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Vegetation management on the railway between Elmers End station and Hayes station

We're writing to give you an update on our work managing the vegetation on the railway between Elmers End and Hayes. As you will no doubt have seen, we've been working on many of the trees along the line, that were posing a threat to the safe and reliable running of the railway.

Why are we doing this work?

Trees and vegetation growing near the railway can pose a serious risk to passengers, staff, and railway neighbours. It can cause issues with the stability of soil earthworks (embankments and cuttings) and can pose an operational risk to the railway, should larger vegetation fall or become damaged.

- We must ensure our train drivers have clear sighting along the railway corridor, allowing them to see and react to distant signals
- We need an opportunity to monitor ground conditions
- We must improve safe access for staff carrying out maintenance work on the track or trackside
- It's vital that we reduce tree related incidents including branches falling on the track and trees falling
- We need to reduce leaf-fall which causes reduced train braking efficiency and signalling problems

In the last 18 months alone there have been three recorded instances of signalling issues, on this particular line, leading to delayed train services because of leaf fall. In addition to the risks mentioned above there were also a number of trees found to be in poor health which needed to be seen to. The photo below shows a mature tree recently felled, near the line at Hayes:

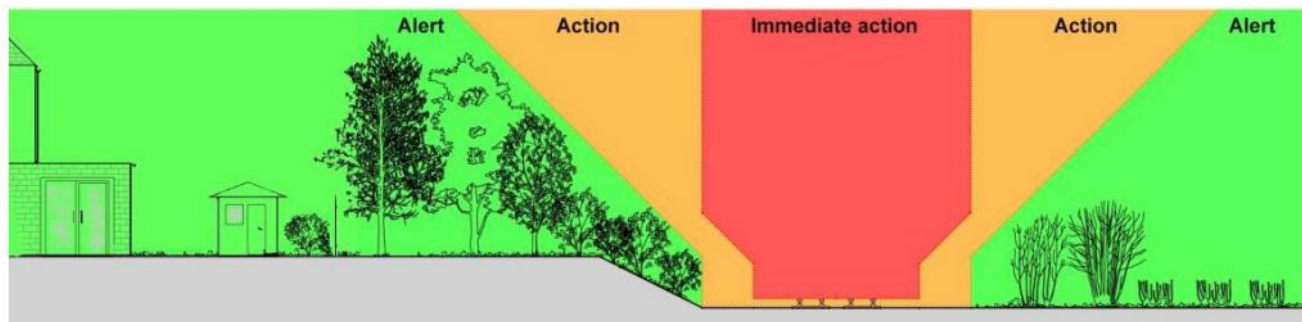


Why are we doing it now?

We've been working closely with Bromley Council to plan our work, not least because, some trees are protected by tree preservation orders. Back in the 1990's the tree preservation order was put in place here to protect many of the green spaces in the locality, which included some areas of land owned by the railway. Since then, we have allowed the trees and vegetation here to grow and thrive, only carrying out urgent maintenance as and when it was required. However, in those 30 years the trees have grown to a stage where the risk they pose to the railway is significant and we need to act now to prevent a serious accident from happening.

You could say this is like the area having its first haircut in 30 years, it seems drastic, but vegetation will re-grow and our maintenance plan (including re-planting in some areas) will encourage a sustainable and safe lineside area which can grow and thrive, offering a more varied habitat for wildlife.

What are we doing?



The picture above is a simple representation of how we're looking to manage the vegetation on our land. The areas coloured orange and red (areas that sit within the first 7 metres from the track), are the areas we need to act on any vegetation growing. In most cases that will mean removal of trees growing in this area.

For all trees and vegetation sitting outside of the orange and red sections, we would look to assess each of them on a case-by-case basis. If a tree is found to be dead, diseased or dying or is posing a significant risk to the railway, it could still be removed. But we'll do all we can to prevent the removal of trees in this area, by considering other vegetation management techniques which may include pruning or pollarding.

What will this work mean to you as a railway neighbour?

