



## **Summary Proof of evidence of Andrew Hunt (for the Applicants) on Economic Benefit (CD38.3A)**

Call-in by the Secretary of State of an application made by Omega St Helens Limited / TJ Morris Limited

Land To The West Of Omega South & South Of The M62, Bold, St Helens

LPA REF: P/2020/0061/HYBR

PINS REF: APP/H4315/V/20/3265899

**March 2021**

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# Proof of Evidence Summary Statement

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## Introduction

- 1.1 This is the Summary Proof of Evidence of Andrew Stephen Hunt. I hold a Bachelor of Science Degree in Economics and Politics and a Master of Arts Degree in European Economics. I am a Member of the Institute for Economic Development.
- 1.2 The evidence which I have prepared and now provide for this called-in planning application (St Helens Council reference P/2020/0061/HYBR) within this proof of evidence (PoE), is true and I confirm that the opinions expressed are my true and professional opinions.
- 1.3 My evidence responds to one of the matters about which the Secretary of State (SoS) has been asked to be informed, i.e.
  - *The extent to which the proposed development is consistent with Government policies for building a strong, competitive economy (NPPF Chapter 6);*

## Relevant Policy

- 1.4 Policy at national, regional and local level supports regeneration and employment growth in St Helens. As a highly deprived place, St Helens has significant new policy and financial support as part of the Government's "levelling up" agenda.
- 1.5 The economic and social objectives of the NPPF make clear the need to deliver new employment opportunities and help tackle deprivation.
- 1.6 The emerging Local Plan makes clear that the adopted Core Strategy has failed to arrest the decline of the Borough and deprivation has got worse. The causes of this are complex, but without doubt the failure to allocate more than 37ha of employment land and focusing in a relatively small area has contributed to the failure to grow employment. The ambition of the draft Local Plan is more closely aligned with the scale of the challenge.
- 1.7 Local policy rightly notes the need to link deprived areas with jobs – both in terms of transport and skills interventions that allow people from the deprived parts of the Borough to access new jobs.

## Socio-Economic Context

- 1.8 St Helens is one of the most deprived places in the country, and in particular in terms of employment, which is one reason it is a focus for levelling up and job creation. St Helens has relatively high levels of unemployment – it has just over 10,000 people (9% of its working age population) who want a job.
- 1.9 Underlying this is a lack of jobs. The decline of traditional industries has not been offset by the growth of new sectors. Employment has barely grown in St Helens since 1984 - the worst

performance in the Liverpool City Region and significantly worse than neighbouring Warrington where employment has more than doubled.

- 1.10 As a result, St Helens has a very low job density at 0.62 jobs per working age resident (333<sup>rd</sup> of 382 UK local authorities). St Helens needs 15,000 extra jobs to reach the LCR average and 27,000 to reach the national average.
- 1.11 This contrasts with neighbouring Warrington where the number is 1.18, up from 0.91 in 2001 and ranks 22<sup>nd</sup>. Part of the reason for Warrington's success has been the delivery and take up of large amounts of B2 and B8 space. From 2009-2019 (broadly the last economic cycle) take-up in Warrington was 195ha compared to 17ha in St Helens.
- 1.12 St Helens enjoys many of the factors that have underpinned Warrington's success – motorway access and land. As Warrington becomes constrained there is a major opportunity to capture more growth and in doing so both tackle deprivation and contribute to regional economic growth and levelling up.

## Employment Land Requirements

- 1.13 The draft Local Plan includes a significant increase in employment land. This is to meet both the needs of St Helens (based on historic take-up) and a strategic element that effectively increases the share of the LCR's growth that would be taken by St Helens.
- 1.14 The LCR has unmet need for a number of reasons that are set out in my main proof.
- 1.15 Whilst St Helens is showing an overall employment land surplus, there are issues with the timing of sites coming forward both in the short term (with various sites being delayed) and in the long term (some of Parkside East will be delivered beyond the plan period). This could significantly reduce the number of jobs that will be delivered within the plan period from around 11,500 to around 7,000.

