

**Tuesday**  
**17 October 2006**

**Volume 450**  
**No. 201**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS**  
**OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY**  
**DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Tuesday 17 October 2006**

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## Former Aerodrome Site (Radlett)

1.30 pm

**Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con):** This is not a debate about the desirability of getting freight off our roads, hence the formation of the title. It is a debate about the necessity of ensuring that rail freight locations are correctly located in areas well served by direct transport, road and rail links, and with minimum impact on local communities.

This is not about nimbyism. I want to stress the need for a truly critical appraisal of the merits of locating a large industrial facility in the green belt accessed off local roads in areas of acknowledged traffic congestion, poor air quality and noise pollution. In fact the Department of Health's own 2006 health profile for St. Albans accepts that our local air quality rating is below the accepted, England average. The Radlett area is a particular hot spot that contributes significantly to that poor rating. I am seeking to outline to the Minister why this particular proposal is an inappropriate development. It is at an early stage, but I feel that I ought to make the case for our communities.

The district council has already allocated £500,000 of taxpayers' money to fight this proposal and given my concerns, the views of the county council and the regional planning committee, which I will seek to highlight later in my speech, I am asking the Minister to call this decision in at the earliest possible stage.

I am sure that the Minister agrees that this proposal must be robustly scrutinised in terms of strict planning criteria and not pushed through as a result of a desire by the Government to locate up to four new interchange sites around a London hub. We must move away from the positive rhetoric of the developer Helioslough as its proposals seek to gloss over the real impact of this development and do not adequately address concerns over the impact of increased traffic and green belt requirements. The proposals also fail to fulfil locational requirements of the Strategic Rail Authority's rail freight interchange policy document, paragraph 4.2 of which states:

"Strategic RFIs tend to be large commercial operations which...may not be considered suitable adjacent to uses such as residential which may be sensitive to the impact of noise and movements".

Park Street is a village and access from the site will be directly adjacent to residential homes and along village roads. I, like many people, am in favour of getting freight off our roads, but strategic rail freight interchanges must be appropriately located. This former gravel working is a metropolitan green belt site that ought to be returned to an acceptable amenity for local residents.

The Minister said in response to my question of 11 October about maintaining the integrity of the green belt that

"it should be altered only in exceptional circumstances."

She went on to say that

"the Government are currently considering the report of the independent Panel...The Panel recommends that the general extent of the Metropolitan Green Belt in Hertfordshire and Essex...should be maintained."—[Official Report, 11 October 2006; Vol. 450, c. 743W.]

**Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere) (Con):** I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining this important debate and on the lead she has taken in addressing the issues surrounding the proposal. As well as addressing technical rail issues, this debate is also important for road traffic and strategic reasons, as she has rightly outlined, and for even wider environmental reasons regarding the green belt. Does my hon. Friend accept that anyone who looks at the proposal has to consider whether it will have a massive impact on the green belt in Hertfordshire, particularly in the area around St. Albans, Park Street, London Colney and Radlett in my constituency? In effect, those communities will coalesce into each other, and an area of green with important environmental qualities will be lost.

**Anne Main:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the important aspects of the green belt is to stop the coalescing of smaller communities and that facility will indeed be lost should the site be developed in that particular way.

Helioslough—the proposed developer—maintains that its study on the site shows that Radlett is an optimum site with regard to location. That may be its opinion as a result of its own study, but a county development control report released on Monday 16 October profoundly disagrees with that assertion. It states that the developers' study is not robust and that

"officers are also of the view that a location North of London is not that preferred to handle anticipated demand for rail freight which is forecast to arise largely from Haven and Thames ports and Southampton and the Channel Tunnel".

It concludes that

"for these reasons the very special circumstances that would be necessary to warrant the release of this Green Belt site are considered not to have been adequately demonstrated by the applicant."

It is not just local people who believe that this green belt site is strategically important. The report says that the site has not demonstrated any real reasons to show it should be treated as an exceptional circumstance. The regional planning sub-committee report also agrees with that conclusion on the green belt, adding that

"the application is therefore not consistent with Policies SS7 and LA1 of the Draft east of England Plan".

The Radlett site proposes a large 3.5 million sq ft strategic rail interchange, warehousing ancillary office developments served by the rail sidings linked to the slow up-line—the midland main line—with no direct motorway access. I do not wish to go on about access on the rail line because it has not actually been demonstrated that the site will get the additional capacity or access to it: that is a transport issue, not the issue I am dealing with at the moment.

There is no direct motorway access and all road access from the new signalised roundabout on the north orbital will be off the A414. A direct road access link for the proposal has already been refused and deemed unacceptable by the highways authority, so all new and existing traffic must still use local roads.

