

**From:** Alyson Ross  
**Sent:** 15 May 2018 14:44  
**To:** TRANSPORTANDWORKSACT

Sent from Mail for Windows 10

Dear Mr Grayling,

I wish to formally object to the Rother Valley Railway extension plans in Robertsbridge.

I am extremely worried about the plans to extend the RVR through our village and across farmland in a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

This is wrong on so many levels, and breaches Government and local Council Policy for protection of the environment, clean air, flood and traffic control, and current policy of removing level crossings from the standpoint road safely.

The planning consent is based on outdated information, claims and statements based on projections and computer modelling of what may happen in 5 or 10 years' time. Are these of any value in the uncertainty of climate change?

There are 6 key issues:

- The building of three level crossings across the A21, Northbridge Street, and B2244 at the narrow bridges.
- The impact on traffic and parking on the whole village.
- The increased risk of the village flooding.
- The destruction of the ecologically sensitive biodiverse farmland at Parsonage Farm and Moat Farm and the introduction of a concrete scar across the AONB.
- The Compulsory Purchase of farmland.
- The forecast financial benefits to the Parish

**Level crossings:**

The A21 is not a little side road but is the main road connecting London and Hastings and as such is extremely busy, especially at weekends and Bank Holidays. The by-pass was built to keep A21 traffic flowing and to protect the village of Robertsbridge from traffic and air pollution. Now with these proposals steam and diesel trains will run right through the village, bring more traffic, congestion and pollution into the village, and further congestion to the A21. The busiest times for normal traffic congestion are exactly the times the steam trains will run, and the level crossing will be active 14 times a day according to RVR. The Government have deemed level crossings to be dangerous and are removing them wherever possible yet the RVR have been given permission to build three across our roads, two of which are very busy and already dangerous, to service their railway.

In 2017 the Road Safety Foundation cited the stretch of the A21 between Hurst Green and Hastings as the highest risk road on England's Strategic Road Network. Huw Merriman called for action to improve the road after sections of the A21 were branded some of the most dangerous roads in the UK. He is NOT now in favour of the extension of the line but RVR are claiming that he is.

The crossing would be built about 100 metres south of a roundabout and near to a bend where visibility is poor, making the road even more dangerous.

### **Impact of traffic and parking:**

Stationary traffic will cause increased CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and air pollution, both in the village and on the A21. The trains will be powered by coal and diesel, both dirty fossil fuels. The Clean Air Act aimed to reduce the usage of unsustainable carbon fuels and reduce the country's carbon footprint.

### **East Sussex Council - Climate change strategy states:**

We are trying to reduce our energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. Our target is to reduce our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 80% by 2050, with an annual reduction of 3% each year.

The Environment Strategy for East Sussex supports our commitment over the next 15 years to protecting the environment, reducing carbon emissions and adapting to climate change.

- reducing carbon emissions and the use of fossil fuels
- improving habitats to reverse and prevent the loss of plant and animal species.

RVR claim the railway will bring thousands of visitors here. They are unlikely to come by mainline train as RVR claim they will – many will come by car. Car parking is already a problem here. There is no space for visitors' cars. The roads are too narrow for extra visitor traffic of the volume expected.

The Neighbourhood Plan is for 155 new homes to be built here with additional traffic movement and need for parking spaces.

### **Flooding:**

The Rother valley is a floodplain. Building structures on flood plains alters and impedes the flow of floodwater, it must go somewhere and will take the course of least resistance, making it unpredictable and dangerous.

Robertsbridge is subject to extreme flood risk and has been flooded many times over the past few years yet RVR propose to build an embankment through our much-needed and extremely expensive flood control defences. RVR admit that this will be likely to impede their efficiency, particularly in the area where the electricity substation and sewage removal pumps are. Many people in the village still live in fear of the devastation the floods used to cause and may do in the future if the defences are interfered with.

### **Environment:**

RVR claim to be re-instating the old railway line and re-creating historic detail justifying their cause by calling it a 'Heritage' railway. Words which seem to give it the green light, push all the right buttons and tick the planning boxes.

The old working freight line was decommissioned more than 50 years ago, the track dug up and removed, the land SOLD and bought by people who have for decades incorporated it into their lives and livelihoods. The old line no longer exists.

Since the closure of the railway the former track bed has become a species-rich wildlife corridor of secondary woodland. It is an important mixed woodland habitat that supports a diverse mixture of interesting, rare and protected species; plants, mammals including dormouse, bats, and badgers, insects, fungi and birds such as the woodcock, nightingale and cuckoo.

This corridor runs through the River Rother floodplain which is currently a complex and nationally scarce habitat of unimproved long standing permanent pasture and water meadow.

The destruction of this woodland along the old track and destruction of permanent pasture makes a mockery of the government and local councils' environmental policy which is supposed to protect biodiversity, habitat and native species.

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 is supposed to give protection 'for species and habitat of principle importance for biodiversity'. The whole area is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and has been farmed for biodiversity for decades. It is irreplaceable, and no amount of mitigation will bring that habitat back once it has gone.

RVR are insisting that they are entitled to a field at Moat Farm alongside the proposed track because it once belonged to the railway. This land was sold, it no longer has any connection to the railway. RVR want it as for a depot for storage. It runs along the banks of the river Rother and is subject to flooding. Any equipment stored there would be flooded and could well contaminate the river water, at a site known for sea trout, kingfishers and recent sightings of otters.

