

Network Rail ‘dragging feet’ over plans to open abandoned railway for active travel

Councillor criticises stalling of plans to connect the old Piershill to Powderhall line with the city’s paths network.

The old line which traverses Leith has been derelict since freight stopped collecting compacted refuse from the Powderhall Waste Transfer Station, which was demolished in 2019, with the site now being redeveloped with new homes.

Connecting the Piershill to Powderhall railway with the paths network in the north of the city would be “transformational” for walking, wheeling and cycling in the area, SNP councillor Danny Aston said.

The council recently completed a feasibility study into the project – but an ongoing lease between rail bosses and the freight operator for the former waste compactor has put plans “on hold”.

And despite the line no longer being in use, Network Rail has decided to continue classifying it as a “supplementary strategic freight site” meaning it could be re-opened in the future.

However Cllr Aston said the ball was in the arms-length rail company’s court, accusing it of “hiding behind contractual arrangements which have seen the line left abandoned”.

He said: "It's time for them to take action and work with us on this for the benefit of the citizens of Edinburgh.

"It could have a new life now as an off-road active travel link allowing people to walk, wheel and cycle from Jock's Lodge, right through the most densely populated neighbourhood in the whole of Scotland between Easter Road and Leith Walk, onto Powderhall.

"It can link the East of Edinburgh right into the excellent existing path network in the North of city, which are themselves former railway lines. If unlocked, it could be transformational."

He raised the issue at a meeting of the transport and environment committee on Thursday (May 18) and called on the council urge Network Rail to take "decisive action".

A report before the committee said: "Although the railway line has been out of use for several years, since the decommissioning of the former Powderhall waste transfer station, it is still classified by Network Rail as a supplementary strategic freight site.

"There is also a long term lease in place with the former operator of the rail freight service to the waste transfer station.

"Network Rail is in ongoing discussions with the freight operator on the potential to extinguish this lease, however it is currently unclear whether it will be possible to reach agreement or what the timescales for this might be.

"Should these discussions be successfully concluded, Network Rail would then need to seek internal agreement that there is no future potential strategic freight use for the line and approval that the land can be disposed of.

"Given the above, work to develop concept designs for a

potential active travel link are on hold. This will be kept under review and work will recommence should there be significant progress regarding land acquisition.”

Councillor Aston said: “Network Rail who own the line are dragging their feet here and it’s not good enough.

“They’re a company wholly owned by the UK government so most people would expect them to work in the wider public interest.

“It’s time for them to take action and work with us on this for the benefit of the citizens of Edinburgh.”

Network Rail was approached for comment.

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

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Cllr Danny Aston