



Meeting note

Project name	River Thames Scheme
File reference	WA020001
Status	Final
Author	The Planning Inspectorate
Date	16 August 2022
Meeting with	Environment Agency and Surrey County Council
Venue	Microsoft Teams
Meeting objectives	Project Update Meeting
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.

Scheme update and Programme

The Applicant provided a high level project programme to the Inspectorate. The Applicant anticipates commencing Statutory Consultation in Winter 2023, with a view to submit a Development Consent Order (DCO) application in Winter 2024.

The Applicant explained that the proposed River Thames Scheme aims to protect local communities, enhance the River Thames and secure the economy. The Applicant explained that it is using a landscape-based approach to creating a healthier, more sustainable and more resilient community. The proposed development if consented, intends to reduce the risk of flooding; improve access to green spaces; create a network of high quality habitats; facilitate sustainable and inclusive economic growth, and, enable delivery and design that contribute to goals relating to carbon use.

The Applicant explained that it had formally requested that the Secretary of State exercise the power under Section 35(1) of the Planning Act 2008 (PA2008) to direct that the proposed development be treated as development of national significance, on 25 November 2020. The Secretary of State granted this direction on 24 December 2020, and the Applicant explained that Section 105 of the PA2008 therefore applies. The Inspectorate agreed to publish the Section 35 direction on the National Infrastructure webpage.

The Applicant provided a scheme description to the Inspectorate. It explained that the proposed development is a major new piece of green and blue infrastructure comprising: a flood channel in two sections; areas of open green space; an interconnected network of new habitat sites and green and blue corridors; a network of new and enhanced active travel routes, and capacity improvements on the River Thames.

The Applicant explained that the flood channel is in two sections. The Applicant explained that Runnymede channel flows through six lakes and crosses five roads including the M3. The Spelthorne channel flows through four lakes and crosses five roads. The Applicant also explained that it aims to increase capacity of the River Thames through bed lowering down stream of Desborough Cut and through works at three existing weirs.

The Applicant explained that the landscape and green infrastructure is currently at concept design stage. The Applicant is looking at how the proposed development can best deliver an integrated solution. The Applicant explained that the proposed development, if consented, will include public access to new open spaces and will create an improved sustainable travel network.

The Applicant explained that this proposed development is promoted by a multi-agency partnership, led by Surrey County Council and the Environment Agency.

Environmental Impact Assessment Scoping

The Applicant explained that it intends to submit a request for an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Scoping Opinion from the Inspectorate on 3 October 2022. The Applicant confirmed that it would submit a GIS shapefile of the redline boundary at least 10 working days prior to the Scoping request. The Applicant explained that the Scoping Report is based on; addressing previous Scoping Opinion comments; stakeholder feedback; and consideration of the current design boundary and parameters. The Applicant noted that it has scoped on a precautionary basis where a level of uncertainty remains.

The Applicant discussed the project boundary it is using for the EIA scoping purposes. It explained that the design of channel and capacity improvements is well progressed, and that further work is needed with regard to landscape and green infrastructure. The Applicant added that maximum parameters have been developed to allow flexibility for: materials handling; construction methods; new fish passes; habitat creation areas, landscape and green infrastructure, and environmental mitigation. With regard to habitat creation areas, the Applicant explained that in addition to the channel and public open spaces, eleven sites are currently being considered to achieve Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and that it is yet to finalise how much land will be needed to meet BNG requirements.

The Applicant explained that the EIA scoping report is currently going through final checks, and may change prior to submission, but it is currently proposing to scope out: effects associated with decommissioning (as it does not anticipate decommissioning the proposed development); transboundary effects; major accidents and disasters (as relevant elements are covered in other EIA chapters); and disposal of hazardous waste off-site, for all topics except materials and waste). The Applicant explained that it is proposing to scope in the effects of disposal of non-hazardous waste offsite, for all topics.

The Applicant discussed its approach to mitigation. It explained that it has adopted IEMA guidance and added that it had incorporated embedded mitigation. It has aligned the channel to avoid the adjacent Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The Applicant added that an augmented flow will occur through the channel when it is not being used for flood relief, which ensures continuous flow through the system to allow fish passage and reduce effects on water quality. The Applicant also added that it will use various tertiary mitigation best practice.

The Applicant explained that mitigation may be secured through potential mechanisms including, for example, the Outline Construction Environmental Management Plan (OCEMP) and Materials Management Plan (MMP).

