

Great Langborough Residents' Association

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NETWORK RAIL: WHISTLE BOARD ISSUE EAST OF WOKINGHAM MINUTES OF MEETING

Held 3rd December 2018 at The Salvation Hall, Sturges Road, Wokingham.

Attendees :

Residents Committee:

Phil Lawman (PL) – Meeting Chairman

Mark Steers (MS), Roger Gook (RG) and Tony Spring (TS)

Pat Smith (PS) – Chairperson of Greater Langborough Residents Association & Minute taker

Network Rail:

Charlie Usher (CU)	- Head of Maintenance Delivery
Sam Pead (SP)	- Route level crossing Manager
David Smith (DS)	- Head of Route safety
Connie Banda (CB)	- Community relations officer
Lorraine Cogger (LC)	- Community relations Executive

Over 60 local residents.

Julian McGhee-Sumner – local councillor, town mayor and leader in waiting of WBC

1. Introduction

Phil Lawman explained the reasons for the meeting and the format for it including the collection of questions from Residents to be addressed to Network Rail representatives by the committee.

The objectives of the meeting are to

- understand:

- why Network Rails had decided to implement whistle boards each side of Smiths level crossing on 26th November 2018, as a result of which train drivers are instructed to blow their horns at the boards. This has resulted in significant noise pollution to the area with serious impact on families living in the area.
- why Network Rail had decided to do it now

- what Network Rail had done in terms of :
 - risk assessment for the level crossing
 - resident impact assessment
- ensure that Network Rail fully understood the issues and distress that it was causing residents
- agree next steps

Phil made everyone aware that they had the support of John Redwood, Julian McGhee-Sumner and the GLRA committee.

Phil also made everyone aware that BBC South Local news and BBC Radio Berkshire were covering the story tomorrow and that The Wokingham Paper were planning to cover the story this week.

2. Network Rail Rationale for the introduction of the whistle boards

Sam Pead explained that Safety Issues and assessment around Smiths level crossing had been identified 5 years ago which had rated it as a high risk 4th type.

Network Rail had therefore attempted to reduce the risk by a number of strategies which had not worked. These included trying to close the level crossing which is their long term aim. To do this there must be new access from the south side which will only become possible with the road and development planned for 3-5 years' time.

A temporary speed restriction had been put in place at that time but train operator South Western trains could challenge this within 6 months. Network Rail stated that they had implemented the whistle boards to improve user safety and speed up the trains. They believe that the whistle boards give 8 seconds warning to anyone trying to cross.

Other solutions have not been possible because of the curve and poor line of sight there and included considering signals at the crossing because there would be false warnings. It would need to be positioned to the west of the points at the line junction and would detect the train axles passing, including those going to Guildford.

A permanent speed restriction was not acceptable to train operators as they would have to alter the train schedule to accommodate this.

Understanding the rationale

PL asked whether the users of the level crossing or anyone else had highlighted concerns over the safety of using the level crossing. Network Rail confirmed that they had received no concerns or requests to improve the safety.

PL then asked whether the real reason for the introduction of the whistle boards was the pressure being put on Network Rail by South Western trains or Great Western trains.

Network Rail responded that this was a consideration and eventually stated that they were currently being fined about £500k per annum by South Western trains for causing delays to their train timetable on the Reading/Waterloo line, which they would like to avoid in future.

PL then asked whether this was the real reason that Network Rail had implemented the whistle boards. Network Rail said that this was one reason but also improving user safety was of paramount importance.

PL then asked what speed the trains used to go over the level crossing and what speed they are now going over the level crossing. Network Rail stated that they were travelling at 30mph and now, with the whistle boards in place, are able to travel at 60mph in one direction and 70mph in the other direction.

PL then asked the distances of the whistle boards from the level crossing. Network Rail stated that they were 333 yards away on the side where the trains are going at 70mph and 286 yards away on the other side where trains are going at 60mph.

PL asked whether it would be fair to assume that previously trains would have been going at full speed before they reached roughly where the whistle boards are now positioned and at the slower speed for the distance roughly between where the whistle boards are now positioned. Network Rail confirmed that this would have been the case.

PL then asked how much time delay was previously being caused by the trains going at 30mph. Network Rail stated that they did not know exactly but that it was about one minute.

