

TECHNICAL OFFICERS'
WORKING PARTY REPORT

WYE VALLEY AONB
JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
5th March 2018

LYDBROOK BRIDGE HLF BID

Purpose

To seek members support for the bid by Gloucestershire County Council to the Heritage Lottery Fund for restoration of Lydbrook Bridge.

Recommendations

That the JAC supports Gloucestershire County Council and Herefordshire Council in the Heritage Grant application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for the restoration of Lydbrook Bridge.

Key Issues

- Lydbrook Bridge is one of the three remaining former railway bridges spanning the River Wye in the AONB that provides a strategic crossing for walkers, including on the Wye Valley Walk.
- Gloucestershire County Council had to close Lydbrook Bridge in February 2016 due to safety issues with the structure.
- The Wye Valley AONB Manager has been assisting Gloucestershire County Council and Herefordshire Council (joint owners of the bridge) with a Heritage Grant application to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for the restoration of Lydbrook Bridge.
- The Heritage Grant application totals £1,687,000 and requests 84% support from HLF up to April 2021.
- The AONB Unit is committing £5,000 towards the project, alongside anticipated contributions of £250,000 from Gloucestershire County Council and Herefordshire Council.
- In the meantime essential safety work will be carried out to the bridge structure this summer to ensure there is no threat to users of the navigation on the river and the footpath that both pass under the bridge.

Reasons

Lydbrook Bridge, also known as Stowfield Viaduct or The Black Bridge, spans the river between Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. The bridge is jointly owned by Gloucestershire County Council and Herefordshire Council. Under mutual agreement Gloucestershire County Council have responsibility for maintenance of this bridge. The decked walkway of the former railway bridge was used as a footpath forming part of the Wye Valley Walk and providing pedestrian access to the Wye Valley Youth Hostel at Welsh Bicknor. The walkway is a designated Public Right of Way on the Herefordshire half of the Bridge but not the Gloucestershire part.

The bridge was in a deteriorating state despite Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) having regularly repaired the permissive footway deck. Following safety concerns raised during a routine inspection, the bridge was initially closed in February 2016. A Principal Inspection of the structure was undertaken in March 2016, as per GCC's Inspection Policy, by Xeiad (a third party contractor) to allow a roped access inspection and a diving survey. This confirmed the suspicions of the General Inspection that significant works were required. The iron and steel structure is severely corroded in places threatening the integrity of the bridge. A feasibility study was commissioned from GCC's partner contractor Amey to provide more comprehensive advice on the bridge's condition and how it should be managed. The bridge remains closed and remedial Health and Safety work is being carried out to make the bridge 'safe', ie not to be hazardous for those passing under it.

A cost benefit analysis in the feasibility study concluded that unless there is suitable support for conserving the heritage structure, then the majority of the bridge may have to be dismantled for public safety (to protect users of the two public rights of way underneath the bridge: the footpath and the navigation). A new simple footbridge could be installed, probably just upstream over the Wye, if or when sufficient public funds become available. Consequently the historic railway bridge would be lost to future generations.

Six of the 10 railway bridges that once spanned the River Wye between Chepstow and Hereford have been removed. The other remaining 3 are all of a similarly precarious nature. Without sufficient funding most, if not all, of these historic railway bridges over the Wye could have to be closed and dismantled on public safety grounds over the next 10-20 years. Two of the bridges have no formal rights of public access anyway.

The JAC debated the closure of Lydbrook Bridge in November 2016 and voiced their support for Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) reopening the bridge. The Forest of Dean District Council passed a similar motion as did the Wye Valley & Forest of Dean Tourism Association. In June 2017 a public meeting in the Welsh Bicknor Youth Hostel was attended by 59 people. An outcome was the creation of the Black Bridge Steering Group with broad local representation and an active Facebook page (members include representatives of GCC, HC, Forest of Dean District Council, Lydbrook Parish Council, Lydbrook Tump Committee, Lydbrook WI, Wye Valley AONB Manager and local residents/interested members of the public). The AONB Manager led on the submission of a Heritage Grant Project Enquiry Form (PEF) to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for the bridge restoration. The positive feedback from the HLF was circulated and shared, albeit recognising that there was about a 27% pass rate for Heritage Grant applications. A joint meeting between GCC & HC and the Steering Group debated the requirements for progressing with the bridge restoration and agreed to progress the Heritage Grant HLF bid.

