

Proposed Distribution Park, Ditton

Planning Statement

Westlink Group Ltd

November 2007

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This Statement supports the planning application by Westlink Group Ltd for the development of a Regional Distribution Centre and additional warehousing on land at the West Bank Dock Estate at Ditton.
- 1.2 The proposals seek to bring forward a new distribution centre to assist in the regeneration and remediation of an underutilised and contaminated industrial site and help fulfil the economic objectives for Ditton, Widnes. The scheme aims to provide two large storage and distribution warehouses accessible by road and rail. The larger building is intended to function as a Regional Distribution Centre and will comprise 107,556 sqm of B8 storage and distribution floorspace. A second building will provide 31,276 sqm of distribution floorspace.
- 1.3 The Statement primarily addresses the planning issues raised by the proposals. It sits alongside and should be read in conjunction with the suite of accompanying documents and technical reports that comprise the outline planning application, particularly a Design and Access Statement, and the Environmental Statement.
- 1.4 This document will address the planning policy context relevant to the proposed development including an appraisal of the proposal's compliance against the policies identified.
- 1.5 Having undertaken this review exercise and drawn all elements together the Statement finds that the application submission has properly addressed all material issues relevant to the potential development and concludes that the proposal is in general compliance with policy and would convey significant benefits. Associated impacts of the development can be satisfactorily mitigated. On this basis the Statement invites the Council to support the application.
- 1.6 The report is set out as follows:
- **Section 2** sets out the detail of the application site and its location within the area context;
 - **Section 3** sets out the form and detail of the proposed development;
 - **Section 4** summarises the planning policy framework and appraises the scheme against the identified policies; and
 - **Section 5** draws matters together and concludes.

2. BACKGROUND AND SITE CONTEXT

Locational Context

- 2.1 The proposal is to redevelop 41 hectares of land within the West Bank Dock Estate in Ditton, Widnes to create a multi-modal freight distribution cluster to form an integral part of the wider proposals for the Ditton Strategic Rail Freight Park. The site is located approximately 1km south west of Widnes town centre, Merseyside/Cheshire at an approximate National Grid Reference (NGR) of SJ 503 844.
- 2.2 The site is bounded by Desoto Road to the east and Hale Road to the west. The proposed development area is located on the north bank of the Mersey Estuary and approximately 1km downstream of the Widnes-Runcorn road bridge. The River Mersey is located to the south of the site beyond Hutchinson Hill. Two notable watercourses run across the area (Ditton Brook and Steward's Brook), with a further watercourse Marsh Brook located to the east.
- 2.3 Private sidings, serving O'Connor land to the north east of the proposal site, run along the northern edge of the site. Beyond the private sidings lies the West Coast Main Line. The former Ditton railway station is on the London-Liverpool line, located on Ditton Road, on the bridge over the railway line.
- 2.4 The site comprises three principal areas; the Foundry Lane Estate to the west, the Reclamation Site (or "The Mound") in the centre and the West Bank Dock Estate (also known as the Mathieson Road Site) on the eastern part of the development area. Not all the landscape within these areas comprise the current planning application. The site also includes a small area of car parking currently within the O'Connor's site. The Foundry Lane and West Bank Dock sites are currently occupied by industrial units whilst the Reclamation Site is vegetated and planted with trees.
- 2.5 The site's setting can best be characterised as a mixture of heavy and light industrial land uses, but it is recognised that there are potentially sensitive residential areas and habitat sites in the locality that need to be taken into account in the assessment and implementation of the development.

Site details

Planning and Land Use History

- 2.6 The current site is characterised by ad-hoc warehousing development and infrastructure that utilises some of the site but leaves large parts un-utilised. The environmental conditions on the site are generally not very good, although comparable to other sites in the area, in that the soils, groundwater and surface waters are contaminated to varying degrees and the potential for habitats to exist is limited.
- 2.7 The planning and land use history for the various sections of land comprising the site, has been gleaned from a number of sources. These include historic maps and Ordnance Survey Plan coverage originally sourced by Envirocheck, an Environmental Liability Assessment Report for the Foundry Lane and West Bank Dock Estates prepared by WS Atkins in June 2000 and the planning application records held by Halton Borough Council (HBC). The findings are set out below.

West Bank Dock Site (The Mathieson Road Estate)

- 2.8 The 1849 Lancashire and Furness map shows the Mathieson Road Estate land as part of the undeveloped Widnes Marsh which is “covered at Spring Tides”. By 1896, however, the map records indicate the existence of a satinite works, a saw mill and the “Widnes Pottery” on the northern section of the site. The “O’Connor site” to the north of AHC’s Mathieson Road Estate is noted as being occupied by the Mathieson (Chemical) Works which produced sodium carbonate for the soap industry using the Leblanc process. It is known that waste products from the Leblanc process, colloquially known as galligu, were deposited over the wider site.
- 2.9 The survey maps of 1927 & 1928 appear to indicate that ground levels in Ditton Marsh had been raised in this period. The satinite works, saw mill and pottery are still in existence on the southern section of the site in the late 1920’s. However, the Mathieson Works are referred to as the Marsh Works on the 1928 Lancashire and Furness map, possibly coinciding with the transfer of the site’s ownership to ICI. The site was then used for chemical industry related activities for the next fifty years.
- 2.10 The Ordnance Survey Plan of 1968 still records the existence of the Satinite Works buildings and Craigs Saw Mills on the Mathieson Estate site although the Widnes Pottery building appears to have disappeared.

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- 2.11 By 1982, OS coverage first notes the former Saw Mills site in use as a depot and it is known that the site transferred to Hutchinsons around the time. It should be noted that the Hutchinson Estate and Dock Company had been operating from Widnes since the mid-nineteenth century. Hutchinson's erected a number of new warehouses on the site during the 1980s, after which the site was purchased by Albert Constable who set up AHC Services.
- 2.12 The Mathieson Road Estate consists of three parcels of land and/or buildings divided by the Mathieson and Ronan Roads that run approximately east-west through the Estate. The northern-most section, *i.e.* north of Mathieson Road, is mainly in warehouse use (B8 Storage & Distribution use) with AHC's ancillary office and truck servicing facilities.
- 2.13 The central section between Mathieson Road and Ronan Road is also largely in B8 warehousing use although there are several blending and/or mixing units, which could fall into the B2 (General Industry) Use Class, as well as a B1 office building.
- 2.14 The third parcel, to the south of Ronan Road, has been partially bunded at its southern edge and is currently used for parking ancillary to AHC (Warehousing)'s operation. AHC (Warehousing) obtained planning consent for a 10,776 sqm warehouse on this piece of land in May 1992 (HBC Plan. App. Ref. 91/00563/FUL) but the permission was never implemented. Nevertheless, it is clear that, for the Mathieson Road Estate as a whole, the primary existing use is B8 Storage and Distribution with a quantity of B1 offices and, possibly, a small element of B2 General Industry.

The Reclamation Site ("The Mound")

- 2.15 During the latter half of the nineteenth century, it is known that the area of Ditton Marsh now occupied by the Mound, in common with other areas to the east and within the wider Widnes area, was used for the depositing of galligu. As mentioned above, survey maps of 1927 and 1928 record raised ground levels in Ditton Marsh. By the 1960s, Ordnance Survey coverage indicates the site was used as a hard standing (served by rail track) for the storage of timber associated with a saw mill located on the Foundry Lane Estate immediately to the north west.
- 2.16 When in use as a timber yard, photographic records suggest this area may have been subjected to an exceptional flood which deposited stacked timber over the surrounding area. From 1995-98, Halton Borough Council and the freehold owners, Cheshire County Council, undertook a massive reclamation of the site. Following the insertion of sheet piling to protect Ditton and Stewards Brooks, galligu waste from surrounding areas was heaped on the existing hard standing and engineered to create a steep sided mound with an extensive

plateau at its summit. This mound was then capped with clay, top-soiled and planted to provide the green hill visible today.

