

Briefing Note: Gayton Road Bridge Update

The purpose of this briefing note is to share that actions taken on behalf of Bugbrooke Parish Council in the last few weeks regarding the Gayton Road Bridge. The Chair has suggested it would be useful to share the correspondence sent to WNC and MP Sarah Bool.

1. As requested the Clerk wrote to WNC Acting CEO Martin Henry copying in MP Sarah Bool regarding the Closure of the bridge and lack of action (see the latter below). This has now been logged as an official complaint, and the Parish Council are awaiting a response:

Dear Martin,

I am writing on behalf of Bugbrooke Parish Council to express our deep frustration and growing concern regarding the prolonged closure of Gayton Road Bridge and the continued lack of meaningful progress toward a resolution.

For several years, the Parish Council has consistently raised the need for repairs to the bridge. Over the past 12 months in particular, our frustration has intensified as we have witnessed repeated delays, unclear accountability, and a persistent cycle of inaction between West Northamptonshire Council and Network Rail. Each organisation appears to defer responsibility to the other, leaving residents with no clarity and no end in sight.

The most recent update we have received from Richard Butler indicates that there is unlikely to be any progress from the railway side until organisational changes related to Great British Railways have settled. Furthermore, we understand that no funding has been allocated by West Northants Council for this project, with increasing pressure from wider road maintenance demands cited as a contributing factor. This position is deeply concerning and reinforces the perception that this issue is not being treated with the urgency it requires.

The consequences of the bridge closure are severe and far-reaching. What was once a key local route has now forced traffic onto unsuitable alternatives, resulting in significant increases in traffic through Kislingbury, ongoing difficulties for children accessing schools and sports facilities in the village and substantially extended journey times for residents of Gayton, Blisworth, Milton Malsor, and surrounding areas.

This situation has been ongoing since structural concerns were first identified in April 2018. Since then, over £200,000 has been spent on temporary traffic management measures, culminating in the full closure of the bridge on 30th September 2024. Despite this considerable expenditure, no repair works have been delivered.

It is critical to highlight that the bridge structure itself, owned by Network Rail, is considered sound. The issue lies with the road approaches, which fall under the responsibility of West Northamptonshire Council. While we understand that a repair scheme has been designed at an estimated cost approaching £1 million, no funding has been secured, and no clear timeline has been communicated.

Meanwhile, the diversion routes are deteriorating under pressure. Birds Hill, a narrow rural track never intended for heavy use, is now routinely used by HGVs, school buses, and commuter traffic. The condition of this road is rapidly worsening, and the number of near misses reported by residents is alarming. In addition, the canal bridge is now showing signs of structural concern, with a significant crack under observation by the Canal & River Trust.

Residents are understandably angry and increasingly anxious. The Parish Council is being asked for updates on a weekly basis, yet we are unable to provide answers due to the absence of clear communication from WNC. The continued presence of road closure signage is also contributing to confusion and creating additional hazards at local junctions.

This situation is untenable and cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely. It represents not only a failure of infrastructure management but also a failure of communication and accountability.

We therefore formally request an urgent and comprehensive response from West Northamptonshire Council outlining:

- *The current status of the Gayton Road Bridge project*
- *Clear identification of responsibilities between all parties involved*
- *A defined plan of action, including interim measures where appropriate*
- *A realistic and publicly communicated timeframe for repairs or reopening*
- *Details of funding strategy and any efforts to secure financial support*

Above all, we ask that this issue be treated with the urgency and priority it clearly demands. Residents deserve transparency, accountability, and a clear path forward not continued uncertainty.

Finally, we must also raise our concern regarding local representation. Over the past year, Debra King has attended only three Parish Council meetings. The Parish Council does not receive a regular unitary councillor report from the serving administration, leaving both councillors and residents without insight into council activity or decisions affecting our community. Residents elected Debra King to represent Bugbrooke, and there is a growing view that this representation is not being adequately fulfilled. While Councillor Bignell, as a ward councillor and our Chair, provides support where possible; he is not a member of the serving cabinet and is therefore unable to fully update on key issues or reflect the position of the current administration. In light of this, we ask for clarity on whether we can expect consistent attendance from Debra King and the provision of a monthly written report going forward.

We look forward to your prompt response.

