

Rail Electrification – Update

Further promising news. At the latest (the 5th on 5 May) meeting with Network Rail (NR) in Goring, detailed information was sought by the Railway Action Group (RAG) and other attendees, about NR's plans on the potential removal of the existing ugly gantries and the retrofitting of a new, more aesthetic, design. NR have now commissioned new designs and the public will be able to view and comment on these at forthcoming public consultation process.

Some while ago, RAG has persuaded NR's Chief Executive Officer (Mark Carne) to write a letter to the Conservation Boards of the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs AONBs to reaffirm NR's intention to retrofit a better design of infrastructure after they have completed their testing of the current overhead line equipment (OLE) on this Goring Gap section of track. Although there are caveats, the significance of this letter from the head of NR cannot be understated and the whole document may be found under the 'Documents & Links' section of RAG's website.

The key section reads *"... I also re-affirm that should the outcome of the design options and the public consultation highlight that Network Rail should undertake retrospective works to alter or replace the installed apparatus, Network Rail intends to undertake such works as are necessary, subject to costs and the agreement of funding"*.

The 'guarantees' that we are seeking from NR clearly depend on two things. Firstly, as many people as possible turn out for the formal, public consultations to look at these new designs to show NR that the public consultation demands that they take retrospective action and secondly, that the money that NR have put aside in its budget is 'agreed' to be spent for this purpose. The public consultation is now scheduled for September. Details to be published when available.

This last meeting in Goring, chaired by David Bermingham, was well attended with representatives from five Parish Councils, two members for the Council for the Protection of Rural England, (CPRE) a senior planning representative from SODC and John Howell MP for Henley present. NR confirmed that they are well under way with moving from concepts for new designs to more practicable designs. These include 'wire-head spans' (instead of the heavy solid horizontal metal structures currently being used) and thinner, more tubular versions of the upright supports. (By the way, for readers who may be concerned about the viability of the British Steel Industry, we have established in writing from the Department for Transport that *"Network Rail*

sources 95% of its steel rail from the UK". However the government didn't comment on the steel for its electrification gantries, which we know will total about 175,000 tonnes over the next 6 years for the whole electrification project). The new gantry designs will then be tested for visual impact using a specialist contractor and then narrowed down to 3 or 4 designs that have been checked for engineering, safety and reliability requirements. Throughout this process the local statutory bodies and RAG will be consulted with regards to reaching a mutually acceptable design. Then the designs will be shown to the general public at the formal consultation, which is a 6-week exercise within the AONB areas affected.

We also established that the testing of the infrastructure and the new trains will be a two-phase process. Once the national test track (Reading to Didcot) is complete and 'goes live' on 28 May, the infrastructure testing (gantries and overhead wiring etc) will be completed by the end of September. Assuming this is satisfactory, then the new Hitachi electric trains themselves will be tested by the manufacturer's engineers. This final phase 'may' be completed by the end of 2016 or thereabouts.

All in all the meeting was positive and held in a spirit of cooperation rather than the somewhat belligerent attitudes and inflexibility we first encountered during the first meetings in the middle of 2015. However, despite these positive steps, RAG continues to have concerns about whether NR will deliver on their promises in a year or so from now, given the huge budget over-run on the GWML electrification. NR re-affirmed that there is now a line in the overall £2.8billion GWR electrification budget for the 'Goring Gap/AONB retrofit'. That doesn't guarantee, of course, it will be used for that purpose. We are therefore still engaging with an environmental law firm to pursue a formal challenge to the validity of NR's Permitted Development Rights (PDRs) for the project, and the probability that they have not had sufficient regard to protecting and enhancing the beauty of AONBs as they are statutorily bound to do so.

The next meeting with NR should be in mid-June and by then it is hoped that we will have had a preview of the new designs the public will be able to consider in September. For further details and the latest news, see RAG's website: www.savegoringgap.org.uk

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