The Foundry Lane Estate

- 2.17 Unlike the adjacent Mound reclamation site to the south east and other surrounding areas, it is not thought that the Foundry Lane Estate site was used for the depositing of galligu waste during the nineteenth century. In 1849, the Lancashire and Furness map appears to show the area as largely undeveloped land lying to the north east of Ditton Marsh. There are records of the northern half of the Estate having been used as a “Cement Works” by 1893 but this use appears to have ceased by 1907 when it is described as “disused”.
- 2.18 The 1928 map coverage shows the area of the former “Cement Works” in use as a “Tar Works” and a “Manure Works”, with the southern section identified as “Allotment Gardens”.
- 2.19 By 1958, the Ordnance Survey Plan indicates the whole of the Estate was in use as a Timber Yard, including timber treatment works, with railway lines running into the northern section and either side of the saw mill buildings. This use gradually intensified over subsequent years.
- 2.20 In 1993 the Environment Agency installed a sheet-piled flood defence wall along the northern bank of Ditton Brook on the western boundary of the site. The present day warehouses echo the position of several of the former saw mill buildings which were in the ownership of Meyer Forest Products Ltd when the reclamation works began on the adjacent timber storage area in 1996. By 1997 several of the larger saw mill buildings were refurbished and used for the storage of tinned foodstuffs, packet soup and soap powder.
- 2.21 When AHC (Warehousing) Ltd took ownership of the Foundry Lane Estate in the late 1990s, they instructed WS Atkins Consultants to prepare an Environmental Liability Assessment for both the Foundry Lane and Mathieson Road Estates. Subsequently, the northern-most buildings were partly demolished and extended to provide a 15,300 sqm building with an eaves height of approximately 13m (HBC Planning App. Ref. 02/00498). This building is currently let under a long-term lease to Exel Logistics. The refurbished buildings to the south still provide warehousing and are currently let to Danone. A recently constructed railhead occupies the northern part of the Foundry Lane Estate and a further line still runs parallel to Ditton Brook.
- 2.22 It is generally accepted that the existing use of the Foundry Lane Estate falls within Use Class B8 (Storage and Distribution).

Innovis Ditton Planning Application

2.23 A planning application (ref: 05/00212/FULEIA) on this site for similar rail freight proposals and this was granted consent on 24 March 2006. That application related to the proposed INNOVIS rail freight park which comprised up to 7 rail related warehouse units to be occupied by different tenants. Westlink Group Limited has since that time purchased the site and has designed an alternative scheme that whilst ostensibly occupying the same area of land, does have some notable differences (e.g. the diversion of Steward's Brook). On the whole, however, the data that was gathered and assessed for the previous INNOVIS application is still valid and relevant for this application and it has been agreed with the Local Planning Authority that the data arising from many of the studies undertaken for the INNOVIS scheme can be revisited for the Environmental Impact Assessment accompanying the planning application. There are however, a few notable differences between the schemes that warrant more detailed consideration and re-evaluation. These are:

- the proposed scheme will involve the diversion of Stewards Brook which currently bisects the site, the previous scheme only allowed for an enhanced road crossing and new rail crossing of the unaltered brook;
- the proposed scheme will involve approximately 138,832 sq m of warehousing in three main structures (A High Bay unit, adjacent low bay unit and separate warehouse for relocation of an existing tenant). The previous "INNOVIS" scheme involved around 80,000 sq m of warehousing distributed over seven buildings;
- there are no rail heads proposed for this development. However, there are rail freight handling facilities on the adjacent O'Connor's site, and a direct link is proposed;
- the proposed scheme will involve the excavation and treatment of all of the gullies above ground level in the reclamation mound, with this area then being developed over (hard-surfaced). This area remained relatively untouched on the previous scheme; and
- the anticipated HGV movements associated with the new proposals are likely to be considerably less than those proposed for the INNOVIS scheme.

Access

2.24 The site is accessed via a number of private roads including:

- MacDermott Road;
- Mathieson Road;

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- Ronan Road;
 - Vickers Road;
 - Dock Road; and
 - Desoto Road (south).
- 2.25 All of these private roads are currently accessed via the roundabout junction at Desoto Road/MacDermott Road. MacDermott Road and Desoto Road link the private industrial roads to the local and strategic road network.
- 2.26 Access to the motorway network is via the A562 Queensway and A5300 to junction 6 of the M62 (to the northwest) or the A557 and Junction 7 of the M62 (to the northeast).
- 2.27 Currently there is one railway line onto the site, which is used for periodic freight movements with the majority of freight accessing and leaving the site via HGVs. Site personnel generally access the site in private vehicles.
- 2.28 Pedestrian movement around and through the site is inevitably restricted as a result of its existing uses.

Topography

- 2.29 A topographical survey indicates the Foundry Lane Estate is approximately 11.5ha in extent. Ground elevations vary across the site from 7.5m above Ordnance Datum (AOD) in the north east corner to 6.35m in the middle of the site, rising again to 7.5m along the south east boundary adjacent to the reclamation site. Most of the area is between 6.3 and 6.5m AOD.
- 2.30 The 18.5 ha Reclamation site consists of an engineered mound of galligu; a by-product of the local chemicals (and particularly alkali) industry, primarily associated with the *Le Blanc* Process. The Reclamation site rises above the surrounding land from 7.0m AOD to a maximum of 28.5m AOD. The Foundry and West Bank Dock parts of the site have also been built up in parts by galligu deposits.
- 2.31 The West Bank Dock Estate is approximately 7ha in extent and slopes from west to east with a maximum elevation of 15.7m AOD in the south west corner falling to 8.68m at the east at the junction with Mathieson Road (O'Connor site).

Summary

- 2.32 The site and surrounding area has had a longstanding industrial function which has resulted in significant contamination, which provides a redevelopment challenge but also the opportunity to clean up and remediate land formerly in use by the chemical industry.
- 2.33 The site is largely in B2 general industrial and B8 distribution and storage uses, but there are large areas of underutilised land. The Mound is a very recent addition of green space, it is not publicly accessible and is surrounded by industrial land. Planning permission (ref: 05/00212/EIA) was granted on the site for rail freight proposals in 2006.
- 2.34 The site is strategically located in transportation terms, close to the strategic road network but also adjacent to rail facility opportunities. As existing the opportunities the site presents, in terms of its location close to strategic road and rail corridors, are not being optimised.

3. PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

Vision

- 3.1 The intention of the proposed development is to provide a Regional Distribution Centre for a major UK retailer plus additional warehousing floorspace which involves the demolition of existing buildings on the West Bank Dock Estate and Foundry Lane area (a number of which are old number of old, redundant and possibly unsafe buildings) and the construction of three new, purpose built warehouse facilities (although the high bay and low bay warehouses will be conjoined buildings). In order to facilitate this development, there will be some considerable earthworks on the site which will involve the excavation and stabilisation of the Mound area and other contaminated areas of the site.
- 3.2 Westlink Group Limited sees this site as a 'flagship' development for the organisation and it is anticipated that the project will become a benchmark for future proposed sites across the UK.
- 3.3 The proposed new warehouses will be served by road and rail (from the adjacent existing rail freight terminus). The existing container park on the site will become redundant due to the new logistical enhancement of the site and the proposed facilities which will include better circulation of traffic and optimised site usage.

