

PRESS RELEASE: Monday 9 August 2021

Highways England acting like “cowboys and bullies” over bridge scheme

The Chief Executive of the South Downs National Park says his Authority will “resist this vandalism” after Highways England confirmed plans to infill an old railway bridge needed for a proposed active travel route.

In January, campaigners revealed that the state-owned roads company intends to infill or demolish 134 historic structures which it manages on the Department for Transport’s behalf. The programme has proved controversial as many of the affected bridges and tunnels are earmarked for future transport roles and no appraisal has been made of the heritage and environmental impacts.

Stoke Road bridge, on the edge of the South Downs National Park (SDNP) near Winchester, spans a disused railway which is proposed for reuse as part of the Watercress Way, a walking and cycling path. The route is safeguarded against adverse development under a policy adopted in the SDNP Authority’s Local Plan.

Despite Government assurances that structures needed for such schemes will not be affected, Highways England says it intends to clear vegetation around the bridge in September and October, with a view to starting the infilling work in November.

Nicola Bell, the company’s Regional Director, South East, told the *Liphook Herald* that “Before we conduct this kind of work, we reach out to local authorities to determine if there’s a viable interest for retaining the structure for alternative uses such as walking and cycling.

“We contacted the South Downs National Park Authority on April 23, 2020. They have approved the work as permitted development.”

But this claim is contradicted by documents obtained following a Freedom of Information request. In response to Highways England’s letter, planners made clear that the infilling scheme “would likely be considered contrary to policy and might adversely affect future potential as a non-motorised transport route”. They went on to state that “the works appear to be ‘development’ that would require the submission of a planning application”.

Instead, Highways England sent a second letter on 10 September 2020, invoking Permitted Development powers - known as ‘Class Q’ - which facilitate temporary works in emergency situations presenting a serious threat of death or injury. Infilling is intended to be permanent. The bridge currently presents no threat to public safety, with only minor defects.

In a tweet, Trevor Beattie, the SDNPA’s Chief Executive, said: “The National Park does not support the infilling and has not given consent, indeed we have argued without success that

permission is needed, but [Highways England] has used their PD rights. We will resist this vandalism."

The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - condemns Highways England for acting like "cowboys and bullies".

Matt Skidmore, a member of the Group, said: "This is typical of the behaviour we've seen from the company over the past few months. Infilling schemes are being driven through against the wider public interest, without local stakeholders having a voice. There is no scrutiny because normal democratic processes are being circumvented through the continued abuse of Permitted Development powers.

"By putting Stoke Road bridge beyond use, Highways England is obstructing the development of a 27-mile circular path connecting the communities of Alresford, Kings Worthy, South Wonston and Sutton Scotney. This is a disgraceful and unwarranted act by a disreputable organisation that couldn't care less about building a better future."

In a House of Lords debate on 5 July 2021, Lord Rosser, Shadow Transport spokesperson, accused Highways England of "blocking or severing potential routes by demolishing or filling in currently disused railway structures through a back-door process using permitted development powers, which stifles challenges and objections from local communities and organisations".

The Government subsequently announced that Highways England's works programme was being paused until the autumn, pending the establishment of "a formalised framework and engagement process for these structures to understand, in each case, whether there is a realistic prospect of it being used for active travel or other transport purposes in future".

The HRE Group contends that there is already such a process, involving the submission of a planning application.

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Attachments

StokeRoadRoute©TheHREGroup: An aerial view across Stoke Road bridge, showing the old railway which is proposed for repurposing as a walking and cycling route.

StokeRoadDeck©TheHREGroup: The bridge carries a little-used country lane over the former Mid-Hants Railway which opened in 1865.

StokeRoadBridge©TheHREGroup: Uncontrolled ivy growth has caused localised mortar loss to the bridge's parapets, spandrels and arch ring face, but these defects are minor.

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

TrevorBeattieTweet: The tweet from Trevor Beattie, Chief Executive of the South Downs National Park Authority.

SupportingDocuments(PDF): The correspondence between Highways England and the planning team at the South Downs National Park Authority.

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.

In January 2021, it was revealed that 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

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.

Stoke Road bridge near Itchen Stoke (grid reference SU5592232683) was opened in 1865 as part of the Mid-Hants Railway.

Schedule 2 Part 19 Class Q of the The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 permits action in the event of an emergency, or to prevent an emergency, that threatens a loss of human life, illness or injury, homelessness or damage to property. Within six months of the work starting, the property must be restored to its condition before the development began, or to such other state as agreed in writing with the local planning authority.