

Your ref:  
Our ref: SHN/JCP/JB  
DD: [REDACTED]  
E: [REDACTED]  
Date: 4 November 2021

The Planning Inspectorate  
*By online submission*

Dear Sirs

## **EXECUTORS OF N A ALINGTON - TOP FARM, LITTLE BARFORD ESTATE**

### **EXAMINING AUTHORITY'S WRITTEN QUESTIONS AND REQUEST FOR INFORMATION - REFERENCE WQ2 Q2.5.3.3**

We set out below replies to the questions raised by the ExA on 15 October 2021. For the Executors of N A Alington to provide additional details, we now enclose a detailed statement below on their behalf in our capacity as managing agent.

We have had a meeting with Highways England (HE) and its representatives to discuss this matter, and other issues raised in our client's representations regarding the scheme. A compromise solution is under consideration.

**Executors of N A Alington and NFU are asked to provide justification with reference to other NSIP schemes and relevant policies, that the future proofing of the overbridge and other similar provisions is a reasonable request from the Applicant [REP3-025].**

Currently there is an unrestricted access for machinery around the principle arable farming block at Top Farm without having to demount or disassemble equipment. The Applicant is proposing a bridge with 3.5m carriageway and 0.6m borders, a 4.7m total width between parapets, on the basis that the track is about 3.5 m wide. However, the track (and other tracks around the farm) adjoin grass margins or fields and therefore machinery can either run on grass or the track could be widened at modest expense if needed to carry wider equipment. Examples of the current machinery have been provided, together with the widths. The proposed bridge in some cases is of insufficient width for the machinery, or in others is theoretically wide enough (eg Quadtrack at 4.2 m, combine without header) but the tolerance or clearance is too small to be safe and damage to the protective fencing and machinery is likely. Farm machinery has increased in size as farm sizes increase and bridges of sufficient width in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century are now too small to be of practical use.

The best example of obsolescence is the underpass under the East Coast Mainline at the Little Barford Estate. Other examples in the locality are:-

#### **M11 Cambridge - Cantelupe Farm Trumpington**

The construction of the M11 finished in 1980. Cantelupe Farm to the south-west of Cambridge was severed by this road scheme. To connect the blocks of farmland a bridge of 4.7m total width between parapets was provided.

**Figure 1 – M11 bridge (Cantelupe Farm)**



Cantelupe Farm is operated by a large farming business with modern equipment of similar or larger size than used at Top Farm. The farm was a ring-fenced unit without restriction on farm machinery (then smaller than now) but the M11 severed off proportions of the farm and two bridges were provided. The bridges are of insufficient size (and bearing) for the farm and are only used by smaller farm equipment. Instead large cultivation machinery needs to be taken onto the public road network. For the smaller block of land cropping has been changed, for example use of set-aside, fallow or environment schemes that do not require cultivation. These however reduce farming profitability and are dependent on continuing farming support from Government, which is unlikely to continue and indeed will be abolished from 2027. Whereas this solution has been possible on smaller blocks, Top Farm is a large block split in two and reducing cropping would substantially reduce farm profits, commercial viability and in due course farm value.

#### **A14 Cambridge – Park Farm Histon**

The original A14 route split a farm occupied by NIAB (The National Institution for Agricultural Botany) at Histon, due north of Cambridge, utilised for seed and crop trials. A bridge was installed to accommodate movement of farm machinery between both sides of the farm. As with the bridge provided at Cantelupe Farm, it measures approximately 4.7m between parapets. It also a 'humped back' bridge with no line of sight across from either side. This was deemed at the time to be sufficient. It, like the other bridges, is now clearly not. The impact on the operation of the farm here is admittedly less adverse because much of the equipment used for the trial plots is small and specialised, but any large farm machinery must be taken onto the public highway. Because of the difficulties of access and lack of vision this bridge now requires a traffic light system to control access.

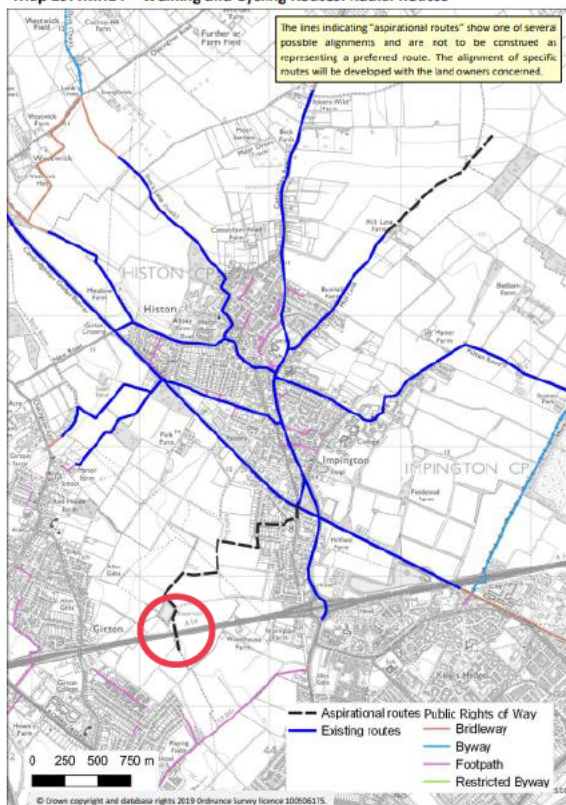
**Figure 2 – A14 Bridge between Histon and Girton (Park Farm)**



We have observed that such bridges may also become used for other purposes over time. The Park Farm bridge is a good example. The overbridge is now being proposed for allocation of a cycleway between Histon and Girton. This is recorded in the *Histon and Impington Neighbourhood Plan* where an 'aspirational' cycle route is delineated across the A14 overbridge.

