



Department
for Transport

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From the Minister of State
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Dear Greg,

Thank you for your email of 19 November, enclosing correspondence from Councillor Philip Gaskin, Chair of Calvert Green Parish Council, and suggesting a meeting to discuss his proposal for a “Green Tunnel” at Calvert.

I am sorry to disappoint your constituent, but there are a number of major reasons – explained further below – why a green tunnel is not feasible at Calvert. However, I hope I can provide some reassurance regarding Councillor Gaskin’s concerns about the operational noise from the railway, which I believe is what has prompted him to re-visit the green tunnel concept.

A green tunnel at Calvert was considered as part of the early design for the railway, but was rejected for a number of reasons, summarised in the quotation provided by Councillor Gaskin in his letter. These original disadvantages continue to stand, and on this basis alone, I am afraid I could not support his proposal.

For example, contrary to the suggestion in your constituent’s letter, a green tunnel would require more land to construct than that which is currently required and available. This is largely due to the need to excavate safe slopes either side of the railway itself (the ‘green bridge’ further south is not a reliable comparator for these purposes). This would create additional environmental impacts, such as the loss of more habitat in a sensitive area, but also in terms of the extra material that would need to be excavated and transported (as well as additional noise impacts during construction).

In addition to higher construction costs, maintenance and operational costs would also be greater due to the need for water pumps (or other drainage solutions) and the additional challenges of maintaining subterranean structures and earthworks.

A further significant problem is the need to connect the railway line into the Infrastructure Maintenance Depot so that maintenance vehicles can access the railway from that facility immediately to the north. The very shallow gradients of HS2 would make this infeasible within the space available.

Alongside these compelling original reasons for discounting the proposal, the very real impacts of changing approach mid-way through delivery must now also be considered. The current scheme has many years of development behind it. Legal powers are in place through the Phase One Act, the necessary land has been acquired and prepared, and numerous additional local consents have been obtained (such as "Schedule 17" approval for the earthworks and structures). Furthermore, detailed design work has been completed and significant construction work has commenced. Making such a major change at this stage would mean unravelling all of this work and starting again and would inevitably therefore lead to very significant additional costs and multi-annual delay to the programme. As set out above, and below, there is simply no case for doing this.

I turn now to the concerns about operational noise from the railway which I understand prompted Councillor Gaskin to re-visit the rejected green tunnel concept. In summary, he is concerned that the original noise baseline was incorrect, that changes to the project since the original noise assessments were carried out have worsened the outcomes, and that HS2 is not implementing appropriate mitigation for its noise impacts. I will address these points in turn.

Regarding the baseline, the position is that the Environmental Statement (ES) identified significant operational noise effects at Calvert. HS2 Ltd considers that alternative baseline levels would not alter this conclusion. However, I am advised that the contractor, EKFB, is nevertheless investigating if lower baseline levels would lead to different conclusions regarding the mitigation proposals.

Councillor Gaskin is correct to state that projections of noise impacts have increased since the original ES assessments were carried out, but HS2 Ltd does not share his view on the significance of these changes. HS2 Ltd maintains that the increase would make no material difference to the significant effect that was reported in the ES. For this reason, HS2 Ltd is satisfied that the current design remains compliant with the Environmental Minimum Requirements.

Regarding what mitigation is appropriate in these circumstances, this is a matter which is still subject to local planning approval by Buckinghamshire Council through the Schedule 17 process, and the final outcome will be informed by the Council's views.

When considering the height of noise barriers, it is always necessary to balance a number of different factors, including acoustic benefits, visual impacts, cost and engineering practicability. In this case, EKFB considers that the 5-metre barrier provides the optimum balance. The reasoning for the proposed design is set out in the publicly available Noise Demonstration Report that accompanied the Schedule 17 application. I understand that a 6-metre barrier has been discussed with Buckinghamshire Council and the Parish Councils. However, in EKFB's view, increasing the barrier height would provide only minor (non-material) benefits in terms of noise levels, whilst adding cost and creating greater visual and landscape impacts.

For all of the above reasons, I see no value in further discussion regarding the green tunnel proposal. However, I understand that EKFB meets regularly with Parish Council representative(s) and has joint Parish Council meetings approximately every fortnight. This provides an appropriate forum for local representatives to raise and discuss issues of concern.

Best Wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Stephenson', with a horizontal line underneath.

ANDREW STEPHENSON MP

MINISTER OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT