

Mrs Anne Main M.P.

St Albans



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Mark Carne
Chief Executive
Network Rail
1 Eversholt Street
London
NW1 2DN

Our ref: SA24902/CM

03 November 2016

Dear Mr Carne,

I am writing following our receipt of a letter from the rail minister on 19 October on matters pertaining to the railfreight development in Radlett. In the letter, the minister highlighted that questions concerning the timetable construction should be addressed to Network Rail (NR).

It has been nearly a decade since the initial proposals were made for the development of the railfreight interchange in Radlett. A lot has changed. The passenger services on routes that will be used by the Radlett Strategic Rail Freight Interchange (SRFI) services have increased, whilst the demand for railfreight in the UK has decreased.

One thing that has not changed is the ambiguity surrounding how freight trains on the Midland Main Line (MML) can run a coterminous service with passenger carriages. Questions remain regarding 1) the capacity for railfreight on current lines between London and the South East and 2) the demand for and efficiency of the Radlett SRFI.

Capacity for railfreight

Capacity for increased railfreight activity on the MML is integral to Radlett SRFI's success. However, planning permission was granted by the Secretary of State without a clear explanation by NR of how they will overcome this whilst also ensuring that passenger services remain uninterrupted.

In his letter, the rail minister wrote that there is 'already provision in the timetable for a large number of daily freight trains on the line through Radlett'. Could NR provide us with more detail of the timetables and calculations?

The minister then notes that, as you are aware, the 'nature of rail freight operations means that not all of [the] paths are always required on a daily basis'. This highlights the challenge ahead for NR to accommodate freight service schedules on passenger routes. The conflict between the timetabling of passenger trains, which anticipates demand, and timetabling of railfreight, which responds to demand, is described in the Department of Transport's Rail Freight Strategy (2016):

Railfreight services operate in response to customer and supply chain demands, making it more challenging to plan for freight services than passenger services, which tend to run to a regular timetable and route (p.8).



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What will NR do to overcome this? The rail minister said in his letter that, to ensure passenger services are not disrupted, railfreight services will be 'barred' from using certain sections of the MML during peak times. What plans will NR enact to guarantee that rail freight services will not require access to passenger routes at peak times?

It remains unclear whether the current routes between London and South East, which have been described in the government's National Networks National Policy Statement (2014) as one of the busiest passenger services with demand that is set to increase by 46.1% by 2033 (p.16/17), could accommodate a sporadic timetabling schedule. Could the Radlett SRFI still function at full capacity if railfreight services were, as the rail minister has assured, 'barred from using the southern part of the Midland Main Line during peak commuter hours'?

The rail minister further highlights the East and West Coast Main Lines (EWCML) as 'particularly good examples of where passenger and freight trains can co-exist' in his letter. As you are aware, the infrastructure of the MML is different to that of the EWCML.

Consequently, the MML is substantially less desirable to railfreight services. In his 2009 report on the Radlett SRFI proposal, Mr Bailes highlights that major freight lines such as the EWCML and Great Eastern Main Line have a gauge of 10. The MML, however, which is not a major freight route to Radlett from the ports, has a freight gauge of only 8 between London and Radlett, which limits the size of container that can be handled and therefore the capacity of the SRFI (p.10). Would you kindly outline any recent assessment NR has made regarding the suitability of the MML route for the increased rail freight migration?

The Department of Transport (DfT) is 'investigating the impact of freight dwell times' to assess 'trade-offs between passenger and freight train pathing decisions', according to its 2016 report (p.8/9). As you are probably aware, Sundon offers a more economical site for railfreight development because it has established rail freight infrastructure, such as a freight loop, that accommodates passenger services.

If the MML route requires reconstruction to accommodate railfreight services as a result of the Radlett SRFI development, the cost of the reconstruction will need to be demonstrably outweighed by the economic benefits of the development. As the DfT writes:

Substantial investment in infrastructure capacity – particularly on inter-urban routes between our key cities, London & South East routes and major city commuter routes – will be needed (2014 p.19).