PL then queried this by saying that assuming the distance between the whistle boards is approximately 600 yards, which is about one third of a mile..... If trains travel at 60mph they would take 20 seconds to travel one third of a mile. Therefore, if they are going at 30mph they would take 40 seconds which means that the time delay is actually 20 seconds and not one minute. Also, the trains will be at a reduced speed anyway as they approach and leave Wokingham station and manage the junction where the Guildford train line crosses. Therefore, we seriously question Network Rail assumption that the whistle boards are going to save one minute? Network Rail said that they now have the technology to log this accurately and if the time saving was not significant they could revert to South Western trains and ask for the speed restriction to be permanent. They confirmed they would need about 2 weeks of trains running to confirm the time being saved as a consequence of using whistle boards. There was a question from the floor about why they had not done this assessment before implementing the whistle boards. Network Rail did not reply.

PL noted that the train horn is inconsistent in volume and type of sound and sometimes is missing altogether. The sound is very unpleasant and has upset residents' lives and sleep patterns not least for allotment users, children and shift workers. Network Rail accepted this and also said that they had no idea that the implementation of whistle boards would have caused so much upset to residents and apologised for this.

3. Risk assessment

RG referred to Network Rail health and safety documentation and also asked what noise levels were deemed acceptable.

Alternatives to whistle boards were discussed, such as Video cameras and a GPS system using axle counting – Network Rail commented that this has to work with Whistle boards.

PL highlighted that sounding the horn is subject to human error. If the train driver does not always sound the horn and the trains are travelling at 60/70mph it was actually now less safe for users of the level crossing. The potential human error of the train driver was always going to be a risk.

RG asked Network Rail which risk assessment they had used. Network Rail replied 2017. RG then asked would it not have been good practice to do another assessment just prior to the whistle boards being installed. Network Rail replied that there was no need for this as nothing had changed. They also confirmed that the horn warning would provide 8 seconds for somebody to get off the crossing. RG responded that for those residents that are hard of hearing or slow to move this may not give sufficient time, including the primary user who is about to have a knee operation. Therefore, our opinion is that the introduction of whistle boards was not improving the safety of users, but actually making it worse!

The primary user of the crossing noted that they sometimes come home after midnight when the trains will no longer be hooting their horns and faster trains without the horns are terrifying.

Other solutions were discussed and the residents felt that Network Rail could have adopted a better solution which would achieve their objectives without causing any disturbance or distress to residents.

PL asked why there had been no consultation with residents or the owners of Knoll Farm, just a letter of information on 7 November, only 19 days before the introduction of whistle boards. Network Rail confirmed that they had contacted Wokingham Council. CU apologised that they had not followed their own procedure and agreed that this should have been done.

4. Impact on residents

TS noted that the Network Rail posters hung in the room only covered risk assessment and missed neighbourhood impact assessment and asked if they had done a neighbourhood impact assessment. Network Rail responded that they had not done one for Smiths crossing but had examples from other areas. TS asked Network Rail to share the examples.

TS asked how many houses were sent the Network Rail letter regarding the work. CB confirmed Network Rail had written to all residents within approximately 500 metres of the line on 7 November which they said was 563 addresses. Some impacted residents in the room mentioned they had come from other streets which did not receive the letter, so we know the household count is much higher. Network Rail agreed to provide a list of the roads that were sent the letters.

TS pointed out the World Health Organisation Guidelines for Community Noise?

'individual noise events exceeding 45dB(A) should be avoided. They advise that excessive noise seriously harms human health and interferes with people's daily activities, at work, at home and during leisure time. It can disturb sleep, cause cardiovascular and psychophysiological effects, reduce performance and provoke annoyance and changes in social behaviour.'

From one house not backing onto the line we measured a 76 dB(A) reading from inside the bedroom with windows closed and 85dB(A) with the window open. To put this in perspective, a car horn is 74 dB(A) maximum. A 10 dB(A) increase is a subjective doubling.

TS gave examples of how the noise is impacting on residents and families' lives which included:

- Teenagers under pressure on studies;
- Younger children being woken early and tired for school;
- Then a family with a two year old daughter and a new-born baby girl who came home from hospital on the day the horns started;
- Shift workers who already have a challenge to sleep in daytime and now have the horns adding disturbance.

