

South Stoke & Goring Railway Electrification Action Group
Meeting with Network Rail – Goring Village Hall – 14th Oct 2015

Attendees:

Chair: Kevin Bulmer – Chairman Goring Parish Council, Cllr South Oxfordshire District Council & Cllr Oxfordshire County Council

SS & GG RAG (RAG):

Ian Haslam, John Wills (Assistant Chairman - Goring PC), Ron Bridle, Bryan Urbick (South Stoke & Goring PC), David Wilson, Roy McMillan (Chairman - South Stoke PC)

Others:

Dr Lucy Murfett (Planning Officer - Chilterns Conservation Board), Henry Oliver (Director – North Wessex Downs AONB)

Network Rail:

Simon Maple (Route Programme and Project Sponsor), Nia Griffiths (Head of Consents and Environment), Richard Turner (Community Relations Manager), Matthew Thompson (Communications Manager)

Apologies:

John Howell, (MP – Henley), Angie Patterson (PA to John Howell), Professor Richard Harding (CPRE – Chairman, Wallingford District), Nigel Hawkey, Peter Brampton (SODC Planning)

Agenda:

1. The overall Consultation Plan – NR
2. Status of Freedom of Information Requests (EIRs) – ALL
3. Consideration of analogous settings and the designs employed by NR, especially over viaduct – RAG / CCB
4. Update on Planting/Screening progress – NR
5. Future Actions and what guarantees will NR provide to deliver on this action post electrification – ALL
6. AOB - ALL

Introductions

Kevin Bulmer (KB) asked everyone to introduce themselves. Afterwards, he quickly moved to the agenda, with clarification (acknowledged from the NR team) that this meeting was not part of the formal consultation, but simply a meeting to discuss the plans for a future consultation.

1. The Overall Consultation Plan

Simon Maple (SM) reiterated NR's desire to 'put things right' and confirmed the "...commitment to put things right".

Kevin Bulmer (KB) asked: "Can we reassure potential attendees that the consultation is genuine, and not just a 'tick box' exercise?"

The NR team nodded assent. Nia Griffiths (NG) laid out the consultation plan, as it is currently envisaged (caveated by – to be confirmed as soon as possible – the certainty that all the design options will be finalised prior to commencement of the formal consultation).

As per NG's explanation:

- The South Stoke Village Hall meeting – scheduled for the 23rd October – because the materials are not all ready, this will no longer be part of the formal consultation. Because it had previously been scheduled, the NR team wanted to keep their commitment and meet with those who planned to attend. The drop-in meeting will now focus on explaining the consultation process, and answer any questions and address concerns of all those attending. FAQs sheets will be available, as will documents that explain the formal consultation.
- There was a request from several (KB, RB, others) that the communication about the formal consultation needed to reassure many (who have seen the existing design continue to be built) that the consultation is genuine, and that the Drop-In meeting attendees' input has potential to impact the final design. Though not able to confirm exactly how this would be done, it was agreed by all the NR team that they would do all they could to ensure that the local community were aware that this is a genuine process and that it will be guiding the final situation reached for NR's electrification project within the AONBs.
- NG indicated that the formal consultation will be held in two or more locations – and the planned launch would be 23rd November (though later in the meeting, the target date was amended). Typically a formal consultation would be six weeks, but because of Christmas holidays, this would be extended to about eight weeks. There would not only be drop-in meetings, but also a website. There was a request for assistance in publicising the available meetings and materials, and RAG agreed. NR was reminded of the deadlines for the Goring Gap News and the South Stoke Parish Newsletter. KB suggested that they also contact Henley Standard as it is a well-read publication in the area.
- After the consultation period, the results would be collated and analysed. Though difficult to say how long this will take and what form it will take, there was an acknowledgement from NG that RAG/key stakeholders will be somehow engaged and allowed to review and respond. Then the recommendations will need to be presented to the NR Board for any final approvals.

Within this discussion regarding the planned consultation, there were questions raised by Henry Oliver (HO) and Dr Lucy Murfett (LM) about the specific areas that will be part of the consultation. HO wanted the brief to include areas of the track that are in the setting of the AONB and not only those literally within it. NR were able to commit that the areas of track would definitely include the sections within the AONB, and would keep in mind HO's request in future discussions.

Within the discussion, NG used the term 'design mitigation', and Ian Haslam (IH) asked for clarification as to what that meant. NG confirmed it meant "alternatives that could or should be applied to the design, and other mitigation".

KB raised further questions about the consultation and the request for certainty that it would not be a tick-box exercise. SM indicated that in previous meetings they had promised this, though IH and others questioned this statement, arguing that RAG's understanding of what had been promised was that NR would only consider change to the system design after successful legal action against it. This was based on the minutes of the 16th July 2015 meeting which had recorded NR stating "If we have

failed in our duty...we will accept retrospective work.” NR confirmed that they meant that they had already agreed to a consultation, and that the consultation may guide potential changes in design.

SM clarified that they would commit to retrofitting and whatever else is required after a formal consultation – subject to agreement of the NR board – and that the intention was to remedy and rectify the situation in the AONBs.

A discussion about the drop-in meetings followed with IH asking that the local communities were informed about NR’s new plan of consultation and potential design change in order that they were not put off attending by regarding the current installation as a *fait accompli*. NR assured the meeting that they would communicate this to local communities prior to the meetings. LM asked why install then retrofit? NG said that everything above ground level is reversible.

