Examination of the Doncaster Local Plan

Harworth Group Plc
Rossington (Site Ref 247) (Representor Ref 05205)
Conisbrough and Denaby (Site Ref 1035) (Representor Ref 05205)

Hearing Statement
in relation to
Matter 4 – Green Belt

September 2020
Introduction / Context

1. This Statement is submitted on behalf of Harworth Group Plc (‘Harworth’), specifically in relation to land in which it has an interest at Rossington Colliery, and Denaby Main.

2. This Statement provides Harworth’s response to the Inspector’s Matters, Issues and Questions (INSP4) for consideration during the forthcoming hearing sessions. Harworth intend to participate in the hearing session in relation to Matter 4.

3. This Statement relates to Matter 4 regarding ‘Green Belt’ in particular, the following questions which are replicated ahead of Harworth’s response.

Question 4.1

Were all reasonable options for meeting identified development needs in non Green Belt locations fully examined during the preparation of the Plan? In particular:

a) Does the Plan make as much use as possible of suitable brownfield sites and underutilised land?

b) Would the Plan be effective in optimising the density of development and making effective use of land in line with chapter 11 of the NPPF?

c) What would the consequences be for sustainable development of accommodating all development needed during the Plan period in non Green Belt locations?

d) Was the Plan informed by discussions with neighbouring authorities about whether they could accommodate some of the Borough’s identified need for development?

Harworth Response

4. It is recognised that national policy requires the policy-making authority to demonstrate that it has examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting its identified need for development before concluding that exceptional circumstances exist to justify changes to Green Belt boundaries.

5. Harworth has no reason to doubt that Doncaster Council has met this requirement and that exceptional circumstances exist to require changes to the Green Belt boundaries and to meet development need.

6. However, national policy also requires the need to promote sustainable patterns of development to be taken into account when reviewing Green Belt boundaries.

7. In this regard, Harworth considers that it does not always follow that the allocation of non-Green Belt land is always preferable to Green Belt land, particularly in locations where the non-Green Belt land is green field and contiguous with the Green Belt.

8. For reference, this is the case at Conisbrough and Denaby where non-Green Belt Site 383 is greenfield, contiguous with the Green Belt and serves the purposes of Green Belt. Indeed, it is understood that this site was Green Belt and was removed as part of an allocation in a previous Plan, and which has not been delivered during

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1 NPPF para.137
2 NPPF para.138
that plan period. Given the nature of this site, it should not be presumed that it is preferable to a similarly located greenfield site that happens to be in the Green Belt.

9. Such sites should be assessed on an equal basis, taking into account relevant sustainability factors such as their contribution to biodiversity, amenity and recreation etc.

Question 4.2

Assuming it is necessary to remove land from the Green Belt, did the approach taken in the Plan give first consideration to land which has been previously developed and/or is well served by public transport?

Harworth Response

10. At Conisbrough and Denaby where Green Belt land is proposed to be reallocated for housing, it is not known that any sites of previously developed land exist within the Green Belt.

11. There is not considered to be any material difference in accessibility by public transport services between the proposed allocation Sites 040 and 383, and Site 1035 as each is accessible by bus with stops in relatively close proximity and a frequency of three services per hour.

12. It is appropriate therefore that each of these sites is considered on an equal basis.

Question 4.3

Would development on each of the eight housing allocations removed from the Green Belt promote sustainable patterns of development?

Harworth Response

13. Harworth considers that the proposed allocation of Site 040 (Sheffield Road / Old Road, Conisbrough) does not promote a sustainable pattern of development given that this site projects out from the settlement thereby creating an incursion into the countryside and a visually prominent form of development. Furthermore, the southwest part of the site is remote from the existing developed areas of Conisbrough and Denaby, thereby potentially limiting the attractiveness of walking and cycling as a means of travel.

14. A sustainable pattern of development may also be achieved by the designation of Site 383 as Green Belt given its existing significant value for biodiversity, public access and amenity. These assets should be retained and enhanced in order to achieve a sustainable pattern of development.