Scheme Proposals

- 3.4 The breakdown of the proposed development is as follows:
- Regional Distribution Centre comprising 107,556 sq m (gross external area) of floorspace within Use Class B8. This includes ancillary office accommodation, a separate vehicle management unit and other ancillary uses. The main warehouse building accommodates both a low bay and high bay component.
 - A separate warehouse building comprising 31,276 sq m (gross external area), within Use Class B8. This includes ancillary office accommodation.
 - Car parking and trailer parking to serve both buildings.
 - Car parking to replace existing car parking serving the adjacent O'Connor's rail freight terminal that would be lost to the development.
 - Trailer parking.

- Amended access arrangements including a western access to Foundry Lane (involving a replacement bridge crossing Ditton Brook), eastern access to Desoto Road and road link to the O'Connor's rail freight terminal.
 - Miscellaneous, associated infrastructure, including gatehouses.
 - Diversion of Steward's Brook, initially on a temporary route and subsequently a permanent route.
 - Landscaping.
- 3.5 It is intended that the Regional Distribution Centre will be occupied by a single user. The development has been designed to meet a particular user's specification. The development will provide a regional warehouse and distribution centre for the firm's network of northern distribution units feeding a national network of retail stores.
- 3.6 The second warehouse is likely to accommodate two units of 19,510 sq m and 5,574 sq m (GEA). The larger unit is intended to provide alternative accommodation for a distribution company currently located on the site, whose existing buildings would be demolished.
- 3.7 The new development will receive goods via road from the east (via new access arrangements on to Desoto Road) and from the railhead on the adjacent O'Connor's freight handling facility. The new short road link between the freight handling facility and the development will enable containers to be delivered to site and decanted into the warehouses. The O'Connor's facility is also within the ownership of Westlink Group Ltd, thereby providing an integrated multi-modal development.
- 3.8 From the development site, goods will be distributed by road and where possible, by rail. The proximity to the rail handling facility provides opportunity for goods to be distributed via the rail network.
- 3.9 The high and low bay units on the Regional Distribution Centre site have been designed to provide a 'cross-docking' facility where, on one side of the unit, loading and unloading facilities are provided for rail containers which are taken inside the building and on the other side, traditional lorry access is provided with traditional dock levellers and roller shutter doors. Approximately 5% of the floor area has been allocated to related office / welfare facilities.

Site Layout

- 3.10 The site layout has been influenced by a number of factors. These include:

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- The existing topography of the site;
 - The various boundary conditions and site constraints including Steward's Brook, the railway lines and other water courses that surround and enter the site;
 - The technical requirements of both the rail container delivery and the road access; and.
 - The need to provide future connectivity to adjacent areas.
- 3.11 The layout has been designed to create the minimum impact on these features and from a sustainability perspective provide the most efficient use of the land available for the development (land-take).
- 3.12 There will be no chemicals storage or materials likely to fall under the COMAH Regulations or other hazardous substance notification or permitting regimes stored on site.

Design

- 3.13 The design of the buildings and the site have been developed in response to the following criteria:
- Reference to the 'Landscaping Strategy and Design Guide' prepared by Atkins for HBC.
 - The juxtaposition of the site in relation to planned or anticipated neighbouring developments.
 - The connection of the buildings to the road and rail links throughout wider area creating a balance between development, access and the environment.
 - The legibility of functions within the building from the public realm.
 - The use of form, detail and materials to create visual interest and scale appropriate to the external spaces which the buildings address.
 - The creation of environments which are welcoming to pedestrians (site workers and visitors).
 - The provision of security by the use of overlooking, lighting, and the avoidance of uncontrollable spaces.
 - The use of a consistent palette of materials of high standard throughout the development including microrib and profiled metal cladding to building walls and roof, aluminium double glazed windows, and steel doors.
- 3.14 The main unit has been designed to optimise the site area and respond to the above criteria:

- The height of internal spaces have been defined to maximise the racking / pallet potential of the spaces;
- The buildings external appearance will be functionally driven in the main, and in this regard, an honest approach has been taken to detailing. The buildings will have consistent elevational treatments, and the materials and colour will be consistent throughout the site. For the Regional Distribution Centre a very simplistic look has been designed for the building, with vertical long span cladding, coloured white to blend in with the skyline and reduce potential visual impact. The second warehouse will complement this and adopt similar principles.
- The building elevations will be broken at lower levels by vehicle docks and fire exits. Key areas of interest, will be provided by the offices pods, which will be a focus for activity. For the Regional Distribution Centre, the external office pods comprise of goods in being provided on the northern elevation and good out on the southern.
- In terms of the scale and form, the buildings, by their nature, are largely driven by the scale of the operations and processes which they are designed to accommodate.
- The size of the buildings is also influenced by the need for an efficient distribution operation, and the economies of scale which govern this.
- In terms of building heights, the High Bay element of the Regional Distribution Centre has been specified as a result of the operational requirements of the racking system proposed. The nature of the operation, and the requirement for a particular volume of mechanised racking results in a ridge height of 40 metres. The remaining floor space of the Regional Distribution Centre will accommodate buildings with a ridge height of approximately 18 metres, which is a standard height for distribution buildings on this scale. The height of the second warehouse is informed by the existing operations of the user it is intended to accommodate.
- As the proposed Regional Distribution Centre is cross docked, activity will result on both of the main (long) elevations. However, activity at the return elevations will be limited. These shorter elevations (which attract less activity) have been oriented towards sensitive receptors.

Access

- 3.15 The site is well served by, and is adjacent to, substantial road and rail links. Internal road and rail links will be enhanced and reconfigured to create the most efficient and economic use of the current site area.

3.16 The development will be accessed as follows:

Car access

3.17 The car parking (900 spaces) serving the Regional Distribution Centre will be accessed via an improved access arrangement from Foundry Lane, to the west of the site. This will necessitate a replacement bridge across Ditton Brook. The car parking (200 spaces) serving the second warehouse will be served from the improved access arrangements to the east, off Desoto Road. The new car parking for the O'Connor's rail freight handling facility will be accessed via its existing road access arrangements.

HGV access

3.18 All HGV access to the site will be from the east, via the new access arrangements to Desoto Road. Access to the east to Foundry Lane will be restricted and only allowed in an emergency. This will discourage any additional HGV movements towards and through Halebank village. An HGV link to the O'Connor's rail freight handling facility is proposed.

Pedestrian and cycle access

3.19 Pedestrians and cyclists will be able to access the site from both the west and east improved access points.

3.20 The application of consistent complementary pathways, roads and aprons to the buildings in terms of materials and layouts, appropriate for their use in all cases, will create a recognisable hierarchy and this palette of materials will assist the buildings in establishing the 'sense of place'. All aprons and access roads have been checked and approved by ADL Traffic consultants in terms of tracking and vehicle movements.

- The internal road network will provide the optimum vehicular accessibility to the proposed units.
- In terms of pedestrian and cycle specific provision, the proximity of the site to local highways and pathways offers an opportunity for accessibility by non car modes to be secured.
- A pedestrian and cycle link may be provided, linking the site to Desoto Road. The route will run southwards in a landscaped setting to the central roundabout providing access to the proposed unit. This will ensure safe and effective access for pedestrians and cyclists to the site.

- Footways will be provided along the road network where necessary. Secure cycle parking will also be provided and parking for the disabled will be located as close to the main entrance point of the building as feasibly possible.

