

5 February 2013

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Dear Mark

A465 Heads of the Valleys Section 2: Brynmawr to Gilwern, Inc. Clydach Gorge

Thank you and the whole team for your continued engagement with DCFW in the lead up to Public Inquiry on this project and for presenting it to us the second time at the Design Review meeting of 31st January 2013. We have set out below our observations from the session and an indicative programme for subsequent meetings on site, and in preparation for formal Design Review in March 2013.

At the meeting, in our Agenda documentation and here in this letter, we formally record the declaration made regarding Martin Knight. Martin is a serving member of DCFW's Design Review Panel and on this occasion Martin was part of the scheme presentation team and it was confirmed that all present were content for Martin to participate in that capacity.

The Commission recognises that this scheme forms part of the wider roads programme and is among the last of the elements of the Heads of the Valleys duelling project. However, as several years have elapsed since the road strategy was developed; the Commission feels it would be beneficial to fully comprehend the key rationale behind the project as it stands today.

This section is taking place in a particularly sensitive and heavily designated landscape of considerable historical significance, adjoining a national park area, world heritage site and historic landscape setting. The scheme represents a dramatic intervention in this context. The rationale must therefore be sound, current and clearly articulated. The Commission was not wholly assured during the meeting, that this was the case.

Three specific areas are significant and formed a large part of the discussion: landscape, connecting structures and retaining walls. We have the following observations which we hope you will consider in the further development of the scheme:

The landscape issues are complex and it was apparent that more work is necessary on the highway boundary and the means of integration with the landscape. Whilst the landscape development is intended to link to the Heads of the Valleys and existing landscape strategies, which we acknowledge are broad, it was not apparent which elements of those strategies are being responded to and incorporated.

Overall the Commission was eager to better understand the experience for road users and pedestrians alike and the impact at human scale.

Following earlier engagement with the Commission in May 2012, it was clear that several changes had been made to the scheme and the introduction of Knight Architects is a positive step, allowing more positive design input to key structures.

In relation to these there remains a need to better articulate the narrative and function for such significant structures. Their scale currently appears at odds with the surrounding area particularly where they connect with existing landforms and we need to be convinced how many of them will be perceived and used by existing communities.

It is apparent that the retaining walls are likely to be the most significant structures in the scheme and these require significant attention to their extent and treatment to minimise negative impact and detract from the surrounding landscape and views. We were encouraged to learn that the retaining walls will be treated in accordance with geological features in the immediate location but we would welcome additional information as to how this will be achieved particularly sectional drawings related to pedestrian viewing points rather than highway junctions.

Alongside the retaining wall proposals, the proposed arrangements at both the Brynmawr and Clydach South junctions are similarly major interventions in the existing landscape, and in dealing with those, the Commission believes significant benefit could be gained from the use of physical working models. We question the 'gateway' status given to the easterly access bridge from Brynmawr and would like to understand more about the potential need for safety guarding and lighting to all the proposed bridge forms.

Can we suggest the following programme for future engagement?

Site Visit

A site visit as soon as possible, with DCFW panel members accompanied by one member of the project team should be the next step. Ideally that person would be you as Costain's representative. Although there is significant local knowledge of the site we suggest the visit will enable further examination of the proposed structures and retaining walls and key views. In order to assess the key views, a copy of the Zone of Visual Influence for the project would be useful to gain an understanding of the extent of visual impacts on the landscape.

Whilst we will cover the whole section, the canal section approaching Gilwern is of specific interest as the retaining wall proposed in the section will significantly impact on the canal which is currently well used. The panel were interested to look at this area from a pedestrian and human scale perspective rather than solely from a traffic point of view.

Preparation meeting:

Following the site meeting, a follow up should be convened in preparation for the formal Review. This preparation will enable greater focus on key areas and allow a structured and detailed day. We will need to see a working model of the site in the Clydach South area for this meeting.

Formal Design Review: Full day allocated

Benefitting from this visit and the preparation the Commission will allocate a 10.30am to 3.30pm day for formal review of the project and the itemised agenda will take a logical progression based on the preparation meetings.

In closing we would reflect that, whilst we appreciate the stage the project has reached and the level of detail required for published Orders and Public Enquiry, the project still warrants significant design attention to ensure that it is cost effective whilst achieving the level of quality and sensitivity required, given the status of the site as one of the most important landscape settings in Wales. Full regard should be given to the status of the Clydach Gorge and its environs as with other historically important settings in Wales and this should be reflected in the scheme. We would also refer you to the comments in our earlier letter and to the need for Welsh Government to lead by example. To this end we look forward to the site visit and full review day and to continued engagement with you and the team.

Yours sincerely

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