

Wednesday 14th April 2021

MPs raise concerns over Highways England's 'assault' on legacy rail structures

The House of Commons Transport Committee has intervened in a row over Highways England's intention of infilling or demolishing hundreds of disused railway structures, many of which have the potential to play roles in future sustainable transport schemes.

The state-owned roads company manages the Historical Railways Estate (HRE) of 3,200 legacy bridges, viaducts and tunnels on the Department for Transport's behalf. In January, it was revealed that 134 structures are going to be put beyond use over the next five years, with the possibility of 480 more to follow.

According to The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, cycling campaigners and greenway developers - around one third of the bridges earmarked for infilling are already proposed for reuse as part of reopened railways, heritage line extensions or new active travel routes, or have identified potential to do so in the future. The Group says this "takes a wrecking ball" to Government policies encouraging more of us to walk and cycle.

Five members of the Transport Committee met a representative of The HRE Group last month and a letter has since been sent to Baroness Vere, the Minister for Roads, Buses and Places, and Nick Harris, Acting Chief Executive of Highways England, urging them both to view the structures as "assets to be preserved, repurposed for public benefit and enjoyed."

The Committee makes clear that the Estate is not only part of our national heritage, but includes many assets with demonstrable public value. It says that the formal agreement under which Highways England manages the structures should be amended to reflect their cultural and strategic importance.

Chair Huw Merriman MP voices the Committee's concern at the likely impact of the proposed infilling and demolition programme on future rail and greenway projects. He also challenges the use of Permitted Development powers which, in many cases, Highways England is invoking to progress work on structures that are effectively safeguarded from adverse development through policies adopted by local councils.

"The future of these historic bridges, viaducts and tunnels should be determined by an open, transparent and democratic process", says Mr Merriman. "Highways England should assess both the safety and value of these structures and, in non-urgent cases, apply to local authorities for planning permission, if it wishes to demolish or infill them."

He goes on, "we understand the average cost of infilling is around £145,000 per bridge, whereas the costs of strengthening to increase the capacity of historic bridges can be much

lower, at £20,000 to £40,000 per bridge. We would like to know why it is better use of public money to infill, rather than strengthen, the bridges affected by the programme.”

The Committee notes that Highways England has objected to planning applications for new walking and cycling routes that are proposed to pass beneath HRE structures and has fenced-off parts of the Estate to which the public previously had access. Highways England and the DfT are asked to set out what steps they are taking to facilitate and encourage access to as much of the Estate as possible.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group, said: “We welcome the Transport Committee’s scrutiny of the approach being taken by Highways England in managing the Historical Railways Estate. Supported by the DfT, the company is guilty of an assault on our great railway heritage and democratic process, pulling the rug from under those who are trying to build a better future for their communities.

“In Herefordshire, Northumberland, East Renfrewshire and elsewhere, proposals for new active travel routes are now in doubt because Highways England is recklessly pursuing infilling and demolition schemes without engineering justification or any prior appraisal as to the impacts of their actions.

“At a time when the value of fresh air and green space has never been clearer, it is unsustainable for the Government to allow vandalism of this kind if it expects us to take seriously its stated commitment to driving an active travel revolution.”

A petition against Highways England’s plans, launched by The HRE Group, has so far been signed by more than 12,300 people.

--ENDS--

Attachments

Great Musgrave©TheHREGroup: A masonry arched bridge at Great Musgrave in Cumbria which is slated for infilling despite being needed for a proposed five-mile connection between the heritage railway operations at Warcop and Kirkby Stephen East.

Kinnersley©HerbieKnott/RexFeatures: A wrought-iron bridge at Kinnersley in Herefordshire, at risk of infilling under Permitted Development powers, which spans the route of the proposed Hereford to Hay-on-Wye Greenway.

Troutbeck©TheHREGroup: Contractors complete the partial infilling of a bridge on the former railway connecting Penrith to Keswick, which is proposed for reopening. The installed archway is not sufficiently large to pass trains through.

HuwMerrimanMP©DavidWoolfall: Huw Merriman MP, Chair, Transport Committee

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

The Transport Committee's letter to DfT/HE (PDF)

Supporting Documents (PDF): explanations within the file.

To link to a video report about this issue or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) https://youtu.be/i_JUNXUPkFQ

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

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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.

The Group's petition against the infilling and demolition programme is available at www.change.org/theHREgroup