



Meeting note

Project name	Lower Thames Crossing
File reference	TR010032
Status	Final
Author	The Planning Inspectorate
Date	13 January 2021
Meeting with	Highways England
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.

Project summary

Highways England (the Applicant) recapitulated the main features of the Lower Thames Crossing (LTC) scheme. The Applicant stated that it was a significant project for the strategic road network (SRN) that would accelerate economic growth and improve journey times. Critical elements of the project included connecting the new road onto the SRN, road user charging, and substantial utilities diversions, some of which would constitute Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects in their own right. The discussion noted the significant scale and complexity of this scheme and considered whether and where additional expectations might be placed on the application documents to support and justify the proposals.

Engagement to date and future engagement strategy

The Applicant outlined its engagement strategy pre-withdrawal. It felt that its engagement activities had been extensive, having shared substantial information with stakeholders and the public, and having made significant changes to the scheme in light of feedback. The Applicant acknowledged that these key relationships were critical to exploring how more information could be appropriately shared.

The Applicant outlined its future stakeholder engagement strategy and stated that there would be a presumption in favour of sharing developing documents with stakeholders where appropriate ahead of completion to enable collaboration. The Inspectorate asked for clarification as to the definition of stakeholders in this context. The Applicant confirmed that stakeholders comprised directly affected local authorities (LA), statutory

undertakers and statutory environmental bodies, key business members (including Ports). The Applicant noted that this engagement sat alongside consultation activities with a wider audience (such as those persons with an interest in the Development Consent Order (DCO) land.

The Applicant confirmed that it had shared its developing application documents with key stakeholders on 2 December 2020 and had offered meetings to stakeholders thereafter to discuss feedback. The Applicant described a similar structure to its proposed engagement timeline relating to future updates and key documents such as the transport assessment.

The Inspectorate queried whether the Applicant would employ non-disclosure agreements as part of its stakeholder engagement, given that this was a concern raised by some LAs pre-withdrawal. The Applicant understood that the concerns raised by LAs pre-withdrawal related specifically to their ability to share information and analysis with Parish councils, and traffic modelling information with their members. The Applicant confirmed that it had taken steps to accommodate this going forward.

The discussion noted the potential to hold tripartite meetings between The Applicant, the Inspectorate and stakeholders including Natural England. The Inspectorate advised that the purpose, agenda and outcomes of such meetings should usefully be clearly defined in advance but that tripartite meetings had occurred on other projects.

Planned action in response to section 51 advice following withdrawal

The Applicant acknowledged that the scale of the LTC scheme necessitated a large application. Accordingly, it was in the process of assessing how the information could be presented in a more accessible way; in particular, information relating to the use of the river and ports. The Inspectorate advised the Applicant to ensure that the expected movements of barges were presented in its application. The Applicant also confirmed that it would be incorporating a navigational risk assessment into its revised application. The Applicant also sought feedback on chapter 12 of the 'Introduction to the Application' document from the original application which intended to provide an explanation of the key application documents.

The Applicant confirmed that it intended to provide Statements of Common Ground (SoCG) upon submission of its new application, the Applicant queried whether the submission of unsigned SoCGs would be useful, acknowledging the resource pressures on certain parties to sign off such documents. The Inspectorate noted the general principle that frontloading information to the examination is to be welcomed. The discussion noted the potential tension between alienating stakeholders by early submission of unsigned SoCG and assisting the Examination in a timely way.

The Applicant advised that it was considering a further public consultation focussing on construction and construction traffic issues. The Inspectorate advised that the Applicant should be mindful not to exclude other issues from consultation where matters may give rise to the need for further consultation. The Applicant queried whether the Inspectorate believed a further public consultation was necessary for the application to be accepted. The Inspectorate was not in a position to advise on this, but stated that the adequacy of consultation responses did highlight concerns about public consultation; chiefly, a lack of

evidence as to how the results of public consultations informed the subsequent iterations of the scheme.

The Applicant confirmed that it was updating several documents relating to its construction traffic phase assessment and mitigation proposals and would be providing a new outline construction traffic management plan. These documents would be shared with LAs and highway authorities. The Applicant did not anticipate that all LA issues in this area would be resolved prior to submission but anticipated that any residual issues would be addressed at Examination.

The Applicant confirmed that it had taken on board the Inspectorate's comments on environmental matters and was also generally updating its application materials in view of what it identified as minor corrections and omissions.

The Inspectorate concluded that its section 51 advice was clearly being considered. It reiterated the need for the Applicant to further develop its technical documents following LA's concerns about information previously shared but restated that it was not in a position to advise whether further consultation should be undertaken.

Re-submission timeline

The Applicant confirmed that it was in the process of communicating with stakeholders to develop its re-submission plan and wanted to allow sufficient time to strengthen its application whilst working with stakeholders to resolve previously identified issues.