



Meeting note

Project name	Lower Thames Crossing
File reference	TR010032
Status	Final
Author	The Planning Inspectorate
Date	7 December 2021
Meeting with	National Highways
Venue	Microsoft Teams
Circulation	All attendees

Summary of key points discussed and advice given

The Planning Inspectorate (the Inspectorate) advised that a note of the meeting would be taken and published on its website in accordance with section 51 of the Planning Act 2008 (the PA2008). Any advice given under section 51 would not constitute legal advice upon which applicants (or others) could rely.

Before the close of the year, the Applicant provided a brief update on some elements of the scheme that would likely form future agenda items going into 2022.

Air quality impacts of nitrogen on ecological sites

The Applicant updated that National Highways and Natural England have agreed to include ammonia in air quality assessments on ecological sites. The Applicant explained that this decision has significantly increased the spatial coverage of the sites to be examined to approximately 150 – 200 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), although the Applicant stated the impact on the conclusions within the information to support the Habitats Regulations Assessment is minimal.

National Highways are in discussion with Natural England to understand how best to avoid/mitigate the air quality impacts on designated ecological sites including the use of barriers and/or the use of speed restrictions. The Applicant is also evaluating how best to provide compensation for effects to the affected designated sites.

The Applicant is assessing the impact of these implemented changes on the local road network, traffic on the M25 to Dartford and other designated ecological sites.

Air quality impacts on human health

The Applicant noted that the proposals change the air quality across the project, particularly at Dartford and also localised worsening across the scheme. National

Highways are monitoring the changes in legislation in regard to the Environment Act, other relevant case law and air quality guidance.

The Applicant is still following LA 105 (Air Quality) which sets out the requirements for assessing the effects of highway proposals on air quality. The Applicant intends to investigate the possibility of quantitative assessment of air quality impacts on human health. The Applicant advised that the consultation would seek to highlight the measures that are proposed to address air quality.

The Inspectorate commented that Local Authorities had been vocal in respect of the relationship between traffic modelling and air quality. The Applicant believed its current assessment was robust and would be looking at the comments coming forward from Local Authorities and other stakeholders on this matter.

National Policy Statement review & carbon

The Applicant acknowledged the evolving policy baseline in which the scheme will be assessed against. The Energy National Policy Statement consultation closed on the 29 November 2021. The Applicant has reviewed the draft, noting minimal concern with compliance, although acknowledging that the Statement could change/evolve.

The Applicant noted that a larger area of uncertainty is in respect of compliance with the National Networks National Policy Statement (NN NPS), which is due to come out in draft for consultation in early 2023. The Applicant is using the Transport Decarbonisation Plan and Environment Act 2021 for an indication of changes to the NN NPS.

The Inspectorate raised the point of need, advising the Applicant to explicitly state the need within the application. Although a key aim is to relieve the Dartford Crossing, the Inspectorate questioned whether the Applicant was considering reinforcing that there are several aspects of need including the Levelling Up agenda, skills, and economy. The Applicant is confident in the primary aim of the scheme to relieve the Dartford Crossing and will continue to review and update the materials for the next submission.

Wider Network Impacts

The Applicant notes that the proposal will change the traffic flow across the region. The discussion noted concerns from Local Authorities and Local Highway Authorities that the proposal may negatively impact some traffic flows. The Applicant updated that they continue to work with such Authorities to understand and respond to their concerns.

The Applicant added that further interventions are not included in the Project's Development Consent Order, but the approach and further process are to be outlined in the updated Wider Network Impacts Management and Monitoring Plan.

Impacts on AONB/SSSI/Ancient Woodland

The Applicant referred to the Project's impact on designated sites including Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), SSSI, and Ancient Woodland. The Applicant

reported that it is working closely with stakeholders on mitigation and compensation measures and documenting this within Statements of Common Ground.

The Inspectorate enquired as to the opportunities available to connect fragmented habitats in the scheme; to provide ecosystem services and resilience; add value in a number of areas including mitigation; and deliver Biodiversity Net Gain. The Inspectorate questioned whether the Applicant is being ambitious enough in regard to the aforementioned opportunities. The Applicant noted the positive feedback from Natural England around the proposed multifaceted public realm at Tilbury Fields and explained that engagement continues with Natural England in how this approach can continue in respect of the revised designs that will come forward.

Cultural heritage impacts

The Applicant is working to reduce the impacts on cultural heritage where possible and is producing an Outline Written Scheme of Investigation and Archaeological Mitigation Strategy for submission in the DCO application. The Applicant notes ongoing positive engagement with Historic England and Local Authority archaeological representatives, although notes some points of concern, which it is working to address.

The Inspectorate advised the Applicant to reflect the issues within the relevant National Policy Statement, including cultural heritage impacts, given its significant role in the Secretary of State's judgement of the application.

Other

The Applicant asked whether the Inspectorate would be providing further comments on the DCO and the navigation-note on river use base line and assessments. The Inspectorate believes it has expressed its concern and raised comments appropriately.

