

Rother Valley Railway

Proposed reinstatement of former Kent and East Sussex Railway track (section between Northbridge Street and Junction Road)

Landscape and Visual Review Update

prepared by

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for

Temple Group Ltd on behalf of Rother Valley Railway Ltd

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 In March 2020, I was commissioned by Temple Group Ltd on behalf of Rother Valley Railway Ltd (RVR) to carry out independent review of landscape and visual matters relating to the proposal to reinstate a section of the former Kent and East Sussex Railway line.
- 1.2 The review is to be included in an overall 'revalidation report', which will form part of the evidence being considered at the forthcoming public inquiry (currently scheduled to open in July 2021).
- 1.3 The aim of the commission was to determine a) whether the findings of the landscape and visual studies carried out between 2013 and 2017 could be relied on for decision-making purposes, and b) whether any matters arising since 2017 - including scheme changes the effects of which had not been assessed - required further study. In the event that they did, I would carry out the necessary studies and report the findings.
- 1.4 The review was completed and submitted to the client in April 2020, and should be referred to for detailed information about the background to and scope of the commission, and the review's conclusions and recommendations. However, due to the COVID-19 situation, it was not possible to visit the site and surrounding areas in order to verify the findings of the desktop studies on the ground, and revisit the conclusions if necessary; therefore, the review recommended that the site should be visited prior to the inquiry.
- 1.5 In April 2021, I was instructed to carry out the site visit, the purpose of which was as follows:
 - i) Check, photograph and record the landscape and visual baseline situation as reported in the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) which was carried out in 2013 / 14, and note any changes which had occurred in the seven or so years which had passed since the surveys were undertaken that could potentially affect the LVIA's results. Examples of such changes include loss and / or growth of trees, the construction and / or demolition of built form, and the introduction of new infrastructure.
 - ii) Assess likely landscape and visual effects to test the findings of the applicant's studies, comparing the LVIA's results with my own, and factoring in changes to both the baseline situation and the scheme.
 - iii) Assess the landscape and visual effects likely to arise from the proposed additional land-take, street-lighting, and spatial deviation.
 - iv) Following the site visit, produce a brief update to the 2020 review.
- 1.6 The visit lasted three days (between 27th and 29th April). Weather conditions were dry and overcast; on the whole, visibility was good to fair.

2. Landscape & Visual Effects

2021 Landscape & Visual Baseline

- 2.1 Comparison between the photographs of the site and surrounding area in the LVIA and the situation in 2021 indicates that overall, there have been few material changes in the physical landscape apart from tree growth in most places.

LVIA

- 2.2 Although there are certain shortcomings, overall, I conclude that the findings of the applicant's landscape and visual studies carried out between 2013 and 2017 can be relied on for decision-making purposes.

Effects on Landscape Character

- 2.3 I agree with the LVIA's conclusion that the scheme as it was when the assessments were carried out would not give rise to significant effects (positive or negative) on landscape character.
- 2.4 My own assessment concluded that the proposed additional land-take, street-lighting and spatial deviation would not give rise to significant effects (positive or negative) on landscape character either.

Effects on Views / Senses

- 2.5 My April 2020 review explained the problems encountered in ascertaining the LVIA's judgements about levels of visual effects, but I concluded there was the potential for the scheme to give rise to high levels of adverse visual effects when seen from certain viewpoints.
- 2.6 During the site visit, it became clear that the restoration of the railway and construction of associated features *per se* would not significantly adversely affect any views (including the proposed night-time lighting); in fact, where the existing vegetation is eroded / in poor health, its restoration could potentially deliver small benefits - see Mitigation below.
- 2.7 In my opinion, the majority of the adverse visual effects would be caused by the trains themselves as they moved through the open countryside.
- 2.8 Levels of effects would depend on a number of factors, mainly the distance of the receptor from the train - broadly, levels would decrease with distance. In close proximity, and especially when at a lower level than the track (as is the case on a couple of footpaths), the moving trains could be intimidating to some. Also, the nature of the receptor must be taken into account, for example people living in residential properties would almost certainly be affected differently / for longer periods than people using public footpaths and other rights of way. In addition, the frequency, duration and times of day / night at which the effects occurred would need to be considered.
- 2.9 In my opinion, in the places closest to the moving trains there is the likelihood that the adverse visual effects arising from them could be high. However, whilst the worst-case visual / sensory scenario has been adopted in the assessments, i.e. some people may find the scheme unacceptable / intolerable, there is always a degree of subjectivity in these matters, since others may enjoy watching and listening to steam trains regularly moving through the landscape.
- 2.10 Some people are also likely to be adversely affected by operational noise effects, whether they can see the trains or not, although the assessments concluded that these would be low-level. Para. 6.5.13 of the 2014 ES stated that '*The predicted noise levels show that the operation of the railway will result in a maximum change in ambient noise level of 1dB LAeq. This is assessed as a **Negligible** effect at the nearest receptors*'. The findings were revalidated in the 2021 ES update.

