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Dear Sir or Madam

Application for 'Prior Approval' Application, Under Part 18 Class A to Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 2015

Alterations of parapets to raise their heights and associated works at Warren Road Bridge, Sonning, Berkshire, RG4 6SY.

On behalf of Network Rail please find enclosed an application for prior approval under Part 18, Class A to Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (GPDO) 2015 for the Alterations of parapets to raise their heights and associated works at Warren Road Bridge, Sonning, Berkshire, RG4 6SY.

Warren Road Bridge located over Sonning Cutting is located on the Engineer's Line Reference (ELR) Paddington to North Road Junction line (MLN1) at 33 miles to 29 Chains.

Please find the following documents submitted in support of this application:

Drawing Title	Drawing Number	Revision
Site Location Plan		
Warren Road Overbridge Existing General Arrangement	02003-BBR-DRG-CIV-0001	B01
Warren Road Overbridge Proposed General Arrangement	02003-BBR-DRG-CIV-0002	B01
Warren Road Overbridge Parapet and Anti-climb Works Proposed Details – Sheet 1 of 2	02003-BBR-DRG-CIV-0003	B01
Warren Road Overbridge Parapet and Anti-climb Works Proposed Details – Sheet 2 of 2	02003-BBR-DRG-CIV-0004	B01
Warren Road Overbridge Proposed road Markings and Signage	02003-BBR-DRG-CIV-0005	B01

Proposal

The proposal seeks Prior Approval for making safety improvements to Warren Road bridge.

New protective fencing will be installed along the edges of the bridge to make it safer for pedestrians and to prevent objects or people from falling onto the railway below. The fencing will be fixed to the existing bridge parapets and will match in appearance and height along the bridge so that it forms a continuous barrier.

Small repairs to the existing brickwork will be carried out where needed, but the bridge itself will not be widened, raised or rebuilt. Along the road edges, new kerbs will be installed to protect the fencing from vehicle damage. The scheme also includes minor changes to road markings and signs on the approaches to the bridge, to ensure the layout remains clear and safe for road users.

All works will take place within the existing bridge and road area, with no change to the overall appearance or alignment of the bridge, and are intended purely to improve safety..

Background

Warren Road Bridge crosses the Great Western Main Line at Sonning Cutting, a long-established railway corridor with a bridge dating from the late nineteenth century. Unfortunately it has been the location of recent fatal incidents, highlighting the urgent need for improved safety measures.

In light of these incidents, the proposed works at Warren Road Bridge are preventative safety measures. They are intended to reduce opportunities for unsafe behaviour and to provide additional protection for the public and the railway,

Need

The core of the proposed works consists of raising the parapet heights. The increased height will act as a safety barrier as this asset is identified as high risk of accidental fall or suicide from climbing onto the parapet, due to the design of the existing parapet.

The increased parapet height is achieved by providing a minimum 1,850mm high parapet. These values include 50mm to allow for tolerance and future resurfacing of the bridge crossing. The horizontal extents of the parapet extension must be at least 3m beyond the track centreline.

The proposed works are shown on the drawings submitted as part of this Prior Approval submission, but generally consist of a new railing solution to be installed on top of the existing brick/coping. The railing will also have an internal perforated mesh along its full length. Anti-climb chamfers and earthing bonding details will also be provided.

The scope of the proposed works is presented in the enclosed documentation.

History

Warren Road Bridge spans the Sonning Cutting on the Great Western Railway (GWR) main line. The first crossing at this location was a timber trestle bridge completed for the opening of this part of the railway in March 1840. The present bridge has a central steel/cast-iron segmental span and GWR red and purple brick abutments and wing walls. It was erected c.1890–1893 when the route through the cutting was widened to four tracks.

Sonning Cutting itself was hand-excavated between 1838 and 1840 and is one of the early major civil-engineering works of the GWR. The cutting has a notable railway safety history, including the Christmas Eve 1841 accident caused by a landslip, which resulted in nine fatalities and prompted

early railway safety reforms; this context is frequently referenced in photographic and historic records of views taken from Warren Road Bridge toward adjacent crossings.

Over time, the bridge has continued to function as a vehicular road crossing, with periodic maintenance and surface works recorded in recent decades, including repainting associated with wider modernisation and electrification programmes on the GWR.

