

FULL PLANNING PERMISSION APPLICATION TO ALLOW A CHANGE OF USE FROM OFFICES (CLASS B1) TO LEISURE USE (CLASS D2)

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

Applicant:	James Hamer-Morton
Premises:	Suites 2, 3 & Basement, 122 Castle Street, Reading, RG1 7RG
Class D2 Use:	Escape Room Centre

1. *INTRODUCTION*

- 1.1 Further to the Planning Statement, in response to requests for further details and commentary on the application for change of use, this document is set out as follows:

Section 2 – Justification for the loss of existing office use at the site;

Section 3 – Testimonials regarding the nature of the use and impact on nearby amenity;

Section 4 – Clarification that no specific sound insulation measures are proposed;

Section 5 – Comments on conditions of other Escape Room permission (161989);

2. *JUSTIFICATION FOR THE LOSS OF EXISTING OFFICE USE AT THE SITE*

- 2.1 The criteria outlined at policy CS11 (paragraph 5.15) states the factors which may be taken into account are (i) proximity to the strategic road network, (ii) ownership constraints, specifically as a response to the marketing of the site for employment use, (iii) balancing supply and long-term demand, (iv) effects on neighbouring use of noise, pollution and air quality, intensity of activity, (v) need for additional housing, community facilities and (vi) likelihood of development resulting in 'islands' of other uses in employment areas.
- 2.2 (i) - The minimal increase in traffic (approximately one vehicle per hour) to the area from guests and accessibility of public transport easily offsets the equivalent office use, especially due to the staggered nature of one escape game running per hour. By opening at 10am and closing at 10pm, employees will avoid adding the standard 'rush hour' traffic, in fact reducing congestion at the busy times, even if only by the two vehicles allocated for by the on-site parking.
- 2.3 (ii) – The initial application to lease that was sent to the landlord to gain permission to run an Escape Room Centre at the premises set the terms very clearly to ensure the other businesses in the building would not be affected. We have agreed to keep noise level to no higher than that of a standard office, and restrict customers to visit bathrooms individually, to avoid raised noise levels in shared corridors. Our obligation is to take every step necessary to create no noticeable difference to the other tenants with our presence while they

are conducting business. With these targets, we don't imagine any necessity to alter what is promised with future marketing of the property.

- 2.4 Past marketing of the property has been limited to agents websites, and brochures (http://docs.novaloca.com/148_225_635949068522950000.pdf) and more recently (<https://www.chancellors.co.uk/properties/bracknell-ho-property/office-to-let/2271826/castle-street-reading>) make it very clear that the premises is shared. It makes no mention of the other tenants being exclusively Office (B1) use, and since our business shouldn't affect theirs, it is unnecessary to alter the marketing of the property, should the application for change of use be successful.
- 2.5 Regarding marketing the premises in question after our lease finishes, this could actually be a benefit to the landlord, having a pre-approved D2 use. Should a business require a B1 use, this would not delay a future tenant, since approval to change usage back to that of a use consistent with the rest of the building would be extremely likely, and the business could trade under a temporary change of use for up to two years while waiting for official approval (see GPDO Schedule 2, Part 4 Class D).
- 2.6 (iii) – Concerns over balancing the supply and long term demand of business spaces must be weighed against having a balanced and varied economy. Given the size of the premises (two small-office suitable rooms), and the expected capacity of employees for the space (two car parking spaces are provided), the loss of such a space would be very minor, with compatible employment opportunities provided with the new use. Given the current state of the basement area being unfit for office use, we consider that our intent to keep it well maintained may even provide more office space long term, after our lease expires, and having such a space in use frees up the alternative premises we have been considering that may be more suited to office use.
- 2.7 (iv) – While the Noise Assessment (see Planning Statement, Section 3) makes it clear that we intend to ensure minimal impact from Escape Room activities on neighbouring businesses and residential properties, we do understand that customers leaving the premises could cause unwanted noise. We consider that our opening hours of 10am to 10pm, and modest footfall will reduce any potential problems, and certainly will come nowhere near the noise inherent to the area by having a public house next door. Our presence, given the aforementioned footfall and ease of access by public transport would have no more effect on pollution and air quality than the current Offices (B1) use.
- 2.8 (v) – Escape Room Centres tend to attract customers from quite far afield, and will have little effect on the need for additional housing or community facilities.
- 2.9 (iv) – By opening an Escape Room Centre close to the city centre, we benefit from having easy access to other linked industries and uses such as existing restaurants and bars. Therefore, our presence should add value and business to the current area, through bringing customers to existing related businesses, rather than bringing more of these businesses to an employment area.

