

NETWORK RAIL INQUIRY

STATEMENT FROM MATT HANCOCK, MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR WEST SUFFOLK

I wish to make a statement about Network Rail's proposal to close Weatherby pedestrian level crossing at Newmarket permanently.

I support closures of level crossings elsewhere where there is clear need or no detriment. But this proposal is unnecessary, would be to the significant detriment of local residents and the town, and sadly has been mishandled by Network Rail from the start.

Having inspected the site myself, and looked into the case history, I can see absolutely no reason to close the crossing. The crossing has been in use for over sixty years. There have been no accidents. It is my view that the loss of amenity from closing the crossing would be very significant, and could well put the public in more danger, not less.

The railway line splits a large part of southern Newmarket off from the rest of the town, including both housing and also amenities like the football club. The railway also bisects a school catchment area, so children would be put at more risk by this proposed closure and alternative route.

The alternative route from southern Newmarket to the town centre runs under an underpass has an incredibly narrow, and in my view dangerous, footpath. The distance is significantly further, and not within walking distance for anyone with a physical disability, and it is clearly a safety hazard. The overwhelming majority of residents are concerned that people who are used to using the pedestrian crossing over many years could scale any fence installed by Network Rail, leading to even greater danger.

Crucially, there is absolutely no pressing need to close this crossing. It has been in operation for decades with no serious accident. The two fatalities recorded in the past ten years - neither recent - were both suicides and therefore not caused by lack of safety features at this crossing.

I do understand the overall drive within Network Rail to reduce the number of level crossings. This involves a significant investment programme, to ensure that crossing closings do not have negative local economic and social impacts – as it would in the case of the Weatherby pedestrian crossing.

I support more trains on the route, and can see the strong argument to replace the crossing with a footbridge at the station. So far this suggestion has been rebuffed on the grounds that Network Rail does not own enough land on either side. However, there are significant verges on either side, which I am confident Suffolk County Council would release. Alternatively other safety features could be introduced.

It is very disappointing that Network Rail have not engaged in any serious options appraisal. Their engagement of the local community has been minimal – at first proposing to hold the public inquiry in a different town – and clearly aimed at avoiding having to try any attempt at rational explanation of the decision.

Worse, their approach to my raising concerns – on behalf of the community – has been dismissive at best and included threatening phone calls to my Parliamentary office. I will be raising this with the Transport Secretary and asking for it to be investigated.

In total, Network Rail's behaviour indicates that the decision to close this crossing – despite the overwhelming evidence against – was predetermined.

I would be grateful if this proposal was therefore halted until a reasonable alternative could be properly investigated.

Matt Hancock MP
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