

PRESS RELEASE: Tuesday 1st June 2021

Cumbrian railways unite against “destructive” bridge scheme

Supporters of two heritage railways in Cumbria have been lobbying council officials and their local MP over the infilling of a bridge that is needed for a planned link between their lines.

Last Monday (24 May), contractors engaged by Highways England moved onto a site at Great Musgrave to start burying the 159-year-old structure which was designed by prolific Victorian engineer Thomas Bouch.

The Eden Valley and Stainmore railways have a long-standing ambition to reunite their operations by laying five miles of track from Kirkby Stephen to Warcop, creating a tourist attraction that would deliver a significant boost to the area. However loss of the bridge would place a substantial obstacle in their way, putting the connection in jeopardy after years of development work.

Highways England manages the Historical Railways Estate of 3,100 disused structures on the Department for Transport’s behalf. In a letter sent on 23 April 2020, they told Eden District Council that an “assessment undertaken in 1998 found the structure suitable only for 17 tonnes” and action was needed to “remove the associated risk of structural collapse and harm to the public”.

Normally, a project of this type would require planning permission as it constitutes an engineering activity and affects the external appearance of the bridge. However, just a day after receiving the letter, a Council officer told Highways England’s agent that “we don’t consider that we would need to see a planning application for these works”.

Mike Thompson, Project Manager for the Stainmore Railway Company, said: “It’s inexplicable that such a destructive project is allowed to go ahead without proper public scrutiny. There are huge potential economic benefits from an 11-mile line through the wonderful landscape of the Eden Valley, linking Kirkby Stephen to Warcop and then on to Appleby.

“Anything that prejudices that opportunity needs to be properly examined through the established democratic process, particularly a bridge infilling scheme that can’t be justified on engineering or public safety grounds.

“We urge the Council to put right their mistake and take immediate action to stop the work.”

In a statement, an officer from the Eden Valley Railway Trust, said: “We oppose the actions of Highways England in filling in the bridge without contacting interested parties and would have expressed our opposition to the idea. The Eden Valley Railway Trust’s long-term aim is to reinstate the line from Warcop to Kirkby Stephen and this has not changed since it was ratified by the members of the Trust back in 1999.”

The work at Great Musgrave is expected to cost £124K and take up to five weeks. In a statement, Highways England said "Infill or demolition is only considered on structures that are unsafe". However locals point out that the bridge is on a lightly-used road, remains in good condition and is showing no signs of being overloaded.

Councillor Phil Dew, who chairs the Upper Eden Railway Heritage Partnership, said: "Quite rightly, the railways' volunteers feel deeply let down by the Council. Years of hard work is under threat because the nature and impact of this scheme was not reviewed with due diligence.

"Was the Council's policy on the fragmentation of green infrastructure networks considered? Was the Council's policy on development that would prevent the future opening of a railway considered? Was the long-term economic impact of this work considered? Absolutely not. It's a reprehensible and damaging error.

"Highways England sent the same template letter about infilling schemes to a number of local authorities last year and we have more than a dozen replies in which they are told to apply for planning permission. But Eden District Council just allowed them to go ahead. I've been alerting officers to the issue since January, but they've been indifferent and dismissive from the outset."

Following an appeal on Facebook, the Bank Holiday weekend saw the railways' volunteers and supporters lobby Dr Neil Hudson, the MP for Penrith and The Border, and Jason Gooding, Eden District Council's Acting Chief Executive, urging them to save the bridge.

The Council's response is awaited.

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Attachments

GreatMusgraveBridge©TheHREGroup: This bridge at Great Musgrave is being infilled despite the trackbed being earmarked for reuse as part of a heritage line extension.

GreatMusgraveSetting©TheHREGroup: The extended line would pass through the outstanding landscape of the Eden Valley.

StainmoreRailway©TheHREGroup: The Stainmore Railway Company, based at Kirkby Stephen East Station, hopes to relay five miles of track to reconnect with the Eden Valley Railway.

WarcopStation©Rosser1954: The Eden Valley Railway is based at Warcop and ratified its aim to reach Kirkby Stephen in 1999.

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

PlanningLetter (PDF): The letter sent by Jacobs, Highways England's agent, about the proposed infilling of the bridge and the response from Eden District Council.

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.

134 structures are at risk of demolition or infilling, 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.