

PRESS RELEASE: Monday 10 July 2023

Community feeling “bullied” as Cumbrian bridge closure looms

Locals have accused National Highways of failing to consult affected businesses as it prepares to close a historic railway bridge for three months whilst it removes infill from around it.

The structure, at Great Musgrave in Cumbria, was controversially buried in 1,600 tonnes of stone and concrete in 2021, using emergency permitted development rights which only last for 12 months. The state-owned roads company was asked to submit a retrospective planning application for its retention, but this received 911 objections and was refused by Eden District Council’s planning committee in June 2022. An enforcement notice has since been issued, requiring removal of the material by 11 October this year.

A 13-week closure of the B6259 - which crosses the 30-yard long bridge - will be imposed whilst the work is completed. National Highways has proposed a 14-mile alternative route, but this cannot be used by many agricultural vehicles due to a low railway bridge.

Under the standard conditions for a Temporary Traffic Regulation Order in the Westmorland & Furness Council area, National Highways was required to “consult with affected landowners, schools, major HGV operating centres, bus companies and businesses about the potential impact of the proposed works and any associated temporary restrictions.” However, locals say the first they knew of the bridge closure was when signs appeared ten days ago, indicating that the road will be blocked from “8am Thurs 17th July”, which is actually a Monday.

“Nobody has been consulted about this”, says Tim Wells, chair of Musgrave Parish Council, “and the impacts are going to be huge. Several farms have to use the bridge to bring in feed and take livestock to market. We have carers on tight schedules who won’t be able to get around all their clients because the diversion is so long. The school bus can’t run.

“How are they allowed to get away with this disruption to people’s lives without talking to us first? Last week I had one email from their engineer and another from a Comms Manager. Neither addressed the issue of the bridge closure. If National Highways had no choice, they would find a way of doing this work with the road open. But they are not looking for solutions.

“Lots of people believe they’re getting their own back for our rejection of the infill scheme. They are meant to be responsible public servants, but we just feel bullied by them. They make it sound as though it’s our fault. The council asked them not to start their infill scheme, but they refused and forced it through under emergency rights. That’s why we are where we are.”

According to National Highways, the arch at Great Musgrave was repointed in 2012, “restoring the bridge to its full live loading capacity”, but it claims that a partial loss of mortar in a 5m² section - about 8% of its surface area - subsequently made it weak again.

Campaigners say this modest localised mortar loss would not affect capacity and suggests National Highways does not understand the basic principles of how a masonry arch works. They also point to the company's inappropriate specification of hard cement for repointing - rather than the softer lime mortar used during the bridge's construction in the 1860s - as the likely cause of problems.

Analysis by a firm of specialist engineers suggests that the structure's modified axle load is about 15 tonnes, well in excess of the 11.5 tonnes needed for a 44-tonne heavy goods vehicle.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers, said: "In a recent email, National Highways' engineer says that after the infill is removed 'we will still have a weak bridge & will have to undertake strengthening works', but this is contradicted by the available evidence.

"Unfortunately they have backed themselves into a corner by contriving an alternative reality about the risks presented by the bridge and they now feel obliged to stick with it, come what may. The consequences will be felt by the community through this disruptive road closure and almost certainly by the taxpayer who will be forced to fund unnecessary works.

"National Highways has been saying all the right things over recent months, collaboratively engaging over the possible repurposing of some historic railway assets. However, the insensitive approach it's taking at Great Musgrave - failing in its obligation to consult local businesses - shows it is still culturally unfit to have this responsibility."

In a letter to National Highways' Chief Executive, Musgrave Parish Council has proposed that traffic management should be put in place to allow use of the bridge by vehicles less than 17 tonnes in weight - its estimated capacity when the last formal assessment was undertaken in 1998. A response is awaited.

--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)

GreatMusgraveTractors©TheHREGroup: Agricultural traffic in the area will be severely affected by the 13-week bridge closure. (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. "Thurs 17th July" is actually a Monday.

Supporting Documents (PDF): Westmorland & Furness Council's standard conditions for a Temporary Traffic Regulation Order; extract from May 2021 email exchange in which NH refuses to stop its infill scheme; a screengrab from NH's Great Musgrave bridge page, acknowledging that the bridge was restored to full live loading capacity in 2012; extract from NH's 2020 inspection report; extract from Bill Harvey Associates' report into the condition and risks presented by the bridge; email from NH's engineer to Musgrave Parish Council; letter from Musgrave Parish Council to NH's Chief Executive.

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

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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 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=1owQSnow1Yj5taYxkzBybTFvnHyxIwWc>

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.