

Proof of evidence

Introduction

Closure of crossing S08 is part of Network Rail's "programme to reduce risk on the railway" (ref NR Statement of Case NR26 paragraph 1). The diversion path proposed for crossing S08 will undeniably reduce Network Rail's risk arising from accidents on the crossing, however unlikely they may be, but will directly result in a significant increase in risk to people legitimately using the diverted right of way. This risk arises from approximately 120 metres of the proposed diversion beside a narrow, fast, busy road.

Better options, which are available, would completely avoid this increased source of risk.

This objection is not against the principle of closing the Stacpool footpath crossing; it is against the details of one part of the proposed diversion route, which does not appear to be adequately safe for plausible future pedestrian use.

Network Rail claim that the proposed route has been checked by Suffolk County Council Highways and has been deemed to be adequate. However, it seems possible that SCC have failed to consider the full range of potential future users of the paths, the paths walkers diverted from the closed crossing will expect to take, actual traffic on the B1113, or the actual dimensional details of part of the path proposed.

Location and connections in the local area

See map presented as Appendix 1.

The railway separates the B1113 from the River Gipping, alongside which is a promoted footpath, the Gipping Valley Footpath. Between the railway and the river are two areas of gravel extraction, operating under an implemented planning permission which includes obligations for a restored landscape after extraction has ended, including for permissive footpaths for public access. Details from the permission are included in Appendix 2. It is expected that the land will be handed to a suitable local organisation for ongoing management for the benefit of the public and the environment. One area has already been landscaped as an open water/marsh area. The requirement is for extraction to be concluded and the rewilding to be completed by the end of 2022. Both areas already attract wildlife, particularly birds, and are being visited by birdwatchers.

The B1113 was the former Trunk Road linking Ipswich to Bury St Edmunds and beyond before construction in the late 1970s of what is now the A14. As a consequence it is built to rather higher, faster standards than many “B” roads. The National Speed limit applies to this section of the road. There is a substantial, fully separated layby beside the B1113 used for parking just a hundred or so metres towards Blakenham from the point where the Stacpool footpath joins the B1113. The next nearest area of public parking is at Needham Lake approximately 2.5Km away. There is no public parking at Baylham, only private parking.

Right of Way users

It is reasonable to expect an increased numbers of members of the public will want to cross the railway to visit the re-wilded areas to watch wildlife, particularly birds. Access is by walking along the river from Needham Market or Baylham, or by crossing the railway, using either the existing “level” crossing or the bridge proposed for the diversion.

It is reasonable to assume that not all visitors using cars to access the sites will be prepared to walk from Needham Lake, and will use the existing layby beside the B1113, crossing the railway to access the wildlife areas.

The diversion route

The diversion proposed will involve walking towards Needham Market alongside the B1113 on the existing pedestrian pavement. While this route is “unwelcoming” and “unattractive” the first part of the path feels safe enough as the roadway is wide, the pavement is adequate and a grass verge separates people from vehicles with the east side of the footway being an open hedge giving space to “spread” beyond the paved surface on either side of the path, for example to pass other walkers. However, as the pavement approaches approximately 120 metres from the point where diverted users turn right away onto footpath 031 four things happen. Firstly the grass verge separating the pavement from the road ends. Secondly the footway reduces in width to about 1.2mtrs. Thirdly the pavement is now beside a raised bank on the east side making it impossible to “escape” away from the roadway. Lastly, the roadway narrows considerably, is on or near the crest of a hill and passing a small side road all of which require drivers’ attention. At this point traffic heading towards Ipswich has just left the boundary of the 30mph zone and is under the National Speed Limit, 60mph for this class of road.

The photographs presented as Appendix 3 shows just how close fast traffic is to pedestrians on this section.

Walking on this section of the path facing the traffic is intimidating. Walking away from the traffic is frightening. Walking with a child, a dog, a pushchair, with a minor disability, or just passing other walkers is a real hazard this close to fast traffic, particularly HGVs which have to be positioned so close to the footway at this point. Significantly, the level of risk is almost entirely in the hands of vehicle drivers; it is no longer a matter almost solely in the hands of the walker as would be the case using the crossing.

Traffic

The traffic along this section of road does not appear typical of a "B" class road running so close to a dual carriageway, which can be explained by considering the wider road network. There is a 7.5T weight limit through Needham Market requiring any heavy traffic heading for Barking etc to approach from Great Blakenham rather than from Stowmarket. The only roads from Needham Market that give access to the A14 and to the east pass under railway bridges respectively 2.3 and 2.4 metres high. The effect is that this section of the B1113 is used by a rather disproportionate number of HGVs accessing the Lion Barn industrial estate, Wattisham Air Base and the towns and villages beyond via Great Blakenham and so passing the crossing site.

A survey taken for traffic on the B1113 passing the Stacpool crossing heading in one direction (south east) only over five one hour sessions is shown in Appendix 4. This is, of course, not a professional traffic survey, but is nevertheless an accurate record of actual vehicle count taken, with care, over several days. There were some factors at the time of the survey that may affect the data. There were temporary traffic lights in operation on the B1113 at the Lion Barn Industrial Estate and at Great Blakenham. Smaller vehicles may have found alternate routes around these holdups reducing the overall vehicle count. HGVs, however, have no alternate route available due to the weight and height restrictions and, so, should not be affected.

The surveys show an average of 1 HGV vehicle passing in the Needham Market towards Great Blakenham every two minutes.

It is interesting to note that as part of the housing development just a few hundred metres towards Needham Market from the Stacpool crossing the developer was forced by SCC to substantially widen existing footways on both sides of the B1113. The new footpath, shown in the photograph in Appendix 5, is over 1.8 metres wide, considerably wider than the section of concern, yet the new section justified on safety grounds is beside a wider carriageway, within the 30mph zone. Traffic at this point will be very similar to that passing the Stacpool path section. It seems surprising that so

much work has been required to upgrade the pavement at this point while NR are saying SCC have no concern over the use of the footway beside the B1113 further towards the Stacpool crossing.

Alternative

There are clear alternatives for a diverted footpath. By far the most attractive would be to route a new path alongside the railway track from the existing Stacpool Crossing to the existing bridge on the west side of the tracks mirroring the new path proposed to the east of the tracks. There is already a “haul way” track here. Network Rail’s argument that this is private land appears rather strange given the land on the “extraction pit” side of the tracks is also private land. Other options may be practical. An estimate of the costs is £12,500 to £16,500 with details given in Appendix 6.

Conclusion

This objection is based on the increased risk to members of the public that can reasonably be expected to use the proposed diverted path. It would appear possible that SCC have not recognised the importance of maintaining a convenient connection between a safe parking area and the restored mineral extraction areas. In their risk assessment SCC may not have considered the route walkers can reasonably be expected to use to access the wildlife areas, the dimensions of the proposed route beside the B1113, the actual traffic levels and mix, or to the likely mix of users.

An obvious, low cost, safer alternative route for the diverted path is possible and should be used.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Map

Appendix 2 Planning conditions

Appendix 3 Pedestrian beside B1113 on the section in question

Appendix 4 Traffic survey

Appendix 5 Newly widened pedestrian pavement beside the B1113 in Needham Market

Appendix 6 Cost estimate