County development control's view in a report to the director for the environment is that the A414, which will provide the access point,

"is already an extremely busy road with flows on this section some of the highest non motorway flows in the county. The

applicant shows that a fully operational SRFI would add around 12% to existing flows. Typically a traffic increase of 5% is considered to be a material increase and therefore this development is likely to have a significant impact on the road network."

That would have a huge and detrimental impact on local road networks.

A report from the regional planning sub-committee dated 6 October said that

"on the evidence presented so far it is not clear that sufficient capacity could be released on the strategic highway network and hence is not consistent to the policy T3 for access."

Again, an excellent planning reason to turn the proposal down.

The impact on the local roundabouts is less well defined in the developer's proposals, but the county report says, from the scanty recommendations that are in the developer's proposals, that

"officers are not satisfied that the solutions offered will prove acceptable in either congestion capacity or safety terms."

It is also worth noting that in the health outcomes for St. Albans, we have some of the highest road traffic incidents, which is above the national average.

Work by the Highways Agency for the regional spatial strategy examination in public showed that specific congestion issues were anticipated for this part of Hertfordshire. Without the proposal, we are still anticipating a massive impact on congestion, and the proposal will only add to that in a detrimental way. The A414 in particular, which will provide the access point, was highlighted as creating congestion issues. Any highways problems that already occur on the M25, and they are numerous, cause rat running and severe additional congestion. The addition of thousands of extra lorries trying to access the site would cause mayhem beyond comprehension.

The traffic implications beyond the two roundabouts that feature heavily in the developer's application are also important. The developer seems to conveniently forget that this will impact on the whole of St. Albans and my hon. Friend's constituency as well. It is not just a Park Street and Radlett proposal.

The Highways Agency does look further afield and is concerned about the junctions where traffic joins the trunk road networks: junction 21A and 22 on the M25 and junction 3 of the A1(M). As a result of those concerns, the Highways Agency has already issued a holding objection to the proposal.

The proposed Park Street bypass, which has long been argued for by local residents, is a key part of this scheme. Unfortunately, that will not deliver the bypass scheme the residents wanted in order to get the lorries that are already there out of Park Street and eliminate the traffic that clogs the village. It will have no impact on the traffic concerns of the Highways Agency.

With regard to alleviating traffic within the village, it could be possible, for example, to exclude heavy goods vehicle traffic from Park Street and Frogmore, but the impact on HGVs that currently use Harper lane, the B556, to access junction 22 of the M25 and on all related local car movements will not be addressed by any bypass proposed for this application and therefore it does not address current traffic concerns and will only add to them. That remains a valid concern and was accepted by the highways authority in its report.

[Anne Main]

Point 17.9 of the county development report, that "the level of benefit in traffic reduction has not been proven", fully supports the residents' views of the application. According to point 17.10, the county council is not convinced at this stage that the proposed mitigation measures are adequate to address the problem. Nor are the environmental implications for Radlett and Elstree fully addressed. Overall, the report recommends refusal of the application.

The employment forecast to do with strategic rail freight interchanges is usually heralded as a good thing. The forecast for this proposal is 3,500 employees, but more than 50 per cent. of the staff are expected to live outside Hertfordshire. The employment gains will be greater than the level of supply in the local area, which is not a priority area for regeneration. There will be little economic benefit to the local area, merely increases in traffic congestion as people try to get to work on already congested roads. In fact, the site is deemed to be poorly located to attract necessary staff. Many of them will be unable to live locally due to the constraints of the village and the fact that house prices are extremely high, and many will be low-paid workers.

Point 5.6 of the regional report concludes:

"Other locations may fit better with the regional policies on regeneration and not require the length of commuting of this site."

This is vital. If the Government truly wish to get traffic off our roads, they must ensure that they are not busing and ferrying in people from other areas just because they say that they want to get freight off the roads.

Contrary to the developers' proposals, the county believes that for the developers to suggest that existing or improved local transport services will serve 67 per cent. of potential employee catchment areas is not credible in practical terms. There has been an attempt to advance a case as to how bicycle and bus services could be improved, but none of the proposals has been deemed credible. The document also states:

"The target non car mode share for journeys to work of 35 per cent. is considered unachievable on the evidence presented... With no evidence that practical difficulties can be overcome."

All that means that the proposal does not, cannot and probably never will meet planning policy guidance note 13 requirements.

Again, I question the developers' proposals, which I know the Minister will have on her desk in the not-too-distant future. The highly selective theoretical noise projection tables included in the proposal include no actual noise readings from the seven existing rail freight interchange sites. I myself have stood in Park Street with a monitor and I can tell the Minister that noise levels already well exceed the European decibel levels. Supporting data for traffic generation were helpfully gleaned from the Daventry site, but noise readings were not included. I feel that that was possibly because they would do little to bolster the proposal.

