

Cabinet – 19th November 2024

Statements submitted by members of the public

1. Statement submitted by Linda Kenyon – North Wareham Action Group

Wareham Railway Crossing

On behalf of the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group and the North Wareham Action Group, I would wish to make the following points.

Any construction of a raised walkway will do nothing to enhance the appearance of an area which has been identified as an ideal area for regeneration providing much needed affordable housing and infrastructure services, which are currently non-existent north of the railway crossing. [The Victorian definition of a village was a settlement that comprised 4 P's. A public house, a primary school, a post office and a parish church. North Wareham has a population just shy of 2500 souls and has a sub post office!!!]

The addition of a further quarter mile walk into the town would undoubtedly lead residents north of the crossing being deterred from this trip. In an area largely populated by elderly residents the need to use a vehicle will probably mean that people will visit Poole or Dorchester to complete their shopping needs.

The closure of the existing crossing will have the direct effect of cutting the town in two and disadvantaging the majority of residents in Wareham. I strongly urge those in authority to place an automated level crossing to benefit the residents of Wareham.

I would urge Cabinet members to consult with the local community before pursuing planning permission action as members should be aware that there is overwhelming support for an automated crossing and the community deserve to know why this option is not being pursued.

2. David Budd, Wareham Town Councillor

My name is David Budd and I have been a Wareham Town Councillor for 48 years. Over this period Dorset Council and its predecessors have failed, despite more recent promises, to work with Town and Parish Councils.

I only learnt of the current proposals regarding the Wareham pedestrian crossing of the railway from a member of the Wareham Town Trust late on the afternoon of Wednesday 13 November. This is very disappointing as the Town Council has had more recent meetings with Dorset Council staff and the Portfolio member regarding the crossing when what was supposed to have been a feasibility study to provide an automated controlled pedestrian level crossing was nothing more than another risk assessment of the existing crossing.

Ramps to the existing footbridge have been considered previously and rejected due to their impact on the Grade II listed railway station, the considerable increase in travel distance, particularly for wheelchair users, which would lead to a disincentive for residents to walk into the town centre and instead to use their car, perhaps to travel elsewhere which would impact on local trade. The town will be in effect cut in half.

Network Rail continue to claim that the existing crossing is one of the most dangerous on the network, but I am not aware of anyone being injured or killed crossing the railway at Wareham. Network Rail is a risk adverse organisation, but just down the road at Wool pedestrians have to share the level crossing with motor vehicles, which has very obvious dangers.

Residents of Wareham and the Town Council have been opposed to the loss of the existing crossing for many years, the very least Dorset Council should have done was to come to the Town Council and explained why an automated pedestrian level crossing cannot be provided.

3. Statement from Carol Turner

From 1950 I lived in Bere Road Wareham. My family all walked across the railway line into Wareham daily for School, shopping/recreational activities/work and Church. The crossing was monitored by crossing gates.

In the 70's early 80's my late husband would use the crossing either pushed in his wheelchair or, use his electric wheelchair to access the town. Throughout my lifetime there has never been an accident on the crossing.

After the flyover was built to replace the vehicular crossing it was discovered that a grave mistake had been made in the paperwork by the County Council officers and the rights of the pedestrian were extinguished as well as the vehicular access rights. The late former Leader of the County Council, Councillor Colin Hodge informed me of this when I joined the Town Council 18/19 years ago adding that "it will come back to bite you" in time. AND This is why we find ourselves in the position we are in today.

To try to rectify the situation the County Council took out a lease to continue the pedestrian rights to cross but this downgraded these rights to permissive. However it was never the intention to extinguish the rights of way for pedestrians as the railway crossing was (and still is) the only safe pedestrian route between the two halves of Wareham.

Wareham residents feel that an enormous injustice has been done by extinguishing their rights of way and vehemently feel that the proposal we are faced with today would add to this injustice. The proposed ramped bridge would be unusable by the many who are elderly and frail, and those who use wheelchairs or experience difficulty in walking unaided, also for those who have to push them, and for those with buggies and small children. Under Government Policy and according to the Department of Transport Design Standards for accessible Railway Stations gradients should not be less than 1:20 but we are being asked to accept 1:12 which is not only far too steep but is also dangerous when coming down especially with a wheelchair or heavily laden pushchair/ pram and is a serious potential accident.

