

Calls for more support for heritage rail

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The Heritage Railway Association (HRA) is continuing to make the case to UK governments that heritage rail needs to be supported during challenging economic times.

The trade body, which represents more than 180 heritage rail organisations, has been pressing the case that the sector has been one of the hardest hit by the rapid rise in energy costs and reduction of visitor spending power.

The cumulative impact of huge electricity price rises and falling visitor spend together with already spiralling costs for coal are forcing many railways to make tough choices. Some are having to consider staffing redundancies or other cost-reducing measures in order to survive.

The HRA has been making a number of representations to the UK government calling for recognition of the challenges and appropriate support where possible. Making the case both directly and through bodies working with the wider cultural or visitor economy sectors, the HRA is ensuring that government is well aware of the current picture for heritage rail.

A significant, but incremental, step on energy costs has come through close cooperation with the Heritage Alliance. The HRA provided data and detailed evidence to government that led to a number of heritage

related activities being added to list of 'Energy and Trade Intensive Industries' which qualify for a higher level of support under the latest Energy Bill Relief Scheme. Most heritage rail operators will now be able to access that higher level support.

Heritage Railway Association Chief Executive, Steve Oates, said: "It's highly unlikely that we'll see the kind of direct support that railways received during the height of the coronavirus pandemic again; that doesn't mean there's nothing governments can do though.

"We certainly don't have access to a magic wand and we have to acknowledge that many sectors in the UK economy are currently being hit very hard by a combination of circumstances. But we'll continue to make the case as forcefully as we can and using every avenue open to us, that heritage rail needs to be considered when government policy is being formulated."

The Heritage Railway Association has also recently submitted a robust response to government consultation on the Spring 2023 budget. The HRA called for strategic and long-term policy intervention that recognises heritage rail, and similar sectors, as the core of the UK's cultural heritage.

The representation highlighted how heritage rail is an essential part of Britain's global appeal and that the sector contributes £600m to the economy every year; directly employing 4,000 people. Heritage railways act as key anchor destinations in towns as diverse as Bridgnorth, Pickering, Porthmadog and Swanage.

The HRA also pointed out that heritage, culture and tourism often fall between the gaps of specific measures or are caught up in the unintended consequences of wider policy decisions. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on heritage rail has previously stated that the sector often suffers through unintended consequences of other policy measures, for example, on coal or engagement of young people.

Photo credit: HRA