

Planning and Building Control

Christine Symes, Decision Officer
Department for Communities and Local
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Date: 11 April 2012

Dear Ms Symes,

TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING ACT 1990 – SECTION 78

APPEAL BY HELIOSLOUGH LTD

LAND IN AND AROUND FORMER AERODROME, NORTH ORBITAL ROAD, UPPER COLNE VALLEY, HERTFORDSHIRE

APPLICATION REF 5/09/07/08

Following your letter dated 29th March 2012. Please find this letter of objection on behalf of Hertsmere Borough Council, which has been agreed with the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Performance, and senior management of the Council. This letter updates our objection letter dated 9th October 2009, and takes into account the National Planning Policy Framework.

Hertsmere Borough Council recognises that the principle behind any Strategic Rail Freight Interchange (SRFI) has certain merits as it has the potential to reduce the level of freight being moved by heavy lorries on Britain's congested road network, and aspiration to increase rail freight in the National Infrastructure Plan and Strategic Rail Freight Interchange Policy Guidance. Whilst in principle a location to the north of London adjacent to the M25 and the Midland Main Line may also appear to have benefits, this proposal is considered to be flawed both strategically and in terms of its impact on the local environment. It is in conflict with national, regional and local planning policies and should be refused.

In strategic terms, this Council considers that is not a suitable location for a SRFI; the rail connections to the site do not meet with the established criteria for such a development and fundamentally the railway gauge is inadequate to cater for the larger freight containers. Access by rail from the main ports and the Channel Tunnel is tortuous and there will be conflicts with passenger services. The immediate access proposed into the site is convoluted and in itself will increase the impact on the Green Belt. The fact that trains wishing to access the site from the north will have to pass the site and then reverse in sidings at Cricklewood before returning north to gain access highlights that the location of this site is flawed. It is also likely that the amount of freight which could be transported by rail would be significantly less than might be expected from a SRFI.

The site is also flawed in terms of its access to the strategic motorway network. If this location were to have any merit there would need to be a direct access onto the M25 for freight vehicles. To access the strategic motorway network lorries will need to access onto the already heavily trafficked A414 and then via either the congested Park Street or London Colney roundabouts before they can reach what is one of the busiest stretches of motorway in the UK.

The applicant's search for alternative sites is also considered to be flawed, particularly in terms of the environmental assessment of alternative locations. The proposed development of this site for a SRFI appears in strategic terms to be opportunistic in the extreme and is without merit. The supporting information submitted with the application has many gaps and at the very least these should be addressed before any alternative consideration could be given to this proposal.

Furthermore, the development of this site will have a devastating and irreversible impact on the local environment. In particular, it will have a significant adverse impact on Radlett and Shenley, and on the surrounding area.

The Radlett Aerodrome site is considered to be an important part of the Metropolitan Green Belt which performs several strategic Green Belt functions. Not least it prevents the coalescence of St Albans, Park Street, London Colney/Napsbury and Radlett. The development is inappropriate with respect to the NPPF by definition it is harmful to the Green Belt and undermines the five purposes of the Green Belt set out in paragraph 80 of the NPPF. By definition (Paragraph 89 and 90 of NPPF) the application is inappropriate development. It doesn't constitute local transport infrastructure, and does not demonstrate appropriately that the Green Belt is justified. The principle of the development could only be justified if there were very special circumstances which clearly outweighed the harm to the Green Belt. In this instance the Council considers that the applicant would need to prove that there was an overriding strategic national need for a SRFI to the north of Greater London and that this was the most suitable and environmentally acceptable location, arrived at following an extensive search and analysis of alternative locations. Fundamentally the application fails to meet the presumption in favour of sustainable development as the adverse impacts of the development would not demonstrably outweigh the benefits, particularly when assessed against the policies in NPPF when taken as a whole. In addition given the site's Green Belt location, the application fails specific Green Belt policies in the NPPF, and does not satisfy paragraph 14 of the NPPF.