Implications

On behalf of GCC & HC, the AONB Manager has been drafting the Heritage Grant application for the restoration of the bridge. The proposal is to restore use of the former railway bridge as a pedestrian crossing point over the River Wye and develop community-based research, recording and celebrating the industrial heritage connected with the local railways, use of river and the symbiotic relationship between Lydbrook and Welsh Bicknor. A Feasibility Study by Gloucestershire County Council (August 2017) identifies the option to repair the bridge structure sufficiently by inserting a Fibre Reinforced Plastic (FRP) deck to carry the footpath. Community projects will include an Oral History project and wider community engagement, linked to interpretation, creative arts and celebration of the use of the

bridge, the river (commerce, canoeing & fishing), the railways, local products passing over and under the bridge (past industrial and contemporary), the Youth Hostel (visitors experiences & memories), the Wye Valley Walk and local walks (experiences and promotion). Information gathered will be displayed both on site, in the village, at the YHA, on-line and at a range of events, bespoke & established. Lydbrook Brass Band will be commissioned to compose a piece of music celebrating the bridge and it will feature in a future Wye Valley River Festival. There would also be seminars on bridge conservation and opportunities for volunteers, apprentices and trainees.

The HLF Heritage Grant application is a 2 stage process, with competitive submissions at both Development Phase and Delivery Phase. The bid will be for £97,000 for the Development Phase during which time all the costs for the Delivery Phase will be finalised. These are currently estimated at £1.59million, with £1.25million for the capital bridge restoration works and £343,000 for project management and community outreach activities. The total grant request from HLF £1,405,175 which is 84% of the total project. The HLF Guidance states a minimum of 10% match funding. Current contributions are estimated at £270,400 with £250,000 from GCC & HC. The AONB Unit is committing £5,000 towards match-funding. The remainder is being sought from other agencies, local organisations, neighbouring landowners and community fundraising, spread over the next four financial years. HLF have advised that there is a 27% success rate for Heritage Grant applications.

If the HLF application is unsuccessful the bridge is likely to remain closed for the foreseeable future until GCC & HC secure the £1.25million necessary to restore the bridge &/or find a less resource intensive solution.

Background

Lydbrook Bridge constructed circa 1869-1873 to carry the connection between the Ross-Monmouth Railway and the Severn and Wye Railway at Lydbrook junction station, for the Edison Swan Cable works. It is one of the four remaining (of the original ten) rail bridges to span the River Wye between Hereford and Chepstow. The bridge is not listed and is maintained by Gloucestershire County Council.

There has been concern for a number of years relating to the long term viability of several of the former railway bridges as pedestrian crossing points over the River Wye. The Wye Valley AONB Partnership undertook a review of the situation, commissioning several surveys and reports, in 2011 & 2012. This identified that the bridges in greatest need of attention were Redbrook Bridge / Penallt Viaduct and Lydbrook Black Bridge (also known as Stowfield Viaduct). Both bridges were recognised as needing significant repair work in the short to medium term to retain their future role as viable crossing points. The Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) endorsed the approach, recognising the concerns centring around the effects of increasingly disconnected local communities, but also the risk the deteriorating structures pose to navigation along the River Wye, the potential closure/diversion of the Wye Valley Walk and other local walking routes, the consequential impact on tourism and recreation and the continuing loss of heritage, with many railway bridges over the Wye already lost. Following discussion and advice from HLF at the time it was decided to progress a project focused on Redbrook Bridge / Penallt Viaduct. This resulted in widespread public consultation and consequent support for the 'Bridging Borders' Heritage Grant application for Redbrook Bridge. This bid was unsuccessful but outlined a range of community engagement and heritage interpretation initiatives that were locally supported.