

Wednesday 24th March 2021

Objectors question DfT's response to bridge 'assault'

Campaigners fighting to prevent hundreds of disused railway structures being demolished or infilled, despite many having potential value for future rail and active travel schemes, have challenged the Department for Transport's "deficient" response to their concerns.

Highways England, who manage the Historical Railways Estate of 3,200 bridges, viaducts and tunnels on the DfT's behalf, plans to infill 115 structures over the next five years, around one-third of which are proposed for reuse as part of greenways, reopened railways or heritage line extensions, or have an identified potential for similar future projects. As many as 480 bridges could be demolished by 2030.

In January, the state-owned roads company said that around 200 of its legacy rail bridges have failed structural assessments and local authorities have not imposed weight restrictions. Infilling is the "most appropriate option" in these circumstances, a spokesperson said. However it has since transpired that almost half of the at-risk bridges don't meet the stated criteria for infilling.

The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, cycling campaigners and greenway developers - says most of the structures are in good condition and showing no signs of distress, suggesting that the loads they are carrying are well within their capacity.

"Highway England is acting disproportionately and without due regard to the future value of these assets in the context of the emerging green transport agenda", asserts Graeme Bickerdike, a member of the group.

"They're using assessments in a binary way to pass sentence on these structures, but decision-making on any interventions should be more nuanced. Why would you spend £145,000 of taxpayers' money - the average cost of an infilling scheme - on a bridge that's crossed by a narrow country lane and very little traffic, is not being overloaded and has no meaningful defects? It's not a justifiable use of public money.

"In most cases, modest remedial work costing a fraction of infilling will increase a bridge's capacity - if that's what's needed - and retain its functionality. We need to derive maximum value from our existing infrastructure; putting it beyond use without considering the broader social impacts is a reckless act."

The group wrote to Transport Minister Chris Heaton-Harris MP in December, but Bickerdike insists that the reply sent by a DfT official was "deficient, not even signed and failed to address any of the substantive issues."

Highways England told local planning authorities last September that 34 bridges were going to be infilled under Permitted Development powers “to prevent an emergency arising”. This approach circumvents normal planning processes and the protection enjoyed by many disused railway alignments under policies adopted in Local Plans.

According to Matt Skidmore, another member of The HRE Group, “It’s an assault both on our railway heritage and democratic process. Highways England clearly recognised that planning permission for infilling might be refused so they acted to impose their will regardless. Those communities with plans for these bridges - which are often valued local landmarks - are having the rug pulled from under them.

“Inspiring proposals to develop greenways face a fatal blow to satisfy a handful of officials who sit in their silos managing spreadsheets, oblivious to people in the real world doing their best to make a positive difference. If Ministers’ levelling-up and active travel promises mean anything, they cannot allow the opportunities presented by these disused railways to be lost.”

The HRE Group has responded to the Transport Minister with ten questions based on public statements by the DfT and Highways England. It asks how the company’s engineers have apparently allowed the condition of 34 bridges to deteriorate so significantly that emergency works were now needed to protect the public, why community groups and heritage railways were not consulted before the infilling plans were formulated, and why 55 of the bridges slated for infilling don’t meet the stated criteria?

“Highways England’s justification for this vandalism changes every time we expose the flaws in their previous excuse”, says Matt Skidmore. “The Minister needs to intervene by safeguarding those structures that have clear value for future transport provision and ensure that the threat to all the others is subject to appropriate scrutiny through planning applications.”

The Minister’s reply is awaited.

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Attachments

Headstone©TheHREGroup: A group of cyclists enter Headstone Tunnel on the Peak District’s Monsal Trail which attracts more than quarter of a million tourists to the area every year.

Horspath©SimonLogan: Locals protest on a bridge at Horspath, Oxford, after Highways England’s contractor turned up unexpectedly and began to demolish the parapets.

LittleSmeaton©TheHREGroup: An inspection of one of the bridges threatened with infilling in North Yorkshire.

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

Supporting Documents (PDF): explanations within the file.

HeatonHarrisLetter (PDF): The HRE Group's letter to the Transport Minister, with ten questions about Highways England's plans.

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

(Link) <https://youtu.be/jg9wxIAysro>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/jg9wxIAysro?controls=0" title="YouTube video player" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; clipboard-write; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" 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

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.