

Thursday 14th January 2021

“Fear and ignorance” driving Highways England’s assault on railway heritage

Campaigners have condemned Highways England over plans to infill more than a hundred potentially useful railway bridges that have failed an assessment they are not required to pass.

It was revealed last week that the company, which manages the Historical Railways Estate of 3,200 disused structures on the Department for Transport’s behalf, has been developing secret plans for the infilling of 115 bridges under permitted development powers that are only applicable in emergency situations. This circumvents the need for planning permission.

Highways England says that “urgent safety action” is now required after around 200 of its bridges carrying roads over former railways failed an engineering assessment - commonly known as BD21 - which is used to determine whether a bridge can carry up to 44-tonne lorries.

However The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, cycling campaigners and greenway developers - point out that 19th Century railway bridges only have to meet an old loading standard, BE4, which specifies a capacity of just 24 tonnes.

Local Highway Authorities are responsible for reviewing the anticipated traffic loading of a bridge against its assessed load-bearing capacity and putting in place any necessary mitigation measures. Highways England claims that none of the 200 bridges is subject to a weight restriction, but site visits to seven of those earmarked for infilling found 3-tonne limits at two of them.

The Group has begun an appraisal of the bridges’ strategic value for future transport provision. Of the 28 structures already reviewed, three are on lines submitted to the Government’s ‘Restoring Your Railway Fund’, one is on a line under consideration for reinstatement by the Welsh Government, seven could be needed for new heritage lines or extensions to existing ones, whilst nine span routes on which cycle paths are proposed. One of the bridges in Scotland is legally protected under a Grade C listing.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group, said: “This is what happens when you ask a company responsible for motorways to act as custodian to thousands of legacy railway structures. They seem unable to understand that taking no action after evaluating the evidence can be an entirely legitimate response to the public safety issues associated with a bridge that’s failed its BD21. It does not mean the bridge is unsafe.

"Network Rail will have structures that have also failed this assessment, but they manage the implications proportionately in collaboration with the Local Highway Authority. What they don't do is block the railway with a thousand tonnes of concrete.

"If Highways England's claims are correct, we need to know how its engineers allowed 115 traffic-carrying bridges to deteriorate so significantly that 'urgent safety action' is now needed to prevent an emergency arising. But if these bridges really need weight restrictions and none has been applied, why are they not already collapsing?"

"There is no impending emergency here. The structures are fine; the problem is with Highways England."

An internal report suggests that as many as 480 of Highways England's disused railway bridges could be bulldozed over the next ten years. The company will receive £13M during this financial year to begin the infilling schemes, but six months ago it awarded contracts worth £254M for works on the Historical Railways Estate up to 2027, including one to a firm with a specialist demolition unit.

"Fear and ignorance are threatening the useful role these infrastructure assets could play for future generations", added Graeme Bickerdike. "The Transport Minister needs to intervene before irreparable damage is done and opportunities are lost."

The HRE Group has urged anyone concerned about the nation's heritage, a cleaner environment and sustainable transport provision to join the 5,000 people who have already signed a petition opposing Highways England's plans. It is available online via www.change.org/theHREgroup

--ENDS--

Attachments

LittleSmeatonBridge©TheHREGroup: Inspecting one of the bridges threatened with infilling in North Yorkshire.

Heckmondwike©TheHREGroup: walkers pass beneath a collection of bridges in Heckmondwike, West Yorkshire, which have spanned a cycle path since 2009.

Bridge(1)©TheHREGroup: a 3-tonne weight restriction approaching one of the bridges proposed for infilling.

Bridge(2)©TheHREGroup: a 3-tonne weight restriction approaching one of the bridges proposed for infilling.

Masbury©TheHREGroup: a bridge over the former Somerset & Dorset Railway which was infilled by Highways England despite it being on a route proposed for reopening by a heritage railway and protected under Policy DP18 of Mendip District Council's Local Plan.

(Higher resolution versions of the above photographs are available on request)

Supporting Documents: explanations within the file

Contact details

Media enquiries: thehregroup@forgottenrelics.org

Notes for editors

The Historical Railways Estate (HRE) is owned by the Department for Transport (DfT) and managed on its behalf by Highways England (HE). HE is responsible for inspecting, maintaining and limiting the liability associated with around 3,200 disused railway bridges, abutments, tunnels, culverts and viaducts.

Although transport policy is largely a matter for the devolved administrations, around 19% of the HRE structures are in Scotland and 11% in Wales. These remain under HE's management.

Highways England operates under a Protocol Agreement with the Department for Transport which sets out its obligations in relation to the safety, inspection, maintenance, disposal of the structures, the maximisation of rental income and reduction of risk. Its remit was formerly fulfilled by BRB (Residuary) until its abolition on 30th September 2013.

In 2020, Highways England awarded framework contracts to six companies for works on HRE structures valued at £254M over seven years. It also agreed a professional services contract with Jacobs, worth £31.9M over ten years, and two contracts for inspections/examinations with a value of £18M over ten years. Until 2027, the average annual budget for the HRE is therefore £41.28M.

The 134 structures currently at risk of demolition or infilling are located in East Anglia (12), East Midlands (4), London and the Home Counties (8), Northern England (16), Northern Scotland (8), North-West England (3), South-East England (11), Central/Southern Scotland (19), South-West England (24), Wales (5), West Midlands (16) and Yorkshire & Lincolnshire (8).

A map showing their locations is available via this link...

https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1_9GtFIDW-QuYPvp8vBcSUD4gH9cOMdZt&usp=sharing

The HRE Group is an alliance of walking, cycling and heritage campaigners, engineers and greenway developers who regard the Historical Railways Estate's structures to be strategically valuable in the context of future rail and active travel provision.

Standard BD 21/01, The Assessment of Highways Bridges and Structures, was superseded in March 2020 by Standard CS 454. Clause 1.5 of BD 21/01 stated that: "Many of the bridges to be assessed by this Standard are of considerable age and represent important features of our

cultural heritage. Their survival to this day owes a great deal to the care of past generations. Where remedial or strengthening works are found to be necessary, the proposals should reflect the duty to retain the character of these structures for the benefit of future generations. Early remedial measures, which restore the carrying capacity and extend the life of these structures, are preferable to urgent reconstruction, as the former not only prove generally to be more cost-effective, but also retain the existing character of these structures.”