

Monday 1st February 2021

Cycle paths and rail projects under threat from Highways England's heritage 'assault'

Proposals for cycle routes, railway reopenings and heritage line extensions are all in jeopardy after campaigners revealed a secret Highways England plan to infill or demolish more than a hundred disused railway structures.

The Government-owned company manages the Historical Railways Estate of 3,200 bridges, tunnels and viaducts on the Department for Transport's behalf. It claims that around 200 of its bridges have failed an engineering assessment to carry 44-tonne lorries and, as no weight restrictions have been imposed, 134 of them need to be infilled or demolished on "urgent safety grounds" to "prevent an emergency arising".

However The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, cycling campaigners and greenway developers - point out that 19th Century railway bridges are only required to carry 24 tonnes whilst a weight restriction is only imposed if the anticipated traffic loading exceeds the capacity of a structure. Most of the at-risk bridges are in good condition and many carry narrow lanes which heavy vehicles could not use.

An appraisal of the structures' value for future transport provision has found that the routes of six proposed cycle paths would be blocked by Highways England's plans, including one that has already been partly built near Newbury, funded by the company. Others are located in Cornwall, Somerset, West Yorkshire and Northumberland.

In East Renfrewshire, the Neilston and Uplawmoor Development Trusts intend to construct a link between the two communities for leisure, commuting and safe school access. Work is currently at the detailed design stage, with the proposed path passing beneath three unusual concrete structures built for the Lanarkshire & Ayrshire Railway in 1903.

Chair David Riddet said: "We have been aware of the proposal to infill the bridges for some time and have registered our objection to Highways England through their consultant, Jacobs. These three bridges are fundamental to the project.

"This link, including the three bridges, is part of East Renfrewshire Council's Strategic Cycle Corridor and the Council supports this project, and in fact is part funding it. ERC has written to HE accordingly.

"We believe that as HE would require planning permission from ERC, it is highly likely that permission will be refused. We understand that these bridges are structurally sound."

However the East Renfrewshire infilling schemes - along with 121 others - are being progressed under Permitted Development powers that only apply in emergency situations

posing a risk of death. This circumvents the need for planning permission. But under these powers, Highways England would have to remove the infill within six months of installation work starting unless the local authority provided written consent for it to stay.

A study has revealed that in 33 of the 63 cases examined, the disused railways spanned by the bridges are safeguarded from development under policies set out in the relevant council's Local Plan. This would have been grounds to reject any planning application.

"The Permitted Development powers are clearly intended for situations where there is an immediate threat of an emergency," says Matt Skidmore, a member of The HRE Group, "but Highways England is seeking to exploit them for routine asset management purposes. Some of the infilling projects are not expected to start until 2025; that's nobody's definition of an impending emergency.

"There are no legitimate engineering grounds for what they're doing so these powers are being used to overcome the challenges that might otherwise arise through the planning regime. This is an assault both on democratic process and our railway heritage, preventing these historic structures from fulfilling a useful future role."

Extensions to heritage lines in Angus, Cumbria and Norfolk could be affected by Highways England's plans, as would the reopening of a strategic north-south railway through west Wales. Two bridges on the former Penrith-Keswick branch - which campaigners hope to reinstate - are also threatened with infilling. Here, Highways England has designed arches for access through the concrete fill, but they are not large enough to accommodate trains.

In Dorset, the company's threat to demolish a bridge could impose additional costs of £750,000 on the construction of a new light railway and active travel route. The community-led project is seeking to develop a 'renewal corridor' with much-needed affordable housing, green energy and transport infrastructure connecting Maiden Newton, on the national rail network, to Bridport and West Bay.

Nigel Ewens, Director of Jurassic Coast Railways, said: "The cost of building a completely new bridge to modern standards would be significantly higher than repairing the existing Victorian structure which benefits from grandfather rights. So retention is crucial.

"At a time when we're increasingly recognising the value of green infrastructure, it's absurd that unaccountable officials are conspiring to put beyond use assets that can be repurposed to enhance biodiversity, wellbeing, community connectivity and reduce our environmental footprint. Where's the joined-up long-term thinking?

"The use of Permitted Development powers to drive through the desecration of these national assets without public scrutiny is a disreputable act and those in a position of influence need to act quickly to ensure a full and proper appraisal of these structures' true value is undertaken before it is too late. This is a call to arms."

The HRE Group has written to the UK Parliament's Transport Committee asking for Highways England's stewardship of the Historical Railways Estate to be investigated. More than 7,600 people have so far signed an online petition objecting to the company's plans.

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Attachments

LittlePetherickBridge©TheHREGroup: Cyclists cross a reopened railway bridge on The Camel Trail in Cornwall.

WeightRestriction©TheHREGroup: A 3-tonne weight restriction approaching one of the bridges proposed for infilling.

EastRenfrewshire©UplawmoorDevelopmentTrust: One of three unusual concrete bridges proposed for infilling, thus blocking the route of a community link between Neilston and Uplawmoor in East Renfrewshire.

Bridport©JurassicCoastRailways: Nigel Ewens standing beneath a bridge earmarked for demolition on a proposed rail and active travel route, part of a 'renewal corridor' between Maiden Newton and Bridport in Dorset.

MapAtRiskStructures: A map identifying some of the key impacts of Highways England's demolition and infilling schemes.

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

SupportingDocuments: explanations within the file

To link to our campaign video or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) https://youtu.be/k_86FspsZeU

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/k_86FspsZeU?rel=0" frameborder="0" allow="autoplay; encrypted-media" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

Contact details

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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 Highways England (HE). HE is responsible for inspecting, maintaining and limiting the liability associated with around 3,200 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.

Highways England 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 30th September 2013.

In 2020, Highways England 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. Until 2027, the average annual budget for the HRE is therefore £41.28M.

The 134 structures currently 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 their locations is available via this link...

https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1_9GtFIDW-QuYPvp8vBcSUD4gH9cOMdZt&usp=sharing

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.