15. It is considered that a more sustainable pattern of development would be achieved by the removal of the prospective allocation Sites 040 and 383, and the allocation instead of Site 1035 which is better integrated with the built form of the settlement and screened by landscape features than Site 040, and is of limited biodiversity value and provides no public access or amenity unlike site 383.

Question 4.4

How would development on each of the eight housing allocations removed from the Green Belt affect the purposes of including land in the Green Belt?
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Harworth Response

16. Harworth considers that the proposed allocation of Site 040 (Sheffield Road / Old Road, Conisbrough) is significantly harmful to the purposes of including land in the Green Belt given the prominence of the site, meaning that its development would be viewed as a significant encroachment into the countryside.

17. In contrast, the physical form and existing screening of Site 1035 mean that allocation of this site and any development will be of lesser prominence and not be perceived to cause encroachment into the countryside to the same degree as Site 040.

18. Across the other purposes of Green Belt, there is considered to be no significant difference between these sites.

19. The allocation of Site 1035 (as suggested by Harworth) would not cause or contribute significantly to any ‘unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas’, the merging of neighbouring towns, or fail to preserve the setting and special character of any historic towns.

Question 4.7

Are the suggested changes set out in the Council’s responses to PQ9 and PQ10 necessary to make the Plan sound, and would they be effective in securing compensatory improvements to the environmental quality and accessibility of remaining Green Belt land that would offset the impact of removing the eight housing allocations from the Green Belt?

20. Harworth has concerns with the Council’s responses to PQ9 and PQ10 insofar as these relate to the identification of the country park at Rossington as a compensatory improvement to environmental quality and accessibility of remaining Green Belt land to offset the harm that would be caused by the removal of other land from the Green Belt.

21. As the Council recognises, the creation of the country park relates to the restoration of the former colliery and the planning permission for its redevelopment. Harworth is responsible for the funding and delivery of the country park to an agreed specification.

22. The land is not currently Green Belt, having only been suggested for inclusion at the Publication Stage (August 2019) and without specific reference in the Publication Draft Plan or identification of this on the Proposals Map (only within the Green Belt Topic Paper). See also our answer to Question 4.9 below.

23. Whilst creation of the country park will undoubtedly constitute an improvement to the environmental quality and accessibility of the site, it is an existing commitment and should therefore constitute a baseline position. Any improvement to environmental quality or accessibility that are to form compensation for loss of Green Belt land elsewhere must therefore be additional to this baseline and funded by the Council or the landowner/developer of the site(s) removed from the Green Belt.

24. Harworth considers it is not appropriate to define an existing commitment (funded and delivered by an unrelated third party) as compensation for a subsequently proposed and unrelated allocation. Any such identification of the country park as a compensatory improvement should only be for a related site (i.e. in Harworth’s control) or an improvement above the committed specification if agreed by Harworth.

25. Harworth therefore supports the Council’s proposed change (answer to PQ10) to require the Green Belt removal allocations to contribute to such improvements in the vicinity of the site as to be established with the Council. Any reference to the Rossington country park forming such compensation in general should be deleted.
Question 4.8

Have exceptional circumstances to justify removing each of the eight housing allocations from the Green Belt been fully evidenced and justified?

Harworth Response

26. This is considered to be a question for the Council to answer.

27. However, Harworth supports the Council’s conclusion that exceptional circumstances do exist to require the change to Green Belt boundaries across the Borough and that such changes are warranted at the Main Towns where development and investment will directly contribute to inclusive economic growth and regeneration.

28. Noting the Council’s response to PQ8 (in particular Appendix PQ8), the exceptional circumstances to justify removing Site 040 from the Green Belt are largely applicable to the whole of the settlement (i.e. lack of alternatives able to meet housing numbers) and would apply equally to Site 1035 as suggested by Harworth.

29. Harworth disputes that the site-specific assessment of this allocation (Site 040) constitutes exceptional circumstances given the weaknesses of the relative site assessment as set out in our preceding representations. It is not accepted that the proposed allocations at Conisbrough and Denaby (040 and 383) have properly been demonstrated to represent the most appropriate sites when other reasonable alternatives are considered (Site 1035). This assessment should not therefore be considered to contribute to exceptional circumstances to justify removal of Site 040 from the Green Belt.

