

Summary proof of evidence

I have lived in the village for almost 9 years but have been visiting here for 66 years

I do not believe there is a compelling case for the T& W Act Order for three key reasons: lack of socio/economic benefits, traffic congestion and risk of flooding.

Economic benefits.

In the original application, RVR's own report (Environmental survey Addendum A) stated,

"The local social/economic impacts of the scheme would be minimal, ..."

This railway would not be of use to anyone travelling to or from work at usual times and would be too expensive to use regularly.

RVR's Statement of Aims says the reinstatement of the railway would help to unlock the tourist potential of the district through the provision of a sustainable transport RVR's infrastructure.

If the main aim of the link is to enable people to travel by train to Robertsbridge then get to the station at Bodiam, then a bookable shuttle minibus would achieve this. Surely a small fleet of electric vehicles is more sustainable than building embankments and maintenance infrastructure, cutting down trees and running diesel and coal trains?

If RVR wanted to support the local tourist economy they could extend the scope of a dial a ride service like this, with bus stops at nearby tourist attractions such as vineyards, Brede, Great Dixter or Smallhythe Place. With more destinations available, this could encourage overnight stays. The railway could attract more customers if, with good marketing, they promoted tours where for example, the railway minibus picked you up at the station, delivered your luggage to Tenterden by train, delivered you to Great Dixter, picked you up later for you to catch the train at Northiam. On to Tenterden for an overnight stay and the next day perhaps the minibus to Smallhythe Place and back then take the train to explore Bodiam, then minibus back to Robertsbridge.

In contrast, the railway would take you to Bodiam, Northiam and Tenterden. That is it.

RVR uses volunteers so will create few jobs. If, as they hope, most visitors come by train, they would only use shops etc in walking distance. The High St is full of listed buildings, there is no room to expand and the shops are those which fulfil the needs of a small village. It would be harmful to the village if an existing shop turned to tourist trade, which would only be seasonal. It seems unlikely any new business would be viable if it only has business for 4 months a year.

If the flood risk is increased, the potential cost of insurance claims and higher premiums is significant.

Traffic and congestion

Tom Higbee's Proof of Evidence proposes that only 15% of visitors would arrive by train. This is a hope; not a certainty. RVR offer no analysis of how their cars would impact on the village, apart from near the level crossings. There are three places where traffic is reduced to one way; George Hill, Northbridge St and Station Rd. All three are very sensitive to even short term increases in traffic flow.

RVR intend to avoid "rush hour" as in 9ish and 5/6ish. However, the two schools, a primary on George Hill and a secondary at the top of Knelle Road create a rush hour at 3-3.30. RVR could be running a train at this time, in term time. More cars park on George Hill at these times and 6 buses travel through the village to the secondary school every school day. There is also short term congestion at the crossroads between Langham Rd and Knelle Rd at school pick up time.

In addition the village has been allocated a target of providing another 150 houses. Planning permission has been granted for 96 dwellings accessed from Northbridge St, near the proposed level crossing. Also, when there is an accident and the A21 is blocked, traffic from the trunk road is routed through the village. This creates gridlock very quickly.

Commuters who do not want to pay for parking leave their cars wherever they can; Mill Rise, Bellhurst Road and lower Langham Road are favourites. We now have parking enforcement which has reduced parking on Station Rd but it has been impossible to see whether commuters are using the station car park more or are moving further out

into residential streets as normal travel patterns have been changed by Covid.

There is a car park at the station but no proposals from RVR on how visitors would be made to use it. Therefore there is a significant risk that visitor parking would exacerbate congestion. People unfamiliar with the village do not know if their chosen parking space will block a road. As I understand it, Tom Higbee's assessment that they expect sufficient parking spaces will be available in the station car park is predicated on only 15% of extra visitors arriving by car and therefore unreliable.

There is a major conflict between two assumptions in Tom Higbee's Proof of Evidence. On one hand, linking the railway will create extra spending and encourage extra visits to other tourist attractions, yet most people will travel to Robertsbridge by train. If they are on foot, they will not be able to visit easily tourist venues

Flood risk

RVR's own earlier assessment (Environmental survey Non Tech Vol 1 Section 4) stated,

"The presence of the new railway embankment will result in a loss of floodplain storage and the bridge crossings will impact flooding by obstructing flood flows.... Flood defences at Northbridge St and Station Rd would need to be raised by .3 m to mitigate the increased flood risk caused by the proposed scheme. There are no plans to defend the museum, pavilion, a commercial property on Station Road, properties at Robertsbridge Abbey, Udiam Cottages, Forge Farm and Park Farm. However, for an electricity substation west of the High St and a pumping station/electricity substation east of the village, there would be an increased risk of flooding, which is considered a significant effect."

So in a previous flood risk assessment (which did not include more recent upgrades for climate change), they were saying there would be an increased risk of power failure and sewage not being pumped away from the village even if the flood defences were raised.

I am concerned that the provision of only one evacuation route from the river meadows to higher ground at Moat Farm puts human lives at risk when livestock has to be moved rapidly. Just last winter, at another place in the village, flood waters rose fast and trapped some sheep and

passersby had to swim out to release them from the field. Water levels can rise very fast.

Rother District Council imposed the following condition on the application for the A21 crossing,

"No development shall take place until a satisfactory scheme for compensatory flood storage has been submitted."

RVR has only started to propose how this could be done during this inquiry.

I believe the adequacy of such arrangements should be tested at this inquiry and not left to be determined later.

I think the importance of keeping the culverts under the embankment on the flood plain clear has been established. I understand that RVR cannot provide a schedule for clearing them until they know how often they block but surely this inquiry should have the opportunity to scrutinise the adequacy of planned inspection (and remedial action) arrangements? For example, when would clearing be delayed until a volunteer work party was available and what would trigger immediate action by a contractor?

I do not know whether the flood risk assessments have included consideration of the surface water run off from the A21, which flooded houses in Northbridge St. I understand that representations were made to Highways England about diverting the flow of water, and any changes in water flow may affect the water flow on the river meadows.

Planning permission has been granted for 96 dwellings on the Hodson's Mill site which will reduce the capacity of land in the locality to absorb water. Plans for that development obviously took into account the flood risk there but I would like to be reassured that the development there and the railway are looked at as a whole, for their potential effects on each other.

I believe that the human and economic cost of potential flooding far outweighs any gains from having a railway.

I also have concerns about the level crossings, safety and congestion issues on the A21 and environmental issues but feel these are adequately addressed elsewhere.

Kathryn Bell