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9th December 2015

Rt Hon Patrick McLoughlin MP and Claire Perry MP
Department for Transport
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
London
SW1P 4DR

Dear Mr McLoughlin and Ms Perry,

Great Western electrification - Chilterns and North Wessex Downs AONBs

Thank you for the letter from Nicholas Woodbridge dated 11th November. We are writing again because it failed to address the key points of our original letter of 23rd October.

We asked to meet with you urgently to discuss the matter of the design of the rail electrification equipment being installed through the two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: the Chilterns and the North Wessex Downs AONBs. We reiterate that we would like to meet with you and discuss the problem and how it can be resolved. We do not want to add to delays and the expense of the electrification project, nor do we wish to be forced into legal routes to challenge the decision-making process surrounding this issue.

Nicholas's letter explains the benefits of electrification (which we support) and sets out why third rail is not suitable for this project (we did not ask for third rail, we merely seek more sensitively designed overhead line equipment than the Series 1 OLE structures being installed). Less visually intrusive OLE designs are clearly possible as demonstrated on the continent e.g. the electrified line between Milan and Turin, and by the HS2 design competition run by RIBA, pictures can be found at

<http://www.ribacompetitions.com/ols/shortlisted.html>

We are pleased that Nicholas's letter emphasises that the Department of Transport expects Network Rail to discharge their statutory obligations. Network Rail as statutory undertakers, as well as Ministers and all public bodies, are subject to a statutory duty under section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of areas of outstanding natural beauty. AONBs have the same status in planning as National Parks; they share the

highest status of protection and great weight should be given to conserving their landscape and scenic beauty (Government policy in the National Planning Policy Framework paragraph 115).

Network Rail has accepted that it failed to carry out specific consultation with us, the public sector bodies whose role is to look after the AONBs, about the detailed OLE designs. This is despite Network Rail's 2013 Environmental Statement for the Great Western Main Line electrification project identifying moderate to large adverse effects on the AONB and recommending specific work with us on the designs. No such consultation took place and the installation began in spring 2015 with no public or stakeholder consultation, no decision-making or consents process, no plans or designs being published, and no audit trail of how design options were selected or demonstrating how the protected landscapes were taken into account.

Network Rail has committed to undertake a review of viable design options for the OLE affecting the AONB and consult the public on this. You may be aware that public feelings are running high on this issue; a recent drop-in meeting run by Network Rail in the tiny South Stoke village hall attracted around 700 people.

We are concerned that the commitment to replace the OLEs through the necessary stretches has been heavily caveated by Network Rail. If we are to accept that the installation continues between Reading and Didcot (we first wrote to Mark Carne seeking removal and replacement of the Series 1 OLE in March 2015) on the basis that they will be replaced in future through the AONBs, we need proper cast iron guarantees that the Series 1 OLE *will* be replaced, not the statement of intent Network Rail has given us couched in uncertainty about consultation responses and replacement costs. We need firm commitments about actions that will be carried out, together with a ring-fenced budget identified as part of the ongoing funding review for this project. Otherwise we must call for an immediate stop and no further installation of the harmful Series 1 OLE infrastructure.

It is vital to resolve the issue so that this and future rail electrification projects across the country can take place in a way that minimises harm to protected landscapes like National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Getting the OLE designs right for these two AONBs could provide an exemplar for how to electrify railways successfully in Britain's finest landscapes. We look forward to your response and meeting with you.

Yours sincerely,



Sue Holden
Chief Officer
Chilterns Conservation Board



Henry Oliver
Director
North Wessex Downs AONB

Cc: Richard Benyon MP

Ed Vaizey MP

John Howell MP

Mark Carne, Network Rail

Simon Maple, Network Rail



The beautiful Goring Gap before the installation. Here the line runs over the Gatehampton Viaduct through the two nationally designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (the North Wessex Downs AONB left of the River Thames, Chilterns AONB to the right)



Brunel's Grade II listed Gatehampton Viaduct over the River Thames. Over the summer fixings were added to mount the Series 1 OLE structures on the outside of the viaduct.



Installation of Series 1 OLE in progress in the AONBs north west of Goring (the Chilterns AONB in the foreground and North Wessex Downs in the background)