

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

A report by Head of Planning Applications Group to Planning Applications Committee on 12 December 2006

Application by Kent Highway Services for redevelopment to provide integrated highways depot comprising offices, garaging, salt barn and storage areas with associated car parking and landscaping, The Poplars Business Park, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

Recommendation: Subject to the final views of the Divisional Transportation Manager and any further views received by the Committee Meeting and satisfactory resolution of outstanding issues, recommend that the application be referred to the Secretary of State, and that subject to her decision, planning permission be granted subject to conditions.

Local Member: Mrs V Dagger

Classification: Unrestricted

Introduction

1. At the Planning Applications Committee meeting on the 10 October 2006 Members deferred consideration of a report on this application to enable investigation of the effects of reducing the number of principal highway depots proposed in Kent from three to two. That report is attached as **Appendix 1** together with the Committee Secretary's notes of the site meeting held on the 17 January 2006 as **Appendix 2**, both for Members' consideration in determining this application. This report updates the position on the application since then and includes responses to further consultation on amended documentation received that address the changed circumstances. It also summarises or refers to correspondence received between finalising the previous Committee Report and the October Committee meeting that would have been reported verbally had the item been considered.

Changed circumstances

2. The details and background of the proposed development are outlined in paragraph nos. (4) to (13) in Appendix 1. It was intended that the Wrotham Depot would be one of three super highway depots, with offices, each serving four District Council areas as part of the re-organisation of the Highway service in Kent. Just before the October Committee meeting the applicant, Kent Highway Services, announced that a review of this re-organisation had been undertaken and that the number of principal depots was reducing from 3 to 2. This was the subject of a report to Cabinet on the 16 October 2006 and will be subject of a further report to Cabinet on the 4 December 2006.
3. Under the circumstances it is now proposed that the Wrotham site would serve the whole of West Kent, serving Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells in addition to Dartford, Gravesham, Sevenoaks and Tonbridge and Malling Districts. It is intended that it would become the Divisional Headquarters for West Kent. Apart from the vehicular access junction now being left turn only and adjustment of the pedestrian access, some minor re-arrangement of storage areas and minor elevational changes to the covered storage building, the amount and disposition of the proposed development remains unchanged. *A revised site layout plan is attached.* However, the enlarged area that it would serve

Item D5

**Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road,
Wrotham – TM/06/2342**

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

would mean that more office staff (225 compared to 159 previously) would be nominally assigned to it, (although the applicants state that there would be no more staff on site at any one time) and it would serve a wider highway network. Consequently this alters the basis on which the application was originally made in terms of the area the site would serve, and the origin and destination of staff and traffic associated with the site. Therefore addenda to the Planning Supporting Statement and Transport Assessment, a revised Travel Plan and amended site layout, have been submitted addressing the changes.

4. With regard to operational use the applicants have provided a table, attached as **Appendix 3**, which lists the depots that would be used as part of the move to two divisional offices. (A table of existing depots and offices is attached as **Appendix 4** for comparison.) The applicant states that the proposed set up produces no difference to the operational requirements than when the choice was for three divisional offices. To clarify this, they state that there would be no change to the number, frequency and direction of trips by gritters and other heavy vehicles from the depot. These trips would still be solely related to the incidence of severe weather and the need for repairs whenever and wherever these occur.
5. As there would not be any more staff on site at any one time and no changes to the operational use, the total number of trips generated remains unchanged. The addendum to the Transport Assessment therefore addresses the changed circumstances on the basis that only the origin and destinations and therefore direction of travel to and from the site for some trips have changed. It concludes that the proposed development would not have a material impact on the local highway network, and the existing network would be able to accommodate the predicted number of trips generated. Furthermore it concludes that the increase in trips as a result of the proposed development would not have a detrimental impact on the A20 London Road, or the surrounding local highway network.
6. A revised Travel Plan has been prepared to demonstrate how an increased number of staff can be based at the site without increasing levels of movement by private car or creating excessive demand for the unchanged number of car parking spaces. The Travel Plan indicates that to a large extent it is to be achieved by a change in working practices. The applicant states that of the 225 total staff based at Wrotham, 16% would be 80 % home based, visiting the office only one day a week. A further 23% would be 60% home based, visiting the office only two days a week. When this is calculated out, it means that on an average day, 28% of staff would be working from home. Home working would apply especially to staff that are mainly mobile, and is intended to both save time and reduce the number of miles travelled.
7. Of the staff who need to be in the office and do not need their cars for work that day, 23% would need to car share and 14% to use public transport. It is assumed that none would walk or cycle, due to the wide catchment area of staff involved. Revised modal share targets have been included in the Travel Plan to reflect that. In addition to the introduction of home working, the public transport and car share modal share percentages would need to be higher than previously. New analysis of the numbers of staff able to use public transport has been carried out to ensure that the percentage of 14% is realistic.
8. The Travel Plan proposes the introduction of additional measures to ensure modal share targets are achieved. These include:

