



PRESS RELEASE: Tuesday 8th June 2021

Highways England acting “dishonestly” in Cumbria bridge row

Work to infill a 159-year-old railway bridge in Cumbria is continuing despite objectors claiming that Highways England “has contrived an alternative reality” to drive through the scheme.

The state-owned roads company manages the Historical Railways Estate of 3,100 disused structures on the Department for Transport’s behalf. In January, it emerged that 115 bridges and tunnels will be infilled and a further 15 demolished over the next five years, but campaigners say the final number could run to several hundred. Many are earmarked for use within sustainable transport schemes.

The bridge at Great Musgrave near Warcop is needed for a connection between the Eden Valley and Stainmore railways whose longstanding ambition is to unite their operations and establish an 11-mile heritage line between Appleby and Kirkby Stephen. Campaigners say that if the infilling is completed, the blockage will be too difficult and costly to remove, scuppering their plans and denying the Eden Valley a much-needed economic boost.

Highways England says it only carries out infilling work on bridges that are “unsafe”. A spokesperson said: “As part of our stewardship of the Historic Railway Estate, we determined the Musgrave Lane bridge - which carries the B6259 over the old railway line - needed strengthening to safeguard the road’s absolutely vital role in connecting local communities like Warcop and Great Musgrave.”

The structure was assessed as having a capacity of 17 tonnes in 1998. Locals say that vehicles over 18 tonnes are unable to make through journeys via the bridge because of an existing weight limit at nearby Kirkby Stephen which is signposted on all approaches. The narrow road that crosses the structure is lightly used, and several sharp bends and humped crossings of the river restrict access by larger vehicles.

According to Highways England’s own inspection reports, the bridge is in Fair condition, shows no signs of being overloaded and has no significant defects. In February 2020, their inspector’s only recommendation was for £5K of repointing which would have increased the bridge’s capacity. That work has not been undertaken.

In a letter to the House of Commons Transport Committee in April, Transport Minister Baroness Vere insisted that “where there is an interest to retain access [beneath a bridge], HE will work to retain this access. Its engagement with local authorities and other stakeholders is part of uncovering that interest where it exists.”

Highways England claims to have “consulted widely - including with Eden Valley District Council, Sustrans and the Eden Valley Railway Company - on our plans to strengthen the bridge.” But both the Eden Valley and Stainmore railways flatly deny there has been any dialogue with the company over the Great Musgrave bridge.

“The first we knew about it was when a national list appeared in January”, says Mike Thompson, Project Manager with the Stainmore Railway. “I’ve spoken to our friends at the Eden Valley Railway and they’re as appalled as we are over Highways England’s claim - which is contradicted by its own reports - regarding the risks presented by the bridge and alleged discussions with us about its future. If the latter is indeed true, then please tell us with whom, where and when. We have heard nothing from them.

“We would have welcomed the opportunity to make clear our opposition to this destructive project. Years of effort by dozens of volunteers is now in jeopardy. There’s not even been a planning application so our voices have been totally silenced.”

In a statement to Rail Engineer magazine, Highways England’s Head of Scheme Delivery, David Wheatley, said: “We can confirm that any work carried out by the Historical Railways Estate in the future will not thwart any potential active travel schemes, or any rail reopenings, including the extension of preserved railways. We have paused infilling and demolition works where local authorities have raised queries about the works.”

Despite this assurance, infilling at Great Musgrave continues. Eden District Council has asked Highways England to pause whilst a review is undertaken, but it refused citing Permitted Development rights.

The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - is campaigning against the infilling programme nationally.

Group member Graeme Bickerdike said: “We’re surprised that a Government-owned company would act so dishonestly. Every statement it makes is contradicted by its actions. This work cannot be justified on engineering, public safety or costs grounds, so Highways England has contrived an alternative reality.

“According to its own figures, it would take about 50 years to spend the £124K infilling cost on routine inspection and maintenance, so the taxpayer won’t begin to see any benefit from this scheme until 2070. But before then - if the opportunity had not been denied them - these two railways would have created a tourist attraction, boosting the local economy and raising tax revenue.

“These distant officials are just managing spreadsheets, oblivious to the damaging impacts of their decisions on good people trying to do positive things for their communities.”

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Attachments

GreatMusgraveBridge©TheHREGroup: Great Musgrave bridge is being infilled despite the trackbed being earmarked for a heritage line extension.

GreatMusgraveDelivery©TheHREGroup: Several wagon-loads of stone arrive at the Great Musgrave site every day.

GreatMusgraveInfilling©TheHREGroup: Machines tip stone down the cutting slope to form the base of the infill.

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

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.