

PRESS RELEASE: Wednesday 28th April 2021

Councils push back against bridge infilling programme

Highways England's plans to infill or demolish 130 legacy railway structures are coming under increasing pressure from local authorities opposed to the negative heritage, ecological and transport impacts that are likely to result.

The state-owned roads company manages the Historical Railways Estate of 3,200 disused railways bridges, viaducts and tunnels on the Department for Transport's behalf. It claims that 115 structures need to be infilled because they are "unsafe" and has attempted to invoke Permitted Development powers that are only applicable for temporary works in emergency situations presenting a risk of death or injury. However inspections record most of the affected bridges to be in Good or Fair condition, exhibiting no defects of concern.

According to The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, cycling campaigners and greenway developers - more than 40 of the threatened structures are already proposed for reuse as part of active travel routes, reopened railways or heritage line extensions, or have identified potential for future roles.

This month, Herefordshire Council has refused planning permission to infill two bridges spanning the route of a proposed 20-mile greenway between Hereford and Hay-on-Wye. Promoters say the link would stimulate more than 200 local businesses through tourism, deliver safety benefits and establish new wildlife habitats.

The Council's Case Officer concluded that the applications conflicted with the National Planning Policy Framework and several policies from the Local Plan Core Strategy, whilst the Landscape Officer noted that the potential of the bridges to form part of a walking and cycle path would be lost and made extremely difficult to reverse.

Andrew Davidson, a member of the team promoting the greenway, said: "We welcome the Council's decision to refuse these applications. Local community groups are developing a network of routes to the west and south of Hereford, offering transformative social, health, environmental and economic benefits. If the passageway beneath these bridges was blocked, the viability of the Hereford to Hay Greenway would be greatly weakened.

"The Department for Transport and Highways England have an opportunity through the Historical Railways Estate to become collaborative partners with those seeking to build a better future by constructing safe active travel infrastructure. We hope the combative approach they've taken so far will moderate in light of the Council's decision.

"The money earmarked for infilling should be spent on modest repairs - which is all that's needed - allowing us to continue our efforts without being impeded."

Having previously accepted the use of Permitted Development powers, Northumberland County Council has become the 16th local authority to insist that Highways England obtains planning permission for its infilling schemes. Six bridges within the county are under threat, two of which span the route of a proposed greenway to the west of Alnwick.

Last September, the company notified planners that urgent interventions were needed “to prevent an emergency arising”; however, seven months later, Council officials have withdrawn their consent as no works have started.

One of the structures forms part of a sympathetically restored former railway station at Staward near Hexham where the waiting room is available as a holiday let. Highways England claims the bridge “represents an ongoing and increasing risk to public safety”, but inspections by the Council and an independent engineer record the bridge as being in good condition.

Allan Park, the owner of Staward station, said: “The actions of Highways England are morally wrong. The use of Permitted Development powers was a ruse to avoid the scrutiny that comes with a planning application. What kind of impending emergency can be ignored for months on end?

“There is no engineering justification for what they want to do; Highways England has made bold claims about the threat posed by the bridge, but has presented no evidence to back them up.

“The nation’s heritage should not be lost to officials looking only at their own narrow needs. These assets are valued by communities and are often important for supporting wildlife. We look forward to presenting our case for the bridge to be retained in its original form as Thomas Bewick, the railway’s engineer, designed it more than 150 years ago.”

Highways England’s own figures suggest the average cost of infilling a bridge is £145,000 whilst ongoing inspection, assessment and repair involve £25,000 of expenditure every ten years. On this basis, no savings accrue from a typical infilling scheme for 58 years.

--ENDS--

Attachments

KinnersleyBridge©TheHREGroup: A planning application to infill this bridge over the disused Hereford-Hay railway at Kinnersley has been rejected by Herefordshire Council.

KinnersleyAerial©TheHREGroup: A second bridge at Kinnersley spans the former railway which is proposed for conversion to host the Hereford-Hay Greenway.

StawardAerial©TheHREGroup: This bridge at Staward in Northumberland is threatened with infilling by Highways England despite being in good condition.

StawardStation©TheHREGroup: The bridge forms part of the sympathetically restored railway station which is available as a holiday let.

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

SupportingDocuments (PDF): explanations within the file.

To link to a video report about the campaign 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" title="YouTube video player" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; clipboard-write; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

Contact details

Media enquiries: thehregroup@forgottenrelics.org

Twitter: [@theHREgroup](https://twitter.com/theHREgroup)

Facebook: [@theHREgroup](https://www.facebook.com/theHREgroup)

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 following local authorities have told Highways England that planning permission is required for their infilling schemes: Aberdeenshire, Angus, Cheshire West & Chester, Essex, Glasgow, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Hertfordshire, Leicestershire, North Ayrshire, North Yorkshire, Northumberland, Perth & Kinross, Powys, Shropshire and Stratford-upon-Avon. Others have raised objections or imposed specific requirements.