Tenterden & Rural Sites DPD Examination in Public

Further Submissions by the Kent & East Sussex Railway

Introduction

These submissions are made by the Kent & East Sussex Railway Company Ltd (K&ESR) in response to the Matters and Issues for the Examination in Public, specifically Issue 1.3 (Vision and Objectives of the DPD) and Issue 12.1 (Tourism). The submissions provide further information to the Inspector with respect to the K&ESR's objections that the DPD:

- places heavy emphasis towards residential allocation and does not adequately consider tourism issues;
- does not take into account the importance of the K&ESR as the leading tourist attraction in the Borough; and
- does not include site specific allocations for railway related development at Tenterden Town and Rolvenden Stations.

History

The K&ESR was constructed at the turn of the last century, taking advantage of the Light Railways Act 1896 between Robertsbridge, East Sussex and Headcorn, Kent. The railway was opened in stages between 1900 and 1905.

The line was the first in the country to be engineered to the new light railway provisions which, although standard gauge, enabled financial savings to be made with less onerous engineering, level crossing and signalling requirements. The line's engineer, Col. H F Stephens, gained national fame for engineering a number of light railways throughout the country.

The line closed to passengers in 1954. A goods service was maintained between Robertsbridge and Tenterden Town until 1961, when the line closed completely.

In view of its unique character, a group of supporters formed a preservation society after closure to reopen the line from Robertsbridge to Tenterden Town.

Kent & East Sussex Railway Company Ltd

In 1971, a new company, the Tenterden Railway Company, was formed. The company has since changed its name to the Kent & East Sussex Railway Company

Limited which now owns and operates the line. The Company is limited by guarantee without a share capital and is registered as an educational charity. The Railway has a current membership of approximately 3,000 who pay an annual subscription.

The Company has statutory powers under a Light Railway (Transfer) Order, granted by the Secretary of State for the Environment in 1973, to operate trains between Tenterden Town and Bodiam, East Sussex.

The Railway reopened to passengers in 1974, initially between Tenterden Town and Rolvenden (1.5 miles). Wittersham Road (3.5 miles) was reached in phases by 1978, Northiam (7 miles) in 1990 and Bodiam (10.5 miles) in 2000. Funding for the extensions of the line was obtained from a variety of sources including Ashford Borough Council, East Sussex County Council, English Partnerships and the Millennium Commission.

A separate company, the Rother Valley Railway Company, is currently reconstructing the line between Bodiam and Robertsbridge (3.5 miles), where it will connect to the national railway network.

Tourism Significance

The K&ESR is the leading tourist attraction in Ashford Borough, carrying 90,000 passengers annually with a further 4,000 visitors to the site. This year the Railway will be operating passenger trains on 173 days. A copy of the 2010 Timetable and Guide is included in Appendix 1.

The majority of trains are steam hauled, the remainder being operated by heritage diesels. The railway is one of Kent's top 20 attractions in terms of visitor numbers. 74% of passengers start their journeys at Tenterden Town, the principal station and administrative headquarters of the Railway.

The line provides a public transport link by trains of historic rolling stock between the historic town of Tenterden and Bodiam Castle (National Trust) through the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Discounted ticketing arrangements are in place with the National Trust.

In addition to its passenger trains, the Railway also holds a number of special events, operates the Wealden Pullman dining train and provides operating experience courses.

Last year, the K&ESR had a turnover of £1.7m. Most of the Railway's workforce are volunteers (over 400). The Company currently employs 26 full and part time staff and 6 casual seasonal staff.

The Railway's General Manager, Graham Baldwin, chairs the Ashford & Tenterden Tourism Association. The K&ESR is a member of Visit Kent, The Kent Association of Tourist Attractions, Seven Wonders (of the Weald) 1066 Country. The Railway was a runner up in the West Kent Business Awards for top major tourist attraction last year and has won an award in the Pride In Ashford and Tenterden Tourism Awards (section of Kent Pride in Tourism) this year.

The Railway has played a significant role in the Tenterden Town & Rural Partnership and its bid for funding. The General Manager has chaired the Economy and Revenue group until this year.

The Railway has just been granted a Heritage Lottery Fund grant for the restoration of the Cavell Van, an historic passenger luggage vehicle. It is the Railway's mission to eventually become the National Light Railway Museum.

