

PRESS RELEASE: Wednesday 23rd June 2021

Cumbrian railways seek reparation in Highways England bridge row

Two heritage railways in Cumbria, whose plans to unite have been thrown into doubt by Highways England infilling an old railway bridge, have asked the company to undo the work or fund the structure's excavation and repair.

The Eden Valley and Stainmore railways first formulated plans to reopen the line between Appleby and Kirkby Stephen East Station in 1995. Two sections have since been completed, but the five-mile connecting route has recently been blocked by the state-owned roads company whose contractor has installed hundreds of tonnes of aggregate and concrete to bury the Victorian bridge at Great Musgrave.

Highways England claimed that infilling was needed to "prevent further deterioration of the bridge from occurring and remove the associated risk of structural collapse and harm to the public". But documents obtained by the two railways reveal that inspectors had no concerns about the bridge's condition and £5K of repointing would have increased its capacity to 40 tonnes, making it safe for any vehicle to pass over. Infilling has cost £124K.

In a letter to Nick Harris, Highways England's Acting Chief Executive, the Stainmore Railway's Project Manager, Mike Thompson, and John Sreeves, Civil Engineering Director with the Eden Valley Railway, express their "collective dismay and huge disappointment" at the infilling and ask why they were not consulted about the plans. Highways England has claimed that they were, but this is flatly denied by the two railways. It is "just one example of how HE has distorted the truth", they say.

David Wheatley, Highways England's Head of Scheme Delivery, recently asserted that his company's ongoing programme of 130 nationwide infilling and demolition schemes would not "thwart any potential active travel schemes, or any rail re-openings, including the extension of preserved railways. We have paused infilling and demolition works where local authorities have raised queries about the works".

This statement is challenged by Mr Thompson and Mr Sreeves who have asked Nick Harris why his company twice ignored requests from Eden District Council to pause the infilling of Great Musgrave bridge - which did not have planning permission - whilst a "detailed investigation" was undertaken.

It is estimated that removal of the infill will cost many tens of thousands of pounds. The two railways already face the prospect of raising significant funds to deliver their future reconnection and say that it is "grossly unfair to the Eden Valley Railway Project that we should be penalised in this way".

They go on, "We are therefore writing to formally request that you either please remove the infill forthwith and make good any damage to the structure, or grant funds to the SRC/EVR to cover this work when the time is right."

"We regard the actions of HE in respect of [the bridge] to be without justification and deeply detrimental to our longstanding goals. It is entirely appropriate that HE makes reparation for the significant additional cost and difficulty imposed on our future operations without prior consultation."

A reply from Highways England is awaited.

--ENDS--

Attachments

GreatMusgravelInfilled©TheHREGroup: Highways England recently infilled a bridge in Cumbria which was needed for a connection between two heritage railways.

GreatMusgrave©TheHREGroup: The attractive masonry structure before it was infilled.

EdenValleyRailway©TheHREGroup: The Eden Valley Railway's station at Warcop.

KirkbyStephenEast©TheHREGroup: The old station at Kirkby Stephen East which serves as the base for the Stainmore Railway Company.

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

SRC-EVR-NickHarris-21062021(red)(PDF): The letter sent by the two railways to Highways England's Chief Executive.

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

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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.

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

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 constraints.