We are already more than 70% through our work programme, which means we still have a good amount of work to do. You'll continue to see our teams working in the area, and our work is likely to be noisy and disruptive to some neighbours. Some of it will need to be carried out overnight when trains are not running. But, where possible, we'll do as much as we can using the noisier equipment such as chainsaws and wood-chippers during the day. Following the completion of this programmed work, this area will be regularly maintained and you're likely to see us follow up in the area frequently over the next couple of years.

For those of you who live closest to the railway, you may have already seen a big change. Across the 4-mile stretch of railway we'll be removing a significant number of trees, many of which are behind residential properties. If your house overlooks the railway, your outlook is likely to change, and I'm sorry for the shock caused when trees and bushes disappear overnight. But we absolutely have to do this, it's the only way we can make sure trains run on time and safely on this key line into London.

What is the impact of our work on the environment?

Some people have asked us about the timing of our work, happening during what is considered bird nesting season. Vegetation management along our lineside is an enormous undertaking – if an average size garden in Britain is 200sq metre (and we know many aren't that big), then we manage the equivalent of 2.6 million gardens. The sheer volume of work needed to keep our garden under control, is very large and it's not possible to do all the work we need to outside of the bird nesting season.

We try to plan our work to reduce the impact on nesting birds, and on other species which reside along our lineside. Something we're very conscious of, is that there is never an ideal time of year to completely avoid ecological impacts. For example, carrying out vegetation management in the winter has a risk of disturbing hibernating animals. So, if we try to reprogramme all our work to address all the varied ecological interests, we wouldn't be able to carry out much vegetation management at all.

Our teams follow good practice for nesting birds, which has been developed in consultation with the RSPB – it involves completing an ecological appraisal far in advance of works but also on-the-day breeding bird checks. You can view the guidance and form we have developed for our workforce and contractors to use here:

<https://safety.networkrail.co.uk/home-2/environment-and-sustainable-development/ecology-biodiversity/>.

Alongside our approach to working during bird nesting season, we also carried out a detailed preliminary ecological assessment (PEA). This PEA is the main survey carried out ahead of our work and looks to identify ecological features in the area, especially those that may be affected by our work. Findings from this survey will then provide guidance to staff about how to conduct certain activities and things they need to look out for (including additional surveys that may need to be carried out – e.g., bat roosting). The objectives of the assessment include:

- Identifying and mapping habitats
- Identifying potential features and habitats that may support protected species as well as record signs of protected species and
- Assessing the ecological value of the site
- Make recommendations following the mitigation hierarchy to avoid, reduce and mitigation impacts on habitats and protected species

Ecologists work closely with the teams who carry out this type of work, carrying out briefings, surveys, checks and making sure recommended mitigations and measures from the PEA are implemented on site. Where possible, we try and minimise our impacts by leaving vegetation to keep connectivity or keep some features where safe to do so.

We realise how important it is to protect our environment as best we can, but we're also obligated to provide a safe and reliable railway. Finding a balance between the two can be difficult, but we are committed to doing our best. For more information on some of the things we're doing please visit our website to find out more about our environmental sustainability strategy

<https://www.networkrail.co.uk/who-we-are/publications-and-resources/environmental-sustainability-strategy/>

What happens next?

Upon completion of our work, we will carry out an assessment of the remaining habitats in area over 7m away from the railway line and will be looking to replant in some areas with vegetation that is more suitable for the railway (such as blackthorn, hawthorn, dog rose, elder etc) where it is appropriate as per the figure with the red-amber and green zones shown above. Please note, replanting options will be considered and discussed this year but it will not happen in the red zone and will be very limited in the orange zone. Where replanting is deemed suitable, it will be undertaken at the right time of the year, but it will take time for the vegetation to establish and grow so it is likely to take a few years before the effect of the replanting is noticeable.

A new more robust maintenance programme will also be designed, so that with regular maintenance of the area it's likely future interventions on the vegetation here will be much less dramatic than the work we're currently carrying out.

We appreciate your support and understanding in this matter and would encourage anyone who has any questions to get in touch by email to communityrelationsouthern@networkrail.co.uk.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John Moss-Coleman".

John Moss-Coleman
Community Relations Manager