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Freepost A303 Stonehenge Consultation

2nd March 2017

Dear Sirs,

A303 Stonehenge – Amesbury to Berwick Down Response to Public Consultation

English Heritage cares for over 400 historic buildings, monuments and sites across the country. In our role as an independent charity, our purpose is to conserve these sites to the highest standards possible, in keeping with their status as part of England's national heritage.

The prehistoric stone circle of Stonehenge is the best known site within our care and as part of the wider World Heritage Site, it is a powerful witness to the once great communities of both the Neolithic and Bronze Age.

We have already seen the benefits of removing the old visitor facilities adjacent to the Stones and the grassing over of the A344. The proposed A303 road scheme has the potential to transform the Stonehenge World Heritage Site landscape. Provided it is well designed and located sensitively, this scheme could greatly enhance the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site whilst simultaneously improving the setting of the Stones themselves, and people's experience of them, by the removal of the surface road.

In addition to our contribution to stakeholder working groups, please see below our response to the public consultation opened on 12th January 2017:

1. To what extent do you agree with our proposed option?

Agree

We strongly believe in the principle of a tunnel and that the proposals have the potential to deliver benefits for Stonehenge, if sited and designed in such a way that is sensitive to the World Heritage landscape, associated monuments and the experience of people visiting the site.

However, while the overall proposals are to be welcomed for the positive transformation which they could bring to the World Heritage Site, there are some aspects of what is currently presented in the consultation documents that require significant improvement to ensure protection of the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site – for example we have particular concerns over the proposed position, alignment and design of the western tunnel portal.

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The proposal for a twin-bored tunnel of at least 2.9km could unlock enormous benefits for Stonehenge and the wider World Heritage Site. It would allow the removal of much of the current, damaging surface A303 allowing the reunification of the large part of the World Heritage Site to the south of the existing road with the part to its north containing Stonehenge and the other currently accessible major ceremonial monuments. This would restore peace and tranquility to Stonehenge whilst opening up safe public access to the many monuments and extensive prehistoric landscape which lies to the south of the current A303.

We welcome the proposed location of the eastern portal that would allow for the reinstatement of the line of the Stonehenge Avenue, an ancient processional route to the stones – and a major feature of the Stonehenge landscape – already partially restored by the removal of the A344 road by English Heritage in 2013. This is the first time that a Government scheme to improve the A303 within the Stonehenge landscape has allowed the line of the Avenue to remain intact.

The proposed western tunnel portal location needs significant improvement, due to its proximity to and impact on the Normanton Down barrow group – one of the key groups of ceremonial and funerary monuments for which the World Heritage Site is designated. We seek Highways England's commitment to improving this aspect of the scheme.

2. To what extent do you agree with our proposed location of the eastern portal?

Agree

Highways England's proposals could deliver significant improvements for heritage in the eastern section of the route, where the proposals would allow the course of the Stonehenge Avenue – presently severed by the A303 - to be reunited. It has responded to the advice given by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and their heritage advisers ICOMOS in their April 2016 report. The proposed scheme is a significant improvement on the previously approved scheme from 2004, which would have exacerbated the severance of the Avenue by the A303.

It is however critical that the portal is kept sufficiently clear of the Avenue to allow good meaningful public access and that the infrastructure is designed and located sensitively if this improvement is to be properly realised.

3. To what extent do you agree with our proposed location of the western portal?

Strongly disagree



The location of the tunnel's western portal is close to the Normanton Down barrow group and this is the element of the proposals that we are keen to see Highways England improve significantly.

It is absolutely essential that the western tunnel portal is designed and positioned sensitively, taking into account the importance of the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site. We have particular concerns regarding the positioning of the portal and approach road in relation to the midwinter solstice alignment that is a very important aspect to many visitors to Stonehenge. The position of the portal is also known from evaluation work to compromise groups of monuments recently discovered.

4. Of the two possible routes for the Winterbourne Stoke bypass, which do you consider is the best route?

We consider option IS to be the best route

Option IN

The current positioning of the northern route to bypass Winterbourne Stoke indicates that groups of prehistoric monuments would be compromised by the road passing through them. This route would also compromise views from Stonehenge and pass through areas of great natural significance. The northern route would therefore have most impact on historic assets within the World Heritage site and therefore affect the Outstanding Universal Value.

Option IS

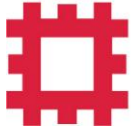
The current positioning of the southern route to bypass Winterbourne Stoke is unlikely to give rise to any additional material impacts on scheduled monuments and other assets within the World Heritage Site that contribute to the Outstanding Universal Value.

English Heritage would therefore strongly support the **southern option** that would have less impact on significance and should also potentially be beneficial to coach movements to the Stonehenge Visitor Centre.

5. What are the most important issues for you as we develop our proposals for the A303/A345 Countess junction?

Over 1.3 million visitors per year visit the Stonehenge Visitor Centre by road with peak numbers seen during the summer months when roads towards the South West of England are already busy.

It is essential that traffic is able to flow freely from East to West on dual lanes, without having to stop and give way. Entry and exit slip roads must be long enough at the points where they join the A roads to allow easy merging of traffic, especially of large vehicles.



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Clear signage for westbound traffic must show that the Stonehenge Visitor Centre is reached by staying on the A303 to the next junction west (currently Longbarrow). Clear signage should also announce the beginning of the Stonehenge & Avebury World Heritage Site.

6. What are the most important issues for you as we develop our proposals for the A303/A360 Longbarrow junction?

The majority of the visitors to the Stonehenge Visitor Centre approach from London and the East and need to complete their journey on the A360. We need to be sure that they can access the Visitor Centre safely and without delay.

The junction must therefore be designed to accommodate a very high volume of traffic, and in particular large coaches, moving from the west bound A303 to the north bound A360 and returning in the opposite direction. A simple crossroads will not be sufficient.

7. Do you have any further comments?

We require further information from Highways England regarding the treatment of the existing A303 if the proposed scheme goes ahead. We look forward to the roadbed being restored to grassland to re-connect Stonehenge with its wider landscape.

We have concerns about the effect of a very lengthy construction phase on the enjoyment of visitors to Stonehenge and the World Heritage Site and their appreciation of the assets of Outstanding Universal Value.

Our ability to generate revenue for the charity and continue to contribute so significantly to the local economy may be affected.

We would urge Highways England to avoid any delays to the journeys of those accessing our Visitor Centre during the construction phase. Also to be mindful of the noise, dust and visual impact of the works for visitors making what could be a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Stonehenge and to provide appropriate mitigation.

Yours faithfully

Kate Mavor
Chief Executive