation. We have concerns over the rate of deliverability at Fiddlers Ferry, and there is also uncertainty at this time over the scale of development that can be accommodated on the site. Owing to its former use, there are decommissioning works and remediation works that will be required, together with other significant enabling infrastructure works and improvements. This will include extensive highways improvements to accommodate the traffic generation from any major development (which will also attract a high dependency on the private car owing to its poor locational sustainability and access to public transport), and possible third-party land acquisition. Furthermore, there are HSE, heritage, ecological and flooding issues to be addressed.
- 2.11. The proposed allocation of Fiddlers Ferry will also result in the loss of a strategic Green Belt gap between Warrington and Widnes in the neighbouring Borough of Halton, which has not been robustly justified. The development of this site would extend the urban area and built form of Warrington immediately up to the boundary of Halton.
- 2.12. Additional information should be provided on the anticipated delivery rates of the employment uses on the proposed employment allocations, with a trajectory of delivery. In particular, more detail is needed in relation to the Fiddlers Ferry allocation – it is noted that this will require a Development Framework, and will also need to include information on infrastructure delivery in respect of funding, timescales and responsibilities. Realistically, it is very unlikely that this site will deliver any development until much later in the Plan period; the Council's position and timescales for the site are considered to be overly optimistic and unrealistic.
- 2.13. The PSVLP is considered too 'broad brush' in commenting on anticipated rates of delivery without taking account of the upfront time and works required in securing planning permission, discharging planning conditions, and undertaking upfront infrastructure/groundworks before any construction of the actual employment accommodation commences and is ultimately completed. This approach will ensure that the employment strategy within the Plan can be found sound.
- 2.14. The Plan is evidently reliant on a supply of sites which present a high-level risk of under-delivery. Any delays to the delivery of these sites will have a significant impact on the employment land supply in the Borough over the Plan period; this risk can be avoided through the pro-active release of other land for employment use, including land in the Green Belt.

2.15. This includes the land promoted by Oyster Capital Industrial Ltd adjacent to Omega North, which is immediately deliverable. The Omission Sites Profiles published by the Council in June 2022 confirms that the Site only makes a moderate contribution to the Green Belt. It is graded 'A' in the context of the EDNA (2019) and performs strongly in terms of its contribution to meeting Warrington's strategic employment land needs. The technical information and work undertaken by the landowner has demonstrated that their omission site could accommodate 45,000 square metres of B2 and B8 uses, is safely accessible, and that the associated trip generation can be accommodated within the local highway network.

2.16. Finally, it is noted that the expansion of Omega (south) to the west will involve the release of Green Belt land in the neighbouring St Helens administrative area, outside of Warrington. There is no reason to adopt this approach given that there is alternative Green Belt land in Warrington, including that adjacent to Omega North, which is available and lies within Warrington Borough (subject to a policy change at the plan-making stage). There is no reason why the Borough's employment needs cannot be positively planned for and met through more Green Belt land release within the administrative boundary of Warrington itself and, in the very least, future employment needs through the allocation of safeguarded land for the reasons set out previously.

**7. What evidence is there to suggest that the Town Centre can viably act as the main location for new Class E Office development, noting that the Economic Development Needs Assessment 2021 identifies that demand is mostly focused on Birchwood rather than the Town Centre, as well as the competition from the adjacent cities of Liverpool and Manchester/Salford?**

2.17. No comments.

**8. Will the lack of explicit support in the Local Plan for the University and higher education more generally, impact on the ability of the Council to achieve the Local Plan's vision and objectives?**

2.18. No comments.

**9. Is the approach to existing employment areas and development within them effective and justified?**

2.19. No. There is concern over the Council's expectation that the residual employment land requirements will be met through windfall sites across the Borough, including within existing employment areas. There is no certainty and confirmation that they will, and the tightly drawn Green Belt boundaries around the Borough mean that there is very little room for manoeuvre to meet any shortfall in the event that they do not. Accordingly, it is considered that the PSVLP should plan positively to meet the full employment needs of the Borough up to 2038 consistent with the spatial strategy, with any

windfall sites that do come forward in the existing employment areas instead viewed as a positive further addition to the supply.

**10. In other respects, is Policy DEV4 justified, effective and consistent with national policy?**

- 2.20. No. The approach to employment has failed to take account of reasonable alternatives and sites which are immediately deliverable, but which would require a policy change and additional Green Belt release (which the BE Group Report makes clear the Council is seeking to avoid). These alternatives would provide for a more deliverable and balanced distribution of employment land across the Borough of varying scale and potential employment uses.
- 2.21. The allowance of land in the neighbouring Authority area of St Helens is considered unnecessary as Warrington is evidently capable of meeting its own employment needs through a policy change.
- 2.22. The proposed employment allocations are not considered to be effective, as they are not considered to be deliverable at the rate anticipated by the Council during the Plan period.
- 2.23. The failure to identify safeguarded employment land means that Green Belt boundaries will not endure beyond the Plan period, contrary to national planning policy at paragraph 140 of the NPPF.
- 2.24. The Plan fails to identify enough employment land to come forward during the Plan period, with an acceptance of an 8 hectare shortfall. This shortfall should be met through the allocation and release of more employment land now at the plan-making stage, rather than being deferred to an early Local Plan review (particularly when taking into account the deliverability rate concerns of the larger allocations during the Plan period). In the very least, it re-enforces the need for safeguarded employment land to be identified in the Plan, together with a policy mechanism to enable the early release of land during the Plan period in the event that there is a shortfall in delivery.

**11. Are any main modifications to Policy DEV4 necessary for soundness?**

- 2.25. Yes. The employment land requirement under Part 1 of Policy DEV4 needs to be expressed as a “minimum” figure. There is no harm in the figure of 316.26 hectares being exceeded provided that such development is sustainable and consistent with the wider development plan and/or other material planning considerations.
- 2.26. Our concerns over the deliverability rates of the two large allocations under Part 4 of the Policy outlined previously are such that additional employment land should be allocated now as part of the Local Plan, including the release of land from the Green Belt. This includes omission site Ref. 9 in the June 2022 Omission Site Profiles, SHLAA Ref. 3140. This site has funding in place capable of

delivery early in the Plan period, delivering 500 – 1,000 jobs through a pre-let development of £75m with approved occupiers and funding on land that is free from any technical constraints.

2.27. In the very least, safeguarded employment land (in the Green Belt) needs to be identified under Policy DEV4 to come forward after the Plan period, as well as a policy mechanism to allow for the early release of such land. This could include omission site Ref. 9 in the June 2022 Omission Site Profiles, SHLAA Ref. 3140.



