

PRESS RELEASE: Tuesday 9 November 2021

National Highways “wilfully ignore” community bridge concerns

Campaigners have condemned National Highways for its failure to recognise the historical, ecological and environmental consequences of its plans to infill a legacy railway structure.

Church Road bridge in Barcombe, East Sussex, is located within a conservation area and spans an established wildlife corridor. But it has been earmarked for infilling by the state-owned roads company which manages 3,100 disused bridges, viaducts and tunnels on the Department for Transport’s behalf.

An ongoing programme of major works will see 68 structures 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.

Last month, 176 Barcombe residents signed a letter to National Highways, setting out their concerns over the heritage, wildlife and community amenity impacts of the scheme which involves the felling of six mature trees and burying the bridge in an estimated 1,000 tonnes of aggregate and concrete.

According to locals, “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.”

But National Highways made no reference to any of these issues in its response, focussing instead on the lack of any viable future rail use, the establishment of a Stakeholder Advisory Forum to review forthcoming work plans and the alleged “fundamental instability issue” with the bridge.

“It’s almost as though they didn’t read our letter”, said Hazel Fell Rayner, the local campaign organiser. “It looks like a stock response in which they wilfully ignore the bridge’s importance to the community - especially its wildlife significance.

“Posters and signs have appeared throughout the village this weekend, supporting efforts to ‘save our bridge’ and ‘stop the infill’; even children are making posters to display. People are horrified and bewildered by the plans for concrete infill, because there is a magic about the place. The structure has to be protected.

“Blocking a wildlife corridor in the middle of a climate emergency and biodiversity crisis is an absolutely crazy thing to do, even on paper. It makes no rational sense and no-one can see a reason anyone would want to do this unless they’re just ticking boxes and wanting to be rid of the responsibility.

“National Highways should feel honoured to be looking after our railway heritage - it’s something really precious. And yet they seem determined to destroy it, whatever the cost.”

Dr Niall Burnside, a landscape ecologist, said: “Things like roads, wall structures and buildings - those can be insurmountable barriers to some species in their movement throughout the landscape. So something such as [Barcombe] bridge - set within the landscape in what appears quite a remote and secluded area - this would encourage the movement of species.

“Infilling this bridge - infilling other bridges - needs to be looked at very very carefully and whatever measures can be put in place to avoid it, should be.

“The importance of a site such as this is beyond question.”

Meanwhile, The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - has accused Transport Minister Baroness Vere of “blatant dishonesty” when she responded to a Parliamentary question from Liberal Democrat peer Baroness Randerson on 15 October.

“There are no current plans to infill Barcombe Bridge”, said the Minister. “All infilling and demolition work on the Historical Railways Estate, including Barcombe Bridge, has been paused while National Highways review their programme and seek additional input through the newly created Stakeholder Advisory Forum.”

However it has since emerged that National Highways issued two contracts relating to the “Church Lane [sic] bridge infill” on 12 August - one for £69,712 of minor works - thought to involve general repairs - and a second for the main infilling scheme valued at £175,838.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group, said: “How could the Minister tell Parliament that there are ‘no current plans’ to infill the bridge at Barcombe when contracts for the work - worth £245K - had been awarded to a contractor two months earlier?

“National Highways is actively pursuing this scheme, undertaking bat exclusion works and threatening to fell trees, for which a third contract of £14K has been let.

“Either the Minister is being misled or she’s in a state of denial. Baroness Vere needs to put a full and final stop to a scheme that would obliterate a valued heritage asset and inflict concrete blight on a delicate habitat. The actions of National Highways are incompatible with the Government’s supposed commitment to delivering a green revolution.”

--ENDS--

Attachments

BarcombeProtest©TheHREGroup: Members of the local community gather of Barcombe bridge to protest at National Highways’ infilling plans.

BarcombeCorridor©TheHREGroup: Barcombe bridge spans an established wildlife corridor - a site described by many locals as “magical”.

BarcombeSign©HazelFellRayner: Signs protesting against the infill scheme appeared around the village over the weekend.

BarcombeScripps©HazelFellRayner: Local campaigner, Jonathan Scripps, with two of the signs.

GreatMusgrave©TheHREGroup: The infilling of Great Musgrave bridge, Cumbria, over the summer saw the structure consumed within hundreds of tonnes of stone and concrete.

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

SupportingDocuments(PDF): The three contracts awarded by National Highways for works on Barcombe bridge, the community letter and National Highways' response, 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 Forgotten Relics' video report about Barcombe bridge or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/Y7kltVY7l8Y>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/Y7kltVY7l8Y" 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 Barcombe bridge 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.