

Proof of Evidence

Alex Machin

I am a local resident who has horses and have ridden this route for the last 15 years. I have children who use this route on their ponies too. I am an experienced horsewoman, I have worked with horses and I am Secretary to the Bicester and Warden Hill Pony Club and organise rallies and camps for children aged between 4 and 21 years old.

Aside from the safety issues and other points raised, particularly those by the BHS which I whole heartedly agree with there are other concerns and problems we have faced.

Dealing with Network Rail sometimes feels a bit like using a chocolate teapot. I have struggled to get answers and information.

As of yet I have been unable to find out who has worked on this project that has any knowledge/qualifications/experience of working with horses. All Network Rail employees have told me that they have no knowledge of horses.

When asked under FOI the closest that NR can get is to tell me that Mott McDonald who have designed the new bridleway are members of relevant industry organisations and they would have consulted with relevant stakeholders such as the British Horse Society – they have not.

Network Rail have asked Charlie Lane to provide an expert opinion on this bridleway – I have written confirmation of this from Charlie. Again, under FOI I have asked to see what the report from Charlie states but 4 times I have had a response saying they do not hold the information – I have requested an internal enquiry (the first time of asking was 19th July 2023).

The research given from NR about comparable railways is not true and accurate. There are very few that run for the same distance, none at the same height or with no break from being alongside the railway and even one of their suggested comparable routes does not exist so this has not been carried out accurately, rather relied upon images from a computer.

This level crossing was in use as a through road for a local farm, by equestrians, local

Walkers, cyclists and by the passengers.

According to data from Network Rail's own Risk Assessments as provided for the last 10 years, there have been no incidents with equestrians whether ridden or on foot at this level crossing. All incidents and near misses at this site were from passengers rushing across the line.

Following a fatal incident at Tackley Station on 31/3/2008, the Government made a number of safety recommendations many of which Network Rail stated proposing to take no action on. Locals believe that none of the strategies were implemented on the ground, although we cannot be sure about their risk assessment, as this risk assessment was not provided when requested by the BHS. The level crossing was then closed 28/4/2020. However there have still been incidents with passengers crossing the tracks rather than using the footbridge. (FOI details of pre and post incidents).

Using the level crossing was not unsafe for horse riders. Phones were provided to call before crossing and check no trains were coming. In the times when a train was approaching horse riders had plenty of room to back away from the railway and avoid the passing train until it was safe to call back again. Escorting my children along this route meant I had plenty of opportunities to mitigate against a train coming.

There is a risk assessment from a previous Bicester Pony Club Secretary in the BHS documents which I stand by. Using the crossing with any number of horses was safe providing the relevant actions were taken (additional helpers where required, using the phones etc). The Pony Club are now unable to use this route at all as the risk is too high. I will certainly never take any horse along it.

The consultation includes historic information from when the subway was the preferred option, however since that option has been removed there is no detail in the consultation documents regarding the cost or quotes of alternative options. These consultation documents have not been reviewed since the subway option was removed.

Therefore, the process has not been thorough, clear or open enough to people.

We were told that quotes were obtained for the lineside route, the in-field route and the northern route, yet none of these other than the lineside route appear in any of

the documentation. Have they reasonably considered other options?

The consultation has not followed the memorandum of understanding between Network Rail and IPRO.

I believe the consultation process to be flawed for the following reasons:

1. There was no attempt to engage with the riding community – when a bridlepath is being diverted. This could very easily have been achieved via local Riding Clubs, Pony Clubs and asking the BHS (British Horse Society) to inform their local members. The BHS was only brought in by local members.

2. The schematic diagram in the NR published leaflet is inaccurate. It indicates a simple mirror image of the existing and the proposed routes. In fact, the existing path is a whole field away (roughly 100m), whereas the proposed route is adjacent. This is misleading. If anyone has responded to the survey accepting the proposed changes (or indeed, not responded, assuming the situation was to be very similar) based on the information given in the leaflet, without knowing the actual topography, then surely that invalidates the consultation process?

Reporting of the Consultation Process

This is inaccurate in several ways:

There is no mention of any other route for the bridleway. On 20/7/23 there was a meeting of Tackley Estate, Network Rail and OCC (Public Rights of Way), discussing the 'Western In-Field Route'. This does not feature in the report, let alone any costings or more detail.

OCC PROW team are not mentioned anywhere in the report I believe. They have an essential part to play in the diversion of any bridleway.

Other options for the crossing are simply not mentioned, let alone in any detail. Why not? Have they been considered?

They state they are consulting with the BHS. They are not. The BHS is totally against the proposed route.

Alexandra Machin