4. PLANNING POLICY APPRAISAL

- 4.1 This section details the planning policy context for the proposed site, setting out national, regional and local policy documents of relevance and highlighting the key policy messages contained within them and explains how the development complies with each policy.
- 4.2 Planning policy relevant to the proposal and which provides the context for its assessment is set out within a suite of documents comprising:
- National Planning Policy Statements (PPS) and National Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) relevant to the development proposals;
 - The Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) for the North West, formerly Regional Planning Guidance for the North West (RPG13) adopted in 2003;
 - The Draft Replacement Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) for the North West, submitted to Government in January 2006;
 - The Panel Report into the Draft Replacement RSS for the North West, published in May 2007;
 - Regional Economic Strategy for the North West, published in 2006;
 - The Halton Borough Unitary Development Plan (UDP), adopted in 2005; and
 - The Ditton Strategic Rail Freight Park (DSRFP) Draft Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), published in 2005.
- 4.3 The statutory development plan comprises Regional Planning Guidance for the North West (RPG13) and the Halton Borough UDP. Halton Borough UDP is saved for a period of three years from the date of adoption.
- 4.4 The Local Development Framework which will eventually replace the Halton Borough UDP is at an early stage of development. Key Development Plan Documents such as the Core Strategy and Site Specific Allocations are not due to be adopted until 2009-2012.
- 4.5 However, a Draft Supplementary Planning Document due to be adopted under the new system ahead of the production of the Local Development Framework in March 2008 has been considered, as has the draft Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) which is due to replace RPG13 when it is adopted in 2008.

National Planning Policy

- 4.6 The Government is currently revising a number of Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) notes through the issue of Planning Policy Statements (PPS). Therefore, to assess national planning policy relevant to the development proposals, due consideration is given to existing PPG's which have not been updated, new PPS's and also emerging consultation draft PPS's, where appropriate.

PPS1 – Delivering Sustainable Development

- 4.7 PPS1 sets out the overarching policy for the delivery of sustainable development through the planning system. The key principles that should be applied in determining planning applications to ensure the delivery of sustainable and inclusive patterns of development are:
- Making suitable land available for development in line with economic, social and environmental objectives to improve people's quality of life;
 - Contributing to sustainable economic development;
 - Protecting and enhancing the natural and historic environment, the quality and character of the countryside, and existing communities;
 - Ensuring high quality development through good and inclusive design, and the efficient use of resources; and
 - Ensuring that development supports existing communities and contributes to the creation of safe, sustainable, liveable and mixed communities with good access to jobs and key services for all members of the community.
- 4.8 The Statement has a particularly strong focus on design and states that good design is indivisible from good planning. It states that high quality and inclusive design should create well-mixed and integrated developments which avoid segregation and have well-planned public spaces that bring people together and provide opportunities for physical activity and recreation. It means ensuring a place will function well and add to the overall character and quality of the area, not just for the short term but over the lifetime of the development. In addition, PPS1 requires that the local community should be fully involved in planning through extensive consultation on formal proposals

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- 4.9 *Addressing these principles, the Design and Access Statement sets out how and why the design of the proposals has emerged and explains how the site fits into the wider regeneration context of Widnes. A Consultation Statement setting out the consultation process has informed the proposed development accompanies the planning application.*

Consultation Draft PPS1 Supplement – Planning and Climate Change

- 4.10 Published in December 2006, Planning and Climate Change is a new style PPS which sets out how spatial planning should contribute to reducing damaging carbon emissions and stabilising climate change.
- 4.11 The PPS details the principles that local planning authorities should adhere to in determining planning applications:
- New development should be located and designed to optimise its carbon performance and limit its likely contribution to carbon emissions. Specifically, new development should be expected to consider and take into account the potential of decentralised energy supply systems based on renewable and low-carbon energy;
 - New development should be located and designed for the climate and impacts it is likely to experience over its intended lifetime; and that
 - Climate change considerations should be integrated into all spatial planning concerns, including transport, housing, economic growth and regeneration and not considered separately.
- 4.12 Whilst only currently in consultation draft form, the document states that local authorities should have regard to the PPS as a material consideration which may supersede the policies in their development plan.
- 4.13 *The Section 15 of the Environmental Statement supporting this application sets out how the proposals comply with sustainability objectives and outlines the measures taken by the development to reduce carbon emissions.*

PPG4 – Industrial and Commercial Development and Small Firms

- 4.14 PPG4 reflects many of the objectives set out in PPS1 with regard to sustainable development and locational preferences. The guidance emphasises the need to reduce travel by encouraging development in areas with more energy efficient modes of transport, including rail. It also mentions that land adjacent to existing infrastructure or disused facilities capable of being returned to freight should also be given careful consideration. The guidance also

advises local planning authorities to provide for choice, flexibility and competition to enable economic growth and ensure sufficient land and a variety of sites are available which are readily capable of development and well served by infrastructure to meet differing needs.

- 4.15 *The proposed development constitutes a sustainable form of development located close to major road and rail infrastructure providing an interchange facility to meet the nation's freight transport needs. Furthermore, the development results in the intensification of an existing inter-modal freight park use and contributes to the improved efficiency in the level of nation-wide transport of freight by road. The development will provide significant employment opportunities and increase economic growth and investment in the locality. The Socio-Economic section of the Environmental Statement sets out that the development will generate approximately 1,726 permanent jobs (direct, indirect and induced) and at least 71 construction jobs.*

PPS9 – Bio-Diversity and Geological Conservation

- 4.16 PPS9 states that planning proposals and decisions should aim to maintain and enhance, restore or add to biodiversity and geological conservation interests. It also states that development proposals provide many opportunities for building-in beneficial biodiversity or geological conservation features as part of good design.
- 4.17 *To ensure that the proposed development would achieve this aim, an Ecological Assessment including a Phase 1 Habitat Survey has been to ensure that the issues are fully scoped out. This is provided within the Environmental Statement accompanying the planning application. The Assessment concludes that the existing site in general provides minimal opportunities for species and habitats due to the prominence of hardstanding and existing buildings.*
- 4.18 *The positive ecological impacts of the development will be the enabling of improved conservation-orientated management of re-created grassland and woodland habitat on-site and off-site, secured via a financial contribution. This will mitigate against the loss of habitat in the area of the Mound. The proposed development will conserve and protect natural resources, both on and off the site including the safeguarding of the River Mersey, a RAMSAR wetland site of national and international importance and provide long-term benefits to water quality.*

PPG13 – Transport

- 4.19 The key aims of PPG13 are to promote:
- More sustainable transport choices for both people and for moving freight;
 - Accessibility to jobs, shopping, leisure facilities and services by public transport; and
 - Reduction of the need to travel, especially by car.
- 4.20 It states that new development should help to create places that connect with each other sustainably, providing the right conditions to encourage walking, cycling and the use of public transport. It also states that parking standards should be set as a maximum.
- 4.21 *A full Transport Assessment of the proposed development is provided with the Environmental Statement accompanying this application. This details the impact of the proposals upon the highway network and concludes that although the location and form of the development would minimise traffic generation, some additional traffic would be generated from the site. The traffic generated by the proposal can be accommodated on the existing road network.*
- 4.22 *Crucially the proposed development will provide a rail fed distribution facility providing a sustainable transportation opportunity to optimise the use of road and rail for rail freight logistics, a key aim of PPG13. Furthermore, the proposal includes a contribution towards a package of measures to improve the accessibility of the site to non private car borne modes of travel and the occupants will adopt a green travel plan to include measures to ensure that employees have robust alternatives to arriving by car, such as cycle parking and, lockers, car sharing clubs and marketing public transport information.*

PPG16 – Archaeology and Planning

- 4.23 PPG16 states that developers and local authorities should take into account archaeological considerations and deal with them from the beginning of the development control process. In order to reconcile the needs of archaeology with development, PPG16 directs developers to undertake an initial assessment of the archaeological potential of their development site before making a planning application.
- 4.24 *A Desk-Based Archaeological Assessment has been undertaken and its conclusions form part of the Cultural Heritage chapter of the Environmental Statement. It concludes that there are deposits of peat present within the site boundaries which may contain evidence for the late prehistoric and Romano-British settlement periods of local and possible regional importance.*

In order to mitigate the impact of the development a watching brief is proposed on the earthworks phase of the development.