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

- Increased management involvement and a full staff travel survey to confirm initiatives.
 - Detailed proposals for securing a public service or shuttle bus link, including a staff survey to determine likely patronage.
 - Extensive use of home working supported by substantial investment in information technology and use of drop in centres where necessary.
 - Implementation of a comprehensive parking management policy.
 - Increased monitoring to provide for constant review of parking issues and immediate action to resolve any problems.
9. The timetable for having the Travel Plan in place has also been tightened up, requiring, *inter alia*, that –
- a full staff travel survey is to be carried out 6 months before occupation,
 - an agreed parking management plan to be launched to staff 1 month before occupation,
 - assignment of parking permits and allocation of days for team meetings to be in place 1 month before occupation, and
 - an improved bus or shuttle link to Borough Green Station to be in place by the time the site is occupied.
10. The applicant has also revisited the site selection process in relation to the justification for the proposed development in the Green Belt because of the wider area it is now proposed that the site would serve, i.e. for the new larger West Kent division. Accordingly the applicant has taken in to account potential sites in Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells Districts that were previously considered in the search for a site to serve the Mid Kent division, in addition to the original ten sites for West Kent. Of the eight sites which were on the original shortlist for the Mid Kent division, seven were in Ashford. The only short listed site outside Ashford was the existing depot at Doubleday House, Aylesford. This site was rejected on the grounds of its peripheral location in relation to the proposed Mid Kent division.
11. However the applicant has assessed the relative merits of the site at Aylesford with the site at Wrotham in the context of the West Kent division as now defined. It is stated that although Aylesford was shortlisted as a candidate site for Mid Kent, and that the original reason for its rejection - poor location - no longer applies, it does not follow that it is necessarily as good a site as Wrotham, or a better one. It is also stated that time is absolutely crucial to the activities based at any highways depot and at Wrotham, access to the strategic road network, either directly or indirectly via the motorways, can be gained immediately. It is stated that this is not the case with the Aylesford site and that a rapid response to severe weather may be hampered by local traffic, traffic signals and speed limits, to a much greater extent than is likely at Wrotham. It is therefore concluded that in terms of swift access to the strategic road network for winter service and for emergency repairs, the Wrotham site has significant advantages over the Aylesford site, and it is therefore the most suitable location for the new West Kent division.
12. In respect of office based staff, it is stated that on the occasions that they need to visit the office, easy accessibility is still needed and that for the same reason that Wrotham is a better location to gain access to the strategic road network, it is a better location to gain access from the same network.

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

13. Bearing in mind the addition of the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells districts, the applicant notes that in terms of Green Belt coverage only the western part of Tunbridge Wells Borough, and a small part of Maidstone Borough on its western edge in the vicinity of Nettlestead are covered by the Green Belt. Most of Tunbridge Wells Borough and nearly all of Maidstone Borough therefore fall outside the Green Belt. It had been noted, in the original submission, that the Green Belt covers the whole of Dartford, Gravesham and Sevenoaks districts, and all but a small part of Tonbridge and Malling Borough. The applicant has acknowledged therefore that the potential area of search for a depot to serve what is now defined as West Kent now includes a substantial area which is not Green Belt, and which may in principle be regarded as more suitable to accommodate what has been acknowledged as inappropriate development in the Green Belt. However, although the reconfiguration of Divisional offices potentially brings some sites in Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells which are not in the Green Belt into consideration, the applicant states that these have been rejected because of accessibility criteria, and comments that in any event they are constrained by strategic gap/urban fringe policies.
14. The applicant has concluded that the Wrotham site is still the most appropriate site and location of all the eighteen sites considered in what now constitutes the West Kent Division. It is also concluded that the significant advantages of the Wrotham site in terms of location and accessibility over the only plausible alternative - at Aylesford - are sufficient to justify the development of the depot in the Green Belt. The applicant further states that this consideration is reinforced by the status of the Wrotham site as previously developed land, and the fact that half of the site forms part of a substantial major developed site as defined in the Tonbridge and Malling Local Plan. The applicant therefore argues that the conclusions of the original Planning Supporting Statement on the matter of very special circumstances are reaffirmed.

