

Fenland District Council response to Network Rail's proposed closure of level crossings in Fenland (C12, C13, C14, C15) – June 2016

Thank you for consulting Fenland District Council (FDC) about the proposed closure of four level crossings within the district. FDC welcomes the opportunity to respond to the proposals.

Fenland in Context

Despite being a predominantly rural area the district suffers from a limited and sporadic public rights of way network in many areas and restricted opportunities for people to access the countryside on foot or cycle. This has an adverse impact on the quality of life of residents.

The district is also one of the most deprived in Cambridgeshire and ranks 94 out of 326 nationally in terms of deprivation levels with parts of Wisbech and March identified as the worst areas. People's health is therefore a key issue with high and rising levels of obesity amongst the population, including children.

FDC is seeking to address these trends through its Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2015-2018. This highlights that:

- The percentage of adults classed as physically inactive is significantly lower (50.5%) compared to the rest of England (56%).
- 72% of the Fenland population are considered obese as opposed to the England average of 64%. Obesity is associated with diabetes, heart disease, hypertension and strokes, hormone-sensitive cancers, osteoarthritis, sleep apnoea as well as having a psychological impact on well-being.
- 30% of the population are smokers compared to 20% of the English population as a whole.
- Alcohol related episodes are significantly higher compared with the English average.
- The district is also worse off in terms of mental and sexual health and the number of teenage pregnancies.

FDC is also seeking to address the problems through its newly adopted Local Plan (May 2014):

- Policy LP2 seeks to create healthy safe and equitable environments and to promote healthy lifestyles.
- Policy LP15 seeks to deliver a robust network and facilities for cycling and walking, encourage more local walking and cycling journeys and enhance linkages between settlements and to areas of natural green spaces and to the surrounding countryside.
- Policy LP7 also seeks to ensure that the Rights of Way network is protected and where possible enhanced.

Local roads and public rights of way which allow for a non-motorised form of transport contribute to achieving a healthy, sustainable society and FDC is not normally supportive of proposals which do not contribute to this objective. Each of the four proposed level crossing closures has the potential to impact on these objectives and each is considered in turn below:

Ref C12 - Silt Drove, March

FDC wishes to highlight that there is ambiguity in this proposal and would seek further clarification on this matter in due course. However, the comments are based on the understanding that the crossing is to be closed to all users and objects to the proposal as currently set out.

Silt Road / Badgeney End is adopted highway and a well-used right of way which provides an important opportunity for local people to walk safely in the countryside away from cars and other motorised vehicles. It is very lightly trafficked but is well used by pedestrians, dog walkers and cyclists. It is a valuable asset for local residents and users.

It provides an important link to the Hereward Way footpath along the southern side of the River Nene (Old Course) via Badgeney End and the permissive / tolerated farm trackway linking the end of Badgeney End to the river.

It also provides part of a wider circular route for people using the local rights of way network in east and south March which allows access to the countryside.

The tarmaced surface means that it is used throughout the year including during winter months and inclement weather.

Silt Road also forms part of a round March circular walking route set out in a leaflet produced by FDC for residents which the Council considers important to improve the health and well-being of local people.

FDC would not object to the closure of the level crossing for motorised vehicles as alternative road routes are readily available. It is important however that pedestrian and cyclists should still be able to cross over the railway at this point. This could be via a small gate similar to that provided at the Middle Drove level crossing (C13). If felt necessary and to allay safety concerns of Network Rail FDC suggests it might also be appropriate to provide a small green/red traffic signal and phone similar to Middle Drove. Good signage and notices should also assist people's safe crossing of the railway.

Ref C13 - Middle Drove

FDC notes that whilst the road is to be closed for vehicular traffic other than for adjacent landowners, the public rights for non-motorised users would be retained at the level crossing. FDC notes that the crossing currently benefits from a telephone and small red/green traffic signal to aid the safe crossing of the railway.

FDC acknowledges that Whitemoor Road to the north could be used by motorised vehicles to reach local destinations and therefore provides an acceptable alternative for vehicular traffic. On the basis that the crossing is still to be available for other users (walkers, cyclists horse riders) FDC has no objection to the closure of the crossing for motorised vehicles only. FDC considers that the small green /red traffic light and telephone contribute to perceived safety in crossing the railway and would seek for these to be retained.

Ref C14 – Eastrea Cross Drove

FDC notes that the crossing is to be closed to all users and that a new footpath to the north of the railway to link to Wype Road is to be provided. FDC suggests that if this type of crossing is considered unsafe then a small green/red traffic light and telephone with appropriate signage (similar to C13 – Middle Drove) would contribute to the perception of safety for users of the crossing.

Given that an alternative footpath is to be provided to Wype Road, FDC would not object to the proposals as set out providing that the new footpath was provided and fully operational prior to the closure of the crossing. The footpath should be of sufficient width and suitably surfaced (e.g. gravel/hogging) such that it can be used during the winter months and in inclement weather. Should the new alternative footpath not be achievable FDC would object to the proposal as currently set out.

Ref C15 – Brickyard Drove

FDC notes that the crossing is to be closed to all users. FDC suggests that if this type of crossing is considered unsafe by Network Rail then a small green/red traffic light and telephone with appropriate signage (similar to C13 – Middle Drove) would contribute to the perception of safety for users of the crossing.

The Public Rights of Way both north and south of the railway are well maintained and have a sound surface which means they can be used during winter months and inclement weather. The pathway to the north of the railway is part of the National Cycle Route 63.

It is noted that it is proposed that users will be diverted to an existing footpath to the west (No 41) which links Benwick Road with the level crossing at Fen Lots Drove. Compared to the existing footpath to be affected by the level crossing closure (No 48) this footpath is of poorer quality and unlikely to be used during winter months and inclement weather. FDC considers that the surface of footpath No 41 should be upgraded with gravel /hogging in order to maintain an appropriate surface for users. Providing that the surface of the footpath was upgraded prior to the closure of the level crossing FDC would not raise objections to the proposal. Should the improved surfacing not be provided FDC would object to the proposal as set out.