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St Albans rail freight terminal approved

Plans for a rail freight terminal at a former aerodrome near St Albans have been approved by the government, subject to agreement of developers' financial contributions.

Communities Secretary Eric Pickles made the decision, after permission had been refused by St Albans Council.

Mr Pickles has given until the end of February 2013 to agree section 106 funding arrangements with all parties.

St Albans MP Anne Main said it was a "mindless act of vandalism".

St Albans City and District Council refused planning permission in 2009, as it considered the proposal would harm the green-belt.

Developer HelioSlough Ltd said its plans followed government policies to transport goods by rail not road and that the terminal was needed to serve the whole of south-east England.

A public inquiry was held in 2009 and Mr Pickles dismissed the company's appeal the following year.

However, HelioSlough successfully challenged that decision in the High Court in July 2011 and the matter was referred back to the government.

Last month Mr Pickles proposed reopening the inquiry, looking to reconsider proposals for the depot in Park Street alongside a similar scheme at Colnbrook, near Slough.

He has now backed the planning inspectorate's decision to allow development, but wants Helioslough to submit "a suitable planning obligation".

Conservative Ms Main said she was "devastated" and that it was "the worst kind of Christmas present my constituents could have received".

"When the minister discussed this with me I made it clear how angry I was and I find the decision incomprehensible," she said.

"I cannot see what has changed since the previous refusals and I shall continue to explore the reasoning behind this change of direction."

She added there were still legal avenues open to challenge the decision and she would now "regroup".

Cathy Bolshaw, from Stop The Rail Freight Exchange group, called the decision "devastating for St Albans".

"The timing stinks, it's just before Christmas and we can't get hold of legal advice for at least 10 days," she said.

"It's like sticking the knife in and twisting it and it make you wonder what on earth has gone on.

"We will keep fighting as long as we can."

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