

PRESS RELEASE: Tuesday 12 October 2021

MP intervenes as bridge scheme descends into “farce”

Campaigners have accused National Highways of “deceit” over plans to bury a historic bridge in a thousand tonnes of aggregate and concrete, blocking a wildlife corridor.

The state-owned roads company manages more than 3,100 disused railway structures on the Department for Transport’s behalf. A controversial programme to infill or demolish 134 bridges and tunnels was revealed in January, but the Government called a temporary halt over the summer. Work is expected to resume in the next few weeks, with 68 structures under immediate threat.

National Highways’ has earmarked Church Road bridge in Barcombe, East Sussex for infilling as part of its Major Works programme. The start date has not yet been scheduled, but contractors prevented bats from roosting or hibernating in the structure last week. Lewes District Council was first told about infilling in April 2020, with National Highways claiming the scheme was needed to remove any risk of “structural collapse and harm to the public”.

The company’s engineer recently described the bridge as being “in a dangerous condition”, but The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - has accused National Highways of “deliberately standing back and watching it deteriorate”. Cracks in the bridge’s parapets and wingwalls were first recorded in 1994.

The structure is located within Barcombe’s conservation area and spans an established wildlife corridor. It is regarded locally as a valuable community asset and a campaign to prevent infilling was launched last week. There is anger at National Highways’ use of Permitted Development rights which avoid public scrutiny and the need for planning permission.

Confusion now surrounds the scheme after local MP Maria Caulfield said on social media that she discussed the issue with National Highways yesterday (11 October) and “the infilling has been suspended as the Transport Minister is now looking into why this was agreed”. The MP made clear that “I will do all I can to get this stopped” and intends to meet campaigners. Meanwhile National Highways claimed in a media statement that “there’s no planned work at the bridge”, whilst one of its directors said infilling was only “paused”.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group, called the situation “a farce that would embarrass The Chuckle Brothers. This has become Schrödinger’s Infill - simultaneously not happening, on hold and confirmed to prevent an emergency.

“The community deserves straight answers from National Highways, not deceit. We know that all 68 schemes are currently paused, but - according to their published works programme - the bridge at Barcombe is identified for infill. Is that still their intention?

"If the structure is 'dangerous' as their engineer claims, the company has been guilty of reckless paralysis. The reality, of course, is that it just needs effective and proportionate repairs - a point made by the local highway authority 20 months ago when it informed National Highways that 'the wingwall cracks are moving'. Why haven't they acted? Maintenance can be carried out at any time, without seeking consent from the Council."

National Highways says that its legacy bridges are only infilled if they are unsafe, but The HRE Group argues that the company's programme is being driven opportunistically - bypassing normal planning requirements - in pursuit of a policy of liability reduction.

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Attachments

BarcombeProtest©TheHREGroup: Members of the community protest at the bridge against National Highways' infilling plan.

BarcombeVehicle©TheHREGroup: A vehicle passes over the bridge which has a 20-tonne weight limit.

BarcombeCracks©TheHREGroup: Cracks were recorded in the bridge's parapets and wingwalls as long ago as 1994.

BarcombeBats©PaulWhitewick: National Highways' contractor has blocked cracks in the bridge's brickwork with loft insulation and covered them with polythene to prevent bats roosting or hibernating in them.

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

SupportingDocuments(PDF): NH's Major Works programme list, Maria Caulfield MP's social media posts, correspondence/emails exchanged between National Highways and Lewes District Council's planning team, an extract from NH's 2013 structural assessment, and mapping demonstrating the extent of Barcombe's conservation area and the woodland status of the former railway trackbed north of the bridge.

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 National Highways (NH). NH 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.

National Highways 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 30 September 2013.

In 2020, National Highways 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 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 the broader threat to HRE structures - including those that have failed assessments - is available via this link...

https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1LVvKXUS_a66LGzG8mPNLZaRpz2hw3ioe

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 National Highways 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.