

PRESS RELEASE: Monday 3 July 2023

“Unacceptable” bridge closure divides Cumbrian community for months

Locals have expressed shock and anger after signs for a 13-week road closure were placed in their village as National Highways prepares to remove 1,600 tonnes of stone and concrete from a historic railway bridge.

The structure at Great Musgrave in Cumbria was controversially infilled under emergency permitted development rights in 2021 despite being in fair condition and needed for a long-planned link between two heritage railways. The state-owned roads company was forced to submit a retrospective planning application to retain the infill material, but this was rejected by Eden District Council in June last year, after which an enforcement notice was issued requiring its removal by 11 October 2023.

Some preparatory works have already taken place, exposing the top part of the bridge’s north side. However, the main scheme - due to start on 17 July - involves excavating beneath the bridge’s arch, so National Highways has arranged a closure of the B6259 - which crosses the structure - for the three-month duration of the project “so our colleagues can work safely”, according to its website. However, it is not expected that workers will be on-site throughout that period.

There was no consultation with either the heritage railways or the parish council before infilling took place and locals remained in the dark about the road closure until signs appeared last week.

Tim Wells, who chairs Musgrave Parish Council, said: “It’s absolutely ridiculous - have they learned nothing? Yet again, there’s been no dialogue with the community directly affected by their actions. How can National Highways not understand the impact this closure will have on villages served by this crucial road?”

“Several farms have property on both sides of the bridge - they need to use it every day. There’s a produce seller who will lose most of their passing trade. Are they going to be compensated? The school bus won’t be able to cross, so what are the children going to do? And then there are people who need to get to work and do their shopping.

“The bridge is about 30 yards long. If you’re in a small vehicle that can use the lane heading north from Great Musgrave, the diversion from one end of the bridge to the other is almost five miles. But for a bigger farm machine, at best you’re looking at more than seven miles going via Brough, and that assumes it will fit under the low bridge at Warcop.

“What they’re planning to impose is unacceptable.”

A campaign against National Highways' infilling and demolition of legacy railway structures has been led by The HRE Group of engineers, greenway developers and sustainable transport advocates. The government stepped in to halt the programme after the Great Musgrave scheme was derided as cultural vandalism, but six infill projects and one demolition form part of the company's provisional works programme for this financial year, subject to Ministerial approval and, in most cases, planning permission.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group, said: "National Highways has been taking positive steps in a better direction over the past 18 months, but they still seem to lack good judgement and fail to understand the importance of early, effective engagement with those impacted by their work.

"The frustration being expressed around Great Musgrave is understandable. National Highways cannot upset community life for such a prolonged period whilst they put right a mistake they shouldn't have made in the first place. They describe infilling as 'fully reversible', but clearly not without huge disruption and the deepest of pockets.

"There has to be a way of appropriately ensuring the safety of their contractor's workforce whilst recognising the needs of local people to go about their business. Continued access across the bridge, with careful traffic management, is clearly vital."

Meanwhile, 280 people have objected to National Highways' retrospective planning application to retain infill at another historic railway bridge, at Congham in Norfolk. Emergency permitted development rights were again exploited, but the local planning authority intervened because the material had not been removed within the maximum permitted period of 12 months.

--ENDS--

Attachments

GreatMusgraveBefore©TheHREGroup: An aerial view showing the bridge prior to its infilling. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveAfter©TheHREGroup: The masonry arch bridge was infilled with 1,600 tonnes of stone and concrete in May/June 2021. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveRoad©TheHREGroup: The B6259, which crosses the bridge, is due to be closed for 13 weeks. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveArch©TheHREGroup: Part of the bridge's north side is visible again following recent preparatory works. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveSign: Tim Wells, chair of Musgrave Parish Council, with a road closure sign at the bridge.

GreatMusgraveRoadClosureInformation©National Highways: Confirmation of the road closure plans from National Highways' website. (Credit: National Highways)

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

Contact details

Media enquiries: 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 NH'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.

Since assuming responsibility for the HRE, NH has infilled 51 bridges at a cost of £8.01M. The programme was paused by the government in July 2021. A map showing the infilled structures, together with the cost of each scheme, is available via this link...

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/1/edit?mid=1owQSnow1Yj5taYxkzBybTFvnHyxlwWc>

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 were at risk of demolition or infilling. These were 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 the threat of infill or demolition has been lifted from all these structures and any future major works will be the subject of review and consultation with its Stakeholder Advisory Forum, established in October 2021.

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 bridge 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.