Description of the Site

Warren Road Bridge carries a local highway (Warren Road) over the Great Western Main Line at one of the deepest points of Sonning Cutting, between London Road Bridge (to the west) and Butts Hill/Pound Lane Bridge (to the east). The bridge and approaches sit within an established transport corridor, and the structure is largely contained within the cutting, only glimpsed in the wider landscape from neighbouring overbridges.

The bridge comprises a central 20 m segmental metal span (wrought iron) with pierced spandrels and simple metal railings set above granite kerbs, flanked by brick abutments/wing walls and side arches. Masonry elevations include a stepped string course, chamfered plinths to the inner parapets, and copings. The north-side parapets are of purple brick; elsewhere the characteristic red and purple brickwork is laid in London bond.

Proposed Development

The proposals comprise highway and bridge safety improvement works to Warren Road Overbridge, focused primarily on the enhancement of parapet safety, anti-climb measures and associated highway alterations.

The works include the installation of new anti-climb fencing to both the existing brick and steel bridge parapets. This consists of 1.8m high prison mesh fencing, fixed to new 60 x 60mm steel posts which are anchored into the existing parapet structures using stainless steel dowels and resin-fixed anchors. In locations adjacent to the existing steel parapet and metallic bridge span, the fencing is fixed to newly formed reinforced concrete foundations to ensure structural stability. The fencing is designed to tie into existing boundary fencing where present, providing a continuous and secure barrier across the bridge.

Minor localised parapet repairs are proposed where required, including brickwork repairs to match the existing parapet in terms of size, colour and mortar, and reinstatement around new fixings. No wholesale removal or replacement of the parapet structure is proposed.

Associated highway works include the installation of new kerbs on both sides of the carriageway adjacent to the bridge, set on reinforced concrete foundations. These kerbs act as vehicle restraint and protection to the new fencing and parapet edges.

In addition, the scheme includes new and amended road markings and traffic signage on the approaches to the bridge. This includes new thermoplastic white edge lining, give-way markings, and the installation of new regulatory and warning signs in accordance with the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions and relevant Traffic Signs Manual chapters. All signage and markings are subject to approval by the Local Highway Authority.

Overall, the works are confined to the existing highway and bridge footprint and are intended to improve pedestrian and public safety, prevent unauthorised access to the railway below, and enhance compliance with current safety standards, without altering the fundamental form or alignment of the bridge.

The design complies with Network Rail standards, Department for Transport codes, and British Building Regulations.

Part 18 Legislation and Prior Approval

This proposal is submitted under Part 18, Class A to Schedule 2 of the GPDO 2015 as permitted development. It does not require full planning permission but the Local Planning Authority (LPA) must give its approval prior to the implementation of the scheme.

Part 18 of the GPDO is applicable to developments which were initially authorised by an Act of Parliament.

The station and existing associated railway land around it were constructed under the authority of the Great Western Railway Paddington Extension Act 1837. This is an extension of the Great Western Railway Act 1835.

https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukla/Will4and1Vict/7/92/pdfs/ukla_18370092_en.pdf 1837 Act
https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukla/Will4/5-6/107/pdfs/ukla_18350107_en.pdf 1835 Act

Section 5 and 8 of the 1835 Act gave the then Railway Company and its successors in title, the power to build, alter and maintain the railway, including the following provisions:

S5 “And be it further enacted, That it shall be lawful for the said Company and they are hereby empowered to make and maintain the Railway and Branch Railways herein-after mentioned, with all proper Works and Conveniences connected therewith, in the Line or Course, and upon, across, under, or over. the Lands delineated on the Plan and described in the Book of Reference deposited with the respective Clerks of the Peace for the Counties of Gloucester, Somerset, Wilts, Berks, Oxford, Bucks, and Middlesex, and....., in the County of Berks; Sonning, North Stoke, South Stoke, and Goring...”

S8 “.....from Time to Time to alter, repair, or discontinue the before-mentioned Works or any of them, and to substitute others in their Stead, and to do and execute all other Matters and Things necessary or convenient for making, maintaining, altering, or repairing and using the said Railway and other Works by this Act authorized ...”