PPS23 – Planning and Pollution Control

- 4.25 This PPS advises that any consideration of the quality of land, air and water and potential impacts arising from development, is capable of being a material planning consideration.
- 4.26 In considering individual planning applications, PPS23 specifies that the potential for contamination must be considered in relation to the existing use and circumstances of the land, the proposed new use and the possibility of encountering contamination during development. Therefore, the local planning authority must be satisfied that the potential for contamination and any risks are properly assessed and that the development incorporates any necessary remediation.
- 4.27 *The objective of the application proposals will be to remediate the site to a condition where it is suitable for employment development. A full assessment of the impacts of the proposed development in terms of air quality, noise and ground conditions is provided within the Environmental Statement accompanying the planning submission. This concludes that the proposed development at the site will have a significantly beneficial effect on the area due to the necessary remediation to make the land fit for purpose.*
- 4.28 *Impacts of the construction phase on both nuisance dust and local air quality have been assessed with regards to the location of locally sensitive receptors. Impacts are predicted to be low at all receptors and insignificant with implementation of common (and often mandatory) mitigation measures.*

PPG24 – Planning and Noise

- 4.29 The impact of noise can be a material consideration in the determination of planning applications. Therefore, PPG24 guides local planning authorities to consider both the likely noise exposure at the time of a planning application and any increase that may reasonably be expected by virtue of the proposed development (i.e. increased traffic movements).
- 4.30 *A full noise assessment is included within the Environmental Statement. Noise levels have been predicted at noise-sensitive properties in the vicinity of the site. The impacts are predicted to be of minor significance during construction and of no significance during operation. It is predicted that construction of the proposed development will not give rise to perceptible levels of vibration at any off-site sensitive receptor.*

PPS25 – Development & Flood Risk

- 4.31 PPS25 was published in December 2006 and promotes flood risk management to the same level as other major spatial planning issues such as transport, housing and economic growth. In determining planning applications, PPS25 directs local planning authorities to:
- Have regard to the policies set out in PPS25 and, as relevant, in the RSS for their region, as material considerations which may supersede the policies in their existing development plan, when considering planning applications for developments in flood risk areas;
 - Ensure that planning applications are supported by site-specific flood risk assessments (FRAs) as appropriate;
 - Apply the sequential approach at a site level to minimise risk by directing the most vulnerable development to areas of lowest flood risk, matching vulnerability of land use to flood risk;
 - Give priority to the use of Sustainable Drainage Systems (SUDS); and
 - Ensure that all new development in flood risk areas is appropriately flood resilient and resistant, including safe access and escape routes where required, and that any residual risk can be safely managed.
- 4.32 Since a large proportion of the site falls within Flood Zone 3, an assessment of the impact of the development is required to confirm that there will be no adverse impact on the existing watercourses, and that there will be no surface flooding as a result of runoff generated by the proposed redevelopment.
- 4.33 *A Flood Risk Assessment has been undertaken and included within the Environmental Statement which accompanies the planning application submission. This concludes that the proposed redevelopment will not be affected by flooding from the River Mersey. The proposals will not impact on the flows or water levels in the River Mersey. The runoff from the site will discharge into the diverted Stewards Brook and the remaining tidal channel to the south. The Stewards Brook diversion will be designed to ensure that there are no increased upstream or site flood risks associated with the diverted channel. The surface water discharge will have the additional benefit of diluting contaminants already in Stewards Brook. Overall, it is considered that the application proposal accord with PPS25.*

Regional Policies

Regional Planning Guidance for the North West (RPG13) (March 2003)

- 4.34 The overriding aim of the Guidance is to promote sustainable patterns of spatial development and physical change. Key objectives of RPG13 are to achieve greater economic competitiveness and growth, with associated social progress and to secure an urban renaissance in the towns and the cities of the North West.
- 4.35 RPG13 contains a number of key economic policies (EC1, EC3, EC4 & EC5) which establish the framework to enable local authorities to use Development Plans to:
- i) target various business sectors and thus increase competitiveness;
 - ii) strengthen the wider regional economy; and
 - iii) promote sustainable business patterns.
- 4.36 Policy EC4 also encourages the creation of “Business Clusters” i.e. businesses which operate in the same or complementary sectors. Policy EC5 specifically required the North West Development Agency’s (NWDA’s) Regional Economic Strategy (RES), updated in 2006, to identify specific Regional Investment Sites and for local authorities to reserve such sites for uses that support the region’s sectoral priorities. The RES identifies 25 such sites, including that at Ditton, as being key to the development of the regional economy.
- 4.37 Policy SD9 reiterates national policy by requiring the Regional Transport Strategy to facilitate the provision of effective multi-modal solutions for the conveyance of goods, people and services, particularly at major hubs.
- 4.38 Transport policy within RPG13 also aims to optimise the potential of the Region’s inter-regional and intra-regional rail & road links and the associated gateway sites. RPG13 Policy T1 underscores the importance of a modern, efficient and well-integrated transport system to the competitiveness of the regional economy whilst Policy T2 encourages all organisations involved in the provision of rail service and infrastructure to work together to deliver an efficient Regional Freight Strategy. RPG13 Policy T7 states that local authorities in the North West should develop freight strategies through the local transport plan system and that the emphasis, when allocating sites, should be on rail freight. Policy T10 establishes the regional transport investment and management hierarchy tasked with, *inter alia*, introducing measures to increase the sustainable movement of freight and to focus investment on major transport infrastructure schemes of regional significance.

Draft Regional Spatial Strategy for the North West (RSS) (2006)

- 4.39 Currently in draft form, the Plan sets out the strategy for delivering future sustainable development across the region to 2021 and will replace RPG13 once it is adopted in 2008. It steers development to the most sustainable locations within the region, making the most of existing and planned transport networks to ensure that any increases in journeys to work, pollution and congestion are manageable.
- 4.40 The draft Policy W2 identifies intermodal freight terminals as regionally significant economic development and Widnes is specifically allocated as a broad location for a facility. The Panel Report into Draft RSS (2007) suggests criteria are developed to guide the allocation of land for such uses.
- 4.41 Policy RT7 of Draft RSS proposes local authorities develop sub-regional freight strategies and take account of the Regional Freight Strategy. The facilitation of freight from road to rail and/or water is recommended. RSS recognises that attempts to increase the volume of freight moved by rail in the region could be constrained by a shortage of freight terminals and in particular, the lack of major intermodal facilities with good access to the motorway network. It states that existing terminals and private sidings across the region have a role to play.

Panel Report into the Draft Regional Spatial Strategy (2007)

- 4.42 While the Panel report suggests some minor wording changes to the policies referenced above, importantly it does not alter the principle of a multi-modal rail freight park in the Widnes area.

North West Regional Economic Strategy (RES) (2006)

- 4.43 The RES vision for the North West is:

A dynamic, sustainable international economy which competes on the basis of knowledge, advanced technology and an excellent quality of life for all where:

- Productivity and Enterprise levels are high, in a low carbon economy, driven by innovation, leadership excellence and high skills.
- Manchester and Liverpool are vibrant European Cities and, with Preston, are key drivers of city-regional growth.
- Growth opportunities around Crewe, Chester, Warrington, Lancaster and Carlisle are fully developed.

