



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Ben Copithorne  
Ashfield Land  
St. Catherine's Court  
Berkeley Place  
Clifton  
Bristol  
BS8 1BQ

19<sup>th</sup> October 2016

Ref: AL/TG/1610

**Re: Phase One Community Consultation, Rail Central**

*Dear Mr Copithorne,*

I write on behalf of my constituents in Blisworth who are directly and specially affected by the proposed Strategic Rail Freight Interchange (SRFI), Rail Central, in my constituency of South Northamptonshire. The village of Milton Malsor falls within the Daventry constituency of my colleague Chris Heaton-Harris MP; although I have been assisting those villagers as well, I am only representing the views of my constituents here, as is right and proper.

Since January 1<sup>st</sup> this year, I have received over 350 pieces of correspondence about Rail Central. This is the second largest single issue affecting South Northamptonshire, judged on volume of correspondence alone, and only just behind HS2 which affects a much larger number of people. The strength of feeling is overwhelmingly clear from residents, as I am sure you are aware from the correspondence you have received, that for a number of reasons they do not want this development on their doorstep. The local action group, Stop Rail Central, has commissioned a Consultation Feedback document which has identified that 82 per cent of residents do not feel there is any benefit to the community, and 89 per cent remain opposed to the proposal in its entirety.<sup>1</sup>

When I met with representatives from Ashfield Land in Milton Malsor on the 29<sup>th</sup> March, I put the point to the developers that if they turned up to public meetings without knowing the final height of the buildings, the increased volume of cars on the roads, the environmental bunding protections, and so forth that they would not be well received locally. My experience has been that my constituents are very knowledgeable in planning matters, and quite quickly become technical experts in specific areas as has been demonstrated by Mark Redding, Alan Hargreaves, Andrew Bodman and others in the action group and which you will see in their consultation response documents.

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<sup>1</sup> Stop Rail Central Community Consultation Feedback | <http://www.norailinterchange.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2016.06.04-Consultation-Feedback.pdf> | June 2016

*Member of Parliament for South Northamptonshire*

I then attended and spoke at a public meeting hosted by Stop Rail Central in Blisworth on the 31<sup>st</sup> March, where I confirmed that I would do all that I can to support local residents and my constituents as the MP. The meeting was exceptionally well attended, with the Scout Hut filled to the rafters with concerned villagers, and I heard the concerns of those who had lived in the area for years, particularly those more elderly residents. The room was hostile to the principle of a strategic rail freight interchange being built, and the villagers affirmed that they would do all that they can to oppose the proposals.

I would like to make very clear at this point in my response that I do not take a view myself on the merits or otherwise of the proposals. As Member of Parliament, my responsibility is to reflect and support the views and concerns of my constituents, and to use the unique perspective afforded to me to bring together the strands of communication I have received from local residents. I have worked with communities across South Northamptonshire on various planning applications and appeal inquiries, and I believe all parties – developers, residents, Planning Inspectorate – have found the strategy useful.


Turning to the concerns that have been brought to my attention by my constituents, I shall deal with each of these in turn.

### **Communication and Engagement**

I will state that Ashfield Land are, in a way, stuck between a rock and a hard place in terms of their levels of engagement. Whilst developers should be recognised for having sought earlier engagement than the statutory process requires, Ashfield Land have been stymied by their inability to provide much of the detail that local residents have asked for.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> May I went to one of Ashfield Land's meetings in Blisworth and I can very much recognise from my own experience this problem. I by no means seek to denigrate those staff who have been on hand at the community consultation events – they have been working hard to engage on what is an emotive issue for many local people – however the effectiveness and purpose of these earlier consultation sessions has been questioned. Too often, my constituents were told that *"it is too early to answer that question"* which, whilst perhaps not an unfair response, does not help to assuage concerns about various aspects of the proposal. Many residents attended several of the public consultation presentations, asking the same questions, and it does not appear that the developers went away to find answers in the interim.

Again, whilst recognising that this is Phase One of the consultation process and that Phase Two will be rolled out in early 2017, I think it would perhaps have been useful to have more presentation sessions spread out across a greater time period to ensure that as many villagers as possible could attend. I've also seen numerous remarks in the feedback I have been sent by residents that events weren't open as advertised, and queries as to why there were four sessions in Blisworth and only one in Milton Malsor. I would respectfully suggest that this is considered for Phase Two of the consultation process, and that Ashfield Land radically expand the public presentation sessions in terms of duration and availability.



