



Northumberland County Council

SCREENING OPINION

Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017

NCC Application Number: 20/02242/SCREEN

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Northumberland County Council has received a request to provide a screening opinion on the need for Environmental Impact Assessment. The request has been accompanied by the following document and plans.

- SLC Property. Request for a Screening Opinion (RfSO) – Resubmission. July 2020
- Plans of the various development proposals

- 1.2 This screening opinion has taken into account the information supplied in the above documents and plans. Whilst this opinion relates to the whole scheme, it relates primarily to the proposed developments in Northumberland. Where appropriate the opinion refers to those elements of the scheme that are proposed to be located in Newcastle upon Tyne and North Tyneside.

2. Description of the Proposal

- 2.1 The proposal is for the reintroduction of passenger train services on the Northumberland Line. The Northumberland Line comprising 22.4 kms of existing rail track (6.4kms of the East Coast Main Line and 16 kms of existing line currently used for freight traffic), between Newcastle upon Tyne and Ashington. The line is located within the administrative areas of Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside and Northumberland.
- 2.2 New train stations and associated works including car parking and access arrangements are proposed at 5 locations within Northumberland - Ashington, Bedlington, Blyth Bebside, Newsham and Seaton Delaval. A sixth station on the line is

proposed at Northumberland Park within North Tyneside. A possible light maintenance depot is proposed at either Furnace Way or Cambois.

- 2.3 The proposal also comprises the provision of rail infrastructure, the refurbishment and upgrading of existing rail related infrastructure, engineering works and the possible provision of light maintenance depot. There are over 20 level crossings on the line and the scheme includes proposals affecting a number of these crossings due to the increased speed and frequency of train services. The scheme also includes the temporary use of land for the duration of the construction period.

3. National and Local Planning Policy

- 3.1 The Development Plan for the area comprises the following documents:

Northumberland:

- Blyth Valley LDF Core Strategy and Development Control Policies (2007)
- Blyth Valley Local Plan (1999) - saved policies
- Wansbeck Local Plan ((2007) – saved policies

North Tyneside:

- North Tyneside Local Plan (2017).

Newcastle upon Tyne:

- Planning for the Future – Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan for Gateshead and Newcastle upon Tyne 2010 -2030 (2015).
- Newcastle upon Tyne Development and Allocations Plan 2015 – 2030 (202).

- 3.2 A new Northumberland Local Plan (2019) (Submission Draft) is currently the subject of Public Examination.
- 3.3 The National Planning Policy Framework (2019) and National Planning Practice Guidance (2014) (as amended) are also material planning considerations
- 3.4 Other documents that will be material considerations in relation to this proposal will include the following:
- North East Strategic Economic Plan (2017)
 - Northumberland Economic Strategy 2019 – 2024 (2019)

- 3.5 North Tyneside Council is also providing a screening opinion for the proposal, in particular the proposed developments in North Tyneside.
- 3.6 The assessment of the proposed development's likely significant effects is in relation to the EIA Regulations only. The assessment does not imply any consideration of the planning merits of the proposals or indicate the likely success or otherwise of any applications for planning permission.

4. Background:

- 4.1 Northumberland County Council provided a screening opinion on 9 August 2019 to a previous iteration of the proposal. That opinion concluded that the proposal would not give rise to significant environmental effects and that an EIA would not therefore be required. (North Tyneside Council provided a screening opinion on 6 September 2019 that came to the same conclusion).
- 4.2 Many elements of the new proposals are the same or very similar to the proposals that were screened in August 2019. The main changes as set out in the RfSO are as follows.
- Reserving additional land for future car parking (to provide for potential growth up to 2039) at the stations proposed at Ashington, Blyth Bebside and Seaton Delaval.
 - Closure of the level crossing at Newsham and the diversion of Laverock Hall road over the rail line with the construction of a single carriageway bridge; the station at Newsham would be located at the existing level crossing.
 - The closure of two level crossings with the crossing at Chase Meadows being replaced by a footbridge and the crossing at Hospital Land being replaced by either a footbridge or an underpass.
 - The previous proposal was to locate the station at Bebside to the north of the level crossing at Front Street. The new proposal is to site the station to the south of the Heather Lea housing estate off Front Street.
 - The refinement of land identified for a number of temporary laydown areas, access routes and compounds.
 - The possible need for a bespoke Light Maintenance Depot to provide for the stabling and maintenance of rolling stock and welfare facilities for staff at either Furnace Way (without welfare facilities) or at Cambois.