- Key Growth Assets are fully utilised (Priority Sectors, the Higher Education and Science Base, Ports/Airports, Strategic Regional Sites, the Natural Environment especially The Lake District, and the Rural Economy).
 - The economies of East Lancashire, Blackpool, Barrow and West Cumbria are regenerated.
 - Employment rates are high and concentrations of low employment are eliminated.
- 4.44 The RES recognises that an adequate portfolio of regional and sub-regional employment sites will be needed to cater for indigenous growth and inward investment in a range of important sectors in the North West including distribution. Ditton, Widnes is identified as a Strategic Regional Investment site.
- 4.45 A key objective for infrastructure is the delivery of the 'Strategic Regional Investment' sites to provide a portfolio of opportunities including sustainable rail freight.
- 4.46 *The proposal conforms to the adopted RPG13 and the emerging RSS as it will form part of a "Business Cluster" of interchange facilities which, together, will form the Ditton SRF a major transport infrastructure scheme of regional significance and one of 25 Regional Investment Sites identified in the Regional Economic Strategy as key to the development of regional economy. The proposed development is an effective sustainable, multi-modal solution to the conveyance of goods and services which will form part of a modern, efficient and well-integrated transport system for the North West in line with prevailing RPG13 and emerging RSS Transport Policy.*
- 4.47 *Crucially, the development will result in a significant number of jobs in the locality which will contribute to the economic well-being of the North West region.*

Local Planning Policy

Halton Borough Unitary Development Plan (UDP)

- 4.48 The Halton Borough UDP was adopted by the Council in 2005 with a Plan period up until 2016. It will be 'saved' for 3 years unless they apply to the Secretary of State to extend this until the adoption of the Core Strategy. The UDP therefore provides the immediate planning context for the application site.
- 4.49 Whilst the plan is now adopted it is relevant to set out background to the policy relating to the proposal site. Early UDP representations by AHC Warehousing and the Freight Operators Commercial Access Link (FOCAL) Ltd, together with encouragement from the North West

Development Agency (NWDA) and Halton Borough Council, led to the concept of a Strategic Rail Freight Park at Ditton to facilitate the inter-modal exchange of freight. Following the Public Local Inquiry into the Halton UDP in the first half of 2003, the Inspector concluded in early 2004 that the DSRFP concept was “a project of exceptional potential worth” and should become adopted policy. With regard to the contentious area of the Mound, which AHC (Warehousing) Ltd and FOCAL had argued should be included in the core area of the DSRFP, the Inspector commented that:

“Its value as a feature could readily be outweighed by its potential value as a development resource for DSRFP”

- 4.50 However, possible technical difficulties and Environment Agency concerns led the Inspector to conclude that the bulk of the Mound should be left outside the core area at this time. He did, however, recommend that it should be included within the boundary of the “Potential Extent of Ditton Strategic Rail Freight Park” to be identified on the UDP Proposals Map. The Inspector also supported minor expansions to the core area of the DSRFP, as proposed by AHC Warehousing and FOCAL Ltd, to include more level areas of ground to the south west and north east of the Mound.
- 4.51 Policies S20 ‘Regional Investment Sites’, TP13 ‘Freight’ and E7 ‘Ditton Strategic Rail Freight Park’ allocate a substantial section of land in Hale Bank and Ditton for the development of the Ditton Strategic Rail Freight Park (DSRFP), within which sits the site.
- 4.52 Policy E7 states that a phased strategic inter-modal rail freight park will be developed on land at Ditton, Widnes in accordance with an overall master plan to be approved as a Supplementary Planning Document. Within the defined park the site is allocated for development provided that it complies with all of the following:-
- a) It is for use by businesses that would utilise the railway for the transportation of freight, and uses offering support services to them;
 - b) It would be of a quality suitable for occupation by companies of regional or national distribution importance, which would give rise to additional new employment opportunities for residents of Halton and surrounding local authority areas;
 - c) It would not have a significantly adverse impact on the environment and on the amenity of local residents, particularly in the Hale Bank area, and would contribute to urban regeneration;
 - d) It would not prejudice the improvement of the passenger rail network or improvements to it identified in the UDP; and

- e) It is demonstrated through a detailed Transport Assessment and Travel Plan that it would not have a significant impact on the local transport networks and trunk road network.

- 4.53 The Proposals Map shows the Mathieson Road, Mound and Foundry Lane Estate sections of the site lying within the boundary defining the “Potential Extent of the Ditton Strategic Rail Freight Park”. The majority of the proposal site is also located within the core Regional Investment Site referred to as Site 255 within the DSRFP, which implies that redevelopment of this land is considered a priority. The only parts of the site remaining outside the core Regional Investment Site are the steeper slopes and plateau of the Mound. Following the Inspector’s recommendations on the UDP, the less steep areas to the south west and north east of the Mound were included in the core area but the Mound itself is classified as Greenspace, albeit within the ‘Potential Extent of the Ditton Strategic Rail Freight Park’.
- 4.54 Greenspace designations are protected under Policy GE5 in the UDP. Infringement of development into designated Greenspace will only be considered on an exceptional basis, and even then, the areas lost to development would have to be compensated for by providing Greenspace elsewhere on the site, or by substantially improving any remaining or adjacent areas of Greenspace.
- 4.55 The UDP Proposals Map also shows the southern section of the Mathieson Road Estate below Mathieson Road as being located within the developed Mersey Coastal Zone as defined by Policy GE30 ‘The Mersey Coastal Zone’. Proposals for development within the Developed Coastal Zone will be encouraged which would contribute to the regeneration of the zone and enhance its environmental quality, tourism and recreational potential, particularly those which would lead to improvements in the accessibility of the coast.
- 4.56 Another designation on the Proposals Map that can be seen to encompass the whole of the site is Policy BE3 ‘Environmental Priority Areas’. Within these areas:
- a) Proposals for development will be expected to be of a quality of design that enhances the character and appearance of that area.
 - b) Development adjacent to or visible from the main road and rail transport routes should be of a high quality of design in terms of landscaping, boundary treatment and facing materials.”
- 4.57 The only other area-specific policies highlighted on the Proposals Map that could impact on the proposed development are those relating to the Mersey Forest project and the River Mersey. Policy GE28 ‘The Mersey Forest’ states that in certain locations planning permission for development will be conditional upon the carrying out of tree planting and other landscape

improvements. In the case of the West Bank Dock Estate, a general level of woodland cover of 20% + is being sought.

