

P-3516/02EN

Answer given by Mrs Wallström
on behalf of the Commission
(16 January 2003)

The Commission is aware that the United Kingdom is considering the construction of a new international airport at Cliffe as one of its possible options for the future development of air transport in the South East of England.

The Cliffe Marshes form part of the Thames Estuary and Marshes Special Protection Area (SPA), classified under Council Directive 79/409/EEC of 2 April 1979 on the conservation of wild birds¹. Therefore, any development of an airport that may adversely affect this site would only be possible if it was in conformity with the procedural and substantive safeguards laid down in Article 6 (3) and (4) of Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora², which apply to all SPAs.

This would require an environmental assessment of the proposed development, with particular regard to its potential effects on the nature conservation values of the SPA. If this assessment shows that significant damage to the SPA would occur then it would only be permissible to proceed in the absence of alternative solutions and where there is an overriding public interest. In such cases it would be necessary to put in place compensation measures to offset the loss of habitat that would arise from the development.

In the context of the consultation exercise on future development of air transport in the United Kingdom and in light of concerns that has been expressed about the possible construction of a new airport at Cliffe, the Commission has written to the British authorities highlighting the need to take full account of the protection requirements of Natura 2000 sites in further examination of the options for the development of air transportation in the different regions of the United Kingdom.

¹ OJ L 103, 25.4.1979

² OJ L 206, 22.7.1992