Accordingly, the railway works proposed could be authorised by the authority of the Great Western Railway Paddington Extension Act 1837. Therefore, the works proposed, fall within the scope of permitted development rights set out within Part 18 of the GPDO as we would “substitute others in their stead”.

Notwithstanding this, the proposal to make the proposed alterations to Warren Road bridge first require the ‘Prior Approval’ of the Local Planning Authority in relation only to the siting and design of the works. The GPDO states that ‘prior approval’ must not be unreasonably refused, nor conditions imposed unless the authority considers that alterations to that design are required to mitigate its impact.

This Act of Parliament gives provisions to; and bestows upon the railway company and its successors (Network Rail) the power to make developments necessary to the running and management of the railway.

Paragraph A.2 (of Part 18, GPDO) outlines the process by which the LPA can give their Prior Approval and comment on the proposals. It states:

The prior approval referred to in paragraph A.1 is not to be refused by the appropriate authority nor are conditions to be imposed unless they are satisfied that -

(a) the development (other than the provision of or works carried out to a dam) ought to be and could reasonably be carried out elsewhere on the land; or
(b) the design or external appearance of any building, bridge, aqueduct, pier or dam would injure the amenity of the neighbourhood and is reasonably capable of modification to avoid such injury.

The LPA may consider only the design, materials, and siting of the works to ensure that the development proposed 'would not injure the amenities of the neighbourhood' and be satisfied that it could not be 'reasonably carried out elsewhere'.

Environmental Impact Assessment

This development does not fall within the scope of the Town & Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 and so Environmental Impact Assessment is not required.

The development is within the scope set out in Paragraph 13 of Schedule 2 of the 2017 regulations. Which refers to the description relating to the original authorisation of the railway (Paragraph 7 of Schedule 1). Paragraph 13 indicates that the thresholds of Paragraph 10(d) of Schedule 2 should be met.

Planning Policy

The works as outlined above, is permitted development under Part 18 Class A to Schedule 2 of the GPDO 2015 and therefore deemed not to require a full planning application. Notwithstanding this, Network Rail has completed a review of relevant local policy and summarises compliance with this below.

National Policy Context

Network Rail would like to take this opportunity to indicate how these proposals would be in accordance with planning policy.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

The NPPF (Updated 2025) provides the Governments overarching planning policies for plan making and decision making in England, with the presumption in favor of sustainable development at its heart.

Transport policy contained within the NPPF is largely focused on the impact of, and location of, new development, in relation to existing transport infrastructure, and provides limited guidance on proposals for new transport infrastructure.

Chapter 9 sets out the Government's key aims for promoting sustainable transport, which is defined in the Glossary as including public transport. Paragraph 116 informs that public transport use should be encouraged and that the needs of people with disabilities and reduced mobility should be addressed.

Chapter 12 notes the importance attached to the good design of the built environment. It advises at paragraph 135 that planning policies and decisions should ensure that developments meet a number of design characteristics including:

- Will function well and add to the overall quality of the area, not just for the short term but for the lifetime of the development:
- are sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape setting, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation or change (such as increased densities); and
- optimise the potential for the site to accommodate and sustain an appropriate amount and mix of development (including green and other public space) and supporting local facilities and transport networks.

Strategic, Regional & Local Policy Context

Local Policy

The proposals align with the adopted Wokingham Local Transport Plan 2025 (LTP4), which provides the current policy framework for transport in the borough and sets out the Council's ambition to deliver a safe, reliable and well-connected transport system that supports sustainable growth.

The LTP emphasises a shift towards sustainable and active travel, seeking to balance car use with improved opportunities for walking, cycling and public transport, recognising the significant health and environmental benefits these modes deliver. It also identifies the need to reduce transport-related carbon emissions through integrated and low-carbon travel choices, with transport interventions expected to contribute positively to climate objectives.

The plan further commits to enhancing the accessibility and attractiveness of sustainable travel options across all communities, addressing mobility inequalities within the borough. In relation to safety, the adopted LTP seeks to maintain and strengthen a transport network **that is safe for all users**, with specific policy direction to improve pedestrian and cyclist links and the conditions around rail stations, achieved in partnership with Network Rail and transport operators.

