



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Mr David Higgins
Chief Executive
Network Rail,
Kings Place, 90 York Way
London, N1 9AG

31 October 2011

Dear Mr Higgins,

Level Crossings, Steventon, Oxfordshire OX13

On Friday I held a meeting in Steventon, a village in my constituency, to discuss Network Rail's proposals to alter the operation of a level crossing situated at The Causeway in the village. Network Rail (NR) sent four representatives, and the Office of the Rail Regulator (ORR) sent two.

More than 150 villagers attended, as did two County Councillors, two District Councillors, the Chairman of the Parish Council and many parish councillors.

The meeting failed to allay the concerns of the villagers, and I have undertaken to write to you setting out the villagers' concerns and to ask you to address them as soon as possible.

As you know, the level crossing at The Causeway lies in the heart of the village. It is a manually operated level crossing, and an employee of NR is permanently stationed at the site. The proposal is to alter the crossing to a CCTV manually operated crossing, operated from Swindon. According to NR, there are some virtues to the arrangement. The operator would, in Swindon, be part of a team rather than being isolated; there would be quicker response times, as both the signal man and the response team would be based alongside the operator in Swindon.

Nevertheless, my constituents remain very concerned.

First, there does not appear to have been adequate consultation. The completion date of the works is set for 5th December, implying that consultation commenced on 5th October. However, there is *no evidence* that the ORR was notified of this date, *nor* the Highways Authority, both statutory consultees. In addition, while not a statutory requirement, the ORR recommends that NR consults with other stakeholders, such as the district council and the parish council. This has certainly not happened in any meaningful sense in this case.



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Will you therefore undertake to delay the current works in order to commence statutory consultation for a full 2 months, and to engage meaningfully with local residents?

Second, the crossing is relatively unique. Not only does it bisect a built up area, trains coming through, do so at speeds of up to 125 mph. We believe this is the only crossing in the western region which has both these elements present, and therefore the physical presence of a crossing attendant would be an important safety measure.

Is there any other crossing in the western region which both bisects a built up area and runs frequent high speed trains at maximum speed?

Third, there is evidence that CCTV manual crossings are less safe than manned manual crossings when it comes to pedestrian incidents. This is of huge concern, as there are many families in the village with young children. We have not seen a safety case and do not know if one has been prepared.

Has a safety case been prepared? What are the statistics for pedestrian incidents on CCTV manually operated crossings as compared to other crossings?

Fourth, no evidence was presented on what specific changes would be made, and how they would affect the village. How would the CCTV cameras operate? What would be their field of vision? How much would they pick up (eg a small obstruction on the line?) Would there be telephones on either side for people to use if there is an incident? Would there be boards on either side indicating the time when the next train was due? Would the new audible warning disturb residents based on either side?

What measures will be put in place to ensure maximum safety for pedestrians if the crossing is CCTV operated?

Fifth, although the new scheme might save money, the exact amount was not specified. Nor do potential new costs seem to have been taken into account. When the crossing fails, for example, the attendant quickly puts out a sign and much time is saved. What would happen if the crossing fails and it is unmanned? How would drivers be told what has happened? What would be the additional costs of a team coming from Swindon every time a minor incident occurred, which hitherto was dealt with by the attendant?

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What cost savings will result from the changes? Has any analysis been done of additional costs that could arise if the scheme goes ahead, such as the cost of call outs from Swindon?

Sixth, the residents were unconvinced that the attendant is a lone worker. The attendants are seen as very much part of the community, and interact with many villagers during their shift.

One resident at the meeting pointed out that she has crossed the railway three times a day for 62 years. I hope you can see that there is a lot of community engagement on the operation of a crossing that operates on a very dangerous line. The situation in Steventon is unique, and the failure of NR to engage properly with residents has caused a huge amount of anxiety, concern and anger.

NR must apply to the ORR for permission to change the crossing, and ultimately the Secretary of State has the right to refuse the application. For this reason I am copying my letter to the Secretary of State, as well as to the ORR, the local County Councillors, District Councillors, and Parish Council Chairman.

I look forward to your early reply to the questions I have marked in bold.

Yours sincerely,

Ed Vaizey
MP for Wantage and Didcot

Office Tel: 0207 219 6350
Office email: langleya@parliament.uk
email: ed.vaizey.mp@parliament.uk
website: www.vaizey.com

cc. Secretary of State for Transport
C/Clr Iain Brown
C/Clr Stewart Lilly
Joanna Simons, Chief Executive, County Council
D/Clr Mike Murray
D/Clr Bill Jones
Dick Bosley, Steventon Parish Council Chairman