

Railway Electrification - The devastating visual impact on Goring and South Stoke

The South Stoke and Goring Railway Action Group (RAG) was formed in March with the aim of minimising the threat of massive and unprecedented visual impact electrification is having on our villages. We accept that any new structures on the elevated sections of the line will change the landscape and be unpalatable, albeit necessary, for the so-called environmental benefits of having a modern electrified railway. However, our mission is to minimise the environmental impact by negotiating with (NR) to use the most sympathetic design possible affecting this highly environmentally sensitive area within the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs AONBs. NR's only current plan for mitigation is planting to try to mask the structures, even though they have no useable land of their own on which to plant trees.

Although some basic consultation between NR has taken place in recent years, the problem has been that the final electrification design plan was not completed until December 2014. Before March 2015 very few people outside NR had access to it and had no knowledge of what metalwork was planned. Any 'consents' by the planning and other authorities were apparently given without knowing what exactly they were consenting to.

A meeting RAG had set up with NR for 15 April was cancelled by their community relations manager two days before when NR discovered that other community members were also going to be present. RAG finally managed to convince NR to agree to another meeting on 6 May and this was held at Goring Parish Council offices. The meeting was attended by four senior NR employees: Head of Consents and Environment, the Route Programme and Project Sponsor, a Senior Asset Engineer and the Community Relations Manager. Present for the RAG were Ian Haslam (Leader), Nigel Hawkey, Roy McMillan (South Stoke PC), Kevin Bulmer (OCC & GPC), John Wills (GPC) and Ron Bridle. John Howell MP, Angie Paterson and Ian Reay (Chairman of the Chilterns Conservation Board) also attended. After an opening statement from NR justifying their current infrastructure plan, Ian Haslam stated that the Group was not against electrification itself, but were opposed to the ugly and imposing infrastructure that was being deployed in this area. He identified the section from Lower Basildon to just beyond the Moultsford Viaduct as that most affected, principally the very visible section of track across the Gatehampton Viaduct and approaching Goring station, and the section visible from the fields in South Stoke. He pointed out that NR had recognised, in its 2012 Environmental Statement, that the work in these sections would have 'significant visual impact' on this particularly sensitive area, but had done nothing to mitigate this either in design or otherwise.

RAG believed that NR had failed during their approvals procedures in three aspects: 1) in carrying out due process, in that they had failed to consult properly with the local authorities, 2) in not putting together an effective mitigation plan, as they had promised, and 3) in not considering alternative designs which would lessen the negative impact on the landscape. RAG requested that 1) NR halted the ongoing installation of the electrification

infrastructure and 2) agreed to produce a more sympathetic design with appropriate mitigation for this section and re-engaged with the relevant local authorities in order to conduct meaningful consultations. RAG further emphasised the legal status of an AONB and the way that NR had breached its statutory duties in carrying out its 'Permitted Development Rights'. Ian Reay then presented the view of the Chilterns Conservation Board, which reinforced the criticism that planting a few trees was an unacceptable solution and that a well thought-out plan encompassing both infrastructure redesign and a planting scheme was necessary. He commented that this engagement was very late in the day and that it should have been held back in 2012. In response, NR admitted that they had failed to consult adequately during the approvals process and would re-engage with the local authorities to remedy this. NR also said they had provisions to fund a planting scheme and the costs of the longer-term maintenance of these areas, which would offer some visual mitigation. This would require negotiating with local landowners. RAG pointed out that any planting scheme constrained to only NR's land would not be able to screen the large stanchions and horizontal gantries as the plants would not be tall enough. John Howell welcomed the offer from NR to hold further consultation talks with the relevant authorities. He asked NR how they planned to proceed and to what timetable. He stressed that this should be done in a short time-frame to avoid adding cost to the electrification programme through needless prevarication. In terms of timing, NR said that testing of the electrified line from Reading to Didcot was planned for early 2016. Any delays, therefore, could have serious consequences. The meeting closed with NR agreeing to respond to a list of 14 questions RAG put to them and to come up with a revised consultation plan within two weeks of the meeting.

The response to RAG's questions has now been received and has demonstrated that NR have no plans to adhere to the findings of their own environmental study and change their infrastructure design, which, in fact is a statutory requirement in an AONB. Their consultation plan, however, has not been received and is now promised for the end of June. No material work appears to have been conducted over the relevant section of track between Goring and South Stoke since the meeting, however it continues apace further down the track between Pangbourne and Reading.

RAG is seeking a lawyer with planning or environmental experience, willing to work on a pro bono basis, as NR's Permitted Development Rights could be legally challenged as they have not conducted the required consultation process properly and not made any changes to reduce the visual impact on the AONB.

We ask concerned residents write to Network Rail to keep up the pressure. The key contact for this is the CEO: Mark Carne, Network Rail, 2nd Floor, One Eversholt Street, London NW1 2DN. mark.carne@networkrail.co.uk. It would be helpful to copy in the clerk of GPC (clerk@goringpc.org).

Finally, RAG has asked NR for a public meeting to allow the whole local community to voice their concerns and if NR agrees, full details will be advertised.

Ian Haslam & Ron Bridle (Railway Action Group).