



Wednesday 6th February 2019

Council backing for 'strategic' tunnel path

Bradford Council has expressed its formal support for the “transformational” potential of creating England’s longest underground cycle route, but says the project cannot be financed from within its own diminishing budgets.

Built in the 1870s, the 1.4-mile long Queensbury Tunnel was the engineering centrepiece of a railway linking Halifax to Bradford and Keighley, but it closed in 1956 and parts of it are now in poor condition. Highways England is currently carrying out £1 million worth of improvement works to the structure, after which it intends to spend £3 million sealing and partially infilling it. However campaigners believe the money would be better invested on repairing the tunnel to form part of a cycle network connecting the communities formerly served by the railway.

Yesterday (5th February), members of Bradford Council’s Executive accepted the recommendations of a report which commits the Council to lobby Highways England for a delay in its abandonment works whilst stakeholders explore sources of funding for the scheme. Calderdale Council has also endorsed the cycle path proposal and will support efforts to move it forward.

The report reveals that a Bradford to Halifax cycle path - passing through the tunnel - would cost £16.3 million to construct but return £2.31 in social, economic and tourism benefits for every £1 spent. The Department for Transport regards this ratio of benefit-to-cost as representing “high value for money”.

Bradford Council will now work with Sustrans, the Queensbury Tunnel Society and Calderdale Council in developing an ‘advocacy document’ before making a bid to the Transforming Cities fund; however the outcome of such an application is unlikely to be known before the Spring/Summer. Highways England has stated its intention to begin the main phase of abandonment works at about the same time, although it has not yet submitted a planning application.

Speaking during the meeting, Councillor Alex Ross-Shaw, Portfolio Holder for Regeneration, Planning & Transport said: “This is about a strategic cycle network, building on City Connect 1 which connected Bradford and Leeds. We have the Shipley Greenway now - finishing that work to connect Shipley in the north of the District into the city centre.

“[The Bradford-Halifax path] is coming out the other way - going west from the city centre and south down to Calderdale. The tunnel is really the transformational element in the middle of it - the jewel in the crown of that route.”

He went on: “There’s some really good data behind it - and evidence - which shows it can be delivered and we’ve really just got to increase that pressure to make sure that it gets the chance to succeed and be restored.”

Councillor John Pennington, leader of the Conservative group on Bradford Council, said: “We have a huge opportunity here to make this tunnel - and the extending track at either side - into a huge attraction for our city and district, and, as Councillors, this is something we should invest in for our future generations.”



Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: “At a time of uncertainty, it’s great that Councillors of all political persuasions are uniting behind a project that will benefit our health, our environment, our economy and our children.

“Queensbury Tunnel would become a nationally significant landmark on our expanding cycle network, helping to deliver Bradford’s aspiration to become a ‘capital of cycling’.

“We welcome the Council’s support and look forward to working with it on a funding bid.”

An ePetition backing the proposed conversion of Queensbury Tunnel as a cycle path has so far been signed by more than 10,600 people.

--ENDS--

To link to a video on the tunnel campaign or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/Yij7v7lM2H4>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/Yij7v7lM2H4?rel=0" frameborder="0" allow="autoplay; encrypted-media" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

A collection of high-resolution photos for Media use is available from:

www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/media/imagery.shtml

More general information on the campaign is available from:

www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/

Contacts

General press enquiries: media@queensburytunnel.org.uk

Norah McWilliam: campaign@queensburytunnel.org.uk

Notes for editors

Queensbury Tunnel was built by the Great Northern Railway between 1874 and 1878 as part of the Halifax, Thornton & Keighley Railway. Work was initially expected to take two years but was delayed significantly by two of the seven construction shafts having to be abandoned due to water ingress. At least ten navvies lost their lives during the work.

The tunnel, which is 2,501 yards (2,287 metres) long, opened to freight traffic in October 1878 and passenger trains in December 1879. The line between Holmfield and Queensbury, which included the tunnel, was officially closed on 28th May 1956. Track lifting took place in 1963.



Queensbury Tunnel would be the longest in the UK to host a shared path if the proposal to reopen it for such a purpose is successful. Currently Combe Down Tunnel in Bath holds that position at 1,829 yards (1,672 metres). The longest in Europe is the 2,931-yard (2,680 metres) Uitzu Tunnel on the Plazaola Greenway in northern Spain. However plans are being developed to restore Rhondda Tunnel in South Wales for cycle path use; this has a length of 3,443 yards (3,148 metres).

The Historical Railways Estate (HRE), part of Highways England, is responsible for inspecting, maintaining and limiting the liability associated with around 3,200 disused railway bridges, abutments, tunnels, cuttings, culverts and viaducts. HRE's remit was formerly fulfilled by BRB (Residuary) until its abolition on 30th September 2013.

HRE's proposed abandonment scheme has been split into two phases, the first of which is for preparatory works and got underway on 1st October. Figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act reveal that the original estimated cost of these works was £560,000, but has since risen to £993,000. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by AMCO-Giffen, the appointed contractor, at £3.016 million.

On 22nd October, Bradford Council informed Highways England that it would need to produce an Environmental Impact Assessment to accompany any planning application due to the complex relationship between the tunnel - most of which would be allowed to collapse - and historic local mine workings.