- 4.58 As for the River Mersey, this stretch of water is protected by a raft of policies in the UDP. These include Policy GE17 concerning the protection of, *inter alia*, RAMSAR sites, i.e. wetlands of international importance; Policy GE18 relating to Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Policy GE23 aimed at protecting Areas of Special Landscape Value. It is noted that the Trans-Pennine Trail also passes to the south of the West Bank Dock Estate, following the shoreline, but does not enter the site. The proximity of the development to both the Ditton and Steward's Brooks, which pass through the area en-route to the River Mersey, implies that specific measures may be required, in consultation with English Nature and the Environment Agency, to safeguard this heavily protected water body.
- 4.59 The extent and consequences of existing ground and water contamination across the site are also considered in detail in the Environmental Statement. However, whilst contamination is clearly a major issue in policy terms, there are many other Pollution and Risk policies within the UDP which are triggered, to a greater or lesser degree, by the proposed development. The individual policies requiring detailed consideration are set out below, together with an indication of the relevant section of the Environmental Statement dealing with each aspect:
- Policy PR1 & Policy TP19 Air Quality – Sections 2.2 & 7
 - Policy PR2 Noise Nuisance – Sections 2.2 & 12
 - Policy PR4 Light Pollution and Nuisance – Sections 2.2 & 11
 - Policy PR5 Water Quality – Sections 2.2, 14 & 17
 - Policy PR6 Land Quality – Sections 2.2 & 14
 - Policy PR7 Development near to Established Pollution Sources – Sections 2.2 & 14
 - Policy PR12 Development on Land surrounding COMAH sites – Sections 2.2 & 8
 - Policy PR13 Vacant and Derelict Land – Sections 2.2 & 14
 - Policy PR14 Contaminated Land – Sections 2.2 & 14
 - Policy PR15 Groundwater – Sections 2.2, 14 & 17
 - Policy PR16 Development and Flood Risk – Sections 2.2 & 17
- 4.60 The many local transport policies relating to an infrastructure project of this complexity are examined in the context of the road and rail proposals detailed by ADL Traffic in Section 16 of the Environmental Statement and the Transport Assessment.

Ditton Strategic Rail Freight Park Draft Supplementary Planning Document (SPD)

4.61 In addition to the new UDP, Halton Borough Council is in the process of preparing a Supplementary Planning Document to guide the development of the Ditton Strategic Rail Freight Park (DSRFP) although this is still at the draft stage and underwent public consultation in November/December 2005.

4.62 The Draft DSRFP SPD document establishes the policy context for the Rail Freight Park. The draft SPD identifies the vision for the DSRFP as:

“to create a national, regional and sub-regional rail freight facility in the context of national transport policy, regional planning and economic policies and local planning policies.”

4.63 Specifically, the SPD identifies the vision as comprising:

- the realisation of the economic and employment potential of commercial freight businesses for the benefit of the Halton community;
- the development of the railway infrastructure both serving the DSRFP (Ditton Sidings), and within the site, to provide the necessary capacity and operational efficiency to support the full potential of the scheme;
- the development of the road infrastructure within the DSRFP, and connecting it to the strategic road network, to provide efficient and effective connections between the commercial and operational interest within the site, and mitigate any impacts of the scheme on local communities;
- the provision of complementary facilities and land uses to support the maximum usage of the DSRFP;
- the addition of further land and development opportunities to provide critical mass, respond to the market opportunity and maximise employment generation potential; and
- the improvement of environmental quality through quality landscape treatments and removal of bad neighbour activities.”

4.64 The SPD expands upon the relevant policies of the plan setting out how they should be interpreted.

- With regard to Policy ‘S1 Regeneration’ the SPD states that the proposals will be expected to provide for the reclamation of those areas within the DSRFP that are currently derelict and/or contaminated and provide for the protection and enhancement of

the local environment, in particular adjoining nature conservation designations and produce a general improvement in environmental quality.

- The SPD refers to Policy 'S20 Regional Investments Sites' stating that development within the DSRFP will be expected to make a key contribution to the economic outputs of the region in terms of job creation.
 - In relation to Policy 'S25 Planning Obligations' environmental capital loss is expected to be compensated for through the provision of landscaped buffers around the DSRFP and landscaping within the DSRFP.
 - As the site falls within the Mersey Forest planting will be sought along the railway corridor.
 - In line with Policy 'PR14 Contaminated Land' proposals within DSRFP will be required to take into account the potential for contamination on site and include mitigation measures at the outset as appropriate.
 - A flood risk assessment is required under Policy 'PR16 Development and Flood Risk'.
 - The site is covered by Policy 'BE13 Environment Priority Areas' and the SPD states that development should raise the standards of visual amenity from residential areas, railway, green belt, Hale Bank Road, Queensway and A682.
 - Policy 'S13 Transport' is relevant to the footpath tunnel linking site 255 (the development site) with St. Michael's Road and this should be upgraded to be safe and user-friendly; contributions will be sought from the developers of site 255.
 - Policy 'TP1 Public Transport Provision as Part of New Development' requires development to be accessible by public transport. The SPD states that a developer contribution and/or provision will be secured to make access by public transport adequate.
- 4.65 In particular, the SPD emphasises the role improvements to the built environment and existing hard & soft landscaping will play in the success of the scheme, and how important this aspect will be to the local community and the wider community of Halton. To this end, a draft Landscape Strategy and Design Guide has also been prepared to ensure all development within the DSRFP is consistent in terms of design and quality.
- 4.66 The SPD identifies 20 sub-areas. The proposal site lies within Site C 'Ditton Road' and Site S 'The Mound'. Within Site C businesses that would utilise the railway for the transportation of freight and uses offering support to them in accordance with Policy E7 are identified as the most appropriate use. The development principles for Site C encompass landscaping

features including tree planting to the railway; the built form, scale and massing, external materials to be of a high standard to promote a strong image and brand for the DSRFP; accessibility to/ provision of public transport facilities; creation of a new rail corridor; and pedestrian footpaths integrated into the whole scheme. Site S is identified for use as amenity open space which to be developed for structural landscaping.

Compliance with the Halton Borough UDP and Ditton Strategic Rail Freight Park Draft SPD

4.67 In accordance with UDP Policy E7 and the DSRFP SPD, the proposed development will:

- Incorporate full road and rail access. This will allow use by distribution companies which use the railway for the transportation of freight, or companies which assist such distributors;
- Provide accommodation of a quality suitable for occupation by a specific distribution operator national importance and retention of existing distribution uses;
- Use their best efforts to provide employment for local residents and those from surrounding areas;
- Avoid any significantly adverse impact on the environment or nearby residents, particularly those in Hale Bank, through sensitive site remediation and the use of the existing vehicular access to the site from the west by cars only and by other vehicles only in an emergency;
- Create a quality “flagship” development with a strong brand image to assist the Council in securing the regeneration of the remainder of the DSRFP and the wider area; and
- Avoid prejudicing the improvement of the passenger rail network or improvements to it identified in the UDP.

4.68 In addition, and as required by Section 1(e) of Policy E7 and UDP Transport policies, a detailed Transport Assessment and a Framework Travel Plan are included within the Environmental Statement supporting the planning application. These documents demonstrate that the proposed development can be accessed by HGVs solely from the east and cars only to the west and that the development will not have a significantly adverse impact on the local transport and trunk road networks. To this end, the existing vehicular bridge access to the Foundry Lane Estate over the Ditton Brook will be upgraded to be made suitable for cars, pedestrians and cyclists (and in an emergency all vehicles).

