

PRESS RELEASE: Wednesday 7th July 2021

Scottish bridges under threat after council's "planning blunder"

Campaigners have called on Dumfries & Galloway Council to take urgent action after a "perverse decision" by planners threatened to make the proposed reopening of a railway more difficult and costly.

In April last year, Highways England told the local authority of its intention to infill a disused bridge at Lochanhead, spanning the former Dumfries-Stranraer line. The route's reopening is identified as an option for improving regional links in the initial appraisal of the South West Scotland Transport Study. The final report is due in the autumn. It would also be needed if a rail tunnel was driven under the Irish Sea, as advocated by the High Speed Rail Group.

Highways England, which is owned by the UK Government, manages the Historical Railways Estate of 3,100 disused structures on the Department for Transport's behalf, including about 600 bridges, tunnels and viaducts in Scotland.

In a letter to planners about the Lochanhead bridge, Jacobs - the agents acting for the roads company - said that "the arch barrel has open joints throughout" and infilling is needed to "remove the associated risk of structural collapse and harm to the public".

The structure, which carries a minor road over the former railway, remains in fair condition and shows no signs of being overloaded. Campaigners state that repointing the open joints would greatly increase its load-bearing capacity.

Engineering works normally need planning consent, but a council officer told Highways England that the works "would be classed as a repair and do not require planning permission".

Chris Rosindale from the Reopening the Dumfries-Stranraer Railway group said: "Jacobs sent the same template letter about bridge infilling schemes to a number of local authorities last April. We've obtained more than a dozen responses in which they are told to apply for planning permission.

"What they're proposing at Lochanhead is not repair; little or no work will be carried out to the existing bridge. They will be creating a new and substantial structure which buries most of it. The Council is guilty of a planning blunder with potentially serious long-term consequences."

The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 states that local authorities must have "regard to the desirability of preserving disused railway infrastructure for the purpose of ensuring its availability for possible future public transport requirements". Dumfries & Galloway Council

has a specific policy “against any development on or adjacent to former railway routes with a reasonable prospect of being reused”.

Mr Rosindale continued: “Despite this, the Council granted consent for a damaging infill scheme without seeking sufficient detail to make an informed judgement. It needs to rectify this perverse decision before it’s too late.”

Also at risk of being infilled is a second structure near Kirtlebridge, carrying the B722 over the former Solway Junction Railway which closed in 1931. The old trackbed was acquired by a local farmer and, for at least the past 60 years, it has been used for agricultural purposes. Without being able to pass under the bridge, two acres of his property will be inaccessible.

Dr Iain Gow, the landowner, said: “This is cultural vandalism and cannot be justified on engineering grounds. Even Highways England’s own contractor admitted to me that the bridge is still in fair condition. It’s 152 years old and needs a few minor repairs, but they would cost a fraction of the £145K that infilling is likely to set back the taxpayer.

“At a time when we’re trying to encourage more people to adopt sustainable forms of transport and exercise more outdoors, the old line offers the potential to extend the currently proposed rail trail connecting Annan via Chapelcross and on to Kirtlebridge. We need to see this fabulous infrastructure as an opportunity to build a better future, not put it beyond use for short-term asset management purposes.

“At very least, the Council has a duty to ensure that backward-looking schemes like this are properly scrutinised to ensure the public interest is best served and owners adjacent to the structures are not disadvantaged. It’s time for the Council to do the right thing.”

Last month, Highways England infilled a bridge in Cumbria which was needed for a connection between two heritage railways. The local council had authorised the work without planning permission. Campaigners described the scheme as “an act of sabotage” and “environmental nightmare”, with the Victorian structure now buried beneath tonnes of aggregate and concrete.

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Attachments

LochanheadBridge©TheHREGroup: The disused bridge at Lochanhead spans the former Dumfries-Stranraer railway which is under consideration for reopening.

Lochanhead©TheHREGroup: Campaigners believe the bridge is structurally sound and needs minor repairs to increase its strength.

TilekilnsBridge©TheHREGroup: Tilekilns Bridge near Kirtlebridge is threatened with infilling despite it providing the only means of a farmer accessing part of his property.

GreatMusgraveBridge©TheHREGroup: Great Musgrave bridge in Cumbria was infilled by Highways England without planning permission and has prejudiced a planned connection between two heritage railways.

(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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Reopen the Dumfries-Stranraer Railway

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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.