

The Hatches Level Crossing: Comments following the Network Rail Drop-in session 5th April 2022

Introduction

The session received a good turnout with most people concerned about the plans to close the level crossing in the Hatches and replace it with a bridge at the bottom of Spencer Close. The plans for Farnborough North were also displayed but appeared to be less controversial.

Network Rail were represented by several staff including the project manager, the bridge designer and the comms team. Unfortunately the Health & Safety experts could not attend. Several councillors came as did representatives from the Mytchett, Frimley Green & Deepcut Society and a variety of residents most closely affected by the plans.

There was a short and somewhat shambolic presentation followed by the opportunity to ask questions one-to-one. Although there were some slips of paper on which one could leave comments there was no organised methodology for collecting information or opinions. It quickly became clear that a decision had already been made to close the crossing and put up a bridge (without local consultation) and that this event was mainly for information.

There were many individual discussions and we are not sure how well the points made and the concerns raised were captured by the Network Rail team. These notes reflect some of the main points we were able to pick up on during the course of the session and are submitted as the agreed view of the Mytchett, Frimley Green & Deepcut Society as the local residents' representative body.

Lack of Consultation

There was widespread anger at the lack of consultation prior to a decision being made. Some of the Network rail staff were ill-informed and tried to insist that the residents' association had been part of a consultation process as long as five years ago. This may have been the case in Farnborough North but not in Frimley Green.

It is a mystery why no such consultation has taken place - good practice examples are easy to find eg [Palmersville Dairy level crossing consultation](#). We would strongly urge Network Rail to conduct a full and proper consultation on this matter especially considering the strength of public opinion and the many legitimate concerns about the appraisal of the options. Users of the crossing should be included in the consultation not just nearby residents.

Safety

The key factor in the decision to close the level crossing is safety. Whilst some people did question the risk assessment - which, incidentally, we have not yet seen - there are sound safety grounds for considering what to do with the crossing. There has been unequivocal pressure from the regulator, the Office of Rail and Road, from the Transport Select Committee, The Rail Safety & Standards Board and others for Network Rail to undertake rigorous risk assessments and to reduce fatalities on crossings.

It was unfortunate that these requirements were not mentioned in the presentation and instead a fatality was cited on another line dating back in 1956! It was stated that there had been 7 near misses in 5 years. It might have been helpful to know how that compares

with other crossings. To the uninitiated just over one near miss a year seems quite low. There have, thank goodness, been no fatalities on this crossing.

Instead of giving details of the near misses - cab video footage would have been helpful - some rather dubious pictures were shown. The first was of someone with their hood up in the rain describing them as having limited vision. However, if you go back 3-4 seconds you would have seen the man and his wife (and their dog) stopping in the refuge area and clearly looking both ways before crossing. This is just one example of selective 'evidence' being used to illustrate a predetermined narrative. Residents want, and deserve, fair and balanced evidence representing the pros and cons of all the options.

In order to arrive at the right decision for this crossing we would like to see proper comparative safety evidence. What are the fatality figures over the last five years for each of the options. We know across the whole network there were two pedestrian fatalities at level crossings in 2019-20, which is the same number as 2018-19. How many of those fatalities were on crossings with miniature stop lights, with an audio warning, object detection technology and locking gates? How does that compare with fatality figures for footbridges and underpasses? (We know of at least 3 fatalities involving footbridges in 2020-21 alone - Berwick Hills, Eaglescliffe and York -and their must be more). Similar comparative data for accidents (eg trips and falls) and other incidents (eg things being dropped on the track) should be essential evidence in any option appraisal involving safety.

Options: Miniature Stop Lights

The use of the latest technology, including miniature stop lights, was dismissed as still subject to people being distracted (which is unlikely if you include audio warnings and lockable gates) and as not being a long-term viable solution. This doesn't quite stack up with Network Rail's plan to introduce over 90 such crossings by 2024 in East Anglia alone. Residents would like to see the full risk and cost benefit analysis for this option, assuming that this has been done.

Residents are not technical experts but there does seem to be a groundswell of opinion favouring an upgraded crossing rather than a bridge and this at least deserves full and proper consideration. An example where miniature stop lights were introduced to address numerous near miss incidents is Claverton level crossing near Bath. At the moment it looks like an enhanced technological solution has been dismissed rather too quickly without defining just how far it would reduce the risk and without presenting a full and balanced analysis in order to inform proper consultation.

Options: Underpass

An underpass was dismissed due to lack of space and flooding risk. Which, on the face of it, might seem reasonable. However, there was no map or measurements of the land available in order to check this out. A graduated zig-zag slope - a mirror image of the upward slope on the bridge - would have a fair sized footprint but it seems feasible that it might be able to fit and, if not, there should be strong evidence proving that is the case. Would access via Chartwell be a more suitable alternative?