4. **EIA Regulations**

- 4.1 Schedule 1 Part 7 of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 “(the EIA Regulations) relates to the construction of lines for long distance railway traffic. The Regulations do not define what constitutes ‘long distance railway traffic’. However, the rail corridor for the Northumberland Line is already in existence catering for freight traffic and the proposal would involve the reintroduction of only local rail passenger services. The Local Planning Authority considers that this proposal, that involves the reintroduction of local passenger railways services on 22.4 kms of existing rail track, does not reasonably fall within the projects covered by Schedule 1 Part 7 and therefore does not constitute Schedule 1 development.
- 4.2 The Local Planning Authority considers that the proposal constitutes development under Schedule 2 Part 10 Infrastructure Projects. The proposal includes elements that fall under Part 10 (d) Construction of Railways and elements that fall under Part 10 (b) Urban Development Projects. These sections require proposals where any part of the development is to be carried out within a ‘sensitive area’ as defined in Regulation 2 (1) of the EIA Regulations or where the development extends to more than 1 hectare, to be screened to establish whether the proposal is EIA development. The proposed development is not within a ‘sensitive area’ but is spread out over various locations within the three Local Authority areas, including in Northumberland, that cumulatively amount to more than 1 hectare, therefore it requires to be screened to establish if it would result in likely significant environmental effects.
- 4.3 Schedule 3 (1) of the Regulations states that the characteristics of the proposal must be considered having regard to its size and design; cumulative impact; use of natural resources in particular land, soil, water and biodiversity; production of waste, pollution and nuisances; the risk of major accidents and / or disasters including climate change; and the risks to human health.
- 4.4 Schedule 3 (2) of the Regulations states that the environmental sensitivity of geographical areas must be considered having regard to the existing and approved land use, natural resources within the area and the absorption capacity of the natural environment paying particular attention to various defined areas

including national and European designated areas, landscapes and sites of historical, cultural or archaeological importance.

- 4.5 Schedule 3 (3) of the Regulations states the likely significant effects of the development on the environment must be considered in relation to the criteria set out in paragraphs 1 and 2 with regard to the impact of the development on the factors specified in regulation 4 (2), taking into account: the magnitude and spatial extent of the impact (e.g. geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected); the nature of the impact; the transboundary nature of the impact; the intensity and complexity of the impact; the probability of the impact; the expected onset, duration, frequency and reversibility of the impact; the cumulative impact with other developments; and the possibility of effectively reducing the impact. The factors specified in Regulation 4 (2) are population and human health; biodiversity with particular reference to protected species and habitats; land, soil, water, air and climate; material assets, cultural heritage and the landscape; and the interaction between these factors.
- 4.6 An assessment of the proposal has been undertaken with reference to the various provisions in Schedule 3 of the EIA Regulations in order to identify if the development would be likely to have significant effects on the environment. Each of the issues listed in the three paragraphs of Schedule 3 are considered in turn in sections 5 - 7 of this screening opinion.
- 4.6 Planning Practice Guidance advises that 'only a very small proportion of Schedule 2 development will require an Environmental Impact Assessment'. PPG provides an indication of the types of impact that are most likely to be significant for particular types of development, whilst emphasising that each development will need to be considered on its merits. For urban development projects PPG identifies the physical scale of such developments, potential increase in traffic, emissions and noise. For construction of railways PPG identifies estimated emissions, traffic, noise and vibration, the degree of visual intrusion and the impact on the surrounding ecology. However, the likelihood of significant environment effects is not limited to these issues and a comprehensive assessment has been carried out.
- 4.7 Schedule 5 (4) (b) of the Regulations requires the Local Planning Authority to take into account the results of any relevant environmental assessment that is reasonably available. Northumberland County Council has carried out a Sustainability

Appraisal (SA) of the emerging Northumberland Local Plan. The SA incorporates the Strategic Environmental Assessment process and the results of the SA have been taken into account in preparing this Screening Opinion.

