

## **M5 Junction 25 Strategic Employment Site Supporting Information.**

### **Introduction**

This report has been collated to provide background information and evidence regarding the value of the proposed Strategic Employment Site (SES) to be located on the South Eastern side of M5 Junction 25 (M5 J25).

It is intended that this report be used as supporting evidence for the Programme Entry Business Case for highways capacity improvements at M5 J25 being made by Somerset County Council (SCC) to the Heart of the South West (HotSW) Local Transport Board (LTB) to confirm a funding allocation within the HotSW Local Enterprise Partnership's Local Growth Fund.

### **Background**

The Economic Development Strategy for Taunton, 'Grow & Green. A New Economic Strategy for Taunton Deane, 2010' showed that the Borough is highly dependent on public sector jobs (40%) and re-balancing the local economy away from the public sector is a vital element of the new strategy. The strategy includes an analysis of the current allocations and plans for employment land within the Borough and recommends that the availability of one or more strategic sites with good motorway connections should be brought forward in the medium term.

As part of a Review into Employment Land in Taunton (2009), A Task & Finish Review Group was established on the basis that opportunities for inward investment within Taunton have been missed and the aim of the group was to assist in resolving and reversing this situation. Group members from the private sector were clear that Taunton is chronically short of a major strategic site, required in the near future, which would complement Firepool.

Their report states that many companies have relocated their operations to Exeter, Yeovil and other surrounding towns due to a lack of appropriate sites in Taunton to accommodate their growth requirements.

The Group agreed that it should be a priority for the Council to work with the Highways Agency for the site at the M5 Junction 25 to come forward to provide in excess of 20 ha of employment space. This was considered by the Group to be essential for the economic wellbeing of Taunton and should be actioned as soon as possible.

### **The Local Planning Context**

In 2011 Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC) adopted its Core Strategy following public examination by the Planning Inspector on behalf of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. The strategy forecasts growth to be in the region of 11,900 net additional jobs in Taunton Deane by 2026.

Strategic Objective 2 is to provide the right conditions and sufficient land in appropriate locations to retain the Borough's high levels of self-containment, re-balance the local economy away from its public sector dominance, promote the growth of the green knowledge economy and raise the overall quality of jobs through related strategies, enabling Taunton and the rest of the Borough to fulfil its true economic potential

Policy SS8 recognises that whilst the existing evidence base suggest that there is sufficient employment land allocated over the plan period, there is evidence that the lack of a second strategic employment site (after Firepool) with good access to the trunk route network has resulted in existing businesses relocating outside of Taunton and restricted inward investment towards the town, thus inhibiting the growth potential of Taunton.

The policy sets out the criteria for the identification of a strategic employment site to be taken forward, as shown below.

#### *Core Strategy Policy SS8*

#### *TAUNTON - BROAD LOCATION FOR STRATEGIC EMPLOYMENT*

*To meet the identified qualitative need for a second strategic employment site, an allocation will be made in the Site Allocations and Development Management DPD having regard to the following criteria:*

- a. of a scale to secure strong inward investment, raising the skills base and profile of the town;*
- b. well located in relation to the national route network and the Taunton urban area;*
- c. targeted towards Class B (non office) use in order to complement rather than compete with town centre office opportunities;*
- d. having no overriding environmental or physical constraints restricting development; and*
- e. capable of delivery within agreed timescales.*

The Heart of South West LEP (HotSW LEP) is fully supportive of Policy SS8 of the Core Strategy which addresses the provision of a strategic employment site. This support is evidenced in a letter from Tim Jones, the then Chairman of HotSW LEP, to Roger Mitchinson at TDBC dated 19/01/2012. The letter states that there is an inadequate supply of employment land within Taunton which the Core Strategy is seeking to address.

The purpose of the letter was to draw to the attention of the Inspector during the examination into the Core Strategy to show that the HotSW LEP fully supports a further strategic employment site for Taunton in the longer term

Following the examination of the Core Strategy the Inspector reflected in his report that despite quantitative supply, several reports had identified the need to ensure the provision of higher quality sites to attract new employers; and there

was anecdotal evidence of companies going elsewhere due to a lack of suitable sites.

