

# Villagers cut off by closure of level crossings

Ben Webster Environment Editor

Gill Baker has used an ancient footpath twice a day for more than 20 years to visit her elderly parents and feed her horses at a farm near her home. Now she faces being forced to walk with her two dogs along a road that has no pavements and is used as a rat run.

Ms Baker, 54, from Essex, is one of thousands of people threatened with long and potentially dangerous diversions from footpaths under Network Rail's plans to close 130 level crossings.

The closures will sever footpaths that were in use hundreds of years before the railways were built. Long-distance paths through scenic areas, including

St Edmund Way and Stour Valley path through Constable country in Essex and Suffolk, will be affected.

Network Rail says it wants to close as many crossings as possible to reduce the risk of accidents and to save money on maintaining them. In some cases it wants to close crossings to allow trains to travel faster and more frequently.

The 130 crossings earmarked for closure are all in East Anglia but Network Rail is expected to seek closures in other regions.

Residents and conservation groups opposing the closures say that many are on branch lines used by a handful of trains an hour where there is no significant risk to pedestrians. They accuse

Network Rail of ignoring the much greater risk that pedestrians will face when they are forced to walk on busy roads.

Ms Baker said that Network Rail had proposed alternative routes between Great Bentley and Thorrington but they were up to three times longer. She added there had been no accidents at the crossing and there was a clear view of trains from a long distance. Richard Harvey, another local resident opposing the closure, said he had measured cars driving at 60mph on the narrow road on to which walkers could be diverted. Trains using the line travelled more slowly and were far less frequent.

Rebecca Bearn is opposing the

closure of another crossing in Essex that would deprive her village, Lamarsh, of the most convenient route to the nearest shop in the neighbouring village of Bures.

She said: "It is completely unnecessary because there has not even been a near miss. The path predates the railway and it connects two communities."

She said an alternative route proposed by Network Rail would force walkers through muddy fields and rob them of views of the Stour Valley.

A Network Rail spokeswoman admitted that the footpath crossings were "not high risk", unlike many of the road crossings it has closed in recent years. She added, however, that "risk

exists even though accidents haven't happened", and claimed that "the safest crossing is a closed one".

She said that Network Rail was consulting on the proposed closures and seeking alternatives that would not increase the risk to pedestrians.

Darren Cottrell, head of level crossing safety at Network Rail, said: "Level crossings are a historic legacy from a bygone age when there were far fewer and slower trains, no cars and a slower pace of life."

"Railways built today are constructed without level crossings."

Three people were killed at crossings in the past 12 months, the lowest number ever recorded.

This page is intentionally left blank