5. Characteristics of the Proposal

- 5.1 In accordance with Schedule 3 (1) of the Regulations the characteristics of the proposal are considered in this section of the screening opinion.

Size and Design

- 5.2 The total site area of the proposed development has not been defined but it is extensive comprising 22.4 kilometres of existing rail track, the rail corridor and the various stations and other locations where development works are proposed. However, along much of the rail line there will be no works taking place and the only change from the existing situation will be the introduction of new passenger rail services. The frequency of rail services has not yet been determined but three options have been identified – half hourly service throughout the day; hourly service throughout the day; and hourly service through the day with a half hourly service at peak periods. In addition over the majority of the remainder of the line the only works are likely to be track improvements including in places the reintroduction of twin track where there is currently only a single track.

- 5.3 The main developments will take place at the proposed railways stations including in certain locations the use of currently undeveloped land. The RfSO document states that design work in some locations is not yet complete but an indication of the proposals is presented including in some cases alternative proposals.

- 5.4 It is concluded that considerations related to the size and design of the scheme are not likely to be significant such as to warrant EIA.

Cumulative Impact

- 5.5 Cumulative impacts occur when the effects of the proposed development combine over the same period of time with other effects in a locality. It is anticipated that the development will be constructed over a period of 30 – 40 months with details of the construction phases being determined after a contractor is appointed. Until a timetable and programme for the construction

works are determined it is not possible to say whether any cumulative impacts would occur. However, taking into account that the proposed station sites will be the main foci of development activity, it is considered that any cumulative impacts are likely to be locally based and unlikely to be significant such as to warrant EIA on these grounds.

Use of Natural Resources

- 5.6 The vast majority of the land to be occupied by the proposed development is already operational train line. The proposed train stations are a combination of existing train station, former train station and new train station with the amount of undeveloped land required being only a very small proportion of the land required for the scheme overall, though important in a local context. In addition the RsFO document identifies areas of land that will be required for a temporary period during construction as laydown areas for contractors. Some of the land required for new stations, car parking, contractor lay down areas and other developments will have soils that should be retained for beneficial use. It is not considered that the use of land and soils will be significant such as to warrant EIA on these grounds.
- 5.7 The RfSO document concludes that water resources have the likelihood of being impacted by the scheme both during construction and when operational. These impacts include risks of flooding and effects on surface water and ground water. The increases in hardstanding at the various development sites in particular for the provision of car parking will increase the impermeable areas and therefore have an impact on adjacent water resources. The Local Lead Flood Authority (LLFA) does not consider that EIA is required. It considers that a Flood Risk Assessment and Drainage Strategy will be required to accompany any planning applications. In addition the LLFA points out that the line crosses a number of watercourses, including the River Blyth, River Wansback, Willow Burn, Sleekburn, Seaton Burn, Brierdene Burn and various smaller watercourses and land drainage consent may be required for any works to be carried out within a watercourse.
- 5.8 The County Ecologist has advised that the proposed development of upgrading track works, new train stations with associated car parking and landscaping does not have characteristics likely to give rise to significant ecological effects within the meaning of the EIA Regulations.

- 5.9 It is concluded that considerations related to natural resources are not likely to be significant such as to warrant EIA.