Late views/representations to the proposal as originally submitted

15. A number of views were received prior to the October Committee Meeting after the committee report had been finalised as follows:

Wrotham Parish Council

In addition to its views set out in paragraph (16) of **Appendix 1** the Parish Council made a further detailed submission the day before the October Committee Meeting. The submission is reproduced in **Appendix 5** except a BBC news item. (*Appendix A of its submission.*)

It reaffirms its opposition to the proposal and questions decisions about restructuring Kent Highway Services and the purchase of the Wrotham site, sets out details of activity and inactivity at the site, sets out a site history and includes a Statutory Declaration from a neighbour to the site and from the Chairman of the Parish Council in these respects. The Parish Council asserts that in addition to the residential use at the Poplars the site only has agricultural permissions and therefore disagrees that the site should be considered as previously developed land as referred to in paragraph (21) of the October Committee Report (Appendix 1).

The Parish Council also considers that I have failed to bring to Members' attention that in its view the proposed mitigation in respect of landscaping fails to meet government guidelines or comes close to the standards required by policies within the Development Plan. It considers the standards being applied to a KCC development are lenient compared to that for others.

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

The Parish Council queries the amount of information provided for the alternative sites assessment and why the applicant has not been required to provide an all encompassing Environmental Statement.

Platt Parish Council confines its comments to matters that affect it directly as the application site is not in its Parish, as follows:

First, they note widely expressed anxiety about the possible effect on local aquifers and ask that this matter be investigated thoroughly.

Secondly, the Parish Council has considerable concerns about traffic generation. They consider that the Travel Plan is unduly optimistic, given the location of the site, the lack of public transport and home bases of employees and therefore it should assume that all employees would arrive by car. It also considers that the proposed operations at the site would significantly add to the volume of traffic on local roads which are already overloaded at peak hours. In particular the Parish Council has in mind the A25 through Platt which, though substandard, will continue to be a Principal Route and a Heavy Lorry Route until such time as the Borough Green and Platt Bypass is built. If permission is granted it asks that a condition be imposed requiring the applicant to make a substantial contribution to the cost of construction of that bypass.

Natural England were consulted in particular on the information provided in respect of an initial scoping survey for ecology and a report on the Herpetofauna Surveys carried out as referred to in paragraph (49) of Appendix1. Based on the information provided Natural England has no objection to this application regarding protected species, subject to the following conditions and recommendations:

An informative setting out the action to be taken, should there be any bats or evidence of bats be found prior to or during works.

A condition to the effect that no development shall commence until a detailed reptile mitigation strategy has been submitted to, and approved in writing by the County Planning Authority. Work shall then proceed in accordance with the agreed strategy with any amendments agreed in writing. Also recommends that should permission be granted that a condition be imposed requiring the production and implementation of a long term management plan and monitoring strategy in respect of habitat created or enhanced in respect of the reptile mitigation and that funding should be secured from the applicant to implement the strategy in perpetuity.

Recommends that should permission be granted measures to enhance the site for wildlife should be secured, for example through the use of native plants in the landscaping or the provision of artificial bird or bat boxes.

Natural England also asks it to be noted that the applicant should ensure any activity they undertake on the site must comply with the appropriate wildlife legislation, and failure to do so may result in fines and potentially, a custodial sentence.

CPRE Kent raises objection on the following grounds:

The site lies wholly within the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Metropolitan Green Belt. CPRE Kent is concerned that the development would set a precedent and would make it difficult to enforce the policies that protect such areas. It does not consider improving efficiency constitutes the very special circumstances necessary to override what is inappropriate development within the Green Belt.

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

The proposed buildings would have a major visual impact and the proposed tree planting would not reach 14 metres in height in fewer than 25 to 30 years.

Considers that moving to one superdepot would surely increase mileage travelled by lorries carrying out gritting operations, than they do at present, contrary to KCC policy. They also consider that that staff working at the site would be car-dependent travelling further distances than at present, as there are no alternative means of transport to the site, contrary to KCC policy.

CPRE Kent questions the logic of the location for gritting lorries being at the foot of a very long hill, which in adverse weather is likely to cause problems.

CPRE Kent is also concerned about saline penetration of the water aquifer of the local pumping station, particular bearing in mind that drainage of the site would find its way into a former clay pit (excavated down to the Folkestone Beds) now infilled with chalk that acts as a drainage sump.

