



PRESS RELEASE: Tuesday 16 November 2021

## **Bridge infill contract awarded despite Government's programme pause**

Campaigners have challenged National Highways over the award of a contract to infill a historic railway bridge despite the Government putting all schemes on hold two weeks earlier.

The state-owned roads company manages 3,100 disused railway structures on the Department for Transport's behalf. A planned programme of major works will see 68 of them put beyond use, but hundreds more are thought to be under longer-term threat.

The Government called a halt to the schemes following the controversial infilling of a bridge at Great Musgrave in Cumbria over the summer. The structure - which had a handful of minor defects - was needed for the proposed reconnection of two heritage railways. According to National Highways, restoring the bridge for future use could now cost £431K.

Despite the pause, preparations for the works programme have continued. On 13 October, an access route was created and trees cut down at a proposed demolition site in Dorset. National Highways failed to notify any of the three affected landowners or seek their consent. The company has since apologised to one of them.

Now it has emerged that a £176K contract for an infilling scheme at Barcombe, East Sussex, was awarded on 12 August, two weeks after the pause was announced. A second contract for £70K of associated repairs was also issued. The affected bridge spans an established wildlife corridor which would be blocked by an estimated 1,800 tonnes of aggregate and concrete.

According to The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - the contract has been omitted from National Highways' current spreadsheet of 'Contracts Pipeline data', published on the company's website. Previous infill schemes have been included and a more recent repair contract for another legacy structure does appear.

The Group has now written to Duncan Smith, NH's Executive Director for Operations, to question how the contract award "was compatible with the Government putting National Highways' bridge infilling/demolition programme on hold". Campaigners have also asked whether "NH is now excluding [Historical Railways Estate] infilling/demolition schemes from its published contracts data and, if so, why".

"The pause has always been something of a smokescreen", says Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group. "They've installed bat exclusion measures and felled trees at a number of sites since August. The direction of travel is very clear and they are obviously keen to restart their destructive programme."

National Highways has established a Stakeholder Advisory Forum (SAF) to support the development of its future major works programme for legacy structures. The first four-monthly meeting took place in October. According to the Terms of Reference, contributors will bring “their own research, data, skills and knowledge. In so doing, forum members’ expertise will be sought in relation to scheme proposals...”

Bickerdike, who represents The HRE Group on the SAF, asserts that “The contract award undermines the Forum before it’s got started. The structure in East Sussex has not yet been put forward for consideration, but NH has already awarded a contract to infill it. This suggests that the SAF will have no influence over decision-making.

“We’ve suspected from the outset that the Forum is just a ploy on National Highways’ part to share blame for its infilling and demolition programme. The SAF has no power to stop a scheme although NH has committed to ‘take into account all feedback from the forum and other relevant stakeholder [sic] before proceeding with works’.

“Awarding a contract demonstrates an intention to proceed with infilling at Barcombe irrespective of the Forum’s views and this is reinforced by its ongoing attempts to push forward with the scheme under Permitted Development powers.”

On 15 October, two months after the contract award, Roads Minister Baroness Vere said there were “no current plans” to infill the bridge at Barcombe in response to a Parliamentary question from Liberal Democrat peer Baroness Randerson.

At a community event in Barcombe on Saturday, Maria Caulfield MP - who represents Lewes - told campaigners that the Government is now investigating the awarding of a contract for the bridge’s infilling.

--ENDS--

## **Attachments**

BarcombeProtest©TheHREGroup: The local community is campaigning against the infilling of the bridge in Barcombe which stands within a conservation area and spans a wildlife corridor. (Credit: The HRE Group)

BarcombeBridge©TheHREGroup: A contract for the infilling of Barcombe bridge has been awarded despite Government placing all National Highways’ schemes on hold. (Credit: The HRE Group)

Great Musgrave©TheHREGroup: National Highways’ infilling and demolition programme was put on hold after the controversial infilling of Great Musgrave bridge in Cumbria. (Credit: The HRE Group)

Dorset©RichardSims: In October, National Highways contractor felled trees without notifying or seeking permission from the three affected landowners. (Credit: Richard Sims)

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

SupportingDocuments(PDF): The contract awarded by National Highways for the infilling of Barcombe bridge; NH's Major Works programme; remediation costs for Great Musgrave bridge; SAF Terms of Reference; The HRE Group's letter to NH.

To link to Forgotten Relics' video report about Barcombe bridge or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/Y7kltVY7I8Y>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/Y7kltVY7I8Y" 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>`

### **Contact details**

Media enquiries: [campaign@thehregroup.org](mailto:campaign@thehregroup.org)

Twitter: @theHREgroup

Facebook: @theHREgroup

### **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 originally listed as being 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](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.