

## Planning and Development

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Our Ref: PRE/2024/0077

Your Ref:

Date: 24<sup>th</sup> September 2024

Dear [REDACTED]

**PROPOSAL: Pre-application advice for full planning permission for the existing IBF and Border Control Post ('BCP') on the Site**

**LOCATION: Sevington Inland Border Facility, Sevington, Ashford TN25 6GE**

It was good to meet you on 5th September to discuss your proposed application for the retention of the Inland Border Facility (IBF) at Sevington. At our meeting, also attended by Roland Mills (Strategic Development & Delivery Manager), we discussed an overview of your proposals, the technical assessment baseline, your proposed community consultation and stakeholder engagement, and the pre-application/application programme, including a potential Planning Performance Agreement (PPA). I address each of these matters in turn below.

### Overview of your proposals

Your pre-application submission relates to a proposed planning application for the retention of the IBF development that has been constructed on the site in accordance with the temporary consent given by a Special Development Order (SDO) which is due to expire on 31st December 2025. I note the continuing strategic importance of the site in terms of border security in the national interest as well as the intention that HGV parking capacity at the site would be used to support the Department for Transport's (DfT) Kent Resilience Strategy (KRS) work to help address the issue of freight disruption/queuing on the strategic road network. The application will need to carefully set out the overarching case in these respects.

You advised that your application will be accompanied by details of the economic benefits of the development moving to a permanent basis, in particular relating to job creation (both



direct and indirect). We briefly discussed this, including employee density compared with that which would likely to have been the case in respect of the storage and distribution uses originally envisaged through the grant of outline planning permission. Employment development is important to the Council and so this area of analysis will be an important consideration for your application.

You have also identified that your application will include measures to safeguard the land at 'Sevington east' for use as a buffer that would provide biodiversity net gain enhancements as well as nutrient neutrality credits. Full details of your proposal for this area, including submission of the Biodiversity Net Gain metric, will be required with your application.

At our meeting we discussed whether this Sevington east area should be included within the application site 'red line' boundary, or, instead, be included within a blue line as part of adjacent owned/controlled land. In order to give greater clarity as to the proposals and given the likely concerns from the local community about the development of Sevington east area and the resultant coalescence with Mer sham (which would conflict with Ashford Local Plan (ALP) 2030 policy SP7 – extract below), I strongly recommend that the area is included within the red line boundary and that the intentions for the site is made very clear in supporting documents as well as the application description. Your proposed measures could then be secured, as appropriate, by planning conditions and/or s.106 obligations: we can discuss this further in due course.

#### **Policy SP7 - Separation of Settlements**

**Proposals for built development on non-allocated sites outside the built up confines of settlements shall be permitted only where its impact, individually or cumulatively, would not result in the coalescence or merging of two (or more) separate settlements, or the significant erosion of a gap between settlements resulting in the loss of individual identity or character.**

**Proposals for outdoor sports and recreational uses will be permitted subject to there being no overriding conflict with other policies and the wider objectives of the Plan. Any related built development should be kept to the minimum necessary to enable the functioning of the associated use, be sensitively located and of a high quality design.**

The proposal would be to retain the as-built floorspace and overall secure site layout as it currently has been developed pursuant to the SDO: there is no intention to seek planning permission for the construction of any further buildings on the Sevington west site. You clarified at our meeting that some small works consented pursuant to the SDO were are still under construction but these should all be completed by this autumn. You also stated that the final built floorspace should be c.34,500 sq.m but that a survey was currently underway to provide an updated precise floorspace figure.

The position with Sevington west is a relatively unusual one in so far as development of a large site, including buildings, has already been carried out in the national interest but on a time-limited temporary basis. The proposal would be for the buildings and the associated uses carried out to remain with a permission secured through a normal TCPA application i.e. the facility would move from being temporary to being permanent. This underscores the importance of any application clearly setting out the national/regional/county importance of a facility remaining at this site, as well as addressing how any issues that

have arisen since 2020 during the temporary period would be addressed. Key issues of which the Council is aware are set out further below and clearly, others could emerge through public consultation and engagement and would need consideration as part of your application.

Your submission includes a list of the most relevant policies from the ALP 2030 which is comprehensive and all of the listed policies will need to be addressed in your submission.

