

Dear Mr Grayling,

Proposed closure of platform at Pilning station

My name is Christina Biggs; I am the secretary of the Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways who campaign for improvements to local rail services in the Greater Bristol area.

I am writing to ask whether you would request Network Rail to replace the footbridge at Pilning station, which is about to be demolished (from Saturday 31 October), so that trains will continue to be able to call at Pilning in both directions.

Pilning station is located between Bristol and Severn Tunnel Junction on the Great Western main line to South Wales, which is being prepared for electrification. As part of the electrification works, the footbridge at Pilning will need to be either raised or replaced, because it is too low for the electric cables. Rather than raising or replacing the bridge, however, Network Rail plans to demolish it and not to replace it. This will take the Wales-bound platform out of use, so that trains will only be able to call in the Bristol-bound direction. We suggest that rather than demolishing the footbridge, Network Rail should lift off the metal superstructure and keep it in a suitable location near the station so that a structural assessment can be carried out with a view to raising the bridge using a higher pediment, or alternatively to commit to replacing it like-for-like. To date a proper structural assessment has not been done.

Network Rail has treated the removal of the footbridge and consequent closure of the Wales-bound platform as a Network Change, and has consulted only the relevant train and freight operating companies (see attached notification). However, before closing part of a station, the procedure set out in the Railways Act 2005 should be followed, including a full statutory consultation, carried out by the Secretary of State (Schedule 7). It appears that Network Rail regard the closure as a minor modification, but that is inappropriate. The platform to be closed is necessary for the provision of passenger services at Pilning, as without it services can only be provided in one direction, which is of little use.

I attach our recent statement to the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership (WELEP) Strategic Leaders' Board, which sets out our case in more detail. Neither WELEP (West of England Local Enterprise Partnership) nor Pilning and Severn Beach Council were consulted about the bridge removal until we alerted them. We have held several media events over the summer and have met with both the Pilning and Severn Beach Parish council, residents and employees in Severnside, all of whom have stated they would welcome a regular rail service to be restored to Pilning. You will have received a letter from the Parish Council and I attach the initial results from a survey that was launched by a local resident, Olga Taylor, as well as our own petition.

We believe that removing the footbridge at Pilning would be short-sighted. Although Pilning currently only has a Saturday excursion service, there is now much industrial development just to the south of the station. We anticipate a healthy footfall not just from nearby residents, but from the inhabitants of towns as far away as Thornbury; some Thornbury parents currently drive their children to Severn Beach station so that they can get to school. Although Network Rail cite Severn Beach and Patchway as alternative stations, there is no parking and a very poor rail service at both stations.

These and other arguments are contained in the attached statement, but my main argument for this letter to you is that it is your responsibility as Secretary of State to either carry out the full consultation for closing part of a station, or to undertake to investigate the structural soundness of the existing footbridge with a view to elevating it and replacing it, or to commit to provide a like-for-like footbridge within the electrification budget. Only then can we instigate even a daily trial service to build the case for a full service for this key location in Severnside. I attach our MetroWest Phase 3 plans and map, where you can see our strategy of utilising heavy rail as a "metro" for the Greater Bristol region that can then interface with bus and cycle lanes. You will also have received our response to the West of England Devolution Consultation where you can see our ideas for reducing the congestion for which Bristol is notorious.

We would be happy to travel to London to meet with you to discuss this key test case, or else to meet you locally to show you the station and footbridge, perhaps with a drink at the excellent Plough pub nearby. The matter is urgent, as Network Rail plan to remove the footbridge starting on Saturday 31 October. We have raised the matter with all standard intermediaries, including Jack Lopresti MP and the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership to no avail, so we felt the matter important enough (and setting an important enough precedent for the coming Devolution Deal) to appeal directly to you to carry out your statutory duty in this regard.

Yours sincerely,

Christina Biggs
Secretary
Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FOSBR)
www.fosbr.org.uk