



Joint Transportation
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Background

In 2014, Ashford Borough Council acquired International House, Dover Place car park and several parcels of land on the southern side of Dover Place from the HCA. This paved the way for the creation of Ashford Commercial Quarter. In 2016, the council granted planning permission for the first 80,000 sq ft office building. Construction of the new building commenced in 2017 and is scheduled for completion by summer 2018.

In addition to the new office building, the existing properties on the southern side of Dover Place will be re-developed by Ashford Borough Council for a mixed-use development with the intention of delivery coinciding with the intention of delivery coinciding with the opening of the new Commercial Quarter office block or shortly after.

In September 2017, the newly built Ashford College located on the corner of Station Road and Elwick Road will open its doors to its first intake of students bringing a new dynamic to the town and increasing pedestrian movements.

Commercial Quarter Enabling Projects

Ashford Borough Council has identified a number of improvements projects which seek to reduce vehicle congestion on Station Approach and provide a more direct and safer route for pedestrians between the Commercial Quarter and the railway station / Stour Centre car parks.

- Station Approach – new zebra crossing
- Station Approach - taxi waiting layby relocation to Stour Centre car park
- Station Approach – construction of a new footpath and landscaping on the site of the former taxi waiting layby
- Stour Centre car park / International House – Link footpath and footbridge over the Great Stour River
- Station Forecourt – Lining and signing project to segregate domestic vehicles from buses and taxis

A further project in Dover Place will deliver improvements to the Dover Place / Station Road junction to accommodate the new Quinn office building. The opportunity will be taken to include the re-surfacing of International House car park with the above works, which will be procured at the same time.

These elements are interlinked and are dependent on the successful relocation of the taxi waiting layby from Station Approach, which will free up the land occupied by the existing layby so that a footway can be constructed along the northern side of Station Approach connecting the Stour Centre car park to the Commercial Quarter. The removal of the existing taxi waiting area and the implementation of traffic regulation orders are also necessary to permit the installation of the zebra crossing and the enforcement of parking restrictions on Station Approach.

Aims

To improve pedestrian connectivity between the Commercial Quarter, the railway stations and South Park car parks.

To reduce vehicle congestion on Station Approach and improve the flow of vehicles through the Station Forecourt at peak times.

Consultation

On 6th April the proposals to move the taxi waiting area were presented to the Taxi Forum and drivers and operators were invited to take part in an online consultation, which was launched on 7th April and was open until 26th April. Contact was made with Ward Members, representatives of the Central Ashford Community Forum and the Mill Court management company.

Details of the consultation were emailed out to all drivers and operators that the licensing section had contact details for. It was placed on the council's website, advertised by social media and sent to people and organisations that may have particular interest in the proposals, such as Southeastern Railway, Stagecoach and tenants of International House. The website included location plans of the proposed taxi waiting area in the Stour Centre car park, detailed plans of the taxi waiting area layout with an indicative vehicle capacity of 17 vehicles, a swept path analysis of proposed vehicle movement, detailed information of the proposals and a link to a Survey Monkey with a number of questions, including an opportunity to add free text.

Responses

75 people responded to the consultation, 21 were taxi drivers or operators, 16 were local residents, 10 were car park users and 28 were "other". Over 86% agreed that the aims of the proposals to reduce congestion and improve access. 68% agreed that the location of the proposed taxi waiting area would support these aims. 69% thought that a CCTV system was the best solution to inform taxi drivers that the taxi rank was empty and 54% thought that the proposed taxi waiting area layout would work in practice.

Issues Raised

There was concern (primarily by taxi drivers and operators) that a two lane waiting area would cause issues when vehicles parked on the inside wanted to leave the waiting area to attend phoned in jobs. A further meeting with taxi drivers and operators was held on 22nd May to determine how the maximum vehicle capacity of the waiting area can be balanced with operational concerns.

The importance of a well-designed and properly maintained CCTV system was raised by a number of respondents, along with the need for a back-up system that would include a call system for disabled vehicles and other specific vehicles to be called to the taxi rank at the front of the station.

Other issues raised include concern that customers would need to walk further to hail a taxi (taxi rank is not moving), that the system would be open to abuse by unscrupulous drivers, that changes to the phasing of the traffic lights at the junction with the A2042 would reduce congestion (planned for 2017) and the 17 proposed spaces were insufficient. Three respondents referred to the issue of flooding and this is addressed in the planning application, which was submitted in May 2017.

14 positive comments received included support for the proposed zebra crossing, welcoming the proposed improvements and agreement that the proposals will help reduce congestion.

Key risks

In order for work to proceed we are awaiting permission from Southeastern/Network Rail in regard to that land which they own or control. This relates to the physical works as well as the related Traffic Regulation Order on Station Approach which is integral to the council's investment in the Commercial Quarter's enabling works. Without either the authority to enforce traffic regulations or a commitment from the landowner to enforce it is likely the relocation of the taxi waiting area will not be able to progress and this will have a significant impact on the wider proposals.