

Subject **Response to Ministerial correspondence your reference:307455**

From Sonia Kundu <sonia@railtotrail.org>

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Date 2020-09-23 17:33

- FinalResponseFinal response to MC, Chapter ID 307455.pdf..pdf (~377 KB)

Dear Chris

Thank you for your response to our letter dated 7.8.20.

Your letter largely outlines the funding opportunities which the Government has made available for Active Travel projects in the UK. We are indeed aware of this funding. Out of that pot of £2bn, Somerset has received a total of £120,000 in the first tranche and there is an indicative figure of £482,000 for the second tranche. Clearly these figures only lend themselves to temporary emergency measures and, to that end, we as voluntary community bodies will continue to do our own fundraising.

In fact, the points raised in our initial letter were nothing to do with funding. Our letter outlined some key issues requiring Government intervention, without which it is very difficult for us to move forward with our Active Travel Route initiatives – and therefore to support you in your goals to improve Active Travel across the country. As Minister of State for Department of Transport, I believe it is in your remit to address these issues head on. I therefore detail them again below.

The first and most important issue is that of the liability relating to current railway infrastructure, such as bridges.

Our projected multi-user railway would pass over and under bridges that once formed part of the Somerset & Dorset railway infrastructure. Many of these bridges are still in use either above or below carrying normal vehicular traffic.

Currently, the DfT are claiming that allowing non-motorised users to pass on the other side of these bridges to the current vehicular traffic would constitute a change of use which therefore means they can no longer retain the liability for maintenance.

Surely any bridge which currently carries vehicular traffic either over or under it must be maintained to the highest safety standards. It can and must be assumed that anything maintained to carry HGVs will require no more or less maintenance if there are also pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians travelling beneath it. Similarly, any bridge with cars and HGVs currently travelling beneath it on a daily basis requires its structural integrity to be maintained even without the addition of cyclists or pedestrians overhead.

The DfT clearly has the budget to maintain these bridges at present. Undoubtedly this should continue to be the case regardless of the addition of non-motorised users – who in any case clearly present a much lighter load. We consider this a loophole that needs closing for the collective good and would urge you to look into doing just that at the earliest opportunity.

The second point which you raise is whether transforming disused railways into multi-user rights of way would prevent the restoration of working railway lines at some point in the future; we'd like to make it very clear that we do not propose transforming any disused lines where there is a realistic possibility of their being returned to working railways and it should be noted that we are working with Somerset County Council to make sure there is absolutely no cross-over here.

The lines which we are proposing to transform into multi-user rights of way for non-motorised users had their tracks removed decades ago and indeed many sections have since been built over. A huge amount of new infrastructure would need to be laid down again for these to be viable as working railways again and most certainly couldn't be achieved within the £500m budget you mention for restoring railways across the country.

What does remain of the old infrastructure – essentially the track bed of hard-standing – clearly lends itself to a much more cost-effective solution. An Active Travel route would tick many of the boxes you mention – reconnecting smaller communities, regenerating local economies and improving access to jobs, homes and education whilst also giving level access to the countryside for disabled and elderly residents and going a long way to improving public health and protecting our environment.

We would also endeavour to link these routes up to the existing National Cycle Network as well as Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans to create by-pass thoroughfares through towns which have expanded and built over the historic routes.

The Government's proposed funding for projects such as ours is inadequate and we will continue to raise our own funds. However, what would greatly help our mission is if central government were to declare projects such as ours in the public interest, aligning with the Government's own stated objectives to increase Active Travel networks and improve public health, and then take action to clear the bureaucratic path to their completion. **Ensuring that liability for the maintenance of old railway bridges remains with the DfT is an excellent way of doing just that**, helping us to keep down costs and smooth the path with local authorities.

We therefore appeal to you directly and urgently, to give your vocal support to our project – and others like it. It fits perfectly, and cost-effectively, into the government's stated aim of boosting cycling and walking infrastructure across the country, of re-connecting smaller communities, and taking steps to meet the environmentally-friendly travel needs of the future.

We look forward to your speedy response.

Yours sincerely,

Sonia Kundu, Somerset Rail to Trail Project

ccd and on behalf of

- Rich Ackroyd, Frome's Missing Links
- Sarah Ellwood, Steam Coast Trail
- Richard Jones, Strawberry Line
- Rachel Thompson, The Trails Trust
- Iain Stewart, Sustrans
- Philip Hackett, British Horse Society
- Richard Pitman, Compass Disability
- Steve Mewes, Wildlife Trusts
- Andrew Combes, Greenways & Cyclerroutes
- Stephen Dominy, Cycling UK



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On 2020-09-09 01:22, POCorrespondence@dft.gov.uk wrote:

Dear Sonia Kundu,

Please see the attached response to your recent correspondence.

Regards

Private Office Correspondence Team
Department for Transport

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