As your proposal involves the provision of new employment uses in an area that adjoins the built-up confines of Ashford, policy EMP1 of the ALP will be particularly relevant to your application. Policy EMP1 states the following:

**Policy EMP1 – New Employment Uses**

**Provision of new employment premises, and the redevelopment, enhancement and reconfiguration of existing employment premises will be permitted within the built-up confines of Ashford, Tenterden and the rural settlements listed in policy HOU3a, or adjoining settlements listed in policy HOU5, provided that:**

- a) The character and appearance of the settlement or surrounding landscape is not damaged significantly by the form of development proposed by virtue of its layout, building design and scale, the level or type of activity it generates, and the functional and visual relationship it has with adjoining uses;**
- b) There would be no significant impact on the amenities of any neighbouring residential occupiers;**
- c) Appropriate provision can be made for parking and access; and,**
- d) The impact upon the local road network as assessed in terms of policy TRA7, can be mitigated. In the rural settlements, it must be demonstrated that the development will not generate a type or amount of traffic that would be inappropriate to the rural road network that serves it.**

My initial assessment of your proposal against the four key strands of policy EMP1, including areas where further information/assessment will be required, is set out below.

**EMP1 a) Character and appearance**

The development involves a significant quantum of development on this site which has significantly altered the character and appearance of the site. It will be important for the application to demonstrate that all sensible opportunities to minimise the visual impact of the development in order to reduce its impacts on the locality have been explored, including taking account of wider viewpoints of the site.

In order to minimise its visual impact, I recommend that you fully investigate measures to reduce the impact of the existing lighting at the site, as well as enhancing landscaping in order to soften the visual impact of the development (and help to reduce the available views of the lighting). The intended mitigation measures will need to inform your Lighting Strategy and Landscaping Strategy.



At present, the impact of the lighting in operation is significant. The site is a visually open area at the sensitive urban fringe and at present it conflicts with the Council's 'dark skies' approach as set out in ALP policy ENV4. The location of the buildings developed on the site means that the impact of lighting in the large open areas developed for HGV parking is much greater as the lack of buildings reduces such light being screened from view.

The glow from the site is discernible and the Mersham community will be likely to comment on this, as might those where the site is visible from elevated land (eg Wye Downs National Landscape and the village of Aldington which is located on a ridge with views back to Ashford). The lighting that has been put in place needs to be checked in terms of any adverse impacts on ecology.

In order to reduce the impact of the lighting, I recommend that you investigate a reduction in the scale and the extent of the existing 12m high columns across the site, as well as potentially adapting luminaires, in order to minimise light spill and the impact on dark skies. I recommend that you also investigate the use of timers or movement sensors to lighting in areas of the site that are used less frequently as this could significantly help reduce the impact of the development. Finally, I am mindful of the need to check the outlook from the homes of nearby residents to luminaires and any other light sources attached to buildings etc. Adverse lighting impacts in the form of piercing 'mini-suns' need to be avoided and that might mean localised adjustment or baffles / cowls etc.

With regard to landscaping, I consider there needs to be a significant improvement to the landscaping to the site boundaries which at present is sparse in many areas. In particular (but not exclusively), I recommend that the landscaping to the north of the site along the A2070 Link Road requires attention given its prominence in public viewpoints as one of the main entrances into Ashford, and to the east of the site along Highfield Lane (including on the bunds). In respect of the former, some of that land may be National Highways land (and this will need to be clarified) and concern is expressed about the quality, health and maintenance of the soft landscaping here. Turning to the latter, the density of tree planting carried out to date is less than that which was envisaged as being developed as a woodland belt and previous visits have identified some planting failures that have previously been fed back as needing attention. Therefore, I would suggest a thorough audit by a landscape architect and a strategy to improve landscaping. The application will need to be accompanied by a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment ('LVIA') which will need to assess the impact of the development from key viewpoints.

At present, there are large areas where fencing provides a harsh boundary to the site when viewed from public viewpoints, with no soft landscaping added. I recommend that, where space sensibly allows, trees or hedges should be added to all areas where fencing fronts publicly accessible areas in order to soften the appearance of the boundary treatment and the development as a whole.

Within the site, I would wish to see exploration as to whether any areas of the hard landscaped parking areas could be redeveloped and tree-planted (perhaps in an east-west axis along with elements of 'blue grid' managing surface water run-off) to help soften views of the large areas of hard surfacing and to further help reduce views of lighting from further afield.

