

Monday 22nd February 2021

## **Campaigners rally against railway heritage threat**

Ten thousand people have signed a petition objecting to Highways England's plans to infill or demolish more than a hundred disused railway bridges, many of which could be needed for future rail or active travel routes.

The Government-owned roads company manages the Historical Railways Estate of 3,200 structures on the Department for Transport's behalf. According to its Strategic Plan for the Estate, Highways England intends to demolish up to 480 structures between now and 2030, with 115 bridges and tunnels earmarked for infilling as part of an ongoing first phase, undermining plans for sustainable transport.

An appraisal by The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, cycling campaigners and greenway developers - has found that about one-third of these structures are already proposed for reuse as part of new cycle paths, reopened railways and extensions to heritage lines, or have been identified as having clear potential for similar projects in the future.

Highways England claims that the at-risk bridges have failed structural assessments to carry 44-tonne lorries and no weight restrictions have been imposed, but evidence obtained under the Freedom of Information Act suggests that 55 of the bridges (48%) have *not* failed their assessments, 24 (21%) are regarded as 'fit for purpose' and eight (7%) *do* have weight restrictions. Most of the structures are crossed by country lanes or farm tracks which heavy vehicles could not use.

Gordon Masterton, who chairs the Institution of Civil Engineers' Panel for Historical Engineering Works, said: "The value of existing infrastructure must be recognised as we evolve to greener modes of transport. Walking and cycling greatly benefit our health, wellbeing and the environment, and we need to build on the uptake seen during the first lockdown by creating more safe space.

"Disused railways offer unique opportunities; many have already been repurposed through iconic active travel routes, enjoyed by millions of people every year. Blocking or severing old trackbeds puts further opportunities at risk.

"Asset management has to be proportionate and holistic. Putting a structure beyond use based only on perceived risk - without fully understanding its wider value - can burden the taxpayer with unnecessary cost and compromise efforts to build a better future for our communities. Such outcomes must be avoided."

According to Highways England's Strategic Report, around £25K is spent on repairs and assessments to each legacy rail bridge every ten years. The firm's last five infilling schemes each cost an average of £145K, meaning that no cost saving is typically made for 58 years.

Chris Todd from Transport Action Network said: "There's a lack of joined-up thinking here. Across the country, new cycle routes are needed to support the government's active travel policies. Yet a handful of officials within the Department for Transport and Highways England are taking a wrecking ball to structures that could be vital in providing better access to our countryside, something we've seen to be incredibly important since the pandemic.

"Our great railway heritage should not be viewed as a liability and it has to be asked whether Highways England is really the right body to be managing these important assets. It has little interest in sustainable transport and seems only concerned with building roads. Its snubbing of local communities who are seeking rail reopenings and new active travel routes when proposing these demolitions and infills exposes its true colours.

"We don't dispute that structures have to be kept in a safe condition, but modest repair interventions will do the job in most cases and make more sense economically. It's time the Government passed control of these important assets to a responsible body that is better able to maintain them for future use."

Most of the planned infilling schemes are being pursued under Permitted Development powers which circumvent the need for planning permission. The HRE Group has accused Highways England of undermining democratic process to drive through schemes that are unnecessary and against the broader public interest. Many of the bridges span disused railways that are safeguarded for future reuse under policies adopted by local councils.

Campaigners are continuing to lobby MPs in an effort to halt Highways England's plans and a petition launched in December has now gathered 10,000 supporters. It can be signed online at [www.change.org/theHREgroup](http://www.change.org/theHREgroup).

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## **Attachments**

LittlePetherickBridge©TheHREGroup: Cyclists cross a reopened railway bridge on The Camel Trail in Cornwall.

JaapstonBridge©Allan Ogg: A bridge threatened with infilling on the proposed route of the Neilston-Uplawmoor Community Link in East Renfrewshire.

GreatAlne©GoogleStreetview: A bridge in rural Warwickshire which Highways England plans to infill due to the supposed threat posed by heavy goods vehicles.

LittleSmeaton©TheHREGroup: Inspection of a bridge in North Yorkshire, earmarked for infilling.

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

Supporting Documents: explanations within the file

### **To link to our campaign video or embed it on your webpage:**

(Link) [https://youtu.be/k\\_86FspsZeU](https://youtu.be/k_86FspsZeU)

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/k_86FspsZeU?rel=0" frameborder="0" allow="autoplay; encrypted-media" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

### **Contact details**

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### **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](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.