

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

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Re: Phase One Community Consultation, Rail Central

I write on behalf of my constituents in Milton Malsor regarding their concerns with the development of the Strategic Rail Freight Interchange (SRFI), Rail Central, in their local area. Despite the village of Milton Malsor falling within my remit, similar concerns have been expressed within the South Northamptonshire constituency of my colleague the Rt. Hon Andrea Leadsom MP, as they too will be affected. Although I have been assisting those villagers, I am writing to you solely in the capacity of Daventry's constituency representative.

A primary concern for the local residents is that the quiet character of the village will be compromised by your development programme; in a single choice questionnaire conducted by Stop Rail Central Action Group (SRCAG) earlier this year, 32% of respondents identified traffic/road congestions to be their primary concern, 24% noise, light and air pollution and 23% the destruction of countryside, environment and wildlife. Cumulatively, 89% of residents are totally opposed to the proposition.

Many constituents also feel that the two-way communication that Rail Central has suggested has not occurred. Milton Malsor's residents feel that the proposals would have a large impact on the area and yet the villagers have only been given one community meeting on the matter. Residents believe this matter has been exacerbated by Rail Central's lack of advertisement given to this meeting.

I would reiterate at this point that this response is simply a reflection of the views held by my constituents; on the merits or drawbacks of the proposals. On the subject of my constituent's concerns, I will address each matter sequentially.

Communities and Involvement

What appears to be a growing point of frustration amongst residents is the time disparity between the public consultations and the release of the digital renders of the site. This has been compounded by what has been described as 'unrealistically positive angles' used in these photographs; in the words of one of my constituents, "it's amazing how a small shrub can mask a massive great crane."

Having heard from constituents over the past months, what is emerging as a pre-eminent concern of local residents is the lack of information coming from Ashfield Land. To cite a recent complaint, the 'updated plans and visualisations for community consultation' do not appear to address the variety of issues facing the residents of Milton Malsor. Whilst the digital renderings offer an idea of location, size and style of the buildings being proposed, they offer no detail on the effects they

may have on light pollution. When contacted by local residents, it has been reported to me that they reply they receive usual states that ‘it is too early to answer that question’.

To note, some of these matters have been taken on board with Rail Central recognising that there is ‘a strong appetite for further exhibitions in Milton Malsor’.

I have received numerous complaints from constituents on the manner in which these ‘exhibitions’ were advertised to them; whilst a timetable was presented in the ‘Community consultation’ document, many residents feel that it is Rail Central’s responsibility to actively, and regularly, draw their attention to community consultations.

Attempts at Mitigation and Compensation

A common argument expounded by Ashfield Land is that the economic benefits brought by SRFI will outweigh the drawbacks facing the residents. One of which is the argument that it will boost employment in the area. However I would draw your attention to the abnormally low levels of unemployment in South Northamptonshire and Daventry; Andrea Leadsom’s constituency in particular has unemployment of only 0.7%. Clearly the existing local workforce would not be able to sufficiently staff these operations and consequently you would be forced to draft in work from the surrounding area; it has been suggested that this labour would come from Northampton and Milton Keynes. This would increase local congestion and road usage, thus nullifying the apparent benefits of reduced congestion suggested by Ashfield Land.

Another proposition by Ashfield Land is the offer of land for a local cricket club and the reworking of the existing footpaths, through and around the Rail Central site. I will reiterate, my constituents do not feel that this is an adequate return for the damage that will be done to the existing countryside; 23% of those asked in the single answer questionnaire I referenced earlier elected ‘Destruction of countryside, environment & wildlife’ to be their primary concern.

Roads

A very real, and relevant concern of the residents of Gayton and Milton Malsor is the potential isolation that this programme could cause. With increased road congestion to the North and large-scale building work to the South, several residents have contacted me with worries of isolation resulting from Rail Central. This is particularly acute with elderly constituents who have questioned how easily the Emergency Services will be able to access the villages should they need to.

Site Viability

Having spoken to constituents from the Daventry area it seems many are thoroughly against the progression of the Rail Central proposals due to concerns that it will dominate the 650 acre patch that it is proposed to be built on. A predominate concern of my constituents is that the congestion and general noise/air pollution from the Rail central proposal will severely affect the surrounding villages; this is exacerbated by the large number of HGV’s in the delivery area. Many constituents are also questioning the validity and viability of the programme. As I am sure you are aware, it is Government policy to support Strategic Rail Freight Interchange (SRFI) infrastructure on the basis that it a) Reduces road congestion – delivering goods quickly, efficiently and reliably to reduce road congestion; b) Reduces carbon emissions – to meet the Government’s vision for a greener

transport system as part of a lower carbon economy; c) Integrates existing SRFIs into a larger network that supports our major conurbations and helps develop efficient infrastructure programmes; d) Supports growth and creates employment – transferring freight from road to rail in appropriate sites.

The points raised by my constituents are that Rail Central does not, in certain cases, meet these criteria and would not be a beneficial addition to the surrounding area. Notably, that the benefits of employment brought with a project of this size would not be enjoyed to their fullest by the local residents who currently see unemployment levels significantly below that of the national average.

Stop Rail Central Action Group drew my attention to the environmental information report drafted by Ashfield Land that dismissed a local alternative, Northampton Gateway, as an unsuitable option. They emphasised the fact that this site is now under consideration by your competitor, Roxhill, and suggested that it may in fact be an appropriate choice after all. Upon examination, my constituents identified that the proposed site for Rail Central was already under the ownership of Ashfield Land and therefore see the validity of the decision to build upon this site as having been undermined. This point has raised concerns with my constituents as to how considered the reports by Ashfield Land have been and has served to degrade public trust in the programme. Cementing this point is the fact that many residents are questioning the need for another Freight Terminal given that Daventry already has a 300 acre alternative (Daventry International Rail Freight Terminal).

As you may know, the Rt. Hon Andrea Leadsom MP hosted a meeting with Andrew Gough, Associate Professor at the University of Northampton and his BA students of International Logistics and Trade Finance and MSc students of International Logistic, on their findings regarding the proposals of Rail Central in the context of the rail freight market. Upon Ms. Leadsom's authority, I have been informed that the students concluded that these proposals were premature and that more favourable sites are available for this project. This seems to reflect the findings of many of my constituents, and again I hope it will shape your decision making process going forward.

Miscellaneous Issues

I will not delve into these subjects in any great deal but will just respectfully draw your attention to matters flagged by residents. These include Loss of heritage, Over population, Increase in crime and Lack of capacity on railways; for additional information on these subjects, I would refer you to Stop Rail Central Action Group's 'Consultation Feedback' document. I hope this exemplifies just how extensive the grievances of my constituents are and I trust they will be appropriately integrated into all areas of management and consultation going forward.

Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider the remarks made by my constituents; I will reemphasise that the views stated in this consultation feedback are the opinions and concerns of my constituents, and not my own, though I will do all I can to support and present their concerns.

Yours sincerely,

Chris

Chris Heaton-Harris MP