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- 4.69 In terms of land use allocation, the proposed development deviates only from the DSRFP core area boundary, as illustrated on the UDP Proposals Map, in the vicinity of the Mound. The Mound is designated Greenspace, protected under UDP Policy GE5. It is necessary to include the Mound within the developable area of the site, as a specific end operator of national significance has identified a requirement for a large floorplate high bay and low bay distribution warehouse, which can only be accommodated on the DSRFP site by developing in the area of The Mound. Any deviation from the proposed building and envelope could prejudice the ability to secure this tenant.
- 4.70 As stated above the Halton UDP Inspector included the area of the Mound within the potential area of the DSRFP because of the areas of possible nature conservation interest but stated that its value as a feature could readily be outweighed by its potential value as a development resource for DSRFP.
- 4.71 The impact on nature conservation & the landscape and the visual impact of utilising this area for development, are considered in *Sections 9 & 10* of the Environmental Statement. The ecology assessment carried out found that the loss of the newly formed habitat could be adequately mitigated through off-site planting secured via a financial contribution.
- 4.72 Furthermore the Landscape Impact Assessment, considered in *Section 10* of the Environmental Statement, found that the Mound was of moderate quality and sensitivity to change. The proposed development will replace the existing run down buildings and facilities of various ages and designs with a good quality, well designed and coordinated development including substantial tree planting and good quality landscape treatment to create a 'flagship' development which will result in a considerable improvement to the existing landscape character of the area. The impact of the proposed development on landscape character is therefore assessed as moderately beneficial. The visual impact will generally be low to moderate and beneficial.
- 4.73 The proposed development will provide circa 1,800 jobs and is therefore of regional economic significance. Moreover, the development of the site will provide significant investment and improvement in a regional investment site. The development will form a large part of the Ditton SRFP a major transport infrastructure scheme of regional significance and one of 25 Regional Investment Sites identified in the Regional Economic Strategy as key to the development of regional economy
- 4.74 Therefore, given that there is no opportunity to fit Unit 1 on the site without the development of the Mound and that the UDP Inspector considered that its worth could be readily outweighed by its development value, it is considered that the development value of The Mound in
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- delivering the first phase of the DSRFP outweighs the loss of the landscape and habitat value of this area, especially as this can be sufficiently mitigated through on-site provision of landscaping and a commuted sum towards off-site provision.
- 4.75 As compensation for this infringement of designated Greenspace, the applicants propose to reinforce tree planting elsewhere within the DSRFP and improve the setting of the adjoining water courses by planting the north east bank of the Ditton Brook and the north west bank of the Steward's Brook adjacent to the site.
- 4.76 With regard to tree planting, as the proposed development encompasses the Mound area the proposal will not, therefore, continue to meet the preferred level of woodland cover (20 %+) indicated for the site in Policy GE28 'The Mersey Forest'. However, the on and off-site planting proposed will mitigate this effect.
- 4.77 In line with the general tenor of Policy E7, Policy BE3 (which locates the site within an Environmental Priority Area), the various environmental policies and the draft DSRFP SPD, Westlink Group Ltd agree that consistent design standards will extend beyond consideration of the warehouse buildings to encompass all aspects of the site. This includes consideration of screen planting, hard landscaping, boundary treatment, signage, infrastructure, street furniture and the use of an approved palette of materials and colours, as suggested in the DSRFP Landscape Strategy and Design Guide. As stated above the visual impact of the development will result in an considerable improvement to the existing landscape character of the area through the replacement the existing run down buildings and facilities of various ages and designs with a good quality, well designed and coordinated development including substantial tree planting and good quality landscape treatment to create a 'flagship' development.
- 4.78 Whilst the site is not located within an area of key archaeological importance, and the land form has been largely re-modelled in the past century, the applicant recognises the importance of establishing and preserving any archaeological record. Consequently, a Cultural and Archaeological Assessment has been carried out by the National Museum of Liverpool's (NML's) Archaeological Unit. The applicant has accepted NML's findings and their recommendation to maintain a watching brief on any peat extraction from the site, as set out in Section 6 of the Environmental Statement.
- 4.79 The social and economic benefits of a project of this scale for the local area and the wider region are substantial. As the analysis prepared by GVA Grimley (see Section 13 of the Environmental Statement) shows, the inward investment and job opportunities created by an infrastructure project such as the proposed development are considerable and the benefits
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will filter down to the local community. This estimates that more than 1,700 permanent jobs will result from the development. This is a significant amount of employment. In addition, the success of such a high profile and sustainable project can only breed further success in attracting distribution firms and businesses of national and international standing to the DSRFP and Widnes area.

- 4.80 It is clearly crucial that the various local pollution and risk policy issues raised by the redevelopment of a large contaminated site are addressed. The relevant tests, assessment methodologies, findings and, where appropriate, mitigation measures relating to each Pollution and Risk policy in the UDP are set out in the Environmental Statement.
- 4.81 Finally, at the site-specific level, the proposal fits with HBC's vision of the Ditton SRFP as outlined in the draft DRSFP SPD.

Key Policy Messages

- 4.82 The following list provides a broad summary of the key planning policy messages emerging from the review undertaken:

- Ditton is a regional investment site for a strategic rail freight park;
- The regeneration of Ditton to provide a strategic employment site delivering opportunities for intermodal distribution, is a key objective of the RSS and the UDP;
- Development should make the most efficient use of previously developed land and be carried out in line with sustainable economic, social and environmental objectives;
- Development should be located at locations accessible by public transport; and
- Development should improve environmental quality through quality landscape treatments and removal of bad neighbour activities and remediation of land.

Summary of compliance with policy

- 4.83 The redevelopment of the proposal site as a freight terminal accords with local and regional aspirations for an inter-modal freight park located within the Liverpool-Warrington-Manchester commercial belt, thus filling an identified gap in national interchange provision.
- 4.84 The redevelopment of the employment site is in accordance with UDP policies. There is specific policy support for the development of a sub-regional freight facility for B8 distribution warehousing accessible by road and rail in the Halton UDP, RPG13 and the draft RSS.

- 4.85 Whilst it is not yet adopted, the development accords with the Draft SPD for the Ditton Strategic Rail Freight Park and the proposals have been developed in accordance with the requirements and aspirations set out within this Draft SPD.
- 4.86 Whilst, 'The Mound' area of the site is allocated under UDP Policy GE5 as 'Protected Greenspace' it was included by the UDP Inspector within the area for the potential extent of the Ditton Strategic Rail Freight Park. It is considered that the development value of The Mound in delivering the first phase of the DSRFP outweighs the loss of the landscape and habitat value of this area, especially as this can be sufficiently mitigated through on-site provision and a commuted sum towards off-site provision.
- 4.87 The Environmental Impact Assessment assessed the development proposals in relation to impact upon the environmental conditions that currently prevail on the site and the surrounding area. The Environmental Statement demonstrates that the short term environmental impacts of the construction phase of the project are typically minor and largely a function of the inevitable disruption caused by a major infrastructure project. With regard to the long lasting/permanent impacts there are no long term residual negative impacts associated with the development.
- 4.88 This statement demonstrates that the application is in accordance with local, regional and national planning policy. On this basis therefore the development of the site can be considered to be appropriate in principle when considered against the development plan and other policy documents.

5. PLANNING BALANCE & CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The proposed development seeks to deliver a sustainable freight terminal capable of delivering regeneration and remediation of an underused and contaminated industrial site. The new development will assist in the local economic objectives for Ditton and the regional objectives to fill an identified gap for intermodal freight development in the Liverpool-Warrington-Manchester commercial corridor.
- 5.2 The application submission is supported by a range of technical reports which assess the technical and environmental compliance of the proposal. Having regard to both the planning policy assessment the detail as set out earlier and the range of supporting information as contained within the suite of accompanying technical documentation, it is our view that the principle of the development is entirely appropriate in that the proposals:
- are in full accord with the key national planning policy principles which seek to deliver high quality, sustainable patterns of development on brownfield sites.
 - are in full accord with the key provisions of existing and emerging Regional Spatial Strategy, which identify Widnes, as a focus for regional storage and distribution development. The scale, type and location of development is regionally appropriate.
 - are in full accord with the key provisions of the Halton Borough UDP which seeks to establish a new strategic rail freight park on land at Ditton, Widnes.
- 5.3 This statement demonstrates that the technical detail of the proposal has also been assessed against the relevant elements of planning policy and development control criteria. On balance it has been demonstrated that the proposal has meets the requirements of the UDP.
- 5.4 On this basis it is our conclusion that the proposal raises no issues of material concern. Accordingly the Council is invited to support the proposals and to grant consent.