No strategic planning document identifies the need for such a facility in this general location and the search process is considered to be inadequate. Furthermore, as identified above, this location in itself is flawed in strategic terms for such a development. The loss of such an important part of the Metropolitan Green Belt to a development of this scale cannot be justified.

The proposed development will also have an adverse impact on Hertsmere's environment in terms of traffic, noise and air pollution and general disturbance.

Whilst it is proposed that the heavy lorries will access the site from the north via the A414 there will inevitably be an increase in lorries using roads in Hertsmere to access the motorway network given the shortcomings in the road access outlined above. Fundamentally it is likely that many of the proposed 3,300 employees on the site will come to work via Hertsmere roads. The proposed development makes no provision for employees to get to the site other than by car. Radlett, Shenley, the Harper Lane/Watling Street junction and Elstree crossroads already suffer from considerable traffic congestion and cannot accommodate additional traffic, let alone the level associated with a development of this scale. It should also be borne in mind that there are other developments in the pipeline, particularly the Harperbury Hospital proposal, which will lead to increased traffic on local roads. The impact of the development would fail to meet paragraph 32 of the NPPF, as the development would have a severe impact on the transport network which will not be appropriately mitigated.

The Park Street bypass will lead to further traffic on roads in Hertsmere. This will make Watling Street a more attractive north/south route and will likely in itself attract more traffic irrespective of the SRFI development onto already congested Hertsmere roads.

Increased traffic will bring with it both noise and dust pollution and increased general disturbance to the local environment. Given the 24-hour nature of the proposed operation, there will be 24-hour disturbance to the local environment.

The heavy freight trains accessing the site will all have to pass through Radlett and Borehamwood and in some instances twice, where their journey has originated to the north of the SRFI site. Given that these will be at night in order to minimise conflict with passenger services, there will inevitably be disturbance caused to local residents living in the vicinity of the railway.

There will also be light pollution resulting from the proposed development. Whilst the site is located to the north of Hertsmere it is likely that at night there will be an impact, further reducing the openness of this part of the Green Belt.

The final significant concern of this Council relates to labour supply and the impact on the local housing market. This part of Hertfordshire has for long been recognised in strategic planning policy documents as one where there should be an overarching policy of restraint in order to protect the Green Belt and to prevent the local economy from overheating (notwithstanding the current economic downturn). The successful legal challenge against the East of England Plan by St Albans City and District Councils and Hertfordshire County Council reinforces the need for alternative options to be more robustly considered before significant and unprecedented Green Belt development can be contemplated.

The area is characterised by low unemployment, high house prices and a significant affordability gap. A development of this scale can only exacerbate these problems. On its own the development is planned to provide for 3,300 jobs. The development will generate more than this through a multiplier effect. This will lead to in commuting and/or pressure for further housing in the locality which could only be accommodated through the release of Green Belt land. In the light of the successful legal challenge against the East of England Plan and the quashing of Policies LA3 and LA4, there are now major uncertainties as to how housing and corresponding jobs growth is to be accommodated in this part of the County. You are requested to give this matter significant weight in your consideration of the planning application, given the impact on local housing demand from a proposal creating 3,300 jobs.

In conclusion, this is clearly an unsustainable site in either strategic or local planning terms for such a development. It is in conflict with national, regional and local planning policies and will have a very damaging impact on the local environment. The location is flawed for such a development and should it proceed there must be considerable doubts whether the industry would support it as a SRFI given the limitations of access by both road and rail. We could in due course be faced with just another large distribution depot in the Green Belt with freight coming in and out by road.

This Council raises strong objections to the proposed development and we recommend you to refuse this application. The application is contrary to the presumption of sustainable development and Green Belt protection policies set out in the NPPF. Should you be minded to grant planning permission then this Council would wish to see significant investment in the local infrastructure via a S106 agreement to mitigate its impact. However, it should though be recognised that no contributions could overcome the significant adverse impact that this proposed development would have on Hertsmere's environment.

I trust the application will be refused.

Yours sincerely

Polly Harris Gorf
Head of Planning and Building Control