

## Rail Freight Interchanges: What Next?

In July and August two Strategic Rail Freight Interchange (SRFI) proposals have been refused planning permission following on from major planning inquiries: Radlett and Kent International Gateway (KIG). To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, to lose one rail freight interchange may be regarded as a misfortune. To lose two looks like carelessness!

Where does this leave plans to develop a network of SRFIs as a foundation for significant rail freight growth?

### The Recent Planning Decisions

Both proposals were in areas with significant impacts on the countryside and local communities.

Clearly there are very few locations in England where you can build a huge development of warehouses and rail facilities without having a major impact on the local environment and communities. This is recognised in the planning process, and SRFIs can still gain planning permission provided they can demonstrate the **need** for the facility and that there are no suitable but less harmful **alternative sites** available.

### Kent International Gateway

KIG's "needs case" was partly based on an assumption that the facility would be used to intercept goods from Europe and consolidate them in warehouses for onward distribution by road and rail. However, the planning inspector reported that he was not satisfied that the proposal would function as an SRFI in this way.

Nor did the inspector agree that KIG would be well placed to function as an SRFI serving London and the South East. In particular, he cited the Strategic Rail Authority's (SRA) SRFI policy which suggested that such facilities should be near to the M25. More on the SRA policy later!

### Radlett Freight Interchange

Following a second planning inquiry the planning inspector recommended that the appeal be upheld and the SRFI be given planning permission, but the Secretary of State disagreed and denied the appeal.

There was general agreement that the facility was needed and would function as a true rail freight interchange, but one of the key issues at both inquiries was whether a less harmful suitable alternative site could be developed as an SRFI.

Again, a key influence was the SRA SRFI policy which suggested that 3-4 SRFIs would be required to serve London and the South East. Given the location of Radlett, the search area for alternative sites covered the North West quadrant of the region around London.

While the inspector agreed that there were no suitable alternative sites which would potentially have less impact, the Secretary of State (SofS) disagreed. He found that a potential SRFI at Colnbrook, near Heathrow, could have less impact.

## The Good News

The Secretary of State has made it clear that support for the development of SRFIs is undiminished.

There are several major SRFIs currently being planned, some of which serve the areas of the refused applications.

Significantly, SRFI developments of over 60 Hectares will be considered as “nationally important infrastructure projects” and dealt with through the new processes introduced by the last government (and currently being amended by the present government). This may provide more clarity on the needs issue in particular.

## Our View

The decisions should be seen as an opportunity to reassess the way in which **need** and **alternative sites** are assessed.

In distribution terms, Colnbrook would serve a very different market to Radlett. Radlett would have been well placed to serve businesses and communities in Hertfordshire and North London. But the scheme proposers could not make this case as the SRA policy would suggest that there is not demand for both Colnbrook and Radlett.

The other reason for concern at the Radlett decision is the idea that a viable site can be turned down on the basis that an alternative site **might** be developed which **might** have less impact. If the remaining alternative site fails to be developed, where does that leave the strategy for rail freight? The result may be ad hoc development of individual or small clusters of warehouses served 100% by road.

KIG is perhaps different. The needs case is not helped by the absence of major distribution developments in the area and a feeling that

the location is neither near a port nor well suited for access to London. There will be many in the distribution industry as well as local communities who feel that the right decision has been made in this case.

## Time for a New Approach?

Our key concern is that major planning decisions continue to be influenced by a policy published by the SRA six years ago – the SRA SRFI Policy. This policy was based on theoretical research into distribution flows and patterns. At the time it was not clear exactly how the theoretical approach had been applied, and there was little consultation with the distribution industry.

IF SRFIs are refused, ad hoc distribution development will result, without access to rail. It makes sense to support developers who see demand for distribution centres with rail access.

Demand forecasts for SRFIs tend to be based on models which assume that past trends continue, and are not necessarily well suited to forecasting future changes such as portcentric distribution. Any new approach should be rooted in the changing needs of the distribution sector.

Obviously there are more issues than this, but our clear view is that it is time to move on from the SRA’s SRFI strategy and to bring the planning process closer to emerging distribution strategies.

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## Intermodal Terminal Solutions