3. *TESTIMONIALS REGARDING THE NATURE OF THE USE AND IMPACT ON NEARBY AMENITY*

- 3.1 For an assessment of impact on nearby amenity regarding transport, noise and retail, please see the Planning Statement attached to the application. Not covered in this however is the residential impact, which we consider boils down to visual, footfall and noise when outside the premises, since our agreements have always focused on ensuring that the activities within the Escape Room Centre are invisible to those outside the premises.
- 3.2 Visually, we are not requesting permission to change anything outside the building. No extra signage will be added to the outside of the building. Our presence for marketing will remain online.
- 3.3 In our experience running an Escape Room Centre in Peterborough, even with a prominent store front, our customers pre-book their games online, so we do not expect any additional visitors beyond the guests that have already made a booking. The modest impact is likely to be small groups arriving once or twice an hour. Our Peterborough venue is next door to a cafe, and a branch of a credit union, which we believe to be compatible to the premises in Reading at 122 Castle Street, which has a pub next door. Our impact on footfall is negligible to our venue in Peterborough because of the other amenities nearby, which we expect to be comparable to that of The Castle Tap situated next door to the premises. Since its opening hours are later than the proposed hours of Deadlocked Ltd, our impact on residential properties from sheer numbers of customers should be negligible.
- 3.4 The noise of customers leaving the premises is our other concern regarding the impact on the amenity of the area for residents. Our customer experience includes a briefing, for safety, but also, and perhaps more uniquely to us, a full debriefing to avoid them heading straight out into public noisily and excitedly. We do not allow customers to be under the influence of alcohol during to experience our Escape Rooms, which curtails a rowdy group affecting the local area after their experience. Given the fact that there is a pub next door, our impact on the amenity of the area is likely to be almost non existent other than hopefully bringing in and creating happy visitors.

4. *CLARIFICATION THAT NO SPECIFIC SOUND INSULATION MEASURES ARE PROPOSED*

- 4.1 The application for lease and tenancy agreement for the premises explicitly require the presence of Deadlocked Ltd to have no effect on the other businesses in the building through additional noise beyond what would be expected from normal office activities. While the activity itself of solving puzzles in a team is generally an intellectual process, and therefore is unlikely to affect general noise levels in the building, the main noise from an Escape Room comes from audio from the design of the Escape Rooms themselves (e.g. background music/pre-recorded story elements) which we intend to limit in the following ways.
- 4.2 The basement area (where two of our Escape Rooms will be located) is already very well

noise isolated from the rest of the building. Suites 2 and 3 are directly above the first Escape Room and will allow us to ensure any audio from music or story elements do not leak into the rest of the building. This can be achieved simply by setting the volume to an acceptable level. Should further noise reduction methods be necessary (such as audio insulation) we are fully prepared to have these in place before opening.

- 4.3 Suites 2 and 3 are on the ground floor and therefore closer to the other businesses in the building with less sound isolation inherent in their placement, and we intend to run one Escape Room within these suites. Above the suites are some bathroom facilities for the building, which will allow us to perform initial tests with regard to sound levels and noise leaking without affecting the rest of the building. We are prepared to include sound proofing in the room, should it become necessary, using acoustic foam tiles, though would much prefer to limit the volume of story elements and background audio to avoid issues in the first place.
- 4.4 We will invite other businesses in the building to test our Escape Rooms so that they fully understand our business and have a dialogue open to instantly solve sound problems before we open to public bookings.
- 4.5 Our Escape Rooms are designed in-house and our design philosophy has always been to use the quirks and restrictions of a property as an advantage. One method to reduce noise for the Escape Room on the ground floor, should no other methods work is to make silence a gameplay mechanic; Penalising participants' final score for making too much noise, or simply suggesting that they must not draw attention to themselves as part of the story has worked extremely well in the past to reduce noise levels to well below that of a standard office, and sometimes improve the Escape Room experience itself.

5. *COMMENTS ON CONDITIONS OF OTHER ESCAPE ROOM PERMISSION (161989)*

- 5.1 Timetrapp Escape Rooms sought permission for change of use from B1 (Office) to D2 (Leisure) in the same way that we are (Application No. 161989) which was granted with conditions that we would find acceptable, should the same conditions be given to us. The notable conditions and our comments are as follows:
- 5.2 *The development to which this permission relates must be begun not later than the expiration of three years beginning with the date on which the permission was granted.*
Our tenancy agreement hinges on permission for change of use being granted, and begins immediately thereafter. We expect to open for bookings within a month of this date.
- 5.3 *Notwithstanding the provisions of the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 (as amended), the application land by virtue of this permission shall only be used as an escape room activity/puzzle facility and for no other use within Use Class D2 (Assembly and Leisure).*

We have selected the premises for its unique qualities and layout because we feel that it best uses the space, and have no plans to use it for any other purpose than an Escape Room Centre. Doing so would also violate our tenancy agreement.

- 5.4 *The development hereby permitted shall not operate outside the hours of 10:00-22:00 hours Monday to Sunday.*

These are the opening hours we have suggested, based upon our existing Escape Room Centre in Peterborough. While we have trialled longer opening hours (with permission) at this venue, we did not receive bookings that started earlier than 10am or run later than 10pm and therefore have no problem with limiting our hours to those that make business as well as sociological sense.

- 5.5 *There shall be no more than 25 people at any one time in the escape room use hereby permitted.*

We run our Escape Rooms every other hour, giving time for staff to reset the rooms and prepare for the next guests who have an hour long experience. With a maximum number of players per room of 6, even at capacity, including a member of staff per group, we would not ever have more than 21 people on site. In practice, we will stagger our game start times to avoid multiple groups arriving at once, so only two games could be running at any one time. Our average group size is 3.7 people, so, even rounding up, on a fully booked day, we expect approximately 11 people on site at once, and would have no problem staying under 25.

- 5.6 *No noise associated with the escape room activities hereby permitted shall be audible within adjoining premises.*

Our obligation is to ensure that no noise associated with the escape room activities are audible within the other offices of the same premises, so this philosophy of self contained and isolated audio is happily already part of our targets.

James Hamer-Morton

14/06/2017