



Transport Committee

House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA

Tel 020 7219 3266 Email: transcom@parliament.uk

Baroness Vere of Norbiton
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State
Department for Transport,
Great Minster House,
33 Horseferry Rd,
London,
SW1P 4DR

23 March 2021

Dear Baroness Vere and Mr Harris,

I am writing on behalf of the Transport Committee about Highways England's management of the Historical Railways Estate, which is made up of 3,200 bridges, tunnels and viaducts across England, Scotland and Wales.

Protocol Agreement between Department for Transport and Highways England: Historical Railways Estate

We urge Highways England and the Department for Transport not to view the estate primarily as a risk to be minimised, but rather as assets to be preserved, repurposed for public benefit and enjoyed.

Under its 2015 Protocol Agreement with the Department for Transport, Highways England's role is to reduce the liabilities on the Secretary of State from individual structures within the estate. The estate is not only part of our national heritage, but includes many strategic assets with demonstrable public value. We would like to see the Protocol Agreement amended to reflect the cultural and strategic value of these historic structures.

Under the Protocol Agreement, Highways England is also required to co-operate with the Department in its endeavour "to transfer the Heritage Estate (in whole or in part) to local authorities and other third parties." Highways England, as part of this, is required to produce and maintain a plan of engagement. We would be grateful to know what steps the Department and Highways England are taking to transfer parts of the Historical Railways Estate to local authorities and third parties, especially local community groups.

Plans to demolish and infill parts of the Historical Railways Estate

We are concerned to hear about Highways England's plans to infill or demolish parts of the estate. We have been informed that 130 bridges and tunnels will be demolished or infilled over the next five years. In addition, we understand that up to 15% of the estate (around 480 structures) is at risk of being demolished between now and 2029/30.

Many of these historic structures already have an identified use and many more have clear potential to be used in future. Historic bridges, viaducts and tunnels, for example, help to facilitate walking and cycling routes throughout the country. Plans to demolish



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and infill these structures not only block existing, and potential, walking and cycling routes, but also prevent the structures being used to reopen historic railway lines.

Around one-third of these 130 structures, for many reasons, have no realistic prospect of offering any public value. In such cases, it is reasonable to demolish or infill these structures, but, in principle, effort should be made to preserve the estate and encourage local communities to make use of these assets.

Use of Permitted Development Orders

We have also been informed that Highways England is proposing to use Permitted Development Orders, designed to be used on urgent safety grounds, to enable demolition and infilling to take place. Public safety is paramount, and there may be circumstances in which these historic assets pose an urgent risk to public safety and urgent action is needed. However, where Permitted Development powers are used, we would expect to see work carried out within weeks, rather than months or years later.

In non-urgent cases, the future of these historic bridges, viaducts and tunnels should be determined by an open, transparent and democratic process. Highways England should assess both the safety and value of these structures and, in non-urgent cases, apply to local authorities for planning permission, if it wishes to demolish or infill them.

We would be grateful if you could assure us in your reply that Permitted Development Orders will only be used when these historic structures pose an urgent, serious and demonstrable risk to the public and that demolition and infilling will be carried out promptly.

Use public money to preserve historic structures with strategic benefit

To help preserve our cultural heritage, public money should be used, where possible, to restore these historic assets, especially in circumstances where the restoration costs are cheaper or equivalent to the cost of rendering these structures beyond use. For example, we understand the average cost of infilling is around £145,000 per bridge, whereas the costs of strengthening to increase the capacity of historic bridges can be much lower, at £20,000 to £40,000 per bridge. We would like to know why it is better use of public money to infill, rather than strengthen, the bridges affected by the programme.

Restricting access

We have been informed that Highways England has objected to applications for new walking and cycling routes that pass beneath these historic structures and has fenced off parts of the estate to which the public previously had access. We would be grateful if you could set out what steps Highways England is taking to facilitate and encourage access to as much of the estate as possible.

Finally, my colleagues and I would like to congratulate Mr Harris on his appointment as the Acting Chief Executive of Highways England, earlier this year. This is a critical



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role and we look forward to working him, and his colleagues, over the remainder of this Parliament.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Huw Merriman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Huw Merriman MP
Chair of the Transport Committee

[cc Nick Harris, Acting Chief Executive, Highways England]