The current pedestrian bridge is listed and is the entry to Wareham Town. The proposal of a ramped structure is totally out of keeping and in my opinion an eyesore and detracts from the appearance of the historic bridge. In this time of change, as Mayor speaking on behalf of the Townspeople of Wareham I urge you all when making your decision to consider and listen carefully to what the residents of this town are saying and please show that you are a Council who listens and cares for their voters.

4. Statement from Cllr Keith Critchley, Chair, Wareham Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group

Wareham Pedestrian Level Crossing

This is the only pedestrian route between the two halves of Wareham and is of vital importance to the town's cohesion. When the nearby flyover was built, Dorset County Council prepared a stopping up order, extinguishing, by mistake, the pedestrian as well as the vehicular rights of way. Realising the mistake, Dorset County Council took out a lease over the crossing from British Rail. The right of way was then reduced to a permissive rather than public footpath.

In 2009 Annette Brooke MP took the issue to Parliament and Parliamentary Under Secretary Chris Mole stated "Safety concerns are of great importance, but the severance of communities and reducing accessibility to key transport routes are no less so... I encourage Dorset County Council and Network Rail to ensure that all appropriate options are considered ... and that safety, accessibility and community needs of Wareham are appropriately provided for."

Since then, options have been investigated. Three Planning applications for ramped bridges have been submitted. The first could not be implemented. The second and third were refused due to the impact on the Listed Railway Bridge/street scene and the increased distance for pedestrians resulting in increased car use. The gradient was too steep for unpowered wheelchairs and many pushchairs.

Lifts were considered impractical to accommodate the number of people using the crossing, many with pushchairs/bikes.

This issue was raised by local residents when Wareham's Neighbourhood Plan was being developed. The independent Examiner recognised the importance of the ground level crossing concluding in his report "*It is clear from the evidence submitted that the retention of the pedestrian crossing over the railway has widespread community support and it is reasonable in every respect for the Town Council to reflect this support in the WNP.*" Wareham Neighbourhood Plan, which includes a policy for retention of the ground level crossing, was adopted by Dorset Council on 8th November 2021 and now forms part of Dorset Council's Development Plan.

In 2022 it was understood that Network Rail would review options for automation of the crossing in the light of technological advancements elsewhere on the railway network. However, the report commissioned by Network Rail has turned out to be a risk assessment and not a feasibility study into automation of the crossing.

We urge you to ask Network Rail to fully investigate the latest technological solutions to enable the gates to be automated and keep the ground level crossing that should have continued to be a permanent right of way for pedestrians/cyclists.

Rather than make a hasty decision I urge deferment for you to talk to Wareham Town Council and see the crossing yourselves.

5. Statement from Mrs Susan Rushton

Ref Wareham Railway crossing...

The idea of closing the crossing is ludicrous! We use it all the time & the alternative route proposed is lethal. You will be putting more lives at risk by been made to use the flyover with no pavements... all I've ever heard of us 2 near misses since 1990

The cost to run the hut is extortionate & needs to be investigated Why carnt the gates at Wareham work on the same system as the ones in Wool, east Holme etc... they are not manned & seem to close effectively and in time to avoid people using the crossing

I personally think this has dragged in long enough& the decision needs to be taken to improve the gates so they close when trains are on the way or a new bridge installed complete with either lift or escalator.

We can put a man in the moon & back but carnt sort this issue out...

Full time closure is not an option to us who live in the north side of Wareham

6. Statement from Geoff Boulton

I would like to object to item 15 on the Cabinet Meeting Agenda scheduled for 19th November at 6.30pm.

How can the future of the Wareham Level Crossing be discussed at this meeting without the prior notice to the residents of Wareham.

The public have not had sight of the independent report, commissioned by the MP Michael Tomlinson.

I find it objection that as a past objector to the previous plans for a ramp, along with numerous others, that we have not been informed about this meeting.

My past objections still stand and I view this item extremely suspiciously.

I would appreciate an explanation to the councils actions.

7. Statement from James Pope

I understand that there is going to be a proposal to build a ramp to the footbridge across the railway track at Wareham Station, presumably to replace the current level crossing.

This is a very inappropriate idea. The footbridge is high, and a ramp will be steep and/or long and will present a serious obstacle to parents with pushchairs, people in wheelchairs, old and infirm people, train travellers who might have heavy luggage, and children on bicycles going, for example, to and from schools in Wareham. The level crossing is heavily used, and is the best and most obvious facility, and this is the crossing option that should be supported.

I hope you will consider this point of view when you discuss the future of the crossing at Wareham station.