

All Interested Parties Consultation - Ridgeway Users



To The Secretary of State,

Ridgeway Users recently met with Ms Anderson and her family who are listed as an interested party. Due to personal circumstances they were unable to make direct representations earlier in the planning process, but they are lifelong graziers of the nature reserve. We are writing this letter on their behalf to clarify and further the points we made during the examination period. We believe these concerns are crucial to considering the full effects of the DCO and in case of approval, establishing proper mitigation to ensure equalities obligations are met.

Their position is that this application should be refused due to its disruptive cumulative effects on the Romani way of life, but it is also important to put forward their mitigation preferences in case it is approved. These include some additional protection for the remaining nature reserve to prevent further loss of grazing land to development so as to protect their traditional way of life. This is alongside seeking clarity over safety measures.

Due to their ongoing positive relationship with Thames Water, Ms Anderson states her preference that the nature reserve land is managed and owned by Thames Water rather than Cory to avoid issues with multiple landlords and build upon their established relationship. She also notes their relationship with Cory is strained and that she believes a tenancy agreement between them could make their lives more difficult going forwards than if it were with Thames Water.

We would also like to confirm in writing that contrary to the applicant's statements in their written and oral representations, Ms Anderson absolutely believes that their use of the land is part of their traditional way of life as members of the Romani community. Relatives have been born and died on this land (including grandparents) and Ridgeway Users witnessed the traditions around horse raising and handling being passed on to the younger generation first hand during our visits. This land was once part of the largest Romani Grazing marshes in Europe and has been progressively lost to development and forced removal following the floods and the 1960s removals of Romani encampments (fought bravely by Labour MP Norman Dodds). This has been the cause of some considerable hardship and upset.

To further evidence this, Ms Anderson notes that she teaches children in local schools about her traditional way of life through her horses which she also takes to Romani fairs such as the New Forest Fair Drive. She worries the land will be slowly eroded until there is none left, despite it being of importance to both her and the wider Romani community who often come to visit the horses and the land. It is of greater cultural importance to the wider Romani community than simply a patch of marshland. If such a scheme is to be approved, it is unclear what provisions are in place to prevent another take of land down the line, despite the cultural importance of this land.

The Secretary of State has asked the applicant to discuss the use of land for mitigation on the old golf-course. It has not been specified whether this land would be made available to graziers, but Ridgeway Users certainly believe it should be. However, upon discussing this with Ms Anderson, she and her family would personally be unable to use the land because it is too far away and impractical to split time between the remaining parts of Crossness Nature Reserve and the Golf Course. Moving horses regularly between the two sites would be bad for the horses and time consuming.

Nevertheless, they are keen that if the Golf Course is to be used for mitigation land, that grazer families from a Romani background are given access to this land. That being said, it is crucial to ensure it is made suitable for horses, which are a key part of stabilizing grazing marsh ecosystems and this would need to be planned for suitably and would require stable facilities. Due to inter-family relationships, any additional mitigation land on the Southern Marshes (below the nature reserve, across the main road) could cause interpersonal issues within the community as this land is already grazed by others and this could be seen as a slight against them.

Ms Anderson notes that if the scheme goes ahead, Mr Anderson (no relation), has decided to move off the land and she will be assigned his old grazing pastures. The Peabody land due to be designated as part of the official nature reserve, which is already grazed upon, will be partially flooded as part of the proposed biodiversity uplift. We note that not only have Friends of Crossness called into question the biodiversity benefits of such a scheme, but that the graziers are fearful this will increase the risk of several diseases for their horses such as mud fever, rotting hooves and laminitis.

It is also unclear to them what the exact land loss as a result of this relocation and flooding will be, as the boundaries are set to change substantially, flooding removes pasture and this is key if mitigation is to be established correctly and transparently.

Similarly, Ms Anderson also wants to ensure measures are in place to ensure that the ditch water which her horses regularly come into contact with will be safe. We have already found PFAS (Commonly referred to as 'Forever chemicals') in samples taken from surrounding ditches and even Cory's own outflow pipe in our investigations. Some of those found above environmental limits were Persistent Organic Pollutants. Both Ms Anderson and Ridgeway Users are worried that the new scheme could introduce these chemicals in greater quantities due to the use of PFAS in carbon capture. There is currently no provision in the Environmental Permit to monitor these substances. This ought to be changed to ensure grazier and animal safety.

We also wanted to address the communication that has taken place during the process between Cory and Ms Anderson. Whilst the applicant states that communication has been clear and direct, Ms Anderson and her family appeared to be uncertain of the schedule, believing the scheme to already have been approved and that they would have to move off the land this winter and have even been preparing to do so. This is not the case as far as we are aware. Whilst Ridgeway Users do not believe the applicant has caused confusion deliberately, the engagement with the graziers has self-evidently not achieved its goals and has thus fallen well short of what is required.

Yours sincerely,
Ridgeway Users