Mitigation & Enhancement

- 2.11 I do not recommend relying on existing or proposed vegetation to mitigate adverse effects on views.
- 2.12 Whilst planting may help to screen or filter certain views from certain directions, it relies on factors such as absence of pollution, pests, diseases, damage and so on, none of which can be guaranteed in future. Also, new planting would take many years to achieve the height required to screen some of the views, and may never reach the heights required to screen others. Finally, the railway operators and users are unlikely to want the whole of the section to be through a deeply-wooded corridor, missing out on fine views of the surrounding countryside.
- 2.13 During the site visit I noticed that the far eastern end of the site corridor had recently been roughly surfaced with stone. That has resulted in some damage to and loss of trees, and the resultant gaps allow views in from nearby residential properties, roads, commercial premises, and a campsite. This was not anticipated in the effects assessments (NB it adversely affects character as well as visual amenity).

Tree damage along eastern section of site



- 2.14 Prior to surfacing, this section would have been an unmanaged mature tree belt as per the section immediately west, which runs for some 1.3km, ending at a field boundary south east of Salehurst. A shorter section further west is also well-wooded. It is therefore possible that the same damage / loss would happen when the rest of the wooded sections were surfaced.
- 2.15 The density of the trees in the unmanaged belt vs the paucity of trees along the surfaced section is clearly visible on Google Earth, as shown in the snip below.

Google image of eastern section of site



- 2.16 Of course, the final scheme would need to be subject to good landscape design and proper future management; however, the planting which is proposed for ecological mitigation along the eastern section (see Figure E3a -Mitigation and Compensation Plan dated 4th April 2018) seems to be comprehensive, and appropriate within the local landscape.

- 2.17 Furthermore, during the site visit I noted that the section of line which has already been restored appears to be well-managed, and the associated vegetation is in good condition.

Restored section of line at Udiam, east of site



- 2.18 Thus, where the existing vegetation is eroded / in poor health, its restoration, and / or new planting, could potentially deliver small visual benefits (on the basis that it is not required for mitigation, only enhancement).

3. Summary Conclusions & Recommendations

- 3.1 The findings of the applicant's landscape and visual studies can be relied on for decision-making purposes.
- 3.2 The scheme would not give rise to significant effects (positive or negative) on landscape character.
- 3.3 The restored railway itself would not give rise to significant adverse effects on views, but there is the potential for adverse visual / sensory effects to arise from the moving steam trains.
- 3.4 My April 2020 review concluded that there was a relatively high degree of consensus that the heritage steam railway is recognised for the positive contribution it makes / can potentially make to landscape character and visual amenity (and related areas such as social / cultural / economic sustainable travel / tourism, green infrastructure and natural capital). *'The Kent and East Sussex Steam Railway [which] runs from Bodiam to Tenterden in Kent'* is one of CLCA 13's stated Key Positive Landscape Attributes. The *2019-24 High Weald AONB Management Plan* notes that the *'89km of historic railway line'* within the AONB contributes to the area's 'Natural and cultural capital'. My conclusion remains the same.
- 3.5 The scheme could potentially be in slight conflict with Objectives W1 (temporary), and FH1 (permanent) of the 2019-24 High Weald AONB Management Plan; otherwise, the scheme meets all the other relevant objectives. In certain aspects, the scheme demonstrates a high degree of compliance with the objectives.
- 3.6 I recommend that all tree damage / loss is mitigated and / or compensated for.

- 3.7 I also suggest that there is scope for landscape and visual enhancement. If new planting is proposed that is not required for screening or other mitigation, and is well-designed and well-managed, it could make a positive contribution to local landscape character, visual amenity and biodiversity, resulting in some small long-term scheme benefits.

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