



Thursday 25th June 2020

Campaigners question Government's active travel commitment

In March, Transport Secretary Grant Shapps announced a £2 billion investment to build on the unprecedented 70% increase in cycling seen in some parts of the UK during the coronavirus lockdown.

Announcing a summer launch to an updated version of the Government's Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy, Shapps said that "We know cars will continue to remain vital for many, but as we look to the future we must build a better country with greener travel habits, cleaner air and healthier communities."

But a campaign group in West Yorkshire believes those words ring hollow after the Department for Transport (DfT) offered only a fraction of the funding needed to construct a greenway between two of the county's biggest population centres via a 1.4-mile long disused railway tunnel.

For the past seven years, the Queensbury Tunnel Society (QTS) has been working with local councils, cycling groups and environmentalists to make the case for 'an iconic route' linking Bradford with Halifax and the Calder valley. It believes the greenway would offer a realistic long-term alternative to steep, congested roads for the 14,300 commuters who travel daily between the two conurbations, as well as helping communities beset with health problems and stimulating the local economy by drawing more tourists into the area.

A new assessment of the greenway's likely value, released today by Bradford Council, concludes that it would return £5.60 in social and economic benefits for every £1 invested. That figure increases further when leisure and tourism is also factored in. "The numbers are exceptionally good", says Norah McWilliam, the Society's leader, "and represent very high value for money".

The Council expects the full eight-mile scheme to cost around £27 million, accounting for 30 years of maintenance, the tunnel's repair and the removal of around 2,000 tonnes of stone from one of its ventilation shafts which was tipped in last October during an intervention which the Council believes required planning permission.

Highways England, who manage Queensbury Tunnel for the DfT, is currently pursuing plans to formally abandon the Victorian structure which took four years to build with the loss of ten navvies. First costed at £2.7 million in 2016, the scheme is now expected to set the taxpayer back £7 million.

Grant Shapps first showed an interest in the project last year when he instructed DfT officials to work with Bradford Council to look at other options to abandonment and, if possible, find a viable way forward. In March he told Bradford's local paper that he had "specifically prevented" the tunnel being filled in and would "work with local leaders...to come up with a better solution." However last week the Council received a "best and final offer" of £4 million which wouldn't cover 60% of the tunnel repair costs. It was given just four days to respond.

Now the Society has written an open letter to Mr Shapps in which it states that the funding offer "caused deep dismay and bewilderment" to thousands of supporters who had been "expecting something a good deal more positive", based on his previous comments.



Dr McWilliam asserts that Shapps' offer "calls into question the Government's commitment to active travel and its intention to level up infrastructure and regenerate local economies".

She goes on to say that "£4 million has already been spent on strengthening works to parts of the tunnel; a further £3 million would be needed to complete its abandonment, subject to planning permission. It is inexplicable that you seem content to spend public money destroying a magnificent piece of Yorkshire's industrial heritage rather than supporting positive plans for a greenway that would reduce congestion in the long term, help communities beset with health problems, attract tourists and stimulate local businesses."

The Society has urged the Transport Secretary to allocate a sufficient sum from the Government's £2 billion active travel fund to give Bradford Council the confidence to take on the tunnel's ownership and construct a cycle route through it. Doing so, it argues, would support policies for healthy active travel, mitigating climate change and 'levelling' of northern economies.

Despite the deadline having passed for accepting its £4 million offer, the DfT has said it is still in discussions with Bradford Council over the tunnel's future.

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To link to a video on the Bradford-Halifax Greenway or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/LzfdJna0Tno>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/LzfdJna0Tno?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/

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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 2018. However the contractor, AMCO-Giffen, pulled most of its staff and equipment out of the tunnel in October 2019 after a significant inundation of floodwater. No.2 Shaft was infilled under emergency planning powers later that month.

Figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act reveal that the original estimated cost of the preparatory works was £545,000, but had risen to £4.06 million by the end of June 2020. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by contractor AMCO-Giffen at £3.016 million.