IH enquired to what managerial level in NR the issue of design change had been discussed and approved. SM replied that Mark Carne was aware and that further discussions regarding it would take place in the following days, when he had meetings arranged with him. He was not aware if the issue had been discussed at a higher level or whether the Transport Secretary, Patrick McLoughlin had been informed.

NR were asked what aspects of the new plan they had undertaken. NG replied that the Consultation Plan had been formalised and initiated, and work on new possible designs was being kicked off. In a response to a question regarding who would do the designs SM said that this would be done by in-house design teams and perhaps F&F. In answer to queries on how Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) would fit into the plan, NR replied that this was being looked at and should be ready using the new designs for the formal start of the Consultation Period, but that the timeframe was tight. IH said that from RAG’s perspective they didn’t mind if the timeframe was extended in order that the best outcome was arrived at (with the plan elements slotting together properly) IF, and only if, RAG were convinced that a design change was a real and probable outcome. The Parish Councils and the AONB bodies supported this stance, which was reaffirmed and welcomed by NR.

It was then questioned by RB as to why NR would pay to have the current plan installed, with the risk that it may need to be changed such that the costs associated would be much higher than if they simply stopped the current plan, did the consultation, and then pursued the final, agreed plan. SM clarified that this had been looked at, and that it was actually cheaper to build the test track and then pay for any retrofitting (as may be required from a consultation) than to delay. The test track completion is critical to the rest of the line being completed, and there are substantial costs for rolling stock and other issues that would be incurred if the test track was not completed, as NR will be charged for the trains even if they don't use them. This meant that the cost of retrofitting the track will be cheaper than delaying the test overall.

It was asked why they didn’t change the test section to another area, outside of an AONB. SM clarified that this had also been considered, but stated that there is no other area that could have been used for full testing, although some limited tests have now been moved to the East Coast route.

SM also mentioned the third rail design, but explained that it had lots of problems and operational drawbacks such that it doesn't make sense for GWR.

NR were asked whether headspans were also being re-considered as part of the review of alternative, less visually intrusive alternatives to portals. SM said yes, they would be considered.

2. Status of Freedom of Information Requests (EIRs)

IH reviewed the Fols that had been submitted from RAG and separately from Goring and South Stoke Parish Councils to NR. NG said that she would check that the requests were being progressed according to the necessary time-frames.

SM said NR would prefer the group not to use FOIs, and that the Group should first go directly to the NR electrification if further detail were required.

3. Consideration of analogous settings and the designs employed by NR, especially over viaduct

Clarity on this point was requested by NG.

IH explained, and showed images of possible alternative designs from the HS2 design competition conducted through RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects), and then contrasted them with the current designs being installed in the AONBs. He also sought assurance (as supported by LM & RB) that newer designs would be considered. LM emphasised this point, and indicated that she wanted to see completely new designs, and not those already put forward or a modest alteration of the existing design. These should include designs starting entirely from an aesthetic viewpoint and then adapted to work from an engineering criteria and safety viewpoint. An independent view of the visual impact should be undertaken using LVIA legislation and practices. This was acknowledged by NR, although SM stated that some designs such as a third rail could not be considered based on safety grounds.

LM asked whether the viaducts would be included in any design change, such that the new design system extended across them rather than switching to the old design. NG assured her that they would be included in the review, and that the use of portals would be reconsidered on the viaducts.

There was further discussion about the consultation and the importance to get it right. KB (and others) reiterated that probably starting the formal consultation in January is more realistic – not to diminish importance, but rather to make sure that things are done properly, with good design options explored, and proper LVIAs completed.

4. Update on Planting/Screening progress

HO indicated that ‘planting trees’ isn’t the only option and that NR should also consider removing secondary woodland on embankments, because of valuable grassland, although that is without the new factor of the overhead wires. Sometimes replacing needed grasslands would be more appropriate. NG, based on previously communicated biodiversity work, completely agreed.

It was agreed by all that this should become part of the formal consultation, and of course, any new designs (should they be forthcoming from the consultation process) should be taken into consideration before a planting/screening process was agreed.

5. Future Actions and what guarantees will NR provide to deliver on this action post electrification

IH asked for NR’s new plan to be formalised as a ‘Statement of Intent’ in order to give sufficient confidence to RAG, and the other authorities present, such that they could adapt their future plans in terms of legal challenges and the media engagement plan. Without this, he said, RAG would be obliged to carry on their plans unchanged. He also requested that this be made available in time for

the drop-in meeting scheduled for the 23rd Oct in order that attendees could be made aware of this new information.

RT confirmed that NR would provide a statement of intent.

Questions were raised by David Wilson (DW) about the EIS, asking whether NR had commissioned this formally as part of the planning process and indicated that if an EIS is undertaken then this usually negates any Permitted Development Rights. NG said that the EIS was undertaken due to the magnitude of the project and that it was never intended to be a formal one, but as an 'extra'. As a follow-up, NG/RT agreed to provide clarity on this matter.

6. AOB

IH asked if NR would allow RAG to have a stand at the Drop-In meetings to which Matthew Thompson (MT) agreed.

End of meeting