



Network Rail proceed with application to demolish grade II-listed Brunel bridge and close vital Oxfordshire road for a year (!) without consulting stakeholders OR investigating alternative options which could save the taxpayer millions.

More than 4 years ago now, Network Rail first presented their plan to demolish the road bridge in Steventon, Oxfordshire as part of the the electrification of the Great Western line. It subsequently emerged that, although Network Rail's own contractor Atkins had written a report stating that the track could be lowered to avoid demolition, this option had not been explored. Historic England (formerly English Heritage) therefore commissioned Belgian electrification experts TUC Rail to report on possible alternatives for Steventon bridge and a number of other bridges on the western mainline. The report proposed several measures which are common practice in European countries with more experience of electrification, and which would negate the need to demolish this historic bridge and close (for a year) a road which plays a key role in the strategic road network. Network Rail failed to respond to the points raised in this report, instead hiring TUC Rail to oversee some other challenging parts of the western mainline, clearly validating TUC's expertise but preventing them from supporting us further.

Another year passed, during which Network Rail failed to communicate at all, and indeed ignored repeated enquiries from all levels of local government. Historic England, as a key consultee to the planning process for listed buildings, remained of the view that, until Network Rail supplied overwhelming evidence to justify the need to demolish the bridge, they would reject any application. Network Rail came back to the table suddenly with a back-of-an-envelope proposal to close an adjacent level crossing, dividing our community in two, the need for which was also negated by the recommendations of the TUC report; thankfully under intense popular pressure this application was withdrawn.

Unfortunately, our MP (and now prospective parliamentary candidate), Ed Vaizey, has appeared neither interested in discussing the details of the project, nor aware of the huge disruption that this needless demolition will cause to a vast number of his constituents. We have been grateful for the support of our district councillor (and leader of the Vale of the White Horse District Council) Matt Barber, who has acknowledged that the B4017 "is an important part of the strategic road network", as well as being the principal diversion route when the A34 is closed (which is often!), and has assured us that the VoWHDC will support Historic England's view on the listed building consent.

The application was finally submitted by Network Rail 2 weeks ago, along with a flimsy and nebulous technical justification from their consultants. We intend to rebut this application in the strongest possible terms, and hold this opaque, publicly-funded yet privately-operated organisation to a suitably high standard of evidence before they are permitted to embark on this poorly thought-out plan to destroy a historic listed structure and cause turmoil in the daily lives of thousands. Despite the clear and dangerous precedent this would set, regrettably we expect Network Rail to apply political pressure to the planning process, rather than properly explore any alternative, cheaper, better solution.