

Network Rail - Public 'Drop-in' meeting on electrification

The installation of inappropriate and unsympathetic metal structures for the electrification of the railway continues unabated in our highly environmentally sensitive Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, as you cannot have failed to notice. The Railway Action Group (RAG) has been asking Network Rail (NR) for many months for a proper public meeting to enable a full exchange of views on the design of the electrification system it is installing here and along the Great Western route. It has consistently refused these requests, saying it doesn't like public meetings, but has offered to set up a 'drop-in' session in South Stoke where NR personnel can talk to residents individually. **This is scheduled for Friday 23rd October between 12.00 noon and 8.00pm.** We questioned Network Rail's reasons for choosing South Stoke rather than Goring where the majority of the residents live and which has better transport access and parking. (Draw your own conclusions, but 'divide and rule' comes to mind!). A further meeting may be held in Goring, the date of which will be announced to you if this is to be the case.

The general situation to date (30 Sept) is that RAG has had 2 meetings with senior executives from Network Rail in Goring and a further one is planned for 14 October. Five Freedom of Information Requests have been submitted to NR, letters have been sent the CEO and other senior managers of NR, local MPs, the Rail Regulator and the Secretary of State for Transport and others. John Howell MP has also written to the Secretary of State for Transport and the CEO of Network Rail on RAG's behalf. The Chilterns Conservation Board is working with us and has had its first, long-awaited direct meeting with NR last month following our campaigning for this consultation.

Despite NR accepting in writing it has failed in meeting its obligations 1) under Section 85 of The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to have regard to maintaining or enhancing the natural beauty of the two AONBs in the Goring Gap and 2) failing in its duty to consult properly with the local authorities and conservation boards, it still refuses to consider modifying the design to mitigate the adverse visual effects it's own environmental report states it is having on the Goring Gap.

Whilst NR did not need planning permission to install the electrification system, as it has 'permitted development rights', it is still required to adhere to environmental laws and to consult properly before work began. Neither of the parish councils of Goring and South Stoke, nor the two conservation boards of the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs AONBs had a single meeting with Network Rail before the installation began. As NR admits, the construction plans were not sent to anyone until after the installation began, so nobody was able to ask questions or challenge the design before the stanchions and horizontal portals started appearing.

RAG has produced a short film and a comprehensive website to give residents and others all the information they need to discuss the issues with NR at the drop-in meeting. The film features a planning officer and a

planning consultant explaining the law and the issues. The film, along with the website, has been sent to the media in an effort to get Network Rail to mitigate the devastating visual environmental damage its current design is causing.

The Goring Gap, and the two AONBs it falls within, has the same environmental protection as a National Park and yet NR is treating it as any other section of the line between London and Bristol. In fact, the design being used here, has been described as the worst, in terms of visual irreparable damage, of any other electrification system in the country. It should be the best and have the least visual impact, if the law was adhered to, but Network Rail is worrying more about getting the job finished as quickly and cheaply as possible and is just ignoring the flack.

NR is relying on the fact that most people will accept this electrification design is a *fait accompli* and that it is an impossible task and a waste of time to try to get any concessions out of this national monopoly. RAG believes it is never a waste of time or effort to try to protect our precious environment. We have in writing from NR that it will undertake 'remedial work' if necessary, so it is not too late to do what we can to influence NR that there is an alternative, less visually obtrusive option. It must be stated that RAG fully supports the environmental and passenger benefits that NR claims electrification will bring, it's just the way it is going about it is what we have issue with.

A leaflet explaining the issues is planned for distribution and our website which gives ways of how to help, is www.savegoringgap.org.uk. The film is on the home page, as well as on YouTube, Vimeo and other video hosting sites. Please have a look at it, help if you want to and come to the South Stoke meeting to make your views known.

Ron Bridle (RAG member).