The draft Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report, October 2013, undertaken for the Taunton Deane Site Allocation and Development Plan addresses four options in terms of identifying a new strategic employment site -

- Option 1: Land at Junction 25
- Option 2: Do nothing
- Option 3: Monkton Heathfield
- Option 4: Comeytrowe

Land at Junction 25 was determined to perform the best against economic objectives. The following key points are noted in respect of the site -

- Employment allocation at Junction 25 would assist in providing a range and choice of future supply, with good access to the national route network, and enable Taunton to reach its full economic potential in the south west sub region.
- The provision of adequate employment land will help to support the housing supply which is linked to economic growth.
- The site adjoins the urban area of Taunton and has good public transport links to the urban area.
- The scale and quality of the site requirements would entail significant green infrastructure which provide wildlife benefits.

Taunton Deane Employment Land Supply (2012) review stated in the report that any new “strategic” land allocation in proximity to the M5 fulfils a qualitative as opposed to a quantitative need and is therefore not considered an oversupply. The report goes on to conclude that there is a qualitative requirement for a second (non office based) strategic employment site for medium/longer term growth opportunities. The existing business parks at Blackbrook and Westpark at Wellington are filling up and it is critical Taunton has plans for the future.

In 2014, as part of the evidence base for the emerging Site Allocations and Development Management Plan (SADMP), TDBC commissioned PBA to undertake a study identifying the employment uses, why existing allocations do not fulfil this qualitative need, the economic benefits/disbenefits and to assess likelihood of uptake for such uses at the site at Junction 25 of the M5.

As part of the study PBA carried out consultation with land owners and local agents which showed widespread support for a high quality strategic site at J25. Access to the M5 is seen as a key attribute. The majority of respondents concurred that evaluating demand and supply through forecasting does not allow for meeting the requirements of large operators who may come forward at any point with site requirements. It is essential that Taunton has a readily available supply of land to meet such requirements and attract investment not only from Taunton but from the wider area.

In 2011, Roger Tym & Partners published the Taunton Deane Economic Topic Paper as part of the evidence base for the Core Strategy. PBA referred to the

parameters in this paper to estimate the likely quantum of space and potential number of jobs which might be supported through the 25 ha site at Junction 25. The PBA report concludes that adopting a 35% plot ratio (which is equivalent to 3,500 sqm of floorspace per hectare) for the Junction 25 site, then the site has potential to deliver some 87,500 sqm of employment space.

If it is assumed that 50% of this comes forward for offices uses, 20% comes forward for light industrial/warehousing uses, and the remainder come forward for services (including about 5% of space being vacant at any one time), then some 4,000 jobs might be achievable at the site.

The site was not included as a specific allocation within the Site Allocations and Development Management Plan. SCC and TDBC commissioned Parsons Brinckerhoff to study the impacts of the SADMP on the highway network (1) and to consider mitigation options for the SES (2). The work study work demonstrated that the SES would require a significant investment in highways infrastructure to mitigate the impacts. The site was not specifically allocated due lack of certainty around funding and the need for more work to be undertaken at the time.

In December 2015 TDBC formally (3) decided to produce a Local Development Order (LDO) for the site in order to expedite its delivery. It's currently anticipated that the LDO will be adopted in mid-2017 and will allow development to come forward from this time.

## **Delivery**

In September 2015 the HotSW LEP looked to invite proposals for new Enterprise Zones in the area. TDBC submitted a proposal for consideration by the adjudication panel. The site at J25 was not included in the application to Government at the time however the panel's briefing presented to the LEP Board notes -

'This does not, however, mean that the J25 site is not a strategically significant location or that it is not a priority for the LEP, and it must be included in our wider strategies for growth. The LEP should commit to recognising the J25 site, perhaps with a status akin to the Enterprise Area approach taken in the West of England. Further work will need to be done to identify how this works in practice following submission of our bid, for example how such an approach should inform future funding strategies.

We should to commit to developing a clear MoU between our EZ governance arrangements, and the J25 site, and indeed other growth locations, to ensure that other important non-EZ sites are properly supported.'