Future Development Proposals

In order to maintain and enhance its role as a major tourist attraction it is essential for the K&ESR to improve its facilities, not only for the benefit of its passengers and other visitors, but also for its engineering and administrative facilities and the storage of its historic rolling stock and other equipment. This will have greater importance once the Railway is extended to Robertsbridge and reconnected to the national rail network.

The Borough Council has previously been supportive to these development proposals through the inclusion of site allocation policies S45, S51 and S51A in the Ashford Borough Local Plan. The policies are proposed to be deleted in the DPD. No tourism policies relevant to the Railway's development sites are included in the DPD. The ABC Planning Policy Team has advised that generic policies relating to tourism would be included within the forthcoming Generic Development Control DPD.

The resulting lack of adopted site specific allocations and relevant tourism policies would result in a policy gap against which future planning applications would be considered and an adequate/appropriate planning policy base to provide certainty to the Railway in the provision of these facilities, particularly in funding arrangements.

This approach is contrary to PPS4 policy EC7: *Planning for rural tourism* which, through their LDF, requires LPA's to support the provision and expansion of tourist and visitor facilities in appropriate locations and acknowledges that facilities requiring new buildings in the countryside may be justified in other locations away from service centres and villages where they are required in connection with a particular countryside attraction and there are no suitable existing buildings or developed sites available for re-use.

Extensive pre-application discussions have been carried out in respect of the railway's development proposals at Tenterden Town and Rolvenden with the Council's Senior Planning Officer for the area, Lucy Holloway.

Tenterden Town Station (S45)

The surfaced car park to the west of the station has been completed. The station industrial estate is not within the Railway's ownership. However, there are still development proposals for a new building to house a museum, shop, cafeteria and offices on the existing station site, which is owned by the Railway. This will not only provide enhanced visitor facilities, but enable the removal of the existing unsightly and life expired office accommodation.

The station site is within the Tenterden Conservation Area and adjoins the High Weald AONB. New facilities would be designed to reduce their visual impact in this sensitive location, as required in policy S45.

Rolvenden Station (S51)

Local Plan policy S51 allocates this site for the expansion of the Railway's locomotive maintenance and engineering operations, together with some visitor facilities and car parking. Staff car parking, storage facilities and landscaping has been implemented in accordance with planning permission granted on 12 September 2002. The site is owned by the Railway.

The provision of an additional locomotive shed on the site is actively being pursued in terms of technical design and funding. This is the most appropriate location on the Railway for these facilities, being situated next to the current locomotive shed and maintenance facilities. The railway currently has 12 steam and 8 diesel locomotives.

The site is within the High Weald AONB and close to the Newmill Channel. The requirements set out in policy S51 relating to building design, flooding issues and pollution prevention continue to be relevant to the further development of this site.

Rolvenden Station (S51A)

It is proposed to provide covered carriage storage facilities on this site. At the present time the Railway does not have any covered sidings to provide protection for its restored carriages used for passenger services. The Railway currently has 31 passenger carriages. The existing carriage shed at Tenterden Town is used exclusively for the restoration and maintenance of rolling stock. Following restoration and repainting, the carriages, which are all at least 40 years old, suffer from quickening deterioration from being stabled in the open. This is a problem for the Railway's vintage carriages which are all over 100 years old.

The proposals for the site involve the construction of a 120m x 20m carriage shed to cover four sidings to accommodate a total of 20 carriages. The shed would be used for stabling only. Restoration and maintenance work would continue to be carried out in the carriage shed at Tenterden Town.

The Railway owns the entire field of which S51A forms the northern part. A plan is attached in Appendix 2. Detailed design work is currently being undertaken and Heritage Lottery funding is being sought for this project. In accordance with the pre-application advice received and for technical and operating reasons, it is now proposed that the shed is located at the southern end of the field, rather than the northern end.

The site is in the High Weald AONB and is adjacent to the Newmill Channel. The requirements set out in policy S51A relating to visual impact, building design, landscaping and flooding issues continue to be relevant to the further development of this site.

The additional covered carriage storage facilities have to be connected to the existing railway and, therefore, have to be located either on existing operational land or on land adjoining the Railway. Unlike other businesses, which could expand on sites away from their existing premises, such an option is not available in this case. S51A provides the optimum site for these facilities, being in the railway's ownership, adjoining the existing railway line and a suitable size. There is insufficient space available at any of the other four stations on the line and no other land adjoining the line in the Railway's ownership on which these facilities could be provided.

Conclusion

The Inspector is requested to take these submissions into account in the consideration of Matters and Issues for the Examination in Public.

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