CPRE Kent concludes that it considers no valid case has been made to set aside AONB and Metropolitan Green Belt protection.

independent – Traffic Action Group (i-TAG)

The Group asks that the proposal is rethought and questions the location of the superdepot in the village of Wrotham that (as they understand) would serve the whole County. *[Note this understanding is incorrect, see paragraphs (2) – (3) above.]*

Is concerned about the risks of salt storage and handling as the site is right on top of the water aquifer and is close to a pumping station.

i-TAG considers that it would increase problems (of pollution and safety) of living in a community of increased traffic chaos, poor community road safety and lack of traffic calming. It comments that Borough Green and Platt have no relief road for its villages.

Local residents

I received 4 further letters of representation from local residents, one in the form of a petition with 16 signatories. The points made are similar to those made by other residents as set out in paragraph (19) of Appendix 1. In brief they cover the following:

- This part of London Road is already suffering gridlock and the impact of additional HGV movements from the depot making it worse 24 hours a day, including danger to other road users.
- The development would be a health and safety risk.
- Additional dust and dirt to that arising from the unmade parking area in the Transport Café.
- Potential pollution from salt contamination.
- Noise pollution including from reversing beepers.
- Light pollution including from flashing orange lights.
- Impact on the landscape.
- Invasion of privacy from workers overlooking neighbouring homes.
- The proposed development has not been properly justified.
- No consideration of bio-diversity, archaeology, water resource contamination from salt or non-KCC alternative sites.
- It is contrary to Landscape and Green Belt Policies.
- Demolition of the house at the front would open up views into the site.

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

Further Consultations

16. Consultations have been carried out on the new documents with the appropriate consultees and they have been notified that consideration of the application was previously deferred. Views not received at the time of writing will be reported verbally if received by the Committee meeting.

Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council's further views are awaited.

Wrotham Parish Council's further views are attached as **Appendix 7**.

Platt Parish Council further comments that it is surprised by the contention in the Addendum to the Planning Support Statement that, "There will be no change to the number, frequency and direction of trips by gritters and other heavy vehicles from the depot. These trips will still be solely related to the incidence of severe weather and the need for repairs whenever and wherever these occur". It comments that, the last point cannot negate the obvious common sense conclusion that a depot which is now expected to service six areas instead of the original four is bound to generate more trips.

It notes in the Addendum to the Transport Assessment, that one can expect to find a vehicle entering or leaving the new depot site every 20 seconds during peak hours and that, without the Borough Green and Platt Bypass there would be a 9% increase in traffic on the approach to the site northbound from the M26. This would involve right turns into the site. The Parish Council cannot agree with the conclusion that there would not in these circumstances be a material impact on the local highway network. It is confident that its view would be shared by anyone who has attempted, even now, to slip into the stream of traffic on the A20 along this stretch at busy times.

It notes that the Transport Assessment does not address the likely effect on the A25 through Platt directly. However, it states that common sense and local knowledge compels the conclusion that there is bound to be a significant increase in traffic along this substandard road which winds closely by houses and schools (yet is designated a Principal Route and Heavy Lorry Route). It is the Parish Council's contention that the depot should not be built until the overall traffic situation is improved by the provision of the long-awaited Borough Green and Platt Bypass and that the developer should be required to contribute to the cost of the bypass.

In conclusion, the Parish Council objects most strongly to the depot being built before the Borough Green and Platt bypass.

CPRE Kent further comments as follows:

- "1. It has come to light recently that the identification of much of the Wrotham site as previously developed land was inaccurate. Since the site was closed down by Customs & Excise in 2003, it cannot be claimed that there was continuous use of the site. Since it is now clear that only 30% of the site was genuinely previously developed, it follows that 70% is greenfield, highly protected land. Because none of the criteria which permit development on green AONB land (including national interest) can be met, the development of the site would be directly contrary to Kent and Medway Structure Plan, Tonbridge & Malling Borough Policy P6/18[d] and the draft South East Plan, which are supposed to protect against serious landscape destruction.

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

2. The revised application for the Wrotham development follows a decision that only two of the original three proposed super-depot sites should be taken forward. This change has not, in CPRE Kent's view, been adequately justified and does not provide any improvement in the case for development on Greenfield land in the Metropolitan Green Belt.
3. The Transport Plan, although rewritten in a manner which attempts to justify the use of this site, actually shows that it is contrary to all the relevant transport policies. The site is virtually impossible to reach by public transport or by walking or cycling, and would undoubtedly result in a considerable increase in vehicle mileage by the staff and contractors. The change from local depots now to only two super depots will also clearly lead to a very significant increase in lorry mileage.
4. CPRE Kent states that granting permission would seriously undermine policies in the Kent and Medway Structure Plan and in the draft South East England Plan."

Divisional Transportation Manager's final views are awaited.