As to flood risk, this should be an integral part of a Geotechnical Investigation Report. In any event, underpasses can be built to operate below the water table (such as with the Felixstowe Brach Line Improvements Level Crossings Closure).

A further advantage with a subway would be, if built in accordance with TD27/05 Cross Sections and Headrooms, that it would allow equestrian use without dismounting, thus reinstating the full bridleway status right through to the Blackwater Valley path.

There are perceived safety concerns around underpasses, and concerns about vandalism and other anti-social behaviour, which would all need to be weighed carefully as part of the pros and cons of this option.

Options: Footbridge

The design of the footbridge would appear to meet the set standards as one might expect. However, the Network Rail team gave mixed messages about some key elements. When asked about potential irresponsible behaviour by youngsters, one said that trees would be removed to give open sight of the bridge. Another said that tree planting would screen the bridge, as in the illustrations. Either way, there are concerns about nearby residents losing privacy. It would be good to know which if any gardens and houses would be visible from the bridge and vice versa. Also, would there be CCTV cameras on or near the bridge?

More than one resident commented on the need for a proper ecological impact study. For example, the handrail lights were not shown on the design drawings but the impact on the local bat population should be a consideration.

Would the location of the bridge impede any future use of the Sturt Chord which has been identified as a potential future development of a rail link from the Ascot to Guildford line to the London Waterloo to Southampton mainline, as set out in Transportation Policy IN2 in the forthcoming Surrey Heath Local Plan?

The visual intrusiveness of a bridge, the addition to journey times, the impact on those with less mobility, and, most importantly, the impact on the continuing peaceful enjoyment of nearby neighbours must all feature in an impact analysis along with the aforementioned safety issues.

Train Horns

Noise from train horns remains an irritation under the current arrangement but would be resolved with any of the options above. Noise from an audio warning at a miniature stop light crossing would be far more localised and does not appear to be a major issue for those living near the crossing.

Other Issues

Some mentioned the issue of fishermen accessing the lakes area - the consequential impact on parking and noise; questions on whether the access points for fishermen would change and whether the Frimley Pits Fishery had been consulted. There were questions about whether the gates would remain in The Hatches to provide access for the emergency services and, presumably, for rail engineering works. Lastly, there were questions about the pathway on the west side of the planned bridge - an illustration and some commentary on this would be useful.

Farnborough North changes

Whilst this got little attention we were able to get views from a couple of people who use that route. This is, admittedly, a small sample but along with views heard prior to the meeting it seems that there is general satisfaction with the plans for Farnborough North.

As one person said: “it is a very different situation there”. This at least show that there is no ‘in principle’ objection to a bridge replacing a crossing as long as it is right for the setting.

“To help reduce this impact we look at every level crossing in detail. Deciding how to manage each single level crossing is done through risk assessment and expert judgement. We work closely with the level crossing’s authorised users and liaise with communities around them. Often, the solution to improve safety at one crossing is different to the next.”

Enhancing Level Crossing Safety 2019 – 2029: A long-term strategy targeting improved safety on Great Britain’s railway

Two valid concerns were raised as questions. Firstly, what will happen when a lift breaks down, as they inevitably do from time to time? This is of particular importance to wheelchair users, others with mobility issues and those with luggage or pushchairs. Secondly, what will be the additional journey time for those walking from The Hatches to the far side of the station? This is of particular importance to commuters and those travelling on to Gatwick airport (and needing to buy a ticket first).

Future Sessions

The presentation at the session was universally decried by residents. Poor slides, poor content, talking about one crossing when the slide shows another, poor visibility and no opportunity for others to speak or ask questions so that the whole audience could hear the answers. The display boards were helpful but the staff near each board could often not answer questions properly and in some cases gave wrong information. Staff seemed reluctant or unable to give out an email, even one of the comms staff, who should know better, did not have a business card to give out.

A lot more thought needs to go into any future sessions.

What Next

It is clear that Network Rail has invested a lot of time and effort into planning a new footbridge to replace the level crossing in The Hatches. However, we would ask that those plans be put to one side for the moment and for three actions to be taken:

- i) A full, fair and balanced assessment is done of all the options to include safety, costs and all the issues raised above;
- ii) That assessment and all the supporting evidence be made available to residents and to be the subject of a well-prepared, professional presentation;
- iii) Informed with this information, residents and users of the crossing should be properly consulted with the opportunity to ask questions and to give detailed responses in person and online.

Once that is done, it will be down to Network Rail to re-assess the situation and the preferred option. Prior to any planning application it would be good if there was a further presentation explaining that decision, the rationale behind it and reassuring residents that all the relevant pros and cons have been properly weighted and considered.

The MFG&D Society - and I am sure all the local councillors - would be willing to engage further on this process and make a constructive contribution to help turn around what has been a rather inauspicious start.

We would welcome a full written response to the concerns expressed and the questions raised.

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