The Applicant explained the proposed scoping of individual topics, again noting that the EIA scoping report is currently going through final checks and may change prior to submission. The Applicant discussed its approach to air quality; a qualitative assessment of effects and identification of mitigation based on guidance from the Institute of Air Quality Management (IAQM). It added that atmospheric dispersion modelling will be used to assess emissions from additional vehicles. The Applicant is proposing to scope in the construction effects on dust and particulates; changes in air quality from vehicle movements; and odour from excavating material.

The Applicant explained that there are European sites within proximity to the proposed development, and that parts of the South West London Waterbodies Special Protection Area (SPA) are within the project boundary. It added that approximately eight lakes directly affected by the proposed development are supporting waterbodies to the SPA. It further outlined that 5 statutory designated and 18 non statutory designated sites for nature conservation are within the project boundary. The Applicant is scoping all biodiversity receptors onto the EIA (until surveys are complete to confirm their presence). The Applicant explained that certain species such as dormouse and water voles are likely to be removed from consideration as they were not recorded in previous surveys. The Applicant has, to date, used Defra Metric 3.0 to calculate BNG.

The Applicant is proposing to scope in effects from: vegetation clearance, soil compaction, reduction in the availability of foraging and commuting habitat, resting or breeding sites, habitat severance or direct injury/death of species; noise, vibration, lighting, dust and visual disturbance; works in and around waterbodies; demolition of buildings; creation of barriers to migration between lakes. The Applicant is proposing to scope out effects from accidental spillage or run-off from stored chemicals or fuel. The Applicant then explained what it proposes to scope in/out of the EIA report from a biodiversity and operational effects perspective. The Inspectorate queried the amount of demolition (five buildings, including one outbuilding and four residences) and advised that it would be important to have early discussions with landowners regarding demolition of these.

The Inspectorate was asked for its opinion on the use of Evidence Plans. It confirmed that it is important to show what evidence the applicant and consultees agree on and disagree on at the point of application, so it is in favour of these.

The Applicant explained its approach to assessing climatic factors. Its approach considers the effect that the proposed development has on the ability to meet climate related targets. The Applicant outlined its approach to climate change mitigation and adaptation. The Applicant outlined what it is proposing to scope in under climate change mitigation, including general construction works and embodied carbon in materials; Greenhouse Gas Emissions (GHGs) from vehicle movements; and operation of structures/maintenance activities. The Applicant is proposing to scope in increased flood resilience; GHGs from measures to address flood damage; and the effect on River Thames Scheme users from extreme weather conditions. The Applicant explained that it is proposing to scope out potential damage to soil caused by reduced carbon sequestration.

The Applicant outlined some cultural heritage features in and within the vicinity of the proposed development; including, for example, two scheduled monuments and several conservation areas. It explained that areas of natural ground with medium and high archaeological mitigation are to be explored further through extensive investigations. The Applicant is proposing to scope in: construction: effects on designated and non-designated heritage assets, and buried archaeology and on setting, and, operation: effects on the setting of designated heritage assets; effect on designated and non-designated heritage assets from the change in flood regime and ground water levels; and beneficial effects on the understanding and presentation of heritage assets.

The Inspectorate queried the location of certain heritage assets (the Magna Carta memorial site at Runnymede and the associated site at Ankerwycke), and the Applicant confirmed that these were not within the proposed DCO boundary.

The Inspectorate advised the Applicant to ensure that “temporary” is well defined across all aspect matters in the EIA.

The Applicant explained that the majority of the area within the DCO boundary is in Flood Zone 3 or functional floodplain. The Applicant outlined its approach to assessing flood risk in the EIA. It noted that this topic assesses changes to flood severity and frequency, and it further noted that technical hydraulic modelling underpins the scheme. The Applicant is proposing to scope in: significant beneficial effect (reduction in flood risk frequency and severity); land level changes during construction and operation; alterations to drainage patterns and surface water flooding during construction; and, potential effect from sheet piling on increasing groundwater flood risk. The Applicant is proposing to scope out: temporary construction effects on surface water; flood risk associated with disposal of hazardous waste off-site; on site dewatering requirements during construction; channel operation and downstream fluvial flood risk.