The objectives of the Robertsbridge Plan, 2016-2028, are:

- a) to protect and enhance local open spaces and access to the countryside.
  - b) To plan for climate change and work in harmony with the environment to conserve natural resources.
- The Plan aims to 'achieve solutions to some of the major concerns that the community already faces, such as continued potential flooding from the River Rother and from surface water, parking difficulties caused by commuters to the rail station and the absolute need to preserve and enhance the beautiful natural environment in which the parish sits'.

#### East Sussex.gov.uk – environmental strategy for east sussex, July 2012

"Our local environment is important both as an asset to protect and a resource to utilise and develop. It provides essential services: clean air and drinking water, the soil on which we grow our food, the open spaces that enable us to be physically and mentally active, and a distinctive and in some cases iconic landscape which supports our tourism industry.

This strategy identifies what is important about our environment, our aims and objectives and how we intend to achieve them.

East Sussex has some of the lowest per capita emissions of carbon dioxide in England, but we still emit 6.5 times more carbon dioxide than is globally sustainable and we need to cut carbon emissions by another 1.3 million tonnes by 2026. Our local environment is important both as an asset to protect and a resource to utilise and develop.

We have 7 internationally important wildlife habitats and an amazing 286 local Sites of Nature Conservation Importance, yet Sussex as whole has 472 species which are globally threatened or in rapid decline.

Flower-rich meadows are rare in East Sussex and are usually traditionally managed grasslands. These meadows support rare plants, many butterflies and other insects.

Hay meadows provide a habitat for ground nesting birds. The planting of rye grass or ploughing for cereal crops has destroyed many meadows and grass cutting for silage in May means birds have no time to raise their young".

East Sussex County Landscape Assessment – vision and strategy – describes the area :

"This is a largely unspoilt and tranquil landscape with few intrusive features, as with most of the High Weald landscape the historic field patterns of small fields and significant hedgerows remain intact. A vibrant working landscape with thriving economic activities which conserve the characteristic features and wildlife of the area. The distinctive historic character of this High Wealden landscape conserve and enhance the Lower Rother Valley.

Aims to improve habitat continuity".

All of this describes

How does any of this sit with the proposed RVR extension?

**Compulsory Purchase Orders:**

There is no compelling case for the CPOs taken out by RVR against the two farmers along the route for what is essentially a rich man's hobby. RVR have used an Act of Parliament to force them to hand over sections of their farms, making them unviable and threatening their livelihoods, and that of the people they employ. RVR do not provide employment opportunities but instead rely almost entirely on volunteers.

The farm land in the Rother Valley is owned and farmed by two families who do not wish to sell, their land is not for sale. The third farmer, contrary to hints from RVR, was not in favour of the extension but died and willed his land to a charity who then sold it to RVR against his wishes.

The Compulsory Purchase Order on the land ought to be illegal, is certainly immoral, and is very unpalatable to local people.

### **Financial benefit to Robertsbridge.**

Initially RVR said there would be significant financial benefit to Robertsbridge from the projected 10,000 visitors, to the order of £4 million. Now they admit that there is likely to be little or no financial benefit.

- There will be no paid employment as it will be staffed by volunteers.
- There will be little time for visitors to look around places of interest on the route because they will be constrained by the train timetable.
- They will have their own gift shop and café so no need for visitors to walk into the village.

Since planning consent was given RVR have altered their plans so surely their consent is null and void?

- They have lengthened the timing of the closure of the level crossings.
- Revised the likelihood of flooding due to their tampering with the present flood control defences.
- Reduced the financial benefit to the village from around £4 million to a negligible amount.

The reports have been written from the perspective of the RVR and paid for by them with the express purpose to tick the right boxes for planning permission. RVR provide numbers and projections not real life. You need to look at how it will affect the daily lives of the people who actually live, work and farm here. There is fear that should this go ahead it will set a precedent for anyone with enough money and connections to seize any land they wish despite the owners' objection.

The new railway has no intrinsic value, yet it is being allowed to cause so much upset and such a threat to local homes, land and livelihoods.

RVR have badly mis-represented this as a photogenic steam train chugging through the unspoilt Sussex countryside – it is in fact going to be a steam train shunted across much of the length of the disputed land by a diesel engine, with a concrete access road running alongside. Customers will be paying a not inconsiderable fare only to find themselves being on a diesel engine for part of the journey. It is not what it is advertised to be. Based on this perhaps RVR should run Heritage buses between the mainline railway at Robertsbridge and the steam line at Bodiam. It would be cheaper, less destructive and still be "Heritage", which seems to be the word which was crucial to getting the line approved.

Their 'Heritage' line is taking us back to the Industrial era when our green and pleasant land was polluted by coal smoke.

Surely the real 'heritage' is the beautiful valley, and the farming methods used by the two farms – the hop gardens and working oast at \_\_\_\_\_ whose family have worked it for generations, long before the original train existed. The biodiversity of \_\_\_\_\_, some of the last remaining unimproved permanent pasture and water meadows in the UK, whose seeds from the wildflower meadows are sent to the National Collection.

This is not HS2, or a much-needed bypass, this is a **hobby** railway, of no national importance, a wealthy man's vanity project. It is being given the green light to significantly alter and disrupt the way of life of a village of more than 2,700 people, putting them at risk from air pollution, their homes at risk from flooding, their footpaths and access to the countryside taken away, and their peace of mind destroyed. It is tearing the village apart. All for the hobby of a small handful of people who have no respect for the people of Robertsbridge or Salehurst.

A hobby should never be allowed to cause so much disruption and desecration to others' lives.

Thank you for reading this email.

Yours sincerely,  
Alyson Ross

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