

PRESS RELEASE: Wednesday 21st July 2021

Minister condemned over “embarrassing” bridge deceit

Campaigners have accused a Government Minister of a “comprehensive misrepresentation of the facts” in a letter she wrote to the House of Commons Transport Committee.

Baroness Vere, the Minister for Roads, Buses and Places, was responding to questions about Highways England’s infilling and demolition of historic railway structures which the state-owned roads company manages on the Department for Transport’s behalf.

In January, it emerged that 134 bridges and tunnels constructed during the Victorian era were going to be put beyond use despite many of them being needed for cycle paths, reopened railways or heritage line extensions. A structure at Great Musgrave in Cumbria was controversially infilled by Highways England in May/June 2021 despite plans by the Eden Valley and Stainmore railways to relay the line under it, uniting their two operations.

Huw Merriman MP, chair of the House of Commons Transport Committee, wrote to Baroness Vere on 16 June, pointing out that “Highways England’s most recent inspection reports stated the bridge is in fair condition and the inspector’s only recommendation was to repoint open joints. We would be grateful if you could clarify why the repointing recommendations were not implemented and infilling has been undertaken instead.”

He went on to state the Committee’s understanding that there had been “no dialogue with officers from either the Eden Valley or Stainmore railways about [the infilling of the] bridge” and asked the Minister to “confirm the extent of Highways England’s engagement with these two important stakeholders.”

In her reply, Baroness Vere claimed that “the need to start work on the bridge was urgent. The structure was weak, potentially causing the bridge deck to fall suddenly.” She also told the Committee that “Highways England discussed the former branch line with both Eden Valley Railway and Stainmore Railway”, but made no reference to the bridge itself.

Campaigners from The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - described the claim that the bridge deck might fall suddenly as “either a deliberate attempt to deceive or a demonstration of incompetence”.

“Great Musgrave bridge was not ‘weak’ and masonry arches do not fail suddenly”, asserted Graeme Bickerdike, a member of the Group. In a letter to Mr Merriman, he went on to point out that “Highways England’s engineer recorded the bridge as presenting ‘No significant risk’ to public safety, with a ‘Low’ likelihood of any adverse event occurring and ‘No action [was] required’.”

The HRE Group also provided the Transport Committee with a copy of a letter sent jointly by the Eden Valley and Stainmore railways to Nick Harris, Highways England's Acting Chief Executive, in which they make clear that "neither organisation had been consulted prior to infilling, in direct contradiction to [Highways England's] press statements which we feel is just one example of how HE has distorted the truth."

Mr Merriman noted from press articles that the number of bridges threatened with infilling has apparently been reduced from 115 to 69 and asked the Minister to confirm "the basis upon which 46 bridges have been reprieved".

Baroness Vere claimed that the affected structures, as originally identified, were actually "in various stages of development for maintenance in the interests of public safety", suggesting that infilling had never been confirmed. However The HRE Group pointed out that Local Planning Authorities (LPA) had been told by Highways England that the bridges were going to be infilled on emergency grounds or to "remove the associated risk of structural collapse and harm to the public".

The Minister was guilty of "a clear attempt to rewrite history", said Mr Bickerdike. "There was nothing ambiguous about Highways England's letters to the LPAs: infilling was the only option mentioned and the intention to progress the works was clear, reinforced by disreputable scaremongering over the threat of structural collapse or use of powers only applicable in an emergency."

The HRE Group claimed that "Highways England and the Department for Transport are completely out of touch on this issue and the Minister's perpetuation of their deceit is an embarrassment". The Group has asked the Transport Committee for its urgent attention to Highways England's infilling and demolition programme, and for further dialogue in an effort to challenge it "more robustly".

--ENDS--

Attachments

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

GreatMusgraveAfter©TheHREGroup: Foamed concrete oozes down hundreds of tonnes of tipped aggregate at Great Musgrave bridge.

BrunelBridge©TheHREGroup: Highways England claims it has no plans to infill this bridge, engineered by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, despite telling Cornwall Council that "the works are being undertaken in order to prevent an emergency arising".

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

SupportingDocuments(PDF): The Transport Committee's letter to Baroness Vere of 16 June 2021, Baroness Vere's response of 7 July 2021, The HRE Group's letter to the Transport Committee of 20 July 2021 and a number of associated documents.

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.

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.