There is a lingering perception amongst residents that the developers are not engaging in a two-way dialogue, and that the communication and engagement appears to be very one-directional. I make no comment as to whether this is a fair characterisation of the developers, but it is certainly the prevailing opinion. It is vitally important that Ashfield Land considers the points that are put to them on this by residents, and undertakes to improve processes where possible.

The visualisations also caused concern amongst local residents. Many expressed frustration that these were only provided some months after the public consultation presentations, and that only a selection of viewing points were included, often from flattering angles or without the associated infrastructure of gantry cranes in all views. It also did not help that the East Coast Main Line was indicated on the drawings, rather than the West Coast Main Line, and this has reinforced the perception amongst villagers that not enough due care and concern has been given to the visualisations or the consultation process as a whole.

The visualisation also did not easily demonstrate the scale of the project, nor outline the grade separation between the West Coast Main Line and the proposed high speed freight terminal.

### **Property Bond**

This has been a public relations disaster for the developers. Regardless of how Network Rail's logo appeared on the letterhead that went out from Ashfield Land's agent, Hamer Associates, the damage has been done. Confidence amongst local residents has declined precipitously, due in part to the phrasing of the initial letter and the subsequent communication between Stop Rail Central and Ashfield Land. The local action group does not accept the explanation that the inclusion of the logo was due to a mix-up in letterheads, and I have had a number of constituents write to me to express their dismay at what is perceived to be underhand tactics on the part of the developers.

I am aware that Network Rail are equally concerned, and have asked their legal team to look into the matter. At time of writing, I am awaiting a response from Network Rail reporting on their investigation into how the situation unfolded.

I am broadly supportive of property bonds in principle and I think that they can offer the very best compensation in some situations. The existence of a property bond guaranteeing the pre-blight value (plus or minus house price movements in the intervening years) would enable properties to be bought, sold, re-mortgaged and equity realised. As an added incentive to the normal functioning of the market, I would suggest that the developers may consider that properties with a property bond should be exempt from stamp duty, and that Ashfield Land would cover the costs for this. I do not have a view on the extent of which properties in the area should be included in the property bond; this is a commercial decision for the developers.

Most importantly, a bond would restore confidence in the market and allow the housing market to function more normally, which would allow those now trapped in their homes by this proposal to be able to sell their homes and move on with their lives.

## Site Viability

It is important to recognise that it is government policy to support Strategic Rail Freight Interchange infrastructure, and it is right that we are looking to move freight off our roads and onto rail. The main objectives of Government policy for Strategic Rail Freight Interchanges are to: (a) Reduce road congestion - to deliver goods quickly, efficiently and reliably by rail and help to reduce congestion on our roads; (b) Reduce carbon emissions – to meet the Government’s vision for a greener transport system as part of a low carbon economy; (c) Support long-term development of efficient rail freight distribution logistics - to ensure a network of SRFI - modern distribution centres linked into both the rail and trunk road system in appropriate locations to serve our major conurbations; (d) Support growth and create employment – through the transfer of freight from road to rail, where this is practical and economic.


My constituents are unsure how Rail Central meets all of the above criteria, and I would be grateful to the developers for providing some detailed information on these points.

Given the exceptionally low unemployment in South Northamptonshire – a current rate of 0.7 per cent – the workers for the 8,000 new jobs that are being created will have to travel in from further afield. Indeed, this was confirmed to several of my constituents at the public consultation presentations as being likely from Milton Keynes or Northampton. These 8,000 workers are going to significantly add to the pressures on the local strategic road network, increasing congestion on our roads.

Coupled to that, with potentially 16,000 additional car journeys in the area each day, this volume of traffic is going to have an impact on the site’s ability to reduce carbon emissions, and depreciates the potential for greening our transport infrastructure. As a former Energy Minister, I am very aware that transport is a key challenge in our efforts to decarbonise.

Further, Ashfield Land owns the options on the proposed site. A number of residents have queried how effectively the developer can have considered alternative sites that are owned by a third party developer; these sites are no less suitable simply by the virtue of not being controlled by Ashfield Land. Indeed, one site that was dismissed as unsuitable – Northampton Gateway – is now under active consideration for development as an SRFI by a rival developer, Roxhill. This would seem to undermine the content of Ashfield Land’s preliminary environmental information report that listed the alternative sites, especially as Roxhill’s site is next-door.

