

## Rail Electrification - Update

Some encouraging news. Network Rail (NR) has written to the Railway Action Group (RAG) on 9 March 2016, confirming its previous verbal commitment to retrofitting a suitable new design of electrification gantries throughout the whole AONB section of line (some 20kms from near Pangbourne to near Didcot).

NR's CEO, Mark Carne, is to give his high level endorsement of this in a letter to the AONB Conservation Boards soon. (Hopefully, this may be on the RAG website by the time this is published). In addition, NR has also published on its own website the 'Statement of Intent' that RAG received in October 2015, along with a revised statement of the plans for the Goring Gap section of the track:

[www.networkrail.co.uk/great-western-route-modernisation/oxfordshire/](http://www.networkrail.co.uk/great-western-route-modernisation/oxfordshire/)

Importantly, RAG has also received confirmation in writing that *"Network Rail has made financial provision for potential retrofit works within the overall £2.8bn budget for electrification between Maidenhead and Cardiff."*

At a meeting on 11 March, NR discussed with representatives from The Chilterns AONB, North Wessex Downs AONB, Natural England and an environmental consultancy (2B Landscape Consultancy Ltd), its progress in developing new electrification designs for the Goring Gap/AONB area. NR has now appointed Balfour Beatty to undertake the review of options for less visually impactful designs which can be retrofitted in the AONB area. This review will include a Landscape Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) which will be undertaken by 2B Landscape Consultancy Ltd. Balfour Beatty will also undertake all the technical feasibility work required to ensure the new designs meet all the exacting specifications required to comply with NR's safety and interoperability standards. At some point (tba), Balfour Beatty will produce a report, with recommendations, which will then go the Department for Transport for its 'approvals process'.

However, there are still risks that the retrofit will not go ahead, either because NR, RAG and/or the Conservation Boards cannot agree a mutually acceptable design, which meets both engineering and aesthetic requirements, or because NR and/or the government ultimately decides the cost is not worth the benefit, on a project that is already hugely over budget and time. Therefore it is important for RAG to continue to keep pressure on NR to follow through what it has

promised, and for residents affected or concerned by the designs to maximise the turn-out at the formal consultation meetings to let NR know how strongly people feel about the damage that this poor design has had on our environment.

NR is continuing to install the current design between Reading and Didcot, but this work may/should be complete by end of 2016, ready for the testing programme of the new Hitachi electric trains soon after. Once testing has been completed (timetable unknown), RAG understands that this whole test track area will be potentially retrofitted with the new, lower visual impact design at some point afterwards, assuming a design is acceptable to NR, RAG and the AONBs. Presumably more testing of the new system will be required.

At the next RAG/NR meeting in Goring in April, RAG is hoping to see real signs of progress with the alternate designs that NR/Balfour Beatty are working on and I hope to be able to publish the timetable and venues for the long-awaited public consultation process later this year. Then you will all have a chance to see the new design options and give NR your views. For further details and the latest news, see RAG's website:

[www.savegoringgap.org.uk](http://www.savegoringgap.org.uk)

**Ron Bridle, RAG committee.**