Since the night time quiet period provides only 6 hours of quiet sleep, TS asked how much sleep Network Rail considers an adult requires, to which they responded 8. When asked about children no response was provided by Network Rail.

Multiple members of the audience added their own experience.

TS also raised the impact on house prices for those that are or need to sell their properties now or in the future. Would NR recompense home owners if this were the case? CB said they would come back to us on this point.

TS referenced Rail Safety & Standards Board research brief T680 findings which should have been taken into account when considering whistle boards:

'The cost valuation assigned to a modest impact on the health of railway neighbours counter, and generally outweigh, the safety benefits to crossing users provided by the whistle board.'

'Residents living closest to whistle boards state that their lives are being ruined and some experience chronic health effects.'

One of the residents noted that the Network Rail risk assessment only assessed the physical risk to those using the crossing and not the risk to the residents of the neighbourhood resulting directly from the horns, which includes mental health. They also referenced an acoustic engineer currently on assignment to Network Rail for HS2 from Atkins, Rhys Owen, who could help them calculate the impact on residents. CB did make a note of this.

MS/RG shared a document from Network Rail's Level Crossing Risk Management Toolkit. ID 105 'Mitigation Measure: Installation or repositioning of whistle boards'. This document provides the implementation instructions Network Rail should have followed, which includes consultation with the neighbours of the crossing.

5. Questions/comments from the floor

- a. Ken (Green Drive) – ambient noise is min 101db , max 106db
Noted to be 76dB(A) in a double glazed room with windows shut.
- b. This crossing is unique and has clearly affected more residents than those living within 500 metres of the track – CB accepted that Network Rail could have done more to liaise with residents as those e.g. in Easthampstead Road have also been affected.
- c. David Nash was concerned that there did not appear to have been an assessment of the impact of the existing reduced speed levels before this action was taken.
- d. Tristan Blaine asked for a copy of the risk assessment, which NR agreed to provide.
- e. Julian McGhee Sumner – as local Councillor and Mayor of Wokingham Town, was disappointed that he and the councillors for all three wards effected had no knowledge of this situation. He could not find anyone at the council offices who had had contact with Network Rail (although SP reported that he had had a meeting at the offices)
- f. Question from the floor..... Is it correct that Network Rail guidance to managers states that whistle boards should be avoided for high frequency lines and by Network Rail's own classification this line is high frequency. Also, that there should be full consultation with affected residents. Network Rail responded that his was correct and admitted again that they had not followed procedure of consultation with residents.

6. Summary

MS asked that on the basis that Network Rail had not carried out consultation in accordance with their own rules, that it was not known what the time saving actually was and due to the significant impact on hundreds, possibly thousands of lives they should withdraw the whistle boards with immediate effect. Network Rail refused to do this.

MS then asked who in Network Rail was able to make the decision to remove the whistle boards and what would stop them doing so. CU confirmed that this decision was in part the responsibility of the people around the table and if wanted, could be reversed quickly. They would need to consult with their management but would be able to come back to us shortly. MS pressed for what shortly meant. CU said that it could be a matter of days. PL stated that we would expect a response within a week.

MS stated that whilst we totally accept that Network Rail clearly have a legal duty to ensure public safety, they also have a legal obligation to discharge that duty in a proportionate way and the implementation of whistle boards does not achieve this.

7. Network Rail final response:

Network Rail committed to investigate further the time that was being saved as a consequence of the increased train speed.

Critically, Network Rail said they clearly understood the concerns and the extent of the impact that the horn noise was having on Wokingham residents. They would share this with relevant Network Rail Management with the agreement to come back to PL within the next seven days with their decision on what action they will take.

8. Close

PL thanked the Network Rail representatives for their time and prompt response to residents' concerns.

PL also thanked all the residents who had attended.

A vote of thanks was made from the floor to the Residents' team who had addressed this problem so strongly.

9. ACTIONS

- a. Network Rail agreed to provide a list of the roads that were sent the letters so that the residents association can communicate to other streets that might be affected.
- b. Network Rail to share the existing neighbourhood impact studies they used when considering the implementation of Whistle Boards for the crossing.
- c. Network Rail to provide information on home owner compensation.
- d. Network Rail to provide a copy of the risk assessment.
- e. Network Rail to provide the name of the person(s) they met with at the Wokingham Borough Council Office.
- f. PL to issue minutes to Network Rail and post them on the GLRA website.