Local Member

17. The local County Member, Mrs Valerie Dagger, was notified and sent copies of the new documents on the 9 November 2006

Representations

18. Third parties that made representations to the application as originally submitted have been notified that consideration of the application was previously deferred and of receipt of the new documents, together with immediate neighbours that have not made any representations. Any additional representations to those already made will be reported verbally if received by the Committee meeting.

Discussion

Introduction

19. The introduction to the discussion in my previous report is set out in paragraphs (21) and (22), in Appendix 1. It refers to the context of the site, its derelict and despoiled nature and that part of the site is identified in the Local Plan (Policy P6/18 refers) as being suitable for redevelopment subject to redevelopment achieving an overall improvement in the environment and certain criteria being met. The criteria include impact on the openness of the Green Belt and ensuring a contribution to the objectives of Green Belt designation. It also states that the whole of the site can by definition be considered as 'previously-developed land' and treated as a single planning unit. It will be noted that the Parish Council (in its submissions attached as Appendix 5 & 7) considers that this definition has been wrongly applied in this case as they assert that apart from the residential use at the Poplars the site only has agricultural permissions. It also highlights a long period of inactivity at the site and considers that the applicant has placed undue reliance on the details of an application for a Certificate of Lawful Development. The applicant's agent has commented on these and other matters raised by the Parish Council's submission, and this is attached as **Appendix 6**.
20. I recognise that there are uncertainties about the planning history and that, for example, the recent brick building with the clock tower, as far as can be ascertained, does not have the benefit of planning permission nor does the extended hard standing at the

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

north eastern end of the site. (That is shown on an aerial photograph as recently as 2003 as a grassed area.) In addition, I accept there is likewise uncertainty over the lawfulness of recent uses of the site and it is difficult, in my view, to entirely qualify or quantify any of the previous uses at the site.

21. What is clear, however, is that part of the site has been previously developed, and in addition to a residential property is evidenced by a group of warehouse type buildings on the site. The latter appear to have been standing for a considerable number of years and their lawfulness is not, as I understand, being questioned. [It is possible that these were originally used in connection with the fruit business referred to in the in the Parish Council submissions which appears to have involved some storage and distribution.] I would not regard the buildings as agricultural buildings and remain of the view that the whole of the site can by definition be considered as 'previously-developed land. That said, in my opinion, it has not been given undue weight since I have acknowledged that the whole of the site is within the Metropolitan Green Belt. Moreover given the type of development and that the extent of it goes beyond the Local Plan designation for redevelopment, the development has to be considered as inappropriate development within the Green Belt. Paragraph (22) of my previous report (Appendix 1) makes it clear that it has to be considered on that basis, i.e. notwithstanding what has been said in the paragraph before. [This is restated in paragraph (23) of that report.]
22. It is therefore, as also previously stated, necessary to consider the impact of the development on the openness of the Green Belt and whether or not this is outweighed by very special circumstances, in the light of national Green Belt Policy. In any event Policy P6/18 of the Local Plan requires that proposals for that part of the site included as being suitable for redevelopment should also be tested against the same criteria. The very special circumstances are reviewed below having regard to the changed circumstances outlined in paragraphs (2) - (14) above.
23. The previous report (Appendix1) also considers a number of other key issues. These include, the impact of the development on the landscape taking into account that the land is within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and North Downs Special Landscape Area, the impact of the development on local amenity of residential properties, and local environmental impacts, and the impact of additional traffic generated by the development. These issues are considered in the context of the Development Plan policies, Government Guidance and other material planning considerations arising from consultation and publicity in the previous report (Appendix1) and where necessary are reviewed below.

Metropolitan Green Belt

24. It remains unquestionable that given the form, extent and nature of what is proposed, the development would significantly impact on the openness of the Green Belt, even if in terms of its visual rather than physical presence it could to some extent be mitigated. In particular, the development would extend beyond the area of the existing buildings and the area outside of the land identified in the Local Plan as suitable for redevelopment. The proposed development which extends beyond the land identified in the Local Plan includes part of the office and garage buildings, the salt barn and a large expanse of car parking as previously stated.
25. Mindful of the Green Belt issues associated with the application site, particularly bearing in mind the need to demonstrate very special circumstances, the applicant has gone into some detail about the background and need for the development and site selection

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

process. The latter has now been reviewed to take account of the now extended West Kent division. The purpose for the re-organisation of the County Council's Highway service, including co-location of functions, as referred to in paragraph (6) and (24) of Appendix 1 and need for a suitable site remain.