Waste, Pollution and Nuisances

- 5.10 The RfSO document contains no information on the wastes that will be generated by the proposal. It will be important that such wastes are managed appropriately, including being put to beneficial use in situ wherever practicable, but it is not considered that this consideration will be significant such as to warrant EIA on these grounds.
- 5.11 Similarly the RfSO document contains no information on pollution that might arise from the proposal. After the new passenger rail services are introduced there is potential for a decrease in air pollution resulting from the likely modal shift from car to rail. Having regard to the nature of the proposed development it is not considered that the risks from pollution will be significant such as to warrant EIA on these grounds.
- 5.12 Traffic is an activity that has the potential to cause nuisance in particular to nearby residential properties.
- 5.13 One of the most significant changes from the previous RfSO submission in 2019 is the increased car parking provision that is now proposed at each of the 5 stations in Northumberland. This is particularly the case at Newsham, Bebside and Seaton Delaval, with each station likely to function as park and ride sites. There is potential for nuisance to local residents and businesses in the vicinity of these stations and this will need to be a key focus for the car parking management plans that the RfSO states will be implemented to manage any adverse effects on local amenity. Similarly there will be a need to provide safe and convenient access for rail passengers travelling on foot or cycling to the stations.
- 5.14 The (former) Institute of Environmental Management's Guidelines for the Environmental Assessment of Road Traffic identifies that the effects of increase in road traffic from development cease to be negligible beyond an increase of 30% of the baseline AADT traffic flows for all traffic and for HGV movements. However, traffic flows, including baseline flows and changes to traffic flows resultant from the development proposals are not included in the RfSO and therefore screening for EIA cannot be fully carried out. Nevertheless recognising the potential benefits on the wider road network and modal shift to the use of the passenger rail services,

it is likely that the only sections of highway that have the potential for an increase of 30% of the baseline AADT traffic flows will be in the vicinity of the new stations both when the scheme is operational and potentially in relation to HGV movements during the construction period.

- 5.15 The County Highways Authority is content to deal with highway matters through a Transport Assessment that is currently being scoped with the developers and will be submitted with any planning applications. These will be assessed as part of the consideration of the planning applications. Whilst it is considered that traffic considerations do have the potential for causing nuisance to local residents and businesses, it is not anticipated that these impacts will be significant in EIA terms.
- 5.16 Other aspects that have the potential for nuisance are noise, vibration, dust and lighting and each of these is considered below in Section 7 of this Screening opinion.

Major Accidents, Hazards and Human Health

- 5.17 Nationally the number of major accidents or disasters affecting railways is very low. The Northumberland line is currently used for freight rail traffic and it is not considered that the proposed increase in the number of trains using the line will significantly increase the risk of major accidents or disasters. Such risks therefore are considered to be very low. The modal shift to the use of passenger rail services has the potential to reduce road traffic and reduce road accidents.
- 5.18 There are 22 level crossings along the route, including 17 in Northumberland, each of which represents a potential hazard. With the significantly increased number of trains using the line on a daily basis the injury and fatality risk at each crossing is increased. As a result it is proposed to upgrade or remove all level crossings to improve the safety of users providing a positive benefit.
- 5.19 It is concluded that considerations related to major accidents or hazards are likely to be significant such as to warrant EIA.
- 5.20 Human health issues are dealt with in Section 7 below.

6. Environmental Sensitivity of Geographic Areas

- 6.1 In accordance with Schedule 3 (2) of the Regulations the environmental sensitivity of geographical areas is considered in this section of the screening opinion.

Land Use and Natural Resources

- 6.2 The main existing land use of the proposed development is operational railways including track and embankments. Some of the land that is proposed for stations is former railway station and some of the land that is proposed for car parking is already car parking. Other land proposed for stations, car parking and contractors' lay down areas is currently undeveloped. Whilst some of this is 'brownfield' land, the majority is greenfield and is mainly in agricultural use. The RfSO summarises the effects on land use as follows:

- The change of use of land both permanently and temporarily.
- Engineering operations on or under land
- The removal of trees, shrubs and vegetation.
- Alterations to adopted highways and footways
- Alterations to and closure of level crossings.
- Diversion of existing and construction of new services and facilities
- Alterations to culverts, drainage systems and watercourses.
- Construction of new stations, car parking and associated highway and pedestrian access.
- Construction of new bridges.
- Construction of temporary access roads, compounds and storage areas.
- Use of existing and upgraded railtrack for passenger rail services.