## Impact of the Proposals

- 1.16 The proposed development will meet two identified needs – Warrington's unmet need as identified in the St Helens draft Local Plan and the specific needs of a LCR operator that cannot be met elsewhere.
- 1.17 In doing so, the site can be delivered quickly and bring forward employment land, economic opportunity and jobs early in the emerging Local Plan period when there are few alternatives.
- 1.18 The construction phase will generate around 1,500 job years and £50m of wages and boost GDP by £120m. The operational phases will generate nearly 4,000 jobs, £110m in wages each year and an annual contribution to GDP of £180m. This will make a major contribution to closing the job density gap between St Helens and the LCR. It will also help tackle deprivation with a range of jobs at skills levels that are well matched to St Helens residents.
- 1.19 To enhance the benefits to St Helens, the applicant has also committed to improved transport links to deprived areas and training and employment measures to allow residents increase their skills and access jobs.

- 1.20 There would also be wider benefits from TJ Morris's ability to open a further 325 stores employing a total of 22,750 people across the north and midlands, further contributing to the levelling up agenda and the regeneration of towns and cities.
- 1.21 If the proposals do not go forward, there will be a significant loss to the St Helens and LCR economy in terms of jobs and the growth of one of the LCR's most important private sector businesses.

## Conclusions

- 1.22 Policy and the reality of the socio-economic context dictate that St Helens urgently needs more jobs. Uniquely across the region it has failed to increase employment over the last 35 years and now has some of the most severe deprivation in the country.
- 1.23 Partly as a result of this, it is one of the highest priority areas under the Government's levelling up agenda.
- 1.24 As well as the need for jobs, there is market demand to provide them in this location now.
- 1.25 The evidence base for the draft Local Plan and for the wider LCR show that significantly more employment land is required in St Helens than has historically been delivered. This aligns with real economic need – both in terms of the current and short-term availability of sites and the specific requirements of an LCR-based business for which there is no alternative in the region.
- 1.26 In the longer term, the balance of risks of employment land requirements suggests more is likely to be needed within the LCR's planning horizon of 2037 rather than less.
- 1.27 The development proposals in front of the Inquiry provide an opportunity to deliver 4,000 more jobs and for them to be linked to residents of deprived neighbourhoods through training and enhanced transport connections. The proposals will also support the opening of a further 325 TJ Morris shops with around 22,750 new jobs. The outline element of the scheme can contribute to Warrington's unmet need as identified in the St Helens draft Local Plan.
- 1.28 It is my opinion there is a clear economic need for the proposals to come forward as soon as possible to:
- 1.28.1 deliver much-needed jobs to St Helens
  - 1.28.2 help tackle deprivation
  - 1.28.3 meet the specific needs of one of the LCR's biggest and most successful businesses
  - 1.28.4 contribute to the short-term employment land requirements of both St Helens and the wider region
- 1.29 It is fair to judge that it complies with important planning policies on the economy and taking constructive steps for alleviating existing and long-standing deprivation. These include the St

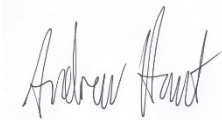
Helens draft Local Plan strategic aims to reduce deprivation and to maximise the contribution of St Helens to the LCR economy.

- 1.30 It has an identified operator for the detailed part, and both parts form an extension of an established and successful business park.
- 1.31 It is common ground that there are no alternative sites for the detailed element of the scheme and unless it goes ahead, those jobs will be lost to St Helens and the wider LCR.

## Declaration

The evidence which I have prepared and provide for this called-in planning application reference APP/H4315/V/20/3265899 in this proof of evidence) is true and has been prepared and is given in accordance with the guidance of my professional institution and I confirm that the opinions expressed are my true and professional opinions.

Dated: 29 March 2021

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Hunt". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above the printed name.

Andrew Stephen Hunt

Director