26. The site selection process is discussed in paragraphs (24) to (29) of Appendix 1 and the applicant's review in the context of the extended area to be served by the site is outlined in paragraphs (10) to (14) above. The extended area opened up the possibility of sites outside of the Green Belt but of the possible additional alternatives only one further site comes forward through the selection process as potentially suitable. This is the existing Doubleday House site at Aylesford. However this has largely been ruled out on accessibility criteria. In clarifying this issue of accessibility, the applicant has stated that there are two strands to this. First, the question of how quickly access can be gained to the principal highway network; secondly, there is the wider question of strategic location – once on the nearest part of the principal road network, how easily the whole of that West Kent network can be reached.
27. In respect of the first issue, the applicant considers that the only viable route for heavy vehicles to travel west from the Aylesford site is to use the M20 westbound from junction 6 but the route along Forstal Road to this junction is neither direct or quick. The applicant comments that in contrast immediate access can be gained to the strategic road network at Wrotham. Secondly, the applicant states that it is clear from looking at a map that many of the principal routes for which Kent Highway Services carries out maintenance and winter service, radiate in all directions out from Wrotham. The applicant also points out how the motorways can be used from this area to provide access to the more distant parts of the principal road network in the division. On the other hand the applicant considers that Aylesford has a markedly inferior strategic location in this respect commenting that the roads do not radiate from it in the same way as they do from Wrotham. The applicant further comments that although Aylesford might be better placed to serve Maidstone Borough, it is not as well located as Wrotham in respect of any of the other five districts which make up West Kent as now defined. Furthermore, the applicant states that the distribution of development proposed in the Kent and Medway Structure Plan, and in the longer term South East Plan, with their emphasis on the concentration of development in the Thames Gateway, will further reinforce the advantages of the Wrotham location.
28. I am aware that significant delays can occur getting out of Beddow Way onto Forstal Road and also out of Forstal Road onto the roundabout at the A229/M20 junction. I also accept the arguments about the application site and, *crucially*, its centrality and relationship to the highway network as a whole to serve the West Kent division, and that it has distinct advantages in this respect. It needs to be borne in mind that in terms of winter maintenance it is intended that Wrotham would cover part of Sevenoaks, part of Tonbridge and Malling and part of Dartford districts and therefore Wrotham has clear advantages overall. To provide this service from the Aylesford site would add a significant disadvantage, for example, to gritting vehicles going to Dartford compared to Wrotham, both in terms of quick access to the strategic highway network and the additional distance that would have to be travelled for a service that needs to be carried out as effectively and efficiently as possible. In this respect, I am advised by Kent Highway Services that the governing factor for salting routes is based on salting rates and best practice not taking longer than 2 hours 15 minutes from leaving the salt loading area. I understand that the Aylesford site would result in areas outside of this limit.

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

29. In addition to the accessibility criteria, the applicant has now advised me that the Aylesford site at 1.21 hectares is too small to accommodate the development for which planning permission has been sought at Wrotham. Furthermore the question of size is reinforced by other factors including that the site is on three different levels and that only about 0.8 hectares could realistically be redeveloped without having to accommodate some of the existing activities which are not part of the County Council elsewhere. The applicant states that in contrast, the site of the proposed development at Wrotham is large enough to accommodate the proposed development, and suffers from no such other constraints. In the circumstances, I accept that it would be difficult to argue that a proposal on the same basis as Wrotham, of the same amount and extent of development could be accommodated on the Aylesford site. Taken together with the disadvantages of the location discussed above, I consider that the Aylesford site is effectively ruled out as an appropriate alternative.
30. In the light of the above consideration of the alternative sites review, I consider that the assessment in paragraphs (30) and (31) of my previous report - Appendix 1 remain relevant to consideration of the application site in the context of the now extended West Kent Division and are reaffirmed. For ease of reference they are reproduced below.
31. In my view, the reasons for the development and the need to locate with regard to the Strategic Highway network and central to the *now extended* West Kent Division are logical and can be accepted. It is also probable that if there were an acceptable alternative it would also be located within the Green Belt. If that is the case, it must be preferable that any such development should then take place on a site where impact on the openness of the Green Belt would be minimised and in particular (to accord with Structure Plan Policy SP1) locations that do not rely on green field sites. I consider that, taken as a whole, that would be true of the application site even though, as acknowledged in paragraph (24) above, by definition the development would significantly impact on the openness of the Green Belt because it would effectively infill the whole site with development. However, it will be noted that about half of the site has been previously developed and is identified in the Local Plan as suitable for redevelopment and arguably is located within an area of/adjoining existing built (ribbon) development and curtilages. Some of that is non-residential, including the café adjacent to the site and petrol filling station about 160 metres to the north-west. In addition, boundary trees and hedgerow to some extent enclose the remainder of the site, where the impact on openness would otherwise be more extensive and intrusive on the countryside beyond.
32. Taking all the above factors into account, I do not consider that an objection on the basis of the effects of the proposed development on the openness of the Green Belt would be warranted. Particularly, as I consider that very special circumstances have been demonstrated for overriding Green Belt policy constraints in this particular case. However, if Members are minded to grant permission, the application would have to be referred to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government for consideration. This is required under The Town and Country (Green Belt) Direction 2005 because the proposal involves inappropriate development that would significantly impact on the openness of the Green Belt.

