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Dear Mr Singleton

Application by Four Ashes Limited for an Order Granting Development Consent for the West Midlands Interchange

Request for Further Information – Deadline 8

Firstly, thank you for the opportunity to take part in this call for information.

As I'm sure you will appreciate, a great number of my constituents are concerned about the proposals and will want to make their views known. I would urge you to take their opinions into account when assessing this application. My own response, on behalf of my constituents, is as follows.

Future Freight Capacity

It appears that the applicant places strong emphasis on the proposed HS2 railway to free up freight capacity on the West Coast main line and adjacent lines. However, the Prime Minister has recently announced a review into HS2, placing the whole project into a period of uncertainty. Equally, dates for completion of the project, if it goes ahead, continue to slip. The earliest that any capacity could be made available tanks to the opening of any HS2 services would, at current estimation be, between London and Crewe 2026/7 and further North 2033. However, many observers feel that these dates are very optimistic.

However, even if the project does go ahead and despite it being a number of years in the making, no reliable guarantees have been made regarding freight capacity on the West Coast main line and adjacent routes. In fact, industry lobby group, the Rail Freight group, recently told the HS2 Select Committee that they fear that existing freight services may actually decline as a result of the 'Classic Compatible' services that will leave the HS2 network and join the West and East Coast main lines.

In a press release they stated "*...the Rail Freight Group (RFG) remains concerned that existing freight services on the West Coast Main Line may be adversely affected in future, once HS2 services leave the high-speed network and start running on the route.*"

Despite the Select Committee asking HS2 to resolve the uncertainty, no guarantees have been made that current freight levels will be maintained, let alone improved.

Equally, the concern has been raised that with no guarantees that freight traffic will be given the priority for any space made available on the rail network by the introduction of HS2, this could be snapped up by commercial passenger operators looking to run cheaper passenger services.

The recent announcement by Virgin Trains of plans to launch a new hourly service between London and Liverpool via an 'open access' application with the Office of Rail and Road, shows that commercial operators see an opportunity to run cheaper passenger services where capacity comes available. This highlights that freight operators would by no means have the monopoly on such availability.

Closing statement

Given the invitation for closing statements, I would also like to reiterate my main reasons for opposing this proposal.

Size of proposed site/Green belt

One of my main objections is the scale of the proposed interchange. 260 Hectares (643 acres) of green belt would be destroyed to site the huge warehouses, new road & rail links and commercial parking. I would suggest that modern developments in technology are making it less necessary to have large sheds to accommodate large amounts of stock, not more. Were a rail freight interchange necessary, connecting rail and road, then surely it would make the need for longer, taller and wider sheds less necessary as companies would be wanting to use the railway to 'move on' their items, not store them. I therefore do not believe that there is a satisfactory argument for this site to be of the scale that is proposed.

Lorry traffic

Whilst I appreciate that proposals have been put forward for minimising the amount of lorries that will travel through Penkridge village from the Interchange, I am concerned about how this will be enforced. The revised proposals for traffic management are an improvement on those in the previous plans but still do not address the concerns over the J13/A449/Gailey traffic. The proposals for installing Automatic Number Plate Recognition technology to catch drivers who are not supposed to use that stretch of road are very welcome. However, a number of issues need to be addressed, such as, what would happen if the M6 is at a standstill or closed between J12 and J13? Would 'unauthorised' vehicles be fined for using the A449 when all other traffic would be allowed to do so freely? If the control was suspended for that period of time, who would make the decision and how would it be communicated?

Impact on other routes

Furthermore, there is no mention of what additional traffic would be travelling on the section of the A5, both East and West bound, between the A449 and the A41 and which would have to pass through the village of Weston-under-Lizard. This section of the A5 (through the village) is restricted to 40mph and has double-white lines and is barely wide enough for two HGVs currently. My constituents are concerned at the additional traffic flows, on a road which is already known for its accident rate and tragically, is notoriously bad for motorcycle deaths. The A41 is a major trunk road up to the ports of Holyhead and Liverpool and it would be a real temptation for HGVs to divert away from their proposed routes to use a short cut to or from the proposed development.

Distance from main Black County and Birmingham conurbations

This scheme is designed primarily to serve Birmingham and the Black Country. However, the nearest part of the Black Country (Wolverhampton) is approximately 7 miles away and Birmingham town centre is 17 miles away. These are all miles that would generate additional significant lorry transport on a road network which is already over capacity much of the time. The A449 and the M6 south bound and other local roads will inevitably become even more congested for longer periods.

Transport for workers

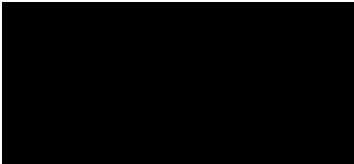
The site is proposed to generate thousands of jobs, which would, of course, be welcome. However, these thousands of workers would need, in the main, to come from elsewhere rather than the surrounding communities, Stafford, Telford, Wolverhampton, possibly even further afield. Even if public transport was used, which at present is rather limited, these workers would add thousands of extra cars onto the local roads, which are already congested. Even if systems were in place to limit lorry movements, the car movements generated by this proposal would cause chaos. This raises the question again of location and whether this proposal would be better situated in a place where the potential employees would be closer to it.

Environmental Damage

The ecological baseline study shows that a number of European Protected Species have been found, including many species of Staffordshire bats as well as great crested-newts and otters. The full impact of the proposed development on each of these species needs to be properly evaluated. I am concerned that the development would be detrimental to maintaining local populations of some or all of these species. The mitigation measures proposed may reduce the damage done but it will be some time before any replacement planting reaches any significant size in order to be able to have the impact that is desired. It is vital, therefore, that continuing efforts are made to ensure that as much information as possible is compiled in order to properly assess the impact of the proposed development, not just at the moment, but into the future if the proposal is permitted and implemented. Given that such a large area, which currently provides a home to a significant amount of wildlife, is due to be lost by this proposal, I would also ask that surveys and monitoring of the surrounding area take place to assess the impact on the ecology of the wider area.

Thank you again for the opportunity to take part in this process.

Yours sincerely



Jeremy Lefroy MP
Member of Parliament for the Stafford Constituency