- 6.3 There will clearly be a variety of implications for land use and natural resources throughout the area during the construction and operational stages of the development but it is not considered that these will be such as to be significant in EIA terms.

Absorption Capacity of the Natural Environment

- 6.4 The County Ecologist advises that no part of the proposed development is within protected areas for nature conservation. Whilst none of the proposed station sites cause concern, sections of track are adjacent to designated sites but as the works simply comprise upgrading of the track within the existing rail corridor,

they are not likely to have an impact on the adjacent designated sites provided that appropriate working methods are utilised.

- 6.5 Sections of bridges at the Rivers Blyth and Wansbeck cross a number of designated sites including the Northumberland Shore SSSI, Northumbria Coast SPA / Ramsar site and the Northumberland Marine SPA. If noisy works, generating greater than 70 dB LAMax at the site boundary, are limited seasonally to avoid the overwintering period, and the works are to existing structures with normal construction level precautionary working methods, the County Ecologist considers that impacts on those sites are unlikely to occur.
- 6.6 At New Hartley, the railway line runs close to the boundary of the New Hartley Ponds SSSI and the County Ecologist is satisfied that with the relevant European Protected Species Mitigation Licence from Natural England and precautionary working methods, harm to the SSSI and its special features can be avoided. The proposed development, as regulated through Town and Country Planning and licensing processes, will not have significant implications for the SSSI.
- 6.7 There are records of bats and badgers along the route and the proposed development will require licenses from Natural England to proceed lawfully with respect to these species where they are found to be within the zone of influence of the works. However, the regulation of the proposed development through the Town and Country Planning and licensing processes will ensure that it proceeds without having significant effects on these species. Accordingly the location of the proposed development does not raise any concerns regarding significant effects within the meaning of the EIA Regulations.
- 6.8 The Northumberland Line does not pass through any land (e.g. National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) that is nationally designated for landscape protection.
- 6.9 At the local level, the line is located with National Landscape Character Area 13: South East Northumberland Coastal Plain, mostly within Northumberland Landscape Character Type 41: Developed Coast, with some areas within Type 39: Coalfield Farmland and Type 42: Urban and Urban Fringe. Restoration and enhancement of landscapes are key themes throughout this area. It is not anticipated that the proposals will result in significant landscape effects within the meaning of the EIA Regulations.

- 6.10 The railway line runs through areas of land that have been designated as Green Belt. In particular it is stated that two of the development proposals at Seaton Delaval and Blyth Newsham are likely to require development on Green Belt land. National and local planning policy states that engineering operations and local transport infrastructure which can demonstrate a requirement for a Green Belt location, is not inappropriate development in the Green Belt provided it preserves the openness of the Green Belt and does not conflict with the purposes of including land in the Green Belt. The impact of the proposal on the Green Belt will be assessed as part of the consideration of any planning applications. It will need to be demonstrated that there are no feasible, safe options to provide the stations and supporting car parking and access arrangements at Seaton Delaval and Blyth Newsham without developing on Green Belt land. One point for consideration is that there is only a relatively narrow stretch of Green Belt separating Seghill and Seaton Delaval and it would be beneficial if the slight encroachment shown on the proposals for the car park at Seaton Delaval station could be avoided. Whilst the RfSO document is not clear in indicating where the temporary compounds would be located and for how long, it would be desirable to avoid Green Belt locations as far as practicable.
- 6.11 Notwithstanding this planning policy requirement, the impacts on the Green Belt are not considered likely to be of such significance that an EIA is required on these grounds.
- 6.12 The County Archaeologist states that the proposed development corridor traverses a landscape which has a high potential for known and currently unrecorded archaeological remains spanning the prehistoric to modern periods. Known archaeological remains close to the proposed development corridor include prehistoric enclosures of Iron Age / Romano-British, evidence of medieval settlement and agricultural activity, post-medieval and industrial activity (evidence of mineral extraction and historic railways) and anti-invasion defences.
- 6.13 The County Archaeologist has previously identified a need to undertake a programme of archaeological assessment based on an agreed study corridor and having regard to the data provided by the Northumberland Historic Environment Record. It is understood that this exercise is now in progress following agreement with the applicants' archaeological consultant on the scope of an initial phase of desk-based assessment. It is anticipated that some additional assessment work (potentially