You will be aware of the reserved matters approval granted by the Council under reference 19/00579/AS which included site landscaping. The viewing corridor of the Grade I Listed



St Mary's Church was intended to be attractively landscaped and have a function as a place to move through and linger within but this has not taken place. The retention of the corridor in its current form will not be sufficient to mitigate the impact of the development on this important heritage asset and so improved landscaping of this corridor is necessary in order to mitigate the harm to the setting of the church. Although the nature of the IBF use will prevent movement through this space by the wider community for the foreseeable future (unless that secure IBF facility need ceases or is retracted in a manner that is clear of the corridor at some point in the future), I can see no obvious reason why it cannot form a valuable asset for employees at the site to use during a break. Benches would be encouraged as part of reimagining the approach to this important space clear of any buildings.

A timetable for landscaping works within and surrounding the site will be required to be submitted with your application in order to give certainty as to when further planting will be carried out.

In order to further reduce the visual impact of the development on the locality, I recommend that you review the need for and investigate any opportunities for a reduction in the height of fencing which is currently particularly high in some areas, especially in areas to the south and west of the site. I consider a reduction in the scale of the fencing would be visually beneficial, provided that it can take place without resulting in an unacceptable increase in noise and lighting from the site. If such fencing cannot realistically be altered then this circles back to my comments above in respect of landscaping improvements to soften visual impacts.

No details are yet available of what I understand to be the proposed additional use of the site for HGV parking as part of the DfT's KRS work: this needs to be addressed in a Transport Assessment. Additional movements to the site and activity relating to this more intensive use has the potential to further impact on the character of the area (as well as neighbour amenity and the highway network and site access for HGVs so full details of this proposal will need to be provided as part of our ongoing pre-application discussions.

To conclude, your application will need to provide full details of your proposed mitigation relating to the above matters in order to reduce the impact of the development on the character and appearance of the locality, including commitments regarding the timescales for their implementation. These measures would be likely to be secured by planning condition on any approval. Your application should also explain the reasons why further measures to reduce impacts have been discounted.

#### EMP1 b) Neighbour amenity

The impacts of the use becoming permanent on the amenities of the occupiers of neighbouring properties, in particular through noise and light pollution and the frequency of vehicle movements, will be important considerations.

I would strongly suggest consultation and engagement with neighbouring residents to understand whether the facility has impacted on their amenity and understand whether there are any measures that could be taken to help reduce or overcome such impacts. These could include changes to lighting/boundary treatments/landscaping as set out above, or changes to the management of the facility. Details of the measures requested by neighbouring residents and how these have been responded to, as well as a timetable for

the implementation of any proposed mitigation measures, will need to be included within the application.

As identified above, the lighting impacts of the site to date on nearby residents are important to understand in formulating any revised lighting strategy. Details of any proposed additional use of the site for lorry parking as part of the DfT's KRS work are also needed in order to understand any potential additional impacts on neighbour amenity compared with the current intensity of use.

To conclude, I consider the impact on nearby residents to be another key matter for your application to address. It will be useful to discuss these issues further following the planned community consultation.

#### EMP1 c/d) Highway safety and parking

A key issue will be an assessment of impact on the strategic and local highway networks and this should be discussed with KCC Highways and Transportation and National Highways as soon as possible.

As set out above, the HGV parking element of your proposal (relating to the DfT's KRS work) would be a new use of the site which is not currently taking place pursuant to the SDO. Full details of this proposed additional use of the site would need to be given as part of ongoing pre-application discussions, including the anticipated frequency, extent and management of this use.

It will be important to assess whether the current main HGV access junction arrangements from the A0270 Link Road that were put in place have given rise to any operational problems and whether there would be any change in the use of the site that would intensify movements through that junction, or the surrounding highway network, that would require changes to be made.

An application will need to include a Travel Plan that details the arrangements for staff parking and measures to facilitate and incentivise their journey to the site using sustainable modes of transport including by public transport. A walk to the site from Ashford International train station would be unrealistic given the distance. I would recommend that you discuss this matter with KCC and Stagecoach in order to identify whether there is the possibility for buses to call in at (or near to) the site. If there are no such opportunities then that might dictate other options need to be explored.

