

Jerry Alderson evidence (script) at Public Inquiry

Hilton Hotel in Cambridge on Wednesday 12 April 2023

As the inquiry's time is valuable, I propose to read from a script, which should take 10 minutes. This will cover the points raised in my objection.

I wish to help Network Rail wherever possible by suggesting solutions. My hope is that when writing your report, sir, you will include my three suggested mitigations [M1, M2, M3] to the application and offer the applicant one piece of advice [ADVICE], which is at the end.

For the record, I submitted my views to NR during its consultation period, and my response to the TWA Order application before the deadline. However, the DfT TWA Unit took until January before acknowledging it, even though I had chased them several times. The PDF on the Gateley-Hamer website is what I submitted last year. It does not contain a corrected paragraph sent to the DfT – I had given the wrong cause of the Hixon accident in 1968. It was caused by a failure of the police to follow the proper process when it was escorting a long vehicle over an AHB.

I am extremely supportive of the railway, and I trust that Network Rail and its advocate recognises and appreciates that. However, that does not mean that I give NR carte blanche to do anything it likes without considering the impact to rail users, road users, the environment and society in general. Hence, my objection.

I want to see the maximum number of trains on a route, which helps the finances of the railway and benefits society by modal shift from car to train. The only way you can maximise services on a route with level crossings is to minimise the barrier downtime, since rail and road traffic must co-exist.

I don't want to appear unconcerned about safety on the railway. I have raised with TOC management my concern about cars passing close to pedestrians at Waterbeach station, where the walking area is quite narrow. This has still not been addressed. The railway is not blamed for road accidents that occur close to the railway but when it involves a train they are. This surely affects the choice of which types of safety risks the railway chooses to act upon, and which it chooses to ignore.

A way of reducing the number of pedestrians using Waterbeach level crossing is to ensure that the TVMs on both platforms are working all the time. The station manager, Great Northern, has failed to achieve this. This is not the responsibility of Network Rail, although may be once subsumed into Great British Railways. I ask that the importance of working TVMs is mentioned in your report, sir, as it is something the DfT can manage [M1].

PAYG smartcards obviously avoid the need to walk over the level crossing.

[SKIPPED: The highest-profile fatality at a level crossing in this region was two teenage girls at Elsenham station in December 2005. Network Rail was strongly criticised, quite unfairly in my view, as the girls only crossed the track because the train operator (then National Express) had not provided a TVM on the Cambridge platform. If only it had done so.]

Let's be clear about modelling. There is no model in the world that will tell you what I will do. If Waterbeach station level crossing is converted to full barrier then I will cease to use the station car park, which will mean a small loss of income to the railway. Instead, I will park either at the village green or outside people's homes, adding to the congestion, as I will have no practical alternative. I am not prepared to reach Waterbeach 20 minutes (rather than five or six minutes at present) before my train is due to be certain of being able to park in the station car park and walk over the crossing to the down platform in time (King's Lynn has only an hourly service so I can't take a risk of missing it).

Much has been made of barrier downtime — it's only part of the story. Delay time matters.

An AHB results in a short queue of cars. Full barriers result in much longer queues. This has a non-linear effect. We must remember that when the barrier rises only the first car can move. There will be a compounding delay before the second and subsequent cars move. If there is, say, a five-second human delay before each movement, then in a queue of 20 cars the last car would start moving 95 seconds after the first. Therefore, it is likely that the twentieth stationary car in the queue would take two minutes before it reaches the level crossing. This optimistically assumes that there are no parked cars, which drivers must manoeuvre around. There are always obstructions in Station Road. With an AHB there are usually a few oncoming cars, but with a full barrier it could be a continuous stream of oncoming cars. This delay is on top of the time spent waiting whilst the barriers are down.

I am not going to challenge NR's modelling, as this has been adequately covered by other objectors. But I am convinced that there will be occasions when the queue of cars will stretch back all the way along Car Dyke Road to the junction with the A10 road.

The mitigation I propose, for your report, sir, is that NR may not be permitted to convert the level crossing to full barrier until the new Waterbeach Town station has been opened (at which time the existing station will be closed) [M2]. According to evidence today, the level crossing conversion is planned for 2025 and the new station will be open by December 2025. Delaying the conversion a few months hardly seems a problem. It is in NR's hands to open the new station earlier. Construction of Soham station, which required no track remodelling, began in February 2021, opening in mid-December 2021, nine months later.

As stated in my objection, I regularly walk across the railway at Milton Fen for leisure purposes. I do so when the weather is good. Of course, the weather can change during my walk. If I get wet when it is my fault, I have only myself to blame. However, if I find myself being drenched for four minutes, whilst stuck behind a full-barrier crossing, I will be cursing Network Rail. I do not oppose a full barrier here, but I propose a simple, cheap mitigation.

A new equipment box will be installed on the village side and once commissioned the old AHB equipment box on the river side will be removed, leaving an unused concrete base. I ask that NR should install a bench seat with a basic shelter (either bus stop style or something more fitting the countryside) for people trapped behind the barrier. Walkers will still get wet in the rain, but hopefully not as much, especially not those who live close to the crossing. NR will be seen to be a good neighbour to the community [M3].

Finally, sir, I ask you to offer NR the following piece of advice [ADVICE] in your report.

I know from talking to NR people that its development teams tend to work in silos and often have little knowledge of other schemes in the area. Moreover, they often have no understanding of the deficiencies of the railway, and simply do the job they have been tasked without consulting their colleagues about what else could be done.

In my objection, I suggested that some small enhancements could be done at the same time as the re-signalling work, particularly reinstating a short section of double track at Chippenham junction to enable a Cambridge-bound train to leave the mainline, enabling the train behind it (possibly a freight train) to continue without delay. Avoiding knock-on delays is important because of the long single-track section between Soham and Ely. This simple enhancement would also generate a time saving to passengers, as the stationary trains will then be closer to Newmarket station whilst waiting for the train from Cambridge to pass it. Doing work at the same time can change the economics of a previously unaffordable enhancement.

I will cite just one example. British Rail singled the East Suffolk Line (that's Ipswich to Lowestoft) in 1984. As a result, only a two-hourly train service was possible. In 2011/12 when the line was re-signalled, a 400-metre-long passing loop, with a reopened second platform, was provided at Beccles. This was achieved for a much reduced £4m cost, of which the local authority contributed £1m. There has been a dramatic increase in patronage thanks to the new hourly service. Had the passing loop not coincided with re-signalling it is very unlikely that the loop would exist today, some 12 years later.

I will comment on your observations of Waterbeach level crossing yesterday, sir.

I was a daily commuter at Waterbeach from July 2008 to March 2011. I do not recount seeing a single so-called 'misuse' of the level crossing, although I accept your entirely valid point that I may have been preoccupied on many occasions. I have seen so-called incidents only a handful of times as a leisure traveller since then. On one occasion I started to cross after the audible alarm had begun and I had not fully crossed when a southbound train appeared in the distance, although there was no risk to me whatsoever as the train took a further 30 seconds, or so, to reach the level crossing. Even so, the driver used their horn.

The evidence refers to 'incidents', almost all of which are crossing 'misuse' without any consequences to anyone. What we really care about are four specific types of incidents: a) deaths, b) injuries, c) damage to a train that has hit an object and d) train driver distress. Those (and scary near misses) are the only incidents that have anything to do with safety.

Thank you.