

PRESS RELEASE: Monday 18 October 2021

Community fights back against bridge “sabotage”

Residents of an East Sussex village have sent a letter to National Highways protesting against plans to infill a historic bridge over a wildlife corridor.

The state-owned roads company manages 3,100 disused railway structures on the Department for Transport’s behalf. An ongoing programme of major works will see 68 of them put beyond use, but campaigners believe hundreds more are under longer-term threat. The Government paused the schemes following the controversial infilling of a bridge in Cumbria over the summer, but works are expected to resume within weeks.

At Barcombe near Lewes, Church Road bridge - dating from the 1880s - carries a minor road over the disused ‘Bluebell line’. National Highways intends to infill it under Permitted Development powers, circumventing scrutiny through the normal planning process.

The structure forms part of a local conservation area which is intended to help preserve and enhance the village’s special architectural and historic interest. It also spans an established wildlife route and ecologically sensitive habitat, with bats, nightingales and ancient woodland.

Signed by 176 locals, the community letter was sent to Duncan Smith, National Highways’ Acting Executive Director for Operations, under whose remit the legacy bridges reside. In it, the company is asked to stop pursuing plans to infill the bridge at Barcombe and “instead conduct a repair that is sensitive to its heritage value and the needs of the local community and wildlife.”

The letter notes that, nationally, “civil engineers have expressed their shame and embarrassment at National Highways’ infill programme” and that the bridge in Cumbria “stands as a monument to your organisation’s cultural vandalism and blinkered approach to eliminating liability”.

“We do not want our bridge to be infilled using our money by a distant public body which seems determined to disregard its broader social obligations”, the community asserts. “We hope that National Highways will act with due care and stewardship in the important task of safely and sensitively maintaining heritage railway structures for the future.”

Hazel Fell Rayner, the local campaign organiser, said: “National Highways should not underestimate the strength of feeling in Barcombe. They seem determined to drive through their scheme, using Permitted Development powers to silence the community.

“The bridge is a valued local asset, both in terms of its history and important role as part of our wildlife corridor. Enveloping it in a thousand tonnes of aggregate and concrete would be a shocking act of environmental sabotage.”

Meanwhile, The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - has accused Roads Minister Baroness Vere of "deceit" after she asserted that there are "no current plans" to infill the bridge at Barcombe, responding to a Parliamentary question from Liberal Democrat peer Baroness Randerson.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of the Group, said: "National Highways has identified infill as its preferred asset management option for Barcombe; the design has been completed, but exclusion measures have been installed on site and approval to start work is awaited.

"The company has written letters to Lewes District Council, including one that states 'infilling the structure is considered necessary to prevent further deterioration and remove the risk of future collapse' - a characteristically hysterical and disproportionate claim. Last week, National Highways' engineer told planners that this 'isn't going away'.

"Like 67 others, the project has been 'paused', but for the Minister to suggest there are 'no current plans' to infill the bridge represents a ridiculous attempt to contrive an alternative reality. Trust in politicians is not enhanced by deceit of this kind. The clear intention is to infill."

--ENDS--

Attachments

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

BarcombeLetter©TheHREGroup: Hazel Fell Rayner, the local campaign organiser, signs the community's letter to National Highways.

BarcombeSignatures©HazelFellRayner: Campaigner and resident Jonathan Scripps with the letter and its 176 signatures.

BarcombeBridge©TheHREGroup: The structure was built in the 1880s and carries a minor road over the former Lewes-East Grinstead railway.

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

SupportingDocuments(PDF): The community letter, 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>

To link to Paul and Rebecca Whitewick's video about the Barcombe campaign or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/1uSw9ZzZkpE>

(Embed) <iframe width="560" height="315"
src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/1uSw9ZzZkpE" 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.

Designed by civil engineer Frederick Banister, the bridge on Church Road, Barcombe was built in the early 1880s as part of a line connecting Lewes and East Grinstead. The structure carries a narrow, minor road and is assessed as having a capacity of 24 tonnes. A weight restriction prohibits vehicles over 20 tonnes from using it, helping to keep unsuitable traffic out of the village. The brick parapets and wingwalls have been subject to movement for many years, with cracks recorded as long ago as 1994. But instead of carrying out appropriate repairs, National Highways intends to bury the Victorian feat within an estimated 1,000 tonnes of aggregate and concrete. The design has already been completed and a start date for the work is awaited. There is anger that the scheme is being progressed under Permitted Development powers which leaves objectors without a voice and circumvents any democratic scrutiny of the historical, ecological and environmental impacts.