*Yours sincerely,
Nicola*

Nicola Palmer
Clerk to Bugbrooke Parish Council

2. Very late last Wednesday evening the Clerk and Chair were contacted by the office of MP Sarah Bool to ask for statements to support West Northamptonshire Council as they prepare to apply for a Department for Transport grant to help fund the vital repairs for Gayton Bridge. The information was needed immediately and involved a late-night stint to fulfil the last minute request, the Clerk was asked to focus on the impact on residents and the Chair the wider issues. Please see copies of the statements below:

Statement from the Clerk to Bugbrooke Parish Council regarding the Closure of Gayton Road Bridge

The prolonged closure of Gayton Road Bridge has had a profound and worsening social impact on the residents of Bugbrooke and neighbouring communities. What may appear on paper to be a local highways issue has become a daily burden affecting families, children, businesses, farmers, commuters, and vulnerable residents across the area.

For many residents, the closure has fundamentally altered everyday life. Journeys that once took only a few minutes now involve lengthy diversions along narrow rural roads that were never designed to cope with sustained high traffic volumes. The resulting increase in mileage and travel time has placed significant financial and emotional strain on households already dealing with rising living costs.

Parents from surrounding villages have repeatedly expressed concerns about the impact on school transport. School buses are now forced to take substantially longer routes, resulting in children frequently arriving late to school in the mornings. This disruption affects not only attendance and punctuality but also creates additional stress for families trying to manage work and childcare commitments. Bugbrooke is has a thriving Rugby, Football and Cricket Club the closure impacts those travelling to the clubs for training and those attending home games.

Residents regularly contact the Parish Council directly and post publicly on community forums describing the extent to which the closure has disrupted access to medical appointments, employment, social activities, and family connections. Many elderly residents and those with caring responsibilities now face much longer journeys simply to attend routine appointments or visit relatives. Others report avoiding evening travel altogether because they are frightened to use the alternative roads in darkness due to their poor condition, narrow width, lack of lighting, and the increasing volume of heavy vehicles.

The diversion routes themselves are becoming a major safety concern. Birds Hill is a narrow country lane never intended to accommodate continuous use by HGVs, school buses, agricultural machinery, and commuter traffic. Residents have reported numerous near misses, deteriorating road surfaces, and growing fears about the long-term resilience of the route. The community feels increasingly vulnerable and isolated.

Residents are now becoming increasingly concerned that Birds Hill itself could ultimately face closure due to the severe crack that has appeared in the canal bridge, which many believe has been exacerbated by the dramatic increase in traffic and the constant use of heavy vehicles since the Gayton Road closure. This bridge is currently under observation by The Canal and River Trust, but anxiety within the community is growing significantly. There are also concerns regarding the vulnerability of the bridge route through Kislingbury, which is under sustained pressure from diverted traffic.

Compounding these fears is the ongoing risk of flooding, which regularly makes several routes in and out of Bugbrooke inaccessible. Gayton Road has historically been a key and dependable access route for the village, and residents are deeply alarmed by the prospect that if further routes fail or are closed, the village could become effectively cut off. The loss of such a significant road connection for years on end is something residents find utterly unbelievable,

and many cannot understand how a situation of this magnitude has been allowed to continue without resolution.

The farming community has also been significantly affected. During harvest periods, farmers are being forced to take large agricultural equipment on extensive diversions, often requiring access to the A5 and other unsuitable routes. This not only increases operational costs and delays but creates additional road safety challenges for both farm vehicles and other motorists.

The closure has also had a wider social impact on community cohesion and wellbeing. Residents feel frustrated by the lack of progress, exhausted by years of uncertainty, and increasingly disconnected from decision-makers. The Parish Council receives continual requests for updates from residents desperate for reassurance and clarity, yet meaningful information has been extremely limited.

There is a growing sense within the community that Bugbrooke is being overlooked despite the seriousness of the situation and the cumulative risks now emerging across the local road network. Temporary measures and prolonged delays have created a situation where residents are no longer simply inconvenienced, they are experiencing genuine and sustained disruption to daily life.

Bugbrooke Parish Council therefore strongly supports any application for Department for Transport funding that would allow urgent progress toward a permanent repair solution. The social, economic, and safety impacts of this closure are too significant to ignore, and residents deserve a clear commitment that restoring this vital route is a priority.

Chair and Ward Councillor Phil Bignell's Statement

Funding Case for Repair and Reopening of the Railway Bridge Access Route to Bugbrooke

Introduction

Bugbrooke is a large and thriving village within West Northamptonshire Council serving not only its own residents but also a wide rural catchment area across neighbouring communities including Rothersthorpe, Gayton and Pattishall.

The village has four principal access routes. One of these routes, via the railway bridge, has now been closed for over two years due to structural concerns and lack of available funding for repair.

The prolonged closure is now having a severe and disproportionate impact on residents, businesses, healthcare access, school transport, economic activity and overall network resilience. The situation has moved well beyond temporary inconvenience and now represents a significant infrastructure and community resilience issue requiring urgent intervention and funding support from the Department for Transport.

