

PRESS RELEASE: Thursday 11 April 2024

Campaigners' delight at Sussex bridge refurbishment plan

A historic railway bridge threatened with infilling by National Highways will be sympathetically repaired after its ownership was transferred to East Sussex County Council.

Church Road bridge in Barcombe was designed by civil engineer Frederick Banister in the early 1880s as part of a line connecting Lewes and East Grinstead. The route closed in 1958, since which time the adjacent section of dismantled railway has been reclaimed by nature. The structure stands within the village's conservation area.

Until recently, National Highways (NH), the state-owned roads company, managed the bridge as part of the Department for Transport's Historical Railways Estate. Cracks had first been recorded in its parapets and wing walls decades ago but, in September 2020, NH told Lewes District Council that the bridge represented "an ongoing and increasing risk to public safety" and would be infilled under emergency permitted development rights as part of a national programme of 115 similar schemes.

The Government stepped into to pause the programme in late-July 2021 due to concerns over conflicts with active travel policies, but National Highways awarded £246K contracts for the Barcombe infilling two weeks later, prompting considerable concern within the community. An open letter to NH's Executive Director for Operations was signed by 176 residents, asking for the works to be halted.

The company relented just before Christmas 2021, but its engineer then lobbied East Sussex County Council (ESCC), the local highway authority, to reduce the bridge's 20-tonne weight limit to 7.5 tonnes. Such a move would have increased public risk by forcing agricultural traffic to divert through the middle of Barcombe and was resisted by ESCC as Church Road is only lightly trafficked.

Now it has emerged that ownership of the bridge has been transferred to the County Council, lifting any residual threat of infilling.

Hazel Fell Rayner, who leads the local campaign, said "We are delighted to hear that ownership of Church Road Bridge has transferred to East Sussex County Council. There is also huge relief in the community that the Highways team has emphasised its intent to repair the bridge with minimal changes to its appearance and no change to the weight limit - which is so important to Barcombe's farmers.

"It does continue to raise local eyebrows that National Highways had, in 2020, effectively declared an 'emergency' to try to push through their plan for concrete and aggregate infill -

and yet all this time later the bridge has remained standing without further strengthening work. This behaviour from a public body has seemed shocking and underhand.

“Infill would have blocked an important and sensitive wildlife corridor adjacent to ancient woodland, and across the community, hundreds of residents got involved in the campaign to save the bridge. It felt like a David & Goliath battle but we are so pleased to have arrived at this very different outcome, where we look forward to the bridge being repaired sensitively for both community and biodiversity benefit.”

In an email to local campaigners, East Sussex Highways has committed to engage positively with the community over its plans for the bridge, insisting that it is determined to retain both its “historical aesthetics” and the existing 20-tonne weight limit. The ownership transfer comes with funding for future maintenance purposes.

--ENDS--

Attachments

BarcombeDemonstration©TheHREGroup: Community campaigners gathered at the bridge in autumn 2021 to make their concerns known. (Credit: The HRE Group)

BarcombeSetting©TheHREGroup: The bridge stands at one end of a tree-lined cutting, valued for its ecology. (Credit: The HRE Group)

BarcombeCyclists©TheHREGroup: Cyclists cross the bridge which is currently subject to a 20-tonne weight limit. (Credit: The HRE Group)

BarcombeBridge©TheHREGroup: Church Road bridge was built by engineer Frederick Bannister in the early 1880s. (Credit: The HRE Group)

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

SupportingDocumentsBAR (PDF): Email from NH confirming transfer; infill notification letter to Lewes District Council; contract award letters; open letter to NH; minutes of stakeholder meeting.

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Notes for editors

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 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. Queensbury Tunnel in West Yorkshire was infilled below two shafts, and strengthened at other locations, at a cost of £7.2M.

A map showing the location of the infilled bridges, together with the cost of each scheme, is available via this link...

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/1/edit?mid=1owQSnow1Yj5taYxkzBybTFvnHyxIwWc>

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 intended to progress most of the schemes under permitted development rights, but the following local authorities told the company 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.

The programme was paused by the government in July 2021 due to concerns over its impact on the future development of active travel routes.

National Highways now claims that the threat of infill or demolition has been lifted from all the under-threat structures and any future proposed schemes will be the subject of review and consultation with its Stakeholder Advisory Forum, established in October 2021.