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Genuine rail freight terminal or warehouses with seldom-used sidings?

HAS anyone else noticed the large number of rail freight terminals in the Midlands which

are under construction or in planning stages? At junction 15 on the M1, developers are aiming to construct five million sq ft of warehousing in what is called the Northampton Gateway Rail Freight Interchange on a wedge of land between the West Coast Main Line and the motorway.

Separately, and some may say contentiously, on the west side of the line, another developer wants to erect a similar amount of rail-connected warehousing. That's 10 million sq feet of warehouse space built either side of the same section of rail line.

If these two plans weren't enough in respect of their size and affect on the local community, there are plans on the table for another rail freight complex at Elmesthorpe, on the Leicester to Birmingham line. Here, a developer wants to build the Hinckley National Rail Freight Interchange, comprising nine million feet of warehousing - like the Northampton scheme, it's on green field land.

Furthermore, there's another new rail freight distribution park with 6,000,000sq ft of warehousing currently being built next to East Midlands Airport, called East Midlands Gateway, and connected to the Stenson Jct to Sheet Stores Jct freight-only line.

So, here are FOUR schemes totalling 24 million sq ft, but include the in-progress extension at Daventry rail freight terminal and you have 32 million sq feet of new warehousing within 50 miles of each other.

How can such vast complexes be justified, particularly as they are all so close to each other?

Before being accused of being anti-rail freight, let me add another key fact.

The developers have been smart, and by presenting each project as a "strategic rail freight interchange" and a "nationally significant infrastructure project", they are circumventing traditional local council planning controls.

Decisions on such strategic schemes come under the remit of a department of the Government's planning inspectorate, with the final decision being made by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities & Local Government.

I suspect I am not alone in finding it rather unsavoury that four almost identical schemes, located in close proximity, are proposed by different

developers, and all designed to fall outside the remit of a local authority?

Objections to the plans by concerned local residents won't count for much and are likely to be over-ridden by the 'strategic' nature of the schemes which will be viewed to be in the 'national interest'.

Within the Midlands are a number of unsuccessful rail terminal schemes - Telford, which is lucky to see one train a week; Prologis Park, Coventry has only seen one, maybe two trains; and at Castle Donington, Marks & Spencer has a rail-linked distribution centre which - according to Network Rail - has never seen a revenue-earning incoming freight train.

Leaving aside the matter of whether there are sufficient freight paths on the WCML to serve the sites, as all are next to motorway junctions there has to be genuine concern whether rail will actually benefit because there are no guarantees nor incentives to do so.

While the developers proclaim thousands of jobs, landscaping works, ecological mitigation, footpath and cycleway links which will be nice for the people working there, exactly what constitutes a 'strategic' element? And four 'strategic' sites within 50 miles?

I have a nagging feeling the 'rail freight' aspect attached to these projects is no more than a sop to ensure the developments get through the planning process. It's a view endorsed by a fellow railway journalist, who opined: "The railway is being abused as an Aunt Sally to garner planning acceptance and funding for developers not least because rail is environmentally sustainable. It's fundamentally wrong and indeed dishonest."

It's likely within a few years these terminals will end up being road-served because it's cheaper, convenient and more flexible, completely ignoring the green credentials rail can offer.

It really would be nice to be proved wrong.



TRAIN OF THOUGHT
Editor's Comment

Crossrail woes worsen

THINGS just get worse for Crossrail.

The capital's major infrastructure project now needs up to £2 billion of extra money to complete the mostly-in-tunnel section from Abbey Wood to Royal Oak (Paddington). Plus, there is no firm guarantee of the line opening this year.

Crossrail's chairman has been forced to resign after the deliberate and disgraceful press leaks he was about to be sacked.

The fact the National Audit Office has launched an investigation into overspending and delays to Crossrail which should separate the 'wheat from the chaff' and

get to the bottom of where it's all gone wrong.

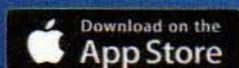
The delay will badly hit Transport for London financially with no fare income from Crossrail, possibly until 2020, but overall rail income for TfL has been declining. Fares have remained frozen for three years and passenger numbers have been dropping.

While the arguments simmer over who said what to whom and when as the blame game is played out, Crossrail gets added to a long list of major rail projects seriously delayed or vastly over budget for one reason or another. For a flagship project, it is so disappointing.

CHRIS MILNER, Editor



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