My understanding is that Ashfield Land are proposing that Rail Central would be operational by 2020. Given that Phase One of HS2, the proposed high speed railway between Euston and Birmingham, is not due to be operational until 2026, my constituents have queried how Rail Central will be able to function effectively in the period 2021-2026. The West Coast Main Line is forecast to be operating at capacity by this time, so I should be grateful for detail on how the developers propose to service the required additional freight movements.



I had the pleasure of hosting Andrew Gough, Associate Professor at the University of Northampton, here in Westminster on the 17<sup>th</sup> March for a presentation by a number of his students from the BA International Logistics and Trade Finance and the MSc International Logistics degree courses. Whilst very much initial findings, the students outlined a study into recent developments in the rail freight market, and provided an overview of the Rail Central proposals. I do recognise that the developers believe the study was flawed in its methodology, the students concluded that the proposals for Rail Central were premature and better sites existed for such a facility.

I would like to take this opportunity to again thank Professor Gough and his students, and to formally place on the record that I found the presentation from the University of Northampton to be incredibly helpful in bringing out some of the critical issues that my constituents are concerned about.

### **Public Rights Of Way**

Rail Central, as proposed, disrupts the current extent of public rights of way, footpaths, bridleways and other access routes without adequate replacement or mitigation. A number of constituents have been in touch with me to raise this point alone and above all others – such is the strength of feeling amongst local outdoor enthusiasts – and they are extremely concerned that the developers are not understanding this.

The main issue arises from the access from Milton Malsor down to Courteenhall Road. I would respectfully request that the developers consult fully on public rights of way. My experience from HS2 has been that it is possible to use a development to extend and expand existing access as part of the planning process, thereby providing more public rights of way after the fact, provided that there is a constructive dialogue with local residents.

### **Traffic**

Residents are absolutely convinced that their villages are going to be deluged with an increase in traffic, both HGVs and commuting traffic. This is especially evident if there are 16,000 additional journeys being made each day by the new 8,000-strong workforce travelling to and from the site.

The strategic road network in the area, namely the M1, A43 and A5, is brought to a standstill whenever there is a major incident in the area. My constituents are concerned that not enough consideration has been given to the impact that this traffic can have in a rural environment, particularly to the health and wellbeing of residents.

I have also had concerns raised with me by my constituents that the Rail Central proposal, in fairness as with other proposals in our area, is being considered in isolation in terms of the cumulative impact of traffic (domestic and commercial) in the area. Over the space of a period of the next ten years, South Northamptonshire is likely to see the construction of HS2, Rail Central, the Towcester Southern Urban Extension and relief road, significant housing

expansion in Brackley, and other planning proposals throughout South Northamptonshire. HS2 alone will add around 1,200 HGV journeys to the A43 each day through to the completion of construction, and there are queries at a local level as to whether this is being taken into account by the developers.

### **Other Concerns**

There is the pervasive feeling amongst those who have been in touch with me that this proposal is going to destroy the character and tranquillity of both Blisworth and Milton Malsor. The visual blight from the warehousing is difficult to mitigate with screening and bunding, let alone the gantry cranes, and the audio blight from the movements of vehicles on the site will be just as problematic for local residents.

The Woodland Trust has detected 20 veteran and 3 ancient trees which are being threatened by this development. As we have yet to see the exact site layout, my constituents are not sure if the trees will be directly affected, but given the wholesale development of the sites, they believe that it is highly likely some of them will be.

My constituents want to see all ancient and veteran trees threatened by the Rail Central development fully protected. Ancient and veteran trees are a vital and treasured part of our natural and cultural landscape, and represent a resource of great international significance. Veteran trees are the ancient trees of the future. It has been estimated that the UK may be home to around 80% of Europe's ancient trees. They harbour a unique array of wildlife and echo the lives of past generations of people in ways that no other part of our natural world is able.

The National Planning Policy Framework states that planning permission should be refused for development that would result in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats, including ancient woodland and aged or veteran trees. This can only be overridden if the need for, and benefits of, the development in that specific location clearly outweigh the loss.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for taking the time to consider these remarks. I will state again that the views expressed in this consultation feedback are reflective of the opinions and concerns of my constituents, and I will continue to act to support them in any way that I can.

With best wishes,



The Rt Hon. Andrea Leadsom MP  
Member of Parliament for South Northamptonshire