Dear Minister,

**Norwich Western Link threatens nationally important landscape**

You announced additional funding for road schemes this week, including funding for road schemes in East Anglia, one of these being the Norwich Western Link. As you know this scheme is likely to cost upwards of £300m for a three-mile road. There is now compelling evidence[[1]](#footnote-1) that shows the far-reaching and complex array of impacts of roads on biodiversity and therefore any new roads must be very carefully sited to avoid further exacerbating the biodiversity crisis.

Unfortunately, the proposed Norwich Western Link would pass through a very ecologically sensitive area, which includes an internationally important chalk stream and highly protected river valley (the River Wensum Special Area of Conservation), as well as mature woodland habitats. The impacts of such a scheme on these sensitive and irreplaceable habitats and their biodiversity cannot be effectively mitigated. Moreover, in our professional view the road scheme is unlikely to get planning permission due to the mounting and detailed long-term scientific evidence that it will irreparably harm the UK’s largest population of rare and threatened Barbastelle Bats (a UK Red List species and protected species under UK law).

We therefore request that there be no decision on any further public funding for this road until clear evidence is presented that Norfolk County Council’s proposed mitigation would be effective for Barbastelle Bats, to ensure that public money isn’t wasted on a project that would never be able to pass planning consent.

Since we last wrote to you in January 2023 to draw attention to significant new evidence on the population of rare Barbastelle Bats in woodlands in the path of the Western Link, local scientists (supported by the University of East Anglia), together with local volunteers have been collecting further evidence on the national importance of these bat colonies in multiple woodlands along the proposed route. All evidence gathered further reinforces our professional conclusion that this area of the Wensum Valley is the largest known colony in the whole of the UK and far exceeds the criteria for designation both as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). In December 2022 Natural England confirmed that it is actively considering the designation of the Wensum Woodlands area as a SSSI on the basis of its importance for the Barbastelle population, as evidenced by the research data.

During this same period, we have awaited evidence from the Council, that they would be able to provide sufficient mitigation specifically for this species that would ensure that damaging impacts on this national important population would be avoided. No such evidence has been provided by the Council, which accords with our conclusion that it is impossible to successfully mitigate for impacts at this scale.

We are of no doubt that a new road of this nature would irreparably damage the population leading to long term decline and local extinction and note growing evidence showing the failure of bat mitigation on the nearby Norwich Northern Distributor Road. In full knowledge of the evidence, this disastrous situation should not be repeated here.

Put simply, there is no evidence in existing scientific research that demonstrates mitigation measures being effective for this species, and we have seen no new evidence from the Council that would address this issue.

Our position is based on the scientific evidence, and it is clear to us that in order to demonstrate commitment to tackling the biodiversity and climate crises this proposal needs to be urgently reviewed. We also note the significant concerns held by the public regarding this proposal, and refer to the public petition calling for the proposal to be stopped, which has gathered nearly 16,000 signatures to date[[2]](#footnote-2).

We would be very willing to discuss our concerns in more detail with your Department, including taking you and/or your officials through summaries of the evidence that has been collected (we have done this both for Natural England and Norfolk County Council). I look forward to hearing your response to our concerns.

With best wishes

Eliot Lyne, CEO Norfolk Wildlife Trust

1. Donald, P. (2023) Traffication – How Cars Destroy Nature & What We Can Do About It. Pelagic Publishing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.change.org/p/stop-the-construction-of-the-proposed-norwich-western-link-road [↑](#footnote-ref-2)