The noise calculations are based on the questionable theoretical premise that there will be an 89 per cent. decrease in traffic flow through Park Street. I dealt with that earlier. In fact, the majority of traffic that currently goes through Park Street will not be tempted to use the bypass. The bypass will merely serve as a link

road into the site for people working on the site. The figures for decreased traffic flow through Park Street and Frogmore are questioned by both county and region in their reports. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) has massive concerns, as do many Radlett residents, who feel that the traffic impacts may well be much greater.

How can it be possible to direct not only HGV traffic but all traffic going east on the M25 or north via the M10/M1 through the strategic rail freight interchange and then make it turn left on to the A414 and come all the way back to the Park Street roundabout? Logic suggests that local roads will see a massive increase in rat-running to avoid the detours.

I seek assurances from the Minister today that she will not take at face value the blithe assurances on the part of the developer that the scheme will benefit the area. In fact, it will have a catastrophic impact. It is completely contrary to green belt policy. It fails on many transport accounts, and the residents are looking to the Minister to take an objective planning decision on the proposal where it fails on all accounts. I would welcome assurances from her on how much weight she will place on the views of local people, the local district and county councils—the district has yet to express a view on this; it has a hearing on it on 1 November—and the regional planning committee, which I have quoted extensively. I trust that when she has examined all their evidence, she will robustly reject the proposal.

May I add a footnote to that? It has cost so much money to fight these large developers. Local authorities feel totally disadvantaged in their fight against massive, inappropriate development that they believe the Government wish to sanction or rubber-stamp. I am looking to the Minister to give us absolute assurances that that will not be the case in this matter.

1.45 pm

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Yvette Cooper):** I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Albans (Anne Main) on securing this debate on a matter that concerns her in her constituency and on raising the proposals for the former aerodrome site at Radlett in St. Albans. The proposal is to build a 3.5 million sq. ft strategic rail freight interchange on that site. I understand that Helio Slough, the site owner, submitted an outline planning application for the proposal to St. Albans district council on 28 July. I understand that it seeks approval for means of access, for siting and for landscaping, with all other matters reserved. The application will be considered by the council's planning committee on 1 November, as the hon. Lady said towards the end of her speech.

The site does fall within the metropolitan green belt and, given the adopted plan, the proposal may well be referred to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for consideration. I shall say a little more about that in due course. In the meantime, I understand that the Highways Agency has served on the council a direction under article 14 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995, which prevents it from taking a decision on whether to grant planning permission, because the applicant has not yet provided sufficient information for the Highways Agency to ascertain the full impact of the proposal on the motorway and trunk roads concerned.

The direction from the Highways Agency will remain in place until 31 December—the end of this year—unless sufficient information has been provided before then to satisfy the agency, given its criteria and the issues that it has to take account of as part of the planning process. That does not preclude the council from considering the application or determining its views on other aspects of the application. Given that concerns are always raised about the time scale of consideration of planning applications, it is right that councils should be able to consider other aspects simultaneously while Highways Agency concerns are explored. Nevertheless, until a satisfactory conclusion is found to the agency's concerns, the article 14 direction must remain in place, which means that the council will be unable to reach a final decision on the matter.

If the Highways Agency's concerns are addressed and the decision is to refuse planning permission, of course the applicant will have the right to lodge an appeal with the Secretary of State. If the council is minded to grant planning permission, the application will be referred to the Secretary of State for consideration. There is a 21-day period within which the decision must be made on whether the application should be called in for the Secretary of State's determination. Should the matter be called in by the Secretary of State, there would need to be a public inquiry, which would look into all these matters.

In view of that and of the fact that the Secretary of State may well have to take a series of decisions relating to this case, it is clear that I cannot discuss the merits of the application. It would be improper for me to do so, as it could be seen to prejudice the case or fetter the Secretary of State's discretion, should she decide to call it in for her own determination or should it go to appeal—or, indeed, prejudice the call-in decision itself. I know that the hon. Lady has requested that the matter should be called in. I must make it clear that there are of course clear rules on the way Ministers deal with planning cases, given the quasi-judicial role that the Secretary of State must play. I will, however, refer to a series of more general issues that need to be taken into account.

Hon. Members are right to say that there is a wider need to get freight on to rail rather than roads, given the need to cut carbon emissions and as part of a long-term strategy to safeguard the environment, in this country and around the world. I understand that the examination in public of the east of England plan identifies the need for one strategic rail freight interchange for the east of England, and that the Strategic Rail Authority's submission to the plan stated that at least one rail freight interchange needed to be accommodated within the east of England region, serving broadly the north quadrant of London and adjacent parts of the east of England.

