

PRESS RELEASE: Monday 27 June 2022

## **National Highways questioned over bridge infill “sweetener”**

Campaigners have challenged National Highways after it committed taxpayers’ money to repairing a collection of old railway structures for which it has no responsibility if it was granted planning permission for a controversial bridge infill scheme.

Last year, the state-owned roads company used emergency development powers to bury a Victorian bridge at Great Musgrave, Cumbria in 1,600 tonnes of stone and concrete, at a cost of £124,000. It claimed the work was needed to “avert a collapse” despite inspection reports recording only a small number of minor defects. Eden District Council told National Highways to apply for retrospective planning permission which was rejected on 16 June.

The company had already agreed to remove the infill from Great Musgrave bridge if the structure was ever needed for future use, at an estimated cost of up to £431,000. But at a meeting of the Council’s planning committee, Hélène Rossiter from National Highways went further, stating that “If the application were to be approved today then we would ring-fence the sum we would have used to uninfill the bridge - again £450,000 - to be used on the improvement and maintenance of railway assets in the Eden Valley”.

The planning application received 911 objections, with just two comments in favour; one of these came from Railway Paths Ltd, a charity which owns a disused line intended for reopening as part of a heritage railway through the Eden Valley.

Director David Pemberton, also speaking at the planning committee meeting, confirmed that “if the application is approved, we gain...£450,000 to reopen the line from Sandford to Appleby and a heritage asset group of 25 bridges preserved and in-use”.

The HRE Group of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers has asked National Highways for evidence that the investment in Eden Valley Railway (EVR) structures would have delivered value for money to the taxpayer and why it was directly linked to approval of the planning application.

“We’re not currently aware of any study that demonstrates the benefits to the local economy of extending the EVR”, said Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group. “Whilst there will certainly be some, National Highways should not be committing taxpayers’ money to any project unless it can demonstrate good returns on our investment.

“Linking the proposal to approval of the Great Musgrave bridge application - which was entirely unrelated in a planning context - makes it feel like a sweetener: an improper attempt to influence democratic process. We were told after the planning committee meeting that at least two members had been lobbied by Railway Paths to approve the application.

“This suggests that National Highways doesn’t understand the responsibilities that come with spending public money. The whole thing smells like Grimsby docks: very very fishy.”

In 2013, the long-term extension plans of the Somerset & Dorset Railway Heritage Trust were dealt a blow when National Highways’ predecessor infilled a bridge at Chilcompton, less than two miles from its base at Midsomer Norton. The Trust's own specialist bridge engineer found that the few recorded defects could have been repaired at a cost significantly less than infilling.

As at Great Musgrave, there was no consultation with stakeholder groups about the scheme and a second bridge was then infilled further down the line at Masbury.

John Baxter, a member of the Trust’s board, said: “It’s simply unfair that National Highways was willing to fund the repair of several structures - as well as committing to the future removal of infill from Great Musgrave bridge - in order to get its planning application through.

“There are more than 150 heritage railways across the UK and I’ve no doubt they would all be delighted to receive significant investment from the taxpayer, but that’s never going to happen and we wouldn’t expect it to. So why should the Eden Valley Railway be singled out?

“We could have worked collaboratively with National Highways to assist with strengthening our two bridges, both for anticipated heavier traffic and our future extension. But it looks as if we will be forced to remove both infills at our own great expense as we work to bring a community railway back between Midsomer Norton and Shepton Mallet, alongside a green cycleway currently under development.”

National Highways has said it will not appeal against the rejection of its planning application to retain the infill at Great Musgrave bridge and an enforcement notice for its removal is expected to be issued by Eden District Council in due course.

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## **Attachments**

GreatMusgraveBridgeBefore©TheHREGroup: Great Musgrave bridge was in generally good condition before it was infilled by National Highways. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveBridgeInfill©TheHREGroup: Work to infill the 160-year-old bridge took place in May and June last year. (Credit: The HRE Group)

CouplandBeckViaduct: Coupland Beck Viaduct is one of several historic railway structures owned by Railway Paths Ltd on the disused line between Appleby and Sandford.

MasburyBridge©TheHREGroup: A bridge at Masbury was infilled in 2013, one of two blocking a proposed extension of a line operated by the Somerset & Dorset Railway Heritage Trust. (Credit: The HRE Group)

MidsomerNorton©Matt Skidmore: Midsomer Norton Station on the heritage line operated by the Somerset & Dorset Railway Heritage Trust. (Credit: Matt Skidmore)

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

Supporting Documents (PDF): Letter from The HRE Group to National Highways.

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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 with a headline value of £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. These 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).

National Highways now claims that only 68 structures will be infilled or demolished in the short term, but hundreds remain at risk in the longer term.

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.