Safety considerations are also embedded within the supporting Sustainability Appraisal, which requires scheme-level assessments to identify risks and incorporate appropriate mitigation measures. Taken together, these policies provide clear support for development that enhances sustainable travel infrastructure, improves safe access for all users, and contributes to a low-carbon, well-connected local transport environment.

Key Planning Considerations - Principal of Development

The proposed works comprise safety-focused improvements to an existing railway overbridge, situated within the long-established operational corridor of the Great Western Main Line. Warren Road Bridge, a late-19th-century structure spanning the Sonning Cutting, forms integral transport

infrastructure that has been in continuous use since its reconstruction in the 1890s. The works do not introduce new land uses, alter the established function of the bridge, or materially change its alignment or footprint. Instead, they provide proportionate enhancements to support safe ongoing use of existing transport infrastructure.

Given the location within an operational railway corridor and the minor, non-intrusive nature of the works, the proposal is consistent with the principle of maintaining and improving established transport assets. The development is therefore acceptable in principle.

Consideration of Proposed Development

Reason for Development

The works respond directly to the need to strengthen public safety at the bridge following serious incidents, including a confirmed fatality at Warren Road Bridge in 2023. Additional incidents near Reading station have reinforced the ongoing risks that arise from unsafe behaviour around the operational railway. These events highlight the necessity for targeted preventative measures at locations where individuals may gain access to dangerous areas or put themselves at risk.

The proposed improvements therefore seek to reduce opportunities for unsafe actions, prevent falls or objects from reaching the railway, and enhance the security of the bridge environment, all while retaining the structure's long-established role and appearance.

Design Concept

The design approach is intentionally modest and sensitive, reflecting the bridge's age, form and materials. The core concept is to introduce continuous protective fencing fixed to the existing parapets, providing a uniform, higher-level barrier along the bridge without altering its structure. Minor protective kerbing and small-scale repairs are designed to blend with the established fabric and ensure the fencing remains protected from vehicular strike.

The overarching design philosophy is risk-reduction without visual intrusion, maintaining the integrity of the original structure while improving its safety performance.

Design and Materials

The bridge is characterised by GWR red and purple brickwork laid in London bond, a steel/cast-iron central span, and parapets incorporating simple metal railings. All new materials have been selected to harmonise with this setting.

- The new fencing adopts a visually recessive, dark-finished metal to minimise contrast with the existing parapets.
- Fixings are designed to be minimal and reversible, avoiding damage to historic brickwork.
- Kerbing will complement the existing granite kerbs already present on parts of the structure.
- Brick repairs will be carried out on a like-for-like basis using matching brick and mortar.

The resulting design retains the bridge's established form, materiality and silhouette while enhancing functional safety.

Landscape and Visual Impact

Warren Road Bridge sits largely within the depth of the Sonning Cutting, meaning its wider visual presence is limited. Historic viewpoints confirm that the structure is only partially visible from neighbouring overbridges such as London Road Bridge and Butts Hill/Pound Lane Bridge, where only glimpses of parapets and upper brickwork are apparent.

Given this context, the addition of slender metal fencing will be visually subtle and read as part of the existing parapet line. There will be:

- No change to the height, width or alignment of the bridge structure.
- No effect on public views beyond the cutting.
- Negligible landscape impact, as all works remain within the existing engineered corridor.

Overall, the proposal preserves the visual character of the bridge and its local context.

Overlooking and Overshadowing

The site is located above the railway cutting, away from residential properties, and the proposed works do not increase the height of the bridge beyond the limited degree required for fencing. There are:

- No habitable properties in close proximity where overlooking would be increased.
- No additional massing, meaning no potential for overshadowing.

Accordingly, the works have no impact on amenity in terms of overlooking or loss of light.

Summary

The proposal does not require full planning permission as it has deemed consent through Part 18 to Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 2015. However, the LPA's prior approval of the scheme is required before works can commence. When undertaking prior approval considerations, the LPA must be satisfied that the scheme will not 'injure the amenities of the neighbourhood' or could not be implemented somewhere else on the land; as set out in paragraph A.2 of Part 18.

Network Rail looks forward to receiving written confirmation that Wokingham Borough Council is satisfied with the proposed works, and that prior approval has been granted.

If you have any queries regarding this application, or wish to discuss any part of this letter, project, or prior approval process, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully



Lisa Bullock (MRTPI)
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