**Anne Main:** On that very point, the report accepted that no site-specific recommendation was made; it also noted, particularly on the employment issue, that the site at Radlett was not a good fit. There were also massive concerns about the road links, which also meant that there was not a particularly good fit. The report merely accepted the general location policy for the east of England, which is a very large area, and certainly did not come down in support of our site.

**Yvette Cooper:** The hon. Lady has raised an important point. The Secretary of State has not yet responded to the examination in public of the east of England plan, and will need to do so in due course. As I understand the position, the panel does not identify any particular location, and clearly such matters need to be taken into account when planning applications are examined. We can note the points raised by the panel and the report commissioned for the East of England Development Agency, which suggests that there is an increasing need for rail freight services resulting from major container port schemes and the ability of the rail infrastructure to accommodate the increase in demand, but we need to be clear that that must not prejudice any planning application, and certainly not one that must go to the Secretary of State.

With planning applications it is necessary to consider a series of site-specific details, including the designation of the land as greenfield, brownfield or in the green belt—and, given the importance of protecting the green belt, wider considerations must be taken into account. It is also necessary to consider a wider range of details concerning applications, such as transport, impact on the area and economic considerations.

As I mentioned earlier, I understand that the Highways Agency is seeking further technical data from the applicant on the impact of the proposal on the motorway and trunk roads involved. I know that the Highways Agency is already seriously considering the traffic implications, as it does in every case, to ensure that they are properly taken into account.

**Anne Main:** The Highways Agency, as the Minister points out, is looking at the implications of the wider effect of the proposals, which the developer's proposal does not deal with. However, the highways authority has already made site-specific observations on the predicted impact and has considered that it is not acceptable. I hope that, although further data may bring solutions to other parts of the equation, specific weight will be given to the existing fact of the almost intractable problems on the site.

**Yvette Cooper:** As I have said, it would be improper for me to comment on the detail of the Highways Agency's views at this stage. It would be inappropriate given the Secretary of State's potential role in the process. The Highways Agency's views need to be taken into account by local councils and planning inspectors as well as by the Secretary of State. As I have also made clear, we give the Highways Agency additional powers through article 14 directions to prevent decisions on planning permissions being made when there is not satisfactory information about the implications for the road infrastructure in the area—particularly major road infrastructure such as motorways and trunk roads. That is precisely to ensure that the planning system properly takes account of transport considerations, wherever the application is made.

**Anne Main:** As a matter of clarification, given that no relevant noise readings were included in the proposals for traffic impact and transport impact, would the Minister expect noise impact facts and figures as part of the environmental statement?

**Yvette Cooper:** Again, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the details of the application, the factors that would need to be taken into account or the level of evidence that would be required on particular issues. In general terms we require consideration against local plan considerations and issues to do with the green belt, transport, the environment, noise, pollution, climate change and the need for economic development. A wide range of issues need to be weighed in the balance by local planning authorities when they consider major applications such as the one we are discussing.

The green belt is an important factor, because green belts are a long-standing element of planning policy, to which we attach great importance. Many businesses operate within the green belt and people live there, so clearly there must be ways in which it can respond to those conditions. Equally, however, we set particularly strong tests for new and future development in the green belt. Those are embedded in the planning policy statements.

The local planning authority also needs to consider wider issues set out in planning policy statement 1, the main planning policy statement for development. Those are issues to do with sustainability and the recognition that our quality of life depends on transport and easy access to jobs, services and shopping, but that there is also a need to sustain our communities for the longer term.

I think, therefore, that it is right that in the first instance the matter should be considered by the local planning authority. It is a matter to be considered first by that authority and the Highways Agency, before

they decide what view to take of the proposal. If it is decided to turn it down there may be a chance of appeal, in which case the Secretary of State will have a role at that point. Should the planning application be accepted, the Secretary of State will need to take a view on whether the proposal should be called in.

I recognise the strong feelings that the hon. Members for St. Albans and for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) have about this matter and I understand that they would like the case to be called in rather than decided by the local authority. We think it important that at this stage the local authority should take the first view, before the Secretary of State takes a decision—before the matter is referred to the Secretary of State to decide whether the proposal should be called in.

I assure hon. Members that whenever call-in proposals are put forward the Secretary of State gives serious consideration to all the relevant circumstances to make sure that an application is appropriate for call-in. We take the view that we should not call in cases that can better be decided at local level by local planning authorities. Therefore it is right to continue with the approach under which it is deemed that only a small minority of cases should be called in for determination by the Secretary of State. Nevertheless, within any individual case we always take the points that are made very seriously.

In the circumstances, it is not possible for me to comment in any further detail on the application, given the point that it has reached in the planning process.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Adjourned accordingly at Two o'clock.*