including geophysical survey and evaluation trenching) may be required in some locations, subject to the results of the desk-based assessments.

- 6.14 An assessment of the significance of heritage assets, both designated (Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas, Registered Park and Gardens); and non-designated heritage assets should be carried out to assess their significance and identify those components which contribute to that significance having regard to the contribution made to their setting. It is important that this exercise is undertaken prior to the formation of definitive designs to ensure it informs the design of the development.
- 6.15 A visual impact assessment should be carried out to assist in evaluating the impact of the development on heritage assets at views to, from and through the development sites and heritage assets. This is particularly important in relation to the line section adjacent to the Grade 1 listed Seaton Delaval Hall and its Parkland which is a Conservation area and Grade II* listed Registered Park and Garden.
- 6.16 Subject to any necessary and appropriate mitigation, to be agreed in advance with the County Archaeologist and Building Conservation Officer, and controlled by way of conditions attached to any future planning approvals, the proposed development is not considered to result in significant environmental effects associated with heritage assets, sufficient to warrant an EIA on these grounds.

7. Likely Impacts of the Proposal

- 7.1 In accordance with Schedule 3 (3) of the Regulations the likely significant effects of the development on the environment are considered in this section of the screening opinion.

Population and Human Health

- 7.2 The line passes through major centres of population, in particular in Newcastle upon Tyne and North Tyneside. In Northumberland it passes through or close to some of the main centres of population in the south east of the County, including settlements classified as 'main towns' (Ashington, Bedlington and Blyth) and 'service centres' (Seaton Delaval) in the emerging Northumberland Local Plan. Between these centres of population the line passes through areas of open countryside.

7.3 The population of southeast Northumberland will be impacted by the proposed development in a variety of ways. During the construction period these impacts will be experienced generally by people as they travel throughout the area, through such aspects as road closures and diversions at the various development sites and their associated temporary access points. However, the main impacts both during construction and after the reintroduction of passenger rail services will be experienced by people living in close proximity to the line in particular the various stations. The submitted documents identify the following properties in close proximity to the line.

- Residential properties adjacent to the railway corridor at Seghill (to the east and west of the railway) and at Seaton Delaval to the south of the railway corridor.
- Residential properties adjacent to the railway corridor at New Hartley, South Newsham and Newsham.
- Residential properties to the east of the railway corridor at Blyth and to the west of the railway at Bebside.
- Residential and non-residential properties through Bedlington Station, Bedlington and West Sleekburn.
- Residential and non-residential properties through Ashington.

7.4 There are potential risks to human health that might result from the proposed development during both the construction and operational periods. The County Council's Environmental Protection Team has been in liaison with consultants acting for the developer and have provided the following comments.

Noise

7.5 Noise nuisance is possible during both the construction and operational stages of the proposed development. The Environmental Protection Team consider that construction noise can be controlled through planning conditions in a similar way to normal construction sites.

7.6 The proposed development will generate operational noise from the rail services and at the railway stations and associated car parks. There are ongoing discussions and the Environmental Protection Team are seeking further understanding of the usage and times of any tannoy systems operated at the stations. Some residential and other properties, including a care home adjacent to the proposed Bedlington station, are located in close proximity to the proposed stations and noise impacts on the living conditions of

occupants of these properties will need to be fully addressed in any planning applications.