The Applicant outlined its approach to assessing health impacts; by using a qualitative assessment informed by Public Health England and DMRB Guidance. The Applicant is proposing to scope in: the effects on flood risk, air quality and disturbance; and, changes in traffic activity, and other factors such as promotion of active travel in the area. The Applicant is proposing to scope out: changes in air quality associated with excavation; release of leachates into commercial and recreational lakes; exposure to contaminated soils, ground gas or water; effects associated with light pollution to communities, and changes in land drainage patterns causing stress.

The Applicant outlined its approach to landscape and visual amenity. The Applicant explained that it is proposing to scope in the potential effects during construction and operation on landscape and townscape character and visual amenity.

The Applicant explained that the materials and waste assessment will be undertaken in accordance with the appropriate guidance. The Applicant outlined what it proposes to scope in including, for example, adverse effects on waste management infrastructure from the generation and disposal of waste. The Applicant outlined what it proposes to scope out including, for example, adverse effects from the transfer of excavated arisings offsite. The Inspectorate asked for information on how effects from the transportation of excavated material were being considered. The Applicant responded that current thinking is to minimise the requirement to transport excavated material by reusing it on site, however the plan for this is yet to be established.

The Applicant outlined the approach used to calculate the baseline and assessment for noise and vibration. It noted that the baseline is informed by noise surveys at sensitive locations and publicly available Defra noise contours. The Applicant is proposing to scope in noise and vibration from sheet piling and other construction activities (during construction), and noise and vibration from maintenance activities and changes in traffic (during operation). The Applicant is proposing to scope out noise from new green open spaces and other landscape works.

The Applicant explained that there are several lakes within the project boundary which are used recreationally for angling, boating or swimming. It also explained that the population density within the site boundary is generally low, with areas of high population density in close proximity. There are a high number of residential and commercial receptors in proximity to the site boundary.

The Applicant outlined that it will conduct a desk-based assessment alongside landowner questions for its socio-economic assessment. The Applicant is proposing to scope in the effects of disruption and reduced accessibility to local businesses, public rights of way network and existing public open spaces; the beneficial effect on the local economy by facilitating the extraction of natural resources, and influx of site personnel using businesses locally; the effects on businesses and users of lakes and on water utility businesses; and the beneficial effects of reduced flood risk. The Applicant is proposing to scope out the release of leachates to waterbodies; the permanent loss of private residential properties and land; the change in land use in Green Belt; and, the changes to road access for local communities and businesses.

The Applicant explained that it has discussed the impact on Green Belt with the LPAs and consider alignment with the LPAs on this regard. The Applicant confirmed that at the current time it has not identified any Special Category Land and noted that there is crown land in some sections of the riverbed. The Applicant explained that its position is to seek agreement with landowners first and seek compulsory acquisition later.

The Applicant explained that the assessment of effects on soil and land will be based on general EIA assessment methodologies. The Applicant is proposing to scope in the permanent loss of top soils, and contamination effects from reuse of excavated material onsite. It is also proposing to scope in the beneficial effects of reduced flood risk. The Applicant explained that it is proposing to scope out the potential for damage, pollution or contamination to soils. The Applicant explained that it is proposing to scope in the potential adverse effects on soil, water and ground water quality associated with operational failures.

The Applicant explained that the proposed development is in close vicinity to several major infrastructure routes including the M25, M3, the rail network and London Heathrow Airport. The Applicant outlined that its Transport Assessment is being undertaken in discussion with highways authorities and National Highways. The Applicant explained that it is proposing to scope in traffic congestion, temporary closures and diversions, journey times and the condition on local roads, and the landscape and green infrastructure opportunities causing changes to traffic movements on roads and public transport. The Applicant explained that it is proposing to scope out the works to weir and impacts on accessibility; new navigable sections of flood channel, bird strike; and maintenance activities.

The Inspectorate asked whether the Applicant had progressed the Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC) and whether any Technical Working Groups had been established. The Applicant confirmed that it has not progressed the SoCC yet and explained that Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) are being completed (referred to in the case with the main local authorities as a Service Level Agreement (SLA)). The Applicant explained that it is considering some non-statutory engagement to re-introduce the scheme to the community.

The Applicant indicated its intentions with regard to achieving Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), and asked for a view on the implications of changes to the current metric used to calculate BNG. The Inspectorate advised the Applicant that work was in progress on advice for this in consultation with Natural England and Defra to determine what is fair and reasonable.

Post Meeting Addendum

The Applicant expressed that it was later asked to submit the Environmental Impact Assessment scoping report to the Planning Inspectorate on 4 October 2022.