

Rail Electrification Update No 9: Network Rail's Public Consultation - soon!

Following on from RAG's last update in August, Network Rail has been undertaking work on the new electrification designs and on the visual impact that these might have on the AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty). RAG members have seen the eleven gantry designs they are considering for a retrofit, but after detailed engineering analysis and cost evaluation they plan to reduce this to three or four possible designs to put before the general public as part of their (very late) consultation process. We have not seen the short listed designs yet and we are pressing for these to include non-portal type structures such as wire-head spans and more slender T-shaped designs. We believe that using these non-portal type structures is the only way to make a meaningful improvement to the aesthetic appearance of the current bulky and over-engineered gantry design.



Current tension portal to support 4 single electrified wires. Photo Ian Haslam

Network Rail will first show the short-listed designs to the 'Design Advisory Group' (the group of local statutory bodies that are working with Network Rail, which includes the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs Conservation Boards), in the next couple of weeks.

Network Rail has put some of the information relating to the remedial evaluation it is undertaking, and the impact that electrification is having on the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs AONBs, on a page of their website (www.networkrail.co.uk/great-western-route-modernisation/oxfordshire/). It includes maps, a list of the early options generated for potential retrofit (not the short-listed ones as yet), comments from the Design Advisory Group and some images from Balfour Beatty's evaluation workshops. The plan is to add more information onto this site as it becomes available.

Network Rail has also confirmed that the Public Consultation regarding the Great Western Mainline Electrification issues will commence on 21st January 2017, with drop-in meetings at various localities throughout the AONBs that have been affected by the work. Network Rail has stated that the process will be in two parts, with a second phase of drop-in meetings, which will incorporate feedback from the first, scheduled for March/April 2017. They have proposed a number of venues in the parishes affected, including Goring, Streatley, South Stoke, Cholsey Moulsoford, Pangbourne & Basildon.

Network Rail will be contacting Parish Councils and Village Halls directly to arrange venues and dates. Please look out for the official notifications from them so that you can plan to attend and make your views known. As with the previous consultation in October 2015, representatives of Network Rail will be in attendance to answer questions and get feedback from the public. The specific dates for each venue may be announced at fairly short notice so we suggest that people interested in attending these meetings consider signing up on our website (link at end of article) and will we email the details directly. It is essential that the maximum number of people affected by the electrification work attend these meetings and make their feelings known to Network Rail, as this may have a major bearing on whether it ultimately fulfill its promises and stated intentions to use the money it says it has put in its budget to undertake the retrofit.

The recent announcements by Network Rail on deferring parts of the electrification work will not have a significant impact on our AONB stretch of track. They have put back the electrification of four branch lines to 2024 and beyond, including the Henley branch line and the Didcot to Oxford branch line. However, the electrification work on the mainline track (from London - Cardiff) will continue with a current timetable for completion scheduled for end 2018, but this appears an optimistic forecast. The knock-on effects mean that Network Rail has had to order more bi-mode trains (hybrid electric and diesel) for the mainline service.

RAG's next meeting with Network Rail is planned for January. We hope to know the firm dates for the public consultation dates before Christmas, but as the January issue of GGN is not delivered until about 21/22 January, about the time Network Rail plan to start the consultation. So, to be notified by RAG when the consultations are and where, please register on RAG's website: www.savegoringgap.org.uk/ (Then go to 'How to Help', then 'Join our Mailing List').

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