Vibration

- 7.7 Vibration from the proposed railcars will need to be compared with vibration from the current freight trains. It is understood that the railcars for the scheme have not yet been identified

Air Quality

- 7.8 The Environmental Protection Team consider that construction dust can be covered by the submission of a dust management plan. Regarding operational air quality further information is required.

Lighting

- 7.9 There is the potential for nuisance to residential and other properties from artificial lighting during both the construction and operational stages. Lighting at the proposed stations and car parks has the potential to impact on the amenity of adjacent properties in a similar way to noise and lighting impacts on the living conditions of occupants of these properties will need to be fully addressed in any planning applications.
- 7.10 In relation to the proposed stations and car parks at Seaton Delaval and Blyth Newsham, it will be important that lighting is designed to minimise the impact upon openness and urbanising effects on the Green Belt. The addition of the proposed bridge at Newsham, as a further raised element in this location, also has the potential to impact on openness and should be designed to minimise the impact upon openness and urbanising effects.

Coal Mining Legacy

- 7.11 Much of the area has experienced former underground mining for coal giving rise to potential ground stability and stythe gas issues. Any development proposals requiring ground foundations will need to be accompanied by supporting information on these issues.

Land Contamination

- 7.12 The Environmental Protection Team has identified the need for a minimum of Phase 1 Desk Top Studies for each site.

7.13 In conclusion the Environmental Protection Team considers that sufficient supporting information is being developed for submission with any planning applications for each of these topics. Whilst each of the various impacts will need to be addressed locally, it is not considered that they will be significant in EIA terms.

7.14 In conclusion it is considered that whilst there are likely to be a variety of nuisance impacts that will be experienced in certain localities as a result of the development proposals, the risks to human health are not likely to be significant in EIA terms. There will also be the potential to mitigate risks by the imposition of planning conditions and good working practices.

Biodiversity

7.15 Any works that are related to track and rail infrastructure covered by permitted development rights may have impacts on protected species and habitats. Protected species legislation operates independently of the planning system. Furthermore local authorities have statutory duties under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 and The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 to pay due regard to biodiversity including consideration of certain protected species and sites.

7.16 Given the limited impacts of the proposed development the types and characteristics of the potential impacts are local and can be effectively controlled through the planning and licensing processes and therefore are unlikely to cause significant impacts within the terms of the EIA Regulations.

7.17 Overall therefore the County Ecologist does not consider that the proposed development will give rise to ecological impacts that could be considered to be significant within the meaning of the EIA Regulations.

7.18 The ecological advice related to the proposed works that require planning consent can therefore be equally applied to the works covered by permitted development rights. This is particularly pertinent to any planned works around New Hartley where the New Hartley Ponds SSSI is adjacent to the track and is designated for it population of great crested newts, and to the works around estuaries and coastal designated sites.

- 7.19 Other protected species that regularly use railway lines include nesting birds and badgers.
- 7.20 An Ecological Impact Statement will be required for those works requiring planning consent including laydown areas, stations, car parking and access features. The County Ecologist advises that he has been in regular contact with the applicant's ecological consultants and has been assured that the appropriate levels of survey, assessment and mitigation are in hand.
- 7.21 In conclusion and having regard to the advice provided by the County Ecologist, it is not considered that the proposed development would have significant effects on the biodiversity of the area such as to warrant an EIA.

Land, Soil, Water, Air and Climate

- 7.22 Impacts on land, soil, water and air have been considered above (paragraphs 5.6, 5.7 and 7.8). Any effects would be localised and are not considered to warrant an EIA on these grounds.
- 7.23 The effect of the proposed development on climate and its vulnerability to climate change has been considered in the submitted documents. The key aspect of the proposal is that it provides an opportunity to facilitate a shift towards more sustainable transport modes i.e. from car to rail. There is therefore the potential to reduce fossil fuel based private vehicle emissions thus contributing towards mitigating the risk of climate change. The benefits would be greater if the line was to be electrified but it is anticipated that diesel trains will operate. It is stated that the scheme is being designed, including the choice of equipment, infrastructure and landscaping, to be resilient to extreme weather events including those caused by flooding and heat waves. It will be important that drainage schemes for the various development sites include an allowance for climate change.
- 7.24 It is stated that some decisions have still to be made regarding the number of car parking spaces to be provided at the various stations. Whilst the need to provide adequate car parking is recognised it will also be important that non-car users, including those travelling on foot and by cycling, can safely access the stations hence contributing to a reduction in fossil fuel use.
- 7.25 The construction of the scheme will lead to an increase in greenhouse gas emissions at the various development sites but it is considered that any adverse impacts on climate change will be

outweighed by the wider sub- modal shift facilitated by the reintroduction of passenger rail services.

- 7.26 It is concluded that the proposal will not result in significant climate change effects such as to warrant an EIA on these grounds.

Material Assets, Cultural Heritage and Landscape

- 7.27 The railway line is not within any nationally or internationally designated area for heritage importance.
- 7.28 The construction of railway stations, car parking and bridges has the potential to impact on the setting and significance of heritage assets. It is considered that the potential impact to heritage assets falls below the threshold for EIA, but there will be a need to submit Heritage Impact Assessments with relevant planning applications. These must consider the impact of the development proposals on heritage assets within their proximity and whose setting or features of special architectural and historic interest may be affected by the development proposals.
- 7.29 As noted above (paragraph 6.12) the County Archaeologist states that the proposed development corridor traverses a landscape which has a high potential for known and currently unrecorded archaeological remains spanning the prehistoric to modern periods. Subject to the measures identified above (paragraph 6.16) the proposed development is not considered to result in significant environmental effects associated with heritage assets, sufficient to warrant an EIA on these grounds.
- 7.30 The transport and highway effects of the proposed development were dealt with in paragraphs 5.12 – 5.15 on this screening opinion.
- 7.31 The Northumberland Line passes through an area with an extensive Public Rights of way network. The impacts on this network and access by the public during both constructional and operational stages will need to be addressed in drawing up detailed proposals for the scheme. Where an impact on a public right of way is identified and / or public access could be affected, it will be necessary to explain what mitigation measures and / or temporary closures or diversions are proposed.
- 7.32 The proposed development is not considered to result in significant environmental effects associated with transport, highways or public rights of way sufficient to warrant an EIA on these grounds.

- 7.33 The RfSO document identifies a variety of activities associated with the construction and operation of the scheme that have the potential to change the character of the landscape. Some changes will be temporary, e.g. the construction of compounds and temporary lighting, whilst others will be permanent, most notably the increased number of trains using the line and the new stations and car parks. The removal of vegetation, including trees, will be required in various areas to facilitate the works and some of these will be long-term / permanent effects. Of particular note will be the development of the new stations, car parks and associated infrastructure at Bebside, Seaton Delaval and Newsham in view of their semi-rural locations.
- 7.34 The RfSO document states that the selection of sites to be used for the new stations and their detailed design will be informed by Landscape and Visual Assessments or Landscape Overviews and the type of assessments / overviews have been agreed with the Local Planning Authority.
- 7.35 It is concluded that the proposals will not result in significant landscape effects within the meaning of the EIA Regulations.

Interaction Between the Various Factors

- 7.36 The cumulative effect and interaction between the various factors referred to above are not considered to be of such significance as to warrant an EIA on these grounds.

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 Northumberland County Council as Local Planning Authority (LPA) has considered the proposed development in the context of the EIA Regulations 2017. The LPA considers that the proposed development is not likely to have significant effects on the environment and as such is not considered to be EIA development. The reasons for reaching this conclusion are set out in sections 5 — 7 of this Screening opinion.
- 8.2 The LPA reserves the right to alter this screening opinion if further information becomes available to demonstrate that the environmental impacts of the proposal are likely to be significant in the terms specified in the Regulations.
- 8.3 This assessment does not imply any consideration of the planning merits of the proposals or indicate the likely success or otherwise of the application for planning permission.

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Date:	6 November 2020
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Date:	13 November 2020