Question 4.9

Have exceptional circumstances to justify making the other changes to the Green Belt referred to in the Council’s response to PQ8 been fully evidenced and justified?

Harworth Response

30. Harworth considers that satisfactory justification (including the demonstration of exceptional circumstances) has not been evidenced to warrant designation of land at the Rossington country park as Green Belt. Accordingly, Harworth considers that it is not justified to designate this land as Green Belt and that this should be deleted from the Plan.

31. In particular, it should be noted that:

i. This prospective designation of land as Green Belt was only introduced at the Publication Stage (August 2019) and was not specifically referenced in the draft Plan or on the proposals map. It was introduced and discussed only in the Green Belt Topic Paper (August 2019).

ii. The prospective designation of land as Green Belt has not been assessed at any stage of the Green Belt Review (by Arup) up to and including the Stage 3 Addendum (February 2019).

iii. The Green Belt Topic Paper (August 2019) only considers this prospective Green Belt addition in the context of off-setting harm to the Green Belt and compensating for loss of Green Belt elsewhere. It is not assessed in its own right to establish that it satisfies the tests for inclusion in the Green Belt.

3 Green Belt Topic Paper (August 2019) paragraphs 2.3.80-2.3.81, 2.5.15, 7.6.4-7.6.18, 7.7.2
iv. The Green Belt Topic Paper (March 2020 submission) (DMBC3)\textsuperscript{4} is essentially the same as the August 2019 version in this regard.

32. It is evident therefore that the prospective inclusion of this land within the Green Belt has not established through a strategic policy\textsuperscript{5} or been assessed for its contribution to achieving the five purposes of Green Belt\textsuperscript{6}.

33. It is evident that the prospective inclusion of this land within the Green Belt is driven only as a ‘compensatory improvement’ to offset the impact of removing land from the Green Belt elsewhere.

34. As outlined in our answer to Question 4.7, the Rossington country park cannot be defined as such a compensatory improvement as it is already committed to be delivered to an agreed specification. Its designation as Green Belt is opportunistic and offsets impact only in numerical (land area) terms.

35. This therefore undermines the ‘exceptional circumstances’ which the Council indicates exist to justify amending the Green Belt boundary in this location.

36. Harworth therefore considers that in the absence of appropriate evidence and justification, the land at Rossington country park cannot be designated as Green Belt. In doing so the Plan would not be sound.

37. Harworth also notes that land immediately to the east of location is designated as Open Space (Holmes Carr Great Wood) and not Green Belt on the Publication Version Policies Map. This would appear inconsistent and further reduce the justification for the designation of the adjacent Rossington country park as Green Belt.

38. Accordingly, Harworth suggests that in order to make the Plan sound as justified by evidence and consistent with national policy, the land which the Council proposes to designate as Green Belt should be designated as Open Space. This is entirely appropriate to the function of the country park and offers suitable protection against development that is not compatible with its function as country park.

**Question 4.10**

*Assuming that I conclude that the Plan identifies sufficient land to ensure that justified development needs can be met in suitable locations throughout the Plan period, would there be exceptional circumstances to justify taking additional land out of the Green Belt at the present time, for example to try to ensure that Green Belt boundaries will not need to be altered again at the end of the Plan period?*  

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\textsuperscript{4} DMBC3 paragraphs 2.3.81-2.3.82, 2.5.15, 7.6.4-7.6.18, 7.7.2  
\textsuperscript{5} NPPF paragraph 136  
\textsuperscript{6} NPPF paragraph 134
Harworth Response

39. This is considered to be a question for the Council to answer.

40. However, should it be concluded that there are exceptional circumstances to justify taking additional land out of the Green Belt at the present time, which may ensure that Green Belt boundaries will not need to be altered again at the end of the Plan period, then Harworth would suggest that Site 1035 be favourably considered in this context. This would provide land to accommodate future development needs for employment and/or housing at Conisbrough and Denaby.

41. Please note however, Harworth’s primary case is that Site 1035 should be allocated in the Plan for employment (in part) and housing (in part) development. Our comments in response to this question represent a fallback position only, and should not be construed as an equal alternative to the allocation of this site for development during the current plan period.