

Future of heritage railways in jeopardy

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Several heritage railway operators have launched desperate appeals for help from the public to secure the future of their services.

It's as the UK's heritage railways are being hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. They have closed until further notice with many special events delayed or even cancelled.

Despite of this, the costs continue to come in, with insurance, utilities, salaries, rents and rates, loan repayments, all continuing to mount up.

Among the appeals:

- North Yorkshire Moors Railway has launched a 'crisis fund' with fears it could lose up to £1m in the coming weeks as it's delayed the opening of the 2020 season due to the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Severn Valley Railway Group has launched an 'emergency appeal' and says it needs to find £250,000 to keep the railway ticking over for the next three months.
- East Lancashire Railway says 'The ELR needs you' and says it is facing a number of serious challenges going forward, with the amount set to be lost threatening the continued existence.

The Heritage Railways Association (HRA) is working to ensure that its members, key players in the country's leisure and tourism sector, receive meaningful support and is calling for clarity on issues specifically related to heritage rail, particularly on the treatment of charities, payroll support, and insurance cover.

Steve Oates, the CEO at HRA, said: "We're also providing railways with regular and frequent updates on Covid-19, with guidance and advice to meet the particular needs of railway operation in mind.

"We've also provided a business resilience action plan, to help railways plot a path through the threats and risks posed by Covid-19. And, of course, we're talking to many of our members on a daily basis, providing advice and, equally important, gathering information.

"We're calling on our members to work together, to share experiences and ideas, to work towards common solutions wherever possible, to provide practical aid to each other, and to form a single, powerful voice."

The HRA is in the process of contacting all its railways and museums, gathering information on estimated losses, cashflow predictions, the kind of support they seek to see them through the pandemic, and an outline of the measures they're taking in an attempt to contain the financial impact on their businesses.

He said: "One of the certainties of the Covi-19 pandemic is that the situation continues to change very rapidly. The HRA is now constantly monitoring every useful source, to ensure its guidance and support is timely and realistic.

"But heritage railways operators are all resourceful and resilient railwaymen at heart. Overcoming challenges is part of the business of building and running a heritage railway, and I know our members will meet this challenge as robustly as any other.

"Now's the time for the HRA to help our members hold and work together, share ideas, help with each other's technical and business questions, and speak with one voice.

"Putting emergency business measures in place will help railways to reduce their sense of uncertainty. And there will still be staff with work to do, volunteers who want to help and, before long, families looking for some leisure and entertainment. Being ready for their return is the goal of every railway's survival plan."

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