Strategic Importance of Bugbrooke

Bugbrooke is designated as a Primary Service Village within the West Northamptonshire settlement hierarchy because of the scale and importance of the services it provides to surrounding rural communities.

The village supports:

- approximately 1,100 homes
- a large GP surgery and pharmacy serving approximately 12,000 patients
- a secondary school with around 1,500 pupils
- multiple retail businesses, pubs and hospitality venues
- local employment sites and light industry
- major industrial operations including Heygates, the largest independent miller in Europe

The village therefore functions as an important rural service hub rather than simply a standalone settlement.

Economic Impact

The closure is causing substantial economic harm.

Industrial and Freight Impact

Heygates generates significant heavy vehicle movements, with approximately 20 HGV movements per hour accessing the plant. The reduction in network resilience places increased pressure on remaining routes and creates vulnerability for local freight movement and industrial continuity.

Impact on Local Businesses

Local businesses are experiencing sustained reductions in customer footfall due to reduced accessibility from neighbouring villages.

One example is a local independent pet shop whose owner reports a loss of approximately one third of trade directly attributable to the bridge closure and associated diversion routes.

Pubs, shops, restaurants and other village services are similarly affected, threatening the long-term sustainability of local independent businesses.

This is particularly serious given the prolonged duration of the closure.

Impact on Residents and Communities

The closure has significantly reduced connectivity between Bugbrooke and surrounding villages including Rothersthorpe, Gayton and Pattishall.

Diversion routes add up to five additional miles to regular journeys. This affects:

- commuting
- school transport
- access to healthcare
- social and family connections
- shopping and local services

- elderly and vulnerable residents

The cumulative effect over more than two years has created considerable frustration and growing community tension between villages which historically relied upon direct connectivity.

What was initially viewed as a temporary disruption is now being experienced as long-term rural isolation.

Healthcare Access

Bugbrooke's GP surgery and pharmacy provide essential services to approximately 12,000 patients drawn from surrounding villages and rural communities.

The closure materially affects access to primary healthcare services for many residents, particularly:

- elderly patients
- disabled residents
- carers
- families with children
- those without flexible transport options

As a designated Primary Service Village, maintaining reliable access to these services should be regarded as strategically important infrastructure provision.

Education and School Transport

The village secondary school serves approximately 1,500 pupils, many of whom travel into the village by bus from surrounding settlements.

The bridge closure has increased journey times and operational pressures on school transport through the use of lengthy diversion routes.

This creates:

- increased transport costs
- delays and reliability issues
- additional congestion pressure on remaining access routes
- greater environmental impact through increased mileage

Resilience and Emergency Access Concerns

Perhaps most seriously, the closure has exposed a major weakness in the resilience of the local highway network.

Bugbrooke is already vulnerable to flooding events. Approximately 18 months ago, flooding closed two separate access roads into the village while the railway bridge route remained unavailable.

At that point, only a single remaining access route was available in and out of the village.

This represented a serious risk to:

- emergency vehicle access
- evacuation capability
- healthcare access
- supply deliveries
- community safety
- business continuity

A village of this scale and strategic importance should not be placed in a position where a combination of flooding and infrastructure failure can leave it effectively isolated.

The current situation demonstrates that the bridge route is not merely convenient infrastructure — it is critical resilience infrastructure.

Community Confidence and Public Frustration

As both Chair of the Parish Council and Ward Councillor for West Northamptonshire Council, I receive daily questions from residents regarding the reopening of the bridge.

Despite extensive engagement with:

- West Northamptonshire Council
- Kier
- the local Member of Parliament
- local media

there remains no clear timetable or visible progress toward reopening.

The prolonged uncertainty is eroding public confidence and creating understandable frustration within the community.

Residents increasingly perceive that rural infrastructure needs are being overlooked despite the strategic importance of the village and the severity of the impacts being experienced.

Conclusion and Request

The continued closure of this route is causing significant and escalating harm across multiple areas:

- economic sustainability

- healthcare access
- education transport
- freight movement
- rural connectivity
- network resilience
- emergency preparedness
- community wellbeing

This is not a minor local highways issue. It is a strategic infrastructure problem affecting a major rural service centre and its surrounding communities.

Funding support is therefore urgently requested to enable the repair and reopening of the railway bridge route as a matter of priority.

Failure to act risks continued economic decline, worsening community isolation, further resilience failures during flooding events, and long-term damage to confidence in local infrastructure provision.

The reopening of this route would restore essential connectivity, strengthen network resilience and protect the long-term sustainability of Bugbrooke and the surrounding villages it serves.

Phil Bignell Chair Bugbrooke PC & Ward Councillor for Campion in WNC