In terms of the connectivity of the site, the surfacing upgrades to the nearby PRow at Sevington east have been carried out and are of benefit but they connect to a narrow lane ('Blind Lane') and do not connect further into the heart of Mersham village. From an active travel perspective, I consider there could be an opportunity to improve PRow by extending an upgrade to surfacing into central Mersham. I would wish to see this matter actively explored with KCC's PRow service.

In addition, it would be beneficial to audit and investigate potential for enhanced active travel connectivity to the north at the new Hinxhill residential development, near to Tesco and Willesborough. The funding for one improvement at Kingfisher Close in Willesborough is being dealt with through the existing s.106 Agreement but there is an important stretch of connectivity missing to Bockham Lane off the A20 which appears to relate to the

relationship between the end of the SRN and the beginning of the LRN: the wide cycle/footway narrows considerably for no obvious reason. I recommend that this is also looked into with KCC Highways and Transportation.

To conclude, the impact of the development on the highway network and potential improvements to facilitate the development will need to be discussed with KCC Highways and Transportation, National Highways and KCC PROW as soon as possible as part of ongoing pre-application discussions.

### Other matters

As we discussed, the site is located within the River Stour catchment. If overnight accommodation is to be provided within the site through the HGV parking use (or any other element of your proposal), then the impact of the development on the Stodmarsh Lakes protected sites would be relevant.

Any application proposing overnight accommodation at the site would need to demonstrate that it can achieve 'nutrient neutrality', either through a bespoke mitigation package (potentially including the removal of land from active agricultural use so it simply becomes greenspace) or through a strategic solution, potentially provided by a third party. A shadow HRA would need to be submitted with your application detailing your nutrient calculations and an Appropriate Assessment would then need to be adopted by the Council (in consultation with Natural England) before planning permission could lawfully be granted.

If an overnight use of the site is proposed then it will also be important to understand what the welfare offer would be for users of the site, where it would be and how it would be operated.

With regard to the proposed Archaeological Assessment, I recommend that you discuss your approach and the need for interim/final studies with KCC Heritage. I recommend that you investigate the use of interpretation boards etc within the public realm, such as close to the finds and the ROC cold war bunker, in order to explain interesting history relating to Ashford.

Finally, you agreed to provide confirmation of the former agricultural land status of the site as part of our ongoing pre-application discussions and I look forward to receiving that.

### **Technical assessment baseline & your CLD query**

You have proposed that the baseline for the technical assessment would be taken as the pre-developed condition of the site, with the inclusion of the Phase 1A works only.

We discussed the outline planning permission (our ref: 14/00906/AS) and the subsequent approval of reserved matters (our ref: 19/00579/AS) and grant of a Certificate of Lawful Development (our ref: 19/01099/AS) and the issues set out in your submission sent to us shortly before our meeting. As agreed, we are seeking internal legal advice regarding the status of the CLD in terms of whether it relates to the Phase 1A works only or not and we will let you know our position as soon as we can. We appreciate that this has a bearing on the assessment baseline for your intended application but, in turn, you will appreciate that this matter has been raised with us at short notice.

## **Proposed community consultation and stakeholder engagement**

During our meeting we discussed your intentions for community consultation and stakeholder engagement. As set out above, there are various matters where understanding the impact of the existing development on local residents and the community as a whole, as well as how these impacts can be mitigated, will be key.

Your proposed strategy for community consultation and stakeholder engagement appears to be comprehensive. I have previously confirmed that Parish Councils will not be consulted by the Council on the EIA Scoping Opinion when you submit your request (although the existence of the request would be in the public domain) so you may wish to adjust your proposals accordingly.

With regard to an ABC Planning Officer's attendance at your public events, I would be keen to attend where possible but only in a viewing capacity: I do not feel that it would be appropriate to be there to partake in the event in any formal capacity.

## **Pre-application/application programme**

We are reviewing your draft PPA and note your agreement to the agreed 1st pre-application meeting charge being rolled into a PPA to cover not only the period covering submission through to any resolution to grant permission but also the pre-application period. We will come back to you as soon as possible with our thoughts on the draft PPA so that we can finalise what will work for both parties. As discussed, you may wish to enter into a separate PPA with KCC.

Yours sincerely

  
Team Leader – Strategic Applications  
Planning and Development