



PRESS RELEASE: Tuesday 25th May 2021

Highways England's bridge plans "could scupper" rail schemes

Rail groups have criticised Highways England over a bridge infilling programme which threatens the viability of reopening routes and extending heritage lines.

The state-owned roads company manages the Historical Railways Estate of 3,100 disused structures on the Department for Transport's behalf. It emerged in January that 115 bridges and tunnels are going to be filled in and a further 15 demolished as part of an asset management programme described by campaigners as "unwarranted and destructive".

According to The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, cycling advocates and greenway developers - 21 of the at-risk structures are intended for reuse as part of railways or active travel routes, whilst a further 19 could play similar roles in the medium term. One of the bridges in Scotland - spanning a proposed extension of the Caledonian Railway near Brechin - is Grade C-listed due to its unusual construction.

In Cumbria, the Stainmore Railway Company has the long-term goal of uniting its operation with the Eden Valley Railway by relaying five miles of track between Kirkby Stephen and Warcop. But the plan is now in jeopardy as Highways England's contractor, AMCO-Giffen, set up site at Great Musgrave yesterday (Monday 24 May) to start infilling a bridge, blocking the route. The attractive masonry structure, which carries a narrow road over the former trackbed, is rated for vehicles of 17 tonnes.

Mike Thompson, Project Manager for the Stainmore Railway Company, said: "Heritage railways make significant contributions to local economies and a line connecting Appleby and Kirkby Stephen - which is our ultimate aim - would bring much-needed tourism benefits to the Eden Valley.

"We do not underestimate the engineering challenges involved, but plans to overcome them have been in development for a long time. Engagement with the council, other stakeholders and the community has built support for the link.

"But infilling a perfectly good bridge puts years of hard work at risk and could scupper our plans. The structure was built in 1862 so would benefit from some minor repairs, but to suggest that it presents any meaningful threat to public safety - which is what Highways England has told the local council - is simply ridiculous."

The Norfolk Orbital Railway is an ambitious proposal to establish a multi-purpose route through the county, connecting communities and boosting the economy. It would join the national rail stations at Wymondham and Sheringham via Fakenham and two existing

heritage lines. Studies have been undertaken to establish the project's feasibility and its developers have acquired sections of the former trackbed.

But a cast-iron bridge over the line at Gateley, constructed in 1849, is earmarked for infilling by Highways England, putting the scheme in peril. The structure, which carries a narrow country lane, remains in fair condition.

Paul Young, Project Officer for the Norfolk Orbital Railway, said: "If the UK is to meet its tough environmental commitments, there has to be a new age of the train. Our scheme would reconnect several towns and villages to the rail network - both for passengers and freight - and councils consequently support it. The trackbed under the bridge is protected against adverse development by a policy adopted in the North Norfolk Core Strategy.

"The infilling of Gateley bridge would be damaging and unjustified, further severing a trackbed we've been trying to piece back together. It's extremely disappointing that Highways England is acting without due regard for the bridge's importance as part of a sustainable transport scheme.

"This kind of short-sighted decision-making by a Government-owned body calls into question the Government's commitment to reopening railways."

Both the Stainmore Railway Company and Norfolk Orbital Railway are engaging with local councillors and MPs to oppose Highways England's plans.

Since the 1960s, hundreds of structures have been taken into the ownership of more than 150 heritage railways across the UK. The sector has accrued considerable expertise in the management and maintenance of Victorian bridges. However, under Department for Transport policy, structures within the Historical Railways Estate can no longer be transferred to heritage railways, condemning many to an uncertain future.

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Attachments

GreatMusgraveBridge©TheHREGroup: The former trackbed at Great Musgrave, passing beneath an at-risk bridge, is earmarked for reopening as part of a heritage line extension.

KirkbyStephenEast©TheHREGroup: Both the Stainmore Railway Company, based at Kirkby Stephen East Station, and Eden Valley Railway hope to reconnect in the future.

GateleyBridge©NorfolkOrbitalRailway: The trackbed under the Gateley bridge is safeguarded against adverse development under a local plan policy.

TheBrecklander©GerryBalding: B1 Class No. 61306 'Mayflower' arrives at Dereham of the Mid-Norfolk Railway with the 'Brecklander' from Wymondham Abbey.

(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>`

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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 3,100 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.

Policy CT 7 of the North Norfolk Core Strategy safeguards former railway trackbeds and land against prejudicial development for sustainable transport use, including sites at Sheringham, Cromer, Fakenham, Great Ryburgh, North Walsham, and from Fakenham to the District Council boundary to the south of Great Ryburgh. This latter section is crossed by the at-risk Gateley bridge.