Capacity for railfreight services to move to and from an interchange in Radlett is questionable. Whilst the rail minister has forbidden railfreight services using sections of the MML, it seems that such assurances are unrealistic given the responsive and sporadic timetabling of freight travel. We would be grateful if you could provide us with an outline of your current plans to overcome this timetabling and predicted costs.



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Demand for railfreight

I am still unclear about the realistic efficiency of the Radlett SRFI in the long term. Assurances must be made to avoid the SRFI becoming a mere lorry park.

From our analysis of the Office of Rail and Road's national quarterly statistics between 2014 and 2016, it seems that the railfreight industry is in decline. The total volume of coal moved by rail has decreased by 61.4% since 2014 (Melbourne 2016 p.1). Further, the total volume of all commodities moved by rail has drastically decreased from 5.79 billion net tonne kilometres in 2014/15 (Melbourne 2015 p.5), to 4.20 billion net tonne kilometres in 2016/17 (Melbourne 2016 p.1), with a substantial drop in four of the seven primary commodities moved by railfreight in the UK. Has NR reassessed its strategy regarding the Radlett SRFI infrastructure development in light of these reports?

The government has recently reassessed its national strategy regarding railfreight. Its 2016 Rail Freight Strategy report states that nearly 4000 redundant freight paths were removed in the last two years (p.9). This highlights an increasing lack of demand for and underuse of railfreight in the UK. The report supports this, suggesting that the government will consult with the Rail Delivery Group on whether the 'franchising process' is realistic or even likely to be in future demand (p.9).

Further, the government is still in the process of assessing the drawbacks or benefits of investing in networks made specifically to enable freight growth:

We are continuing the roll-out of digital signalling to unlock existing capacity constraints, and we are working with the rail freight industry to ensure that freight benefits from this [...] Track access charges represent a significant cost for the rail freight industry, with the industry as a whole projected to pay £87million per year in track access charges by the end of CP5 (p.9).

What communications has the government had with the railfreight industry and NR on this? Will the MML be sufficiently flexible to accommodate modern infrastructures? With this current reassessment of national railfreight strategy, it seems to me that the Secretary of State's approval of planning permission, which was based mostly on proposals and reports provided before 2012, is outdated and no longer sufficiently informed. This raises questions about the efficiency of the SRFI in Radlett.

Paragraph 8.126 of the 2010 inspector's report on the Radlett SRFI stated that the proposed location for the site means it is not commercially effective against road movements to ports because it is less than 120 miles in distance from primary deep sea ports such as Felixstone and Southampton. This is in line with findings in the Arup research report, which was included in the government's research to develop their 2016 railfreight strategy, and states:

Where the distances involved are medium to long (in effect, 100 miles or greater) the passenger rail network can achieve quicker journey times than road (p.27).

Does NR share my concerns that the Radlett SRFI will be uneconomical given its location less than 100 miles from London seaports?

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My constituents and I believe that NR needs to reassess the suitability of the Radlett site given the decrease in freight line usage and freight moved over the past few years. Most telling, in a response to a question that I put to the Secretary of State on 20 October, the rail minister wrote:

Since 2000, development consent has been given for ten Strategic Rail Freight Interchanges across Great Britain. The Department for Transport does not monitor progress in constructing these sites. However we understand that not all of these interchanges have yet been constructed.

It is clear that the government itself is not able to provide an update on the progress of SRFI construction in the country. I can find no evidence of any SRFI having been built since 2000, even though planning permission was granted to a number of developments. This is because matters such as those raised in this letter were not properly addressed, and alternative sites that solve these issues were not fully considered.

I would be grateful if NR could provide swift and detailed answers to the questions in this letter given the imminence of Segro's intention to purchase the land from the county council. If the Radlett SRFI is to be realised, then surely these issues of fundamental importance are critical to ensuring that railfreight does not disrupt my constituents' daily travel to work, and ensuring a viable railfreight interchange into the future?

I thank you in advance of your reply.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Anne Main".

Anne Main MP

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