In October 2015 TDBC, SCC, HotSW LEP, Summerfield Developments, Highways England and Environment Agency entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the purpose to promote effective co-ordination and co-operation between the MOU partners to secure the delivery of the proposed strategic employment site adjacent to Junction 25 of the M5 (Taunton), taking

full account of the dependence on the highway infrastructure improvements required to unlock the site. A copy of the MOU is included as appendix A.

Summerfield Developments owns or has options over the entire site. The existing business parks at Blackbrook (Taunton) and Westpark (Wellington), both sites brought forward by Summerfield that are located close to the M5 are filling up and it is critical that Taunton has plans for the future sites of a similar nature..

Since the announcement that the land controlled by Summerfield is the preferred location for the strategic employment site, they have engaged with JLL commercial property agents, to discuss the potential mix of uses that the site could accommodate. At the same time we have received a number of enquiries from potential occupiers. The site has attracted interested for a number of reasons -

- Its proximity to existing businesses.
- Excellent visibility from and connectivity to the motorway and trunk road network.
- With planned improvements to the A358 that will create significantly improved road network, linking Taunton to South Somerset and beyond.
- Hinkley Point development.

The sectors and types of uses that have expressed interest to date -

- Health - including private, specialist care and NHS
- Offices - 60,000 sq. ft. enquiry with space for expansion
- Education - FE/HE colleges
- Car Showrooms
- Petrol filling station / Convenience store
- Manufacturing - food/deserts
- Specialist automotive engineering

Summerfield have demonstrated a strong commitment to bringing forward the site and have invested significant amounts of funding in –

- Topographic Survey of whole site
- Review of existing local utilities, surface water & flood scoping
- Flooding & Drainage modelling
- Geotechnical & Geo-Environmental - full site survey
- Illustrative Masterplan - Preliminary layouts, site use and area calculations
- Landscape Visual Impact Assessment - Preparation of winter views and heritage effects
- Tree Survey / Arboriculture Implications
- Ecology Surveys
- Archaeological Survey
- Land Contamination Assessment
- Air Quality / Noise / Lighting Assessments
- Transport Assessment & Travel Plan
- Agricultural Land Classification
- Utilities Preliminary Infrastructure Assessment

The key to securing any of these occupiers is certainty of the delivery of the business park. During 2015 Summerfield, TDBC and SCC investigated the prospect of a significant employer relocating to the site. The decision not to move to the site was based on a number of factors however part of the reason was the uncertainty of the timing of the delivery of the Junction 25 improvements and creation of the new access to the site.

## **Summary**

With Blackbrook Business Park is almost fully occupied with no potential for more land or buildings, the J25 site is a strategic opportunity to achieve a valuable development for Taunton. Qualitative evidence based on consultation clearly points to demand for a second strategic employment site in Taunton.

The consultation exercise has also shown that there has been consistent support for the development of the strategic site and identifies specific requirements which could be met at the site. It will be important to secure a critical mass of early investment in the site, preferably through a key occupier, or anchor.

Taunton Deane Borough Council Core Strategy identifies in Policy SS8 the requirement for a second strategic site for employment uses especially as evidence shows that many companies relocate to other surrounding areas rather than in Taunton.

The research and analysis undertaken by Peter Brett Associates and during the Core Strategy development process, such as the Economic Topic Paper (2011), shows that there is a high level of support from the business community and from HotSW LEP. It supports the economic strategy for Taunton which is to improve the quality and not just the quantity of jobs.

An MOU has been drafted in order to promote effective co-ordination and co-operation to secure the delivery of the proposed site by all partners and ensures that the site will accord with highway infrastructure issues in the locality.

## Bibliography

1. Parsons Brinkerhof. SADMP Modelling Assessment. 2014.
2. —. Strategic Employment Site - Mitigation Modelling. 2014.
3. Taunton Deane Borough Council. Council Meeting - 15 December 2015 - Part 1 - (iv) (b). 2015.

## Appendix A – SES MOU



MOU Junction 25  
Employment Site.pdf