

# Radlett Strategic Rail Freight Interchange HMWT Position Statement

30<sup>th</sup> January 2013

Planning ref: St Albans 5/09/0708  
Appeal ref: APP/B1930/09/2109433

On 20<sup>th</sup> December 2012, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government issued a letter stating that he was minded to approve planning permission, subject to conditions, for a Strategic Rail Freight Interchange (SRFI) within the Green Belt on the former Radlett Aerodrome site at Park Street. This follows a series of public inquiries and High Court challenges since 2009, and a previous application made in 2006. Both applications were dismissed at appeal, due to a lack of very special circumstances justifying harm to the Green Belt and an unsatisfactory alternative sites appraisal. In a letter dated 14<sup>th</sup> December, the Secretary of State announced his decision not to re-open the inquiry and conjoin it with a similar inquiry at Colnbrook, near Slough. St Albans District Council has given notice of its intention to challenge through judicial review the decision not to re-open the inquiry.

Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust objected to the proposed SRFI in both 2006 and 2009, on the basis of the following:

- Certain and complete loss of two Local Wildlife Sites (ref. 77/082 'Quarry at Former Radlett Aerodrome' designated for breeding bird interest, and ref. 77/025/01 'Grassland at Former Radlett Aerodrome');
- Adverse impacts on local ecology;
- Insufficient and inappropriate ecological mitigation and compensation proposals, based on creation of a 'Country Park';
- Increased disturbance in currently undisturbed areas, with adverse consequences for wildlife.

The Trust had severe reservations about the Country Park proposal, which comprises small, fragmented parcels of land, rather than a continuous area in which significant habitat restoration could be undertaken. HMWT also questioned the robustness, viability and sustainability of the proposed arrangements for managing the land, given that the farm presently grazing the land was due to be demolished. Finally, it was not considered that the proposed mitigation and compensation for loss of the Local Wildlife Sites would be effective, and that increasing public access would in any event change the undisturbed nature of the area and thereby remove its interest for breeding birds.

The ecological impacts of the proposed SRFI have been examined through the appeals process. Whereas in 2008, the Inspector found that harm to ecological matters would not be significant, the Secretary of State agrees with the 2009 Inspector's report, that more weight should be given to the harm to ecological interests and that overall harm would arise in relation to ecology. However, the Secretary of State attributes very considerable weight to the need for SRFIs in the south east, and considers that benefits relating to the country park, public access, reduced CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and employment weigh in favour of the development.



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HMWT recognises that there are circumstances when the need for and public benefits of major infrastructure development justify harm to ecological interests. Where such a case has been made, it is imperative that adequate and appropriate steps are taken to avoid and minimise harm in the first instance, mitigate for adverse impacts, and finally compensate sufficiently to offset residual impacts, through suitable habitat restoration and enhancement in the local area. This is in accordance with national planning policy.

HMWT welcomes the fact that the importance of retaining the farm in operation has been recognised, and that the farm will be restored to a working farm with a visitor/interpretation centre as a condition to permission. This should help to ensure continued grazing of the land, and also encourage education and engagement with nature and wildlife. However, we remain unconvinced by the proposals for a 'Country Park', which it has been recognised do not equate to a country park in the sense that it would normally be understood. Furthermore, we do not believe that the proposals effectively recompense for the loss of breeding waterfowl and wetland bird habitat, for which the Local Wildlife Site was designated, and in that respect do not compensate for the loss of this Local Site. HMWT considers that more thought and effort should be given to habitat restoration and public access improvements that would make a real and measurable contribution to improving ecological connectivity and delivering a Living Landscape around the Upper Colne and Lower Ver valleys.

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