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7 July 2016

Mr. Nigel Parsley
Assistant Coroner
The Coroner's Office
1st Floor, Landmark House
4 Egerton Road
Ipswich
Suffolk
IP1 5PF

Dear Mr. Parsley,

inquest into the death of Archie James Hall

This letter sets out Highways England's response to the Regulation 28 Report dated the 12 May 2015 following the tragic death of Archie Hall in November 2015.

First and foremost I extend my sincere condolences to the family and friends of Mr Hall and reaffirm my commitment on behalf of Highways England to both take all reasonable measures and to work with other stakeholders and partners to do all we can to prevent such incidents in the future.

Background

Orwell Bridge opened to traffic in 1982. Recent years have seen a number of suicides and attempted suicides at the location. This prompted Highways England to commission a review possible measures that could be considered to reduce the likelihood of such tragic events in future. The review completed in March 2015 was carried out in consultation with a range of stakeholders. It identified a range of preventative measures taken in and around similar structures and assessed their likely effectiveness on the Orwell Bridge. The report also considered the psychological, socio and economic aspects of incidents.

I will return to the appropriateness of possible interventions together with any action we intend to pursue later in my response.

Current Situation

Orwell Bridge carries the A14 Trunk Road connecting the Port of Felixstowe with the Midlands and beyond. It measures some 1287 metres long by 24 metres wide and has a total of 18 spans. The bridge piers range from 20 metres to 45 metres in height. The crossing is neither tolled nor permanently manned. The scale and location of the structure makes routine monitoring along its entirety extremely challenging.

We have taken a number of measures to mitigate such challenges including the installation of telephones at each end of the bridge. The phones enable distressed individuals to access immediate counselling and emotional support through contact with the Samaritans. We have also installed closed circuit TV cameras covering almost the entire length of bridge. These cameras are accessed by the Police to monitor unusual activity or behaviour.

Options and future actions

The 2015 review identified that the installation of physical barriers were likely to be one of the most effective means to deter suicides. The parapets fully comply with height requirements designed to prevent pedestrians accidentally falling from the structure. In relation to Orwell Bridge, the review concluded that the use of additional barriers such as solid parapets or panels would add considerable weight to such a long span structure. The addition of such weight when combined with effects of high winds would have a significant impact on the stability of the structure.

The review also looked at the possible use of catching nets. Notwithstanding the safety risks of installing and maintaining such nets, the presence of such equipment would hinder effective inspection and maintenance of the structure itself.

Access to the bridge is unrestricted. It currently forms part of the Stour and Orwell Walk, which is actively promoted by Suffolk County Council and Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There are laybys situated adjacent to the carriageway on both approaches affording prompt access to anyone attending the bridge by vehicle.

We will now consult with stakeholders and other parties regarding access to the bridge to consider what further preventative measures could be taken.

We have considered the possible installation of toe holds on the parapets of the bridge. Current design standards expressly state that toe holds should not be provided on the vehicle side of parapets where pedestrian access is possible. No direct reference is made to the outward facing side of such parapets, although British Standard BS 6779-2 states the '*outer face may be vertical or inclined with plain or featured finish*'.

The installation of toe holds on the outer face of the bridge would create an extended climbing face that could encourage unauthorised access. Their installation would also present a significant health and safety risk to the workforce. We are not aware of the use of such toe holds on the outward facing side of similar structures and therefore their effectiveness in preventing such incidents is unproven. In light of this and the other factors outlined above, we are not intending to take further action in this respect.

We are currently reviewing the effectiveness of the telephones located at either end of the bridge. We will implement any changes at the earliest opportunity.

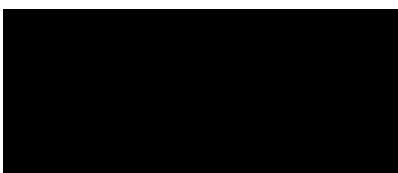
** The parapets comply with the requirements of the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB). Height which varies between 1.15 metres and 1.24 metres. Current minimum is 1 metre for such parapets as specified in Clause 4.23 of the Design standard TD19/06 Requirement for Road Restraint Systems).*

Publication

We fully understand the wider interest that the circumstances surrounding Archie's death and possible actions to prevent future such tragedies may create. It will be a matter for yourself and others to determine what, if any, further information is shared more widely given the sensitivity of such issues, particularly when reported in the media. In light of this we fully support the approach taken by a number of related agencies including the Samaritans in discouraging reporting that increases the notoriety of locations such as this.

There is no doubt that suicide prevention is a complex and challenging matter. We at Highways England are committed to working alongside others in order to support the multi-agency approach that is required to prevent such tragedies from occurring.

Yours sincerely



Regional Director
Operations Directorate - East Region
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