Landscape/Visual impact

33. Landscape/visual impact of the development is discussed in paragraphs (32) - (36) of Appendix 1. This includes consideration of the design and appearance of the building.

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

Impact on Local Amenity

34. Impact on local amenity is discussed in paragraphs (37) - (42) of Appendix 1. This includes consideration of the proximity of the development to residential properties, noise issues, air quality and external lighting.
35. The issue raised by the Borough Council referred to in paragraph (38) of Appendix 1 in relation to whether changes could be made to the design of the upper part of the south-west elevation of the office block has been further discussed with the applicant's Architect. I understand that the he is prepared to make some changes to address the issue by partial inclusion of obscure glazing and I await an amended drawing.
36. In respect of the issues relating to noise discussed in paragraph (40) of Appendix 1. I have had further clarification from the applicant's Architect. I have again re-consulted my environmental consultants and hope to be able to advise on the outcome at the Committee Meeting. However, they are satisfied with the revised layout, which moves the hot boxes and chipping storage further away from the nearest residential property. I would concur with the view that this adjustment would minimise the potential noise nuisance for neighbouring properties.

Construction

37. Paragraphs (43) and (44) of Appendix 1 deal with construction activity, including a recommendation for controlling hours for demolition and construction.

Drainage/Protection of Water Resources

38. Paragraph (45) of Appendix 1 deals with drainage and water resource protection and refers to the Environment Agency's request for appropriate conditions.

Salt Contamination

39. Paragraph (46) and (47) deal with the issue of salt contamination and refers to the Environment Agency needing to be satisfied with drainage proposals in this respect.

Ground Contamination

40. Paragraph (48) of Appendix 1 identifies that the Environment Agency has advised that a desk top study is carried out prior to determination of the application to examine the issue of ground contamination, and imposition of a number of conditions to deal with the issue subsequently. At the time of writing this has been done and, following an initial consultation, I have recently received additional information from the applicant in response with additional reports following further site surveys/work carried out, and I am currently seeking the further advice of the Environment Agency. If Members were minded to grant planning permission this issue should be addressed/resolved in consultation with the Environment Agency prior to any decision being issued.

Ecology

41. Paragraph (49) of Appendix 1 considers the issue of Protected Species. I have now received Nature England's comments as set out in paragraph (15) above. If Members were minded to grant planning permission an appropriate informative and condition could be imposed regarding the bats and reptile mitigation, respectively. With regard to

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

the production and implementation of a long term management plan and monitoring strategy I would suggest that it is considered in the context of and as part of the mitigation strategy. In my view the timescale for long term management should be based on what is actually reasonable and necessary to achieve the objectives of the Strategy, which may well be self sustaining in the longer term. Measures to enhance the site for wildlife could be required as part of the landscaping scheme.

Archaeology

42. Paragraph (50) of Appendix 1 deals with archaeology.

Transport and Access Issues

43. Transport and access issues are discussed in paragraphs (51) – (54) of Appendix 1. The changed circumstances as they relate to these issues arising from the extended West Kent Division are outlined in paragraphs (2) – (9) above. The key points are that the applicants state that there would be no more staff on site at any one time, even though more staff would be nominally assigned to the site, and that the operational use would not change. In the light of this the total number of trips generated remains unchanged although the origin and destinations and therefore direction of travel to and from the site for some trips would change. The addendum to the Transport Assessment concludes that the proposed development would not have a material impact on the local highway network, and the existing network would be able to accommodate the predicted number of trips generated. Furthermore that the increase in trips as a result of the proposed development would not have a detrimental impact on the A20 London Road, or the surrounding local highway network.
44. Other points to note are that no additional car parking is proposed on the site which is any event physically constrained, and no increase in the size of the office floor space is proposed. Therefore to some extent the capacity for more staff on the site would be self governing. The greater use of home working supported information technology and other measures proposed in the Travel Plan to manage the use of the offices, reduce the need to travel, and proposals for securing a public service or shuttle bus link with Borough Green Station will, however, be noted.
45. The access is now proposed to be a left turn only egress as previously required by the Divisional Transportation Manager. Full details would need to be submitted and if planning permission is granted could be reserved by condition and would need to be subject to a stage two safety audit. In addition, conditions should be imposed to safeguard parking, access and circulation within the site, to require the Travel Plan to be actively implemented and regularly reviewed, and to require a scheme of signing and lighting for approval. In addition it would be appropriate to impose a condition stating that the mezzanine floor of the offices should not be extended without the permission of the County Planning Authority in order that the implications for traffic generation and parking could be considered afresh.
46. As previously acknowledged, the site is not currently well served by public transport and there would be an increase in traffic generated by the development (although as discussed above the changed circumstances should not result in further increases in traffic). Subject to the Divisional Transportation Manager not raising a highway objection, I consider that these factors are outweighed by the need for the development to be well related to the strategic highway network and for it to be centrally located within the area it would serve. Subject also to the technical requirements of the

