



Transport Committee

House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA

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Baroness Vere of Norbiton
Minister for Roads, Buses and Places
Department for Transport
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
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16 June 2021

Dear Charlotte,

Historical Railways Estate

Thank you for your comprehensive reply on 16 April 2021 in response to the concerns we raised about the management of the Historical Railways Estate. We were delighted to read that the Department and Highways England welcome our view that as much of the estate as possible should be preserved, repurposed for public benefit and enjoyed. There are, however, a few points we wish to clarify.

Transferring ownership

We were also pleased to read that the preference, under the Historical Railways Estate Protocol, is to transfer ownership, rather than demolish or infill these structures. We were also very encouraged to read about the various transfers that have been agreed with devolved administrations, local authorities and, in some cases, charities. We have, however, been informed that the Department and Highways England no longer allow heritage railways to take responsibility for HRE structures. We would be grateful if you could confirm whether this is the case and, if so, what barriers there are to such organisations taking responsibility for these structures.

Demolition and infilling

We were pleased to read that demolition will only be considered “when absolutely necessary for matters of public safety and within the bounds of our Protocol” and that only 15 structures are currently identified as at risk of demolition between now and 2029/30. In 2016, Highways England stated its aim was to demolish 10-15% of the estate, subject to securing the necessary funding. We would be grateful if you could confirm whether this target remains in place, and, if not, whether any revised target for demolition exists.

We were pleased to read that infilling is not permanent and can, for instance, be dug out if new uses for these structures are identified. Given the cost of infilling and any subsequent removal, we are of the view that Highways England should do all it reasonably can to explore and encourage the use of these assets before infilling is identified. You told us 17 infilling schemes have been paused or adapted. We would



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like to know why this was necessary when you told us Highways England “would not enter a phase of works without clarity over the aspirations for potential re-use.”

Changes to the ongoing programme

We were pleased to read in the press that the number of bridges threatened with infilling has been reduced from 115 to 69. We would be grateful if you could confirm the basis upon which 46 bridges have been reprieved, given that Highways England’s infilling programme was based on a risk assessment by expert engineers and structures are only proposed for infilling if they are “unsafe”.

We have been informed that Highways England is now routinely refusing to provide any information to members of the public about the ongoing infilling and demolition programme. We are concerned this may prevent community groups and other interested parties from making representations about structures of importance to them, particularly if no planning application has been submitted.

We would be grateful if you could provide a list of the bridges and tunnels currently identified for infilling and demolition, and tell us whether there is now a further list of structures which Highways England intends to infill or demolish after the current programme is completed.

We would also welcome your assurance that updated information about the ongoing programme will be made publicly available to ensure appropriate scrutiny and engagement with relevant stakeholders.

Bridge in Cumbria

We have been informed that infilling has started on a disused railway bridge in Cumbria. The bridge is a feature of longstanding plans to reunite and extend the Eden Valley and Stainmore railways.

We have been informed that the bridge has a capacity of 17 tonnes and that the structural assessment recommended that repointing should be undertaken which would increase its capacity to 40 tonnes. We have also been informed that Highways England’s most recent inspection reports stated the bridge is in fair condition and the inspector’s only recommendation was to repoint open joints. We would be grateful if you could clarify why the repointing recommendations were not implemented and infilling has been undertaken instead.

We have also been informed that there has been no dialogue with officers from either the Eden Valley or Stainmore railways about this bridge. We would be grateful if you could confirm the extent of Highways England’s engagement with these two important stakeholders.

Permitted development orders

It is very reassuring to know that most of the work to the Historical Railways Estate has been carried out with full planning permission. We absolutely recognise the need



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for permitted development orders to be used to “prevent emergencies from occurring” where “issues of overriding public safety are in play.” We have, however, been informed of 16 local authorities who have not given consent to the use of these orders. As such, we wish to reiterate that the use of such powers should only be used when these historic structures pose an urgent, serious and demonstrable risk to safety of the public and that such work is carried out promptly.

We have been informed that Highways England twice refused Eden District Council’s request to pause works at the Cumbria bridge, despite not having planning permission. We would like to know why infilling continued in these circumstances and why the bridge presented an urgent risk to public safety.

Funding for the management of the Historical Railways Estate

We would be grateful if you could confirm a) the amount of funding that has been allocated to Highways England to manage the estate in this Parliament, b) the number and length of contracts issued for the management of the estate by Highways England and c) the total value of these contracts.

Yours sincerely,

Huw Merriman MP
Chair of the Transport Committee

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