**Figure 3 – Histon and Impington Neighbourhood Plan**

**Map 19: HIM14 – Walking and Cycling Routes: Radial Routes**



This neighbourhood plan has been ratified by South Cambridgeshire District Council. As such this document forms part of the development plan for the district. Provision of new bridges for pedestrian or bicycle access is expensive and it is easier to use existing facilities. If this progresses there will be a conflict in use, as there is insufficient room for both agricultural and foot/bicycle access.

Such a cycle path was clearly not the intention of the original A14 project when building this bridge. Whilst the bridge at Top Farm is not currently being proposed for use by pedestrians, this could easily change in the future. This would prejudice safe use of farm machinery at Top Farm, if such a small bridge was provided.

On a smaller scale on the A14 and the A120 Little Hadham Bypass the gateways on new accesses from the highway or the new service roads have been provided at a minimum of 6m, most frequently two 3.1 m (10ft) gates. This is in recognition of the size of modern farm machinery.

**Executors of N A Alington, the ExA acknowledges the need to accommodate changes in farming practices; however, explain how equivalent capacity would leave you worse off.**

We disagree that equivalent capacity will be delivered under the Applicant's current proposal, so if left unchanged it actually restricts traffic around the farm. We repeat that the Executors and their farm contractor currently have an unrestricted access route around the farm.

There could be various options available to the Executors if the proposal remained unchanged.

**a)** Unhitch and fold up or load and trail equipment on each occasion there was travel between fields. This results in additional time and therefore cost. Typically, once machinery is delivered work is carried out by one individual but if machinery had to be dismantled extra staff are required.

**b)** Use smaller machinery. This is inevitably more time consuming and therefore more costly. As a result, profit will be adversely impacted and therefore the commercial viability of the farm is diminished. Larger machinery is more efficient in fuel and labour time, as well as limiting travel over land to minimise compaction and number of operations required.

Farming operations are seasonally specific and in many cases weather conditional, so need to use precise weather windows, which may be quite limited. A smaller and therefore inadequate bridge as currently proposed makes the farming business inefficient and less productive. If smaller machinery is used, this is also less efficient and means agricultural operations take a greater amount of time.

The farm utilises a 48m Controlled Traffic Farming (CTF) system at Top Farm. This is critical to prevent over-compaction of soils and is good agricultural practice. A CTF system means that all machinery is of appropriate sizes so that machinery only need to use a certain number of tramlines in the field. This prevents farm machinery having to regularly drive across the field, which damages crops and can also cause significant damage to soil structures. Smaller machinery would mean we could not continue a CTF system.

Maintaining the most up to date and best farm practice is essential to maintain profitability. Government policy for both farming and the environment is directed at reducing direct farm support and concentrating on environmental gain including mitigating climate change. This is represented by the cut in the Basic Payment Scheme subsidy (derived from the EU common agricultural policy) to zero by 2027. This will place additional pressure on farmers to make conventional farming more efficient and maintain profitability.



c) Change cropping. In reality this is not feasible for this sort of land which is most suited to combinable crops, where the use of the larger machinery shows the best returns. For example, smaller scale vegetable production is not possible on land of this type. Therefore, the only possible changes would be to a livestock system, which would entail substantial expense in fencing and housing, water supplies and restoration of grass, or move to habitat, fallow or conservation crops. The returns from these are entirely dependent on government grants and will not lead to long term, sustainable farming profitability. In addition, except for livestock, it doesn't produce any actual food.

Restriction of activity on the farm will adversely affect value and returns as the farm would not be capable of supporting modern production.

**Applicant and Executors of N A Alington, provide an update on the negotiations, which the ExA notes are ongoing, including a view from both parties if the capacity of the bridge (as proposed) can be changed or increased should the need arise in the future.**

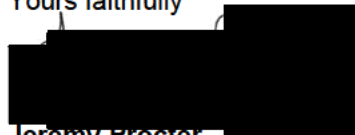
Negotiations are ongoing following a productive virtual meeting with HE. It was concluded that it would not be feasible to upgrade the size or capacity of the bridge in the future and that replacement in the future with a larger bridge would only be possible with substantial traffic disruption and expense.

HE noted that there were ongoing discussions for the provision of additional junctions along the A428. If any of Top Farm is allocated for development under the emerging Local Plan, actual development would take place from west of the East Coast mainline over many years so agricultural use will continue on all or part. The Executors are aware of the proposals for allocation of land for development to the south (around Tempsford) and are involved in consultations regarding the route of EWR so have given consideration to the location of a future or new junction to serve prospective developments and the new station. The proposals for a junction in the vicinity of Top Farm would need to be separate from the bridge improvements at Top Farm, as part of the DCO process. The latter relates purely to the operation of the agricultural estate.

We consider that HE accepted that the 4.7m wide bridge would restrict use and therefore is investigating the provision of a bridge of sufficient width to accommodate machinery up to 6m wide safely. For the avoidance of doubt this bridge must have a weight bearing capacity of not less than the maximum permitted weight for road vehicles (currently 44 tonnes). This would be an acceptable compromise for the Executors.

If we can provide any further information or details, please do let me know.

Yours faithfully



**Jeremy Procter**  
Partner, Rural