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

Divisional Transportation Manager being met, and to the implementation and ongoing review of the Travel Plan, I do not consider that a refusal would be warranted on highway grounds in this particular case.

Other non material planning considerations

47. The detailed submission dated 7 October 2006 from Wrotham Parish Council attached as Appendix 5 contains a detailed account of previous land-uses and ownership history of the site. The substantive points it makes with regard to whether the site should be considered as previously developed land are of relevance and have been covered in paragraphs (19) to (21) above. However, the Parish's Council's submission also covers the cost of acquisition of the site, previous ownership history and criminal convictions of an earlier owner. The submission concludes by referring to alleged damage to the County Council's reputation. I would advise Members that none of these points are material planning considerations and should be disregarded in their deliberations on this application.

Conclusion

48. This proposal has given rise to a variety of issues including the impact of the proposed development on the openness of the Green Belt as discussed above. However, I consider that very special circumstances have been demonstrated in this particular case for overriding Green Belt policy constraints in terms of the need, and specialised nature of the proposed development, the inescapable operational requirements of the proposed development, the lack of alternative sites capable of meeting the exacting locational requirements and the limited visual impact on this part of the Green Belt as a result of the proposed site redevelopment. On balance therefore, subject to satisfactory resolution of the outstanding issues on noise and contamination, and the imposition of conditions, I am of the opinion that the proposed development would not give rise to any material harm and would otherwise be in accordance with the general thrust of the relevant Development Plan Policies. Therefore subject to the final views of the Divisional Transportation Manager and any further views received by the Committee Meeting and to satisfactory resolution of the outstanding issues, I recommend that the application be referred to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and that subject to her decision, planning permission be granted subject to conditions.

Recommendation

49. SUBJECT TO the final views of the Divisional Transportation Manager and any further views received by the Committee Meeting and satisfactory resolution of the outstanding issues on noise and contamination, I RECOMMEND that the application BE REFERRED to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and subject to her decision, PLANNING PERMISSION BE GRANTED SUBJECT TO conditions, including conditions covering:
- the standard time limit,
 - the development to be carried out in accordance with the permitted details,
 - tree protection measures,
 - a scheme of landscaping and boundary treatment, to include measures to enhance the site for wildlife, and subsequent maintenance,
 - details of site and finished floor levels,
 - external materials,

Application for an integrated highways depot, London Road, Wrotham – TM/06/2342

- external lighting,
- details of vehicular access - egress to be designed for left turn only, and a scheme of signing and lighting, for approval,
- provision and safeguarding of pedestrian access,
- provision and safeguarding of parking within the site and vehicular access routes within the site,
- implementation and ongoing review of the Travel Plan,
- details of foul and surface water drainage,
- ground contamination from previous uses,
- location of and construction of contractors' site compound and provision of vehicle parking,
- measures to prevent mud and debris being taken onto the public highway,
- hours of working during construction and demolition,
- preparation and implementation of a detailed reptile mitigation strategy to include a long term management plan and monitoring strategy,
- an archaeological watching brief, and
- no additional floor space added to the buildings without the permission of the County Planning Authority.

50. I FURTHER RECOMMEND that the applicant BE ADVISED of the following informatives:

- Natural England's advice about the action to be taken, should there be any bats or evidence of bats found prior to or during works.
- The applicant should ensure any activity they undertake on the site must comply with the appropriate wildlife legislation, and failure to do so may result in fines and potentially, a custodial sentence.
- The applicant to take account of the Environment Agency's Pollution Prevention Guidelines for Highway Depots.

Paul Hopkins	01622 221051
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Background documents - See section heading
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