

Oral Testimony For Open Floor Hearing 1

Winterbourne Stoke has been described as a poor, benighted village that lies astride the A303, to the west of Stonehenge. It's a description from which I cannot demur.

Even the two routes proposed by Highways England for a bypass served to divide our already sundered community still further; entirely avoidable if only Highways England had taken notice of previous Public Inquiries. The northern bypass route was the better of two poor options for the village. Much better for us, and the World Heritage Site, had the A303 been moved even further north than has ever been suggested before, to the southern fringes of the Salisbury Plain Training Area.

Despite being far from ideal, the current plans have the potential to improve the traffic situation for most of us, but if insufficient mitigation measures are put in place, we may remain benighted forever. The biggest benefits of removal of traffic from the heart of the village might be overshadowed by the increase in overall noise levels in the Parish from increased vehicle numbers and speeds. The same is true of light pollution.

We began raising questions and concerns with Highways England early, before the statutory consultations. We did so in good faith and asked for information and clarification. It was promised, but rarely delivered. We've even had to resort to Freedom of Information requests, which Highways England have fought tooth and nail. We've regarded our dealings with Highways England as something of a poisoned chalice ever since.

Whilst we have entered into discussions to prepare a Statement of Common Ground, it is a very one-sided affair. When we have challenged Highways England's proposals using facts and hard evidence, they do seem rather prone to change the ground rules rather than their plans.

So whether it is the utter stupidity of ending the Western edge of the scheme at the eastern side of the Yarnbury Crossing, the demonstrably needless and locally undesirable Green Bridge 1, the folly of routing footpaths and cycleways out of the village, to the east, on the northern side of the existing A303, rather than the much more sensible southern side, or the idiocy of siting a Pegasus Crossing, that few Brits have ever heard of, let alone used, on a route designed to attract hordes of foreign nationals - Highways England have failed to listen to those with local knowledge or experience. Then we have the issue of radioactive phosphatic chalk where Highways England have failed to get a sensible answer to the hazards it might pose, by failing to set their question to Public Health England in context.

At the opening meeting of the Inspection process last month, we were horrified, but unsurprised to discover one word was barely mentioned. That word was **road**.

Far more attention has been paid to the archaeology of the World Heritage Site than any other aspect of the scheme and you might expect that we would be kicking up a fuss about that. Not so. Far from it. We urge the inspectors to put much more emphasis on archaeology in their report to the Secretary of State. Not the fusty old mesolithic and neolithic stuff you will be bombarded with at these Open Floor Hearing; that will be done to death. No, we want you to focus on the archaeology that this scheme will leave behind for archaeologists 5,000 years from now. There's absolutely no point in building yet another boring dual carriageway - they're two a penny, a bit like round barrows in the World Heritage site. No, it's got to be startling in the extreme - a big tunnel through an iconic landscape will do just that. A bit like Stonehenge was when it first appeared on virgin Wiltshire downland.

All levity aside, we feel that we, the locals, those who live, own businesses and work in the area of the World Heritage Site, are being treated very much as second rate citizens in this process, by Highways England, by the Stonehenge Alliance and even by Wiltshire Council.

Yes, Wiltshire Council - whose motto is "Where people matter". You might have thought that they, and particularly the portfolio holder for strategic highways, would have beaten a path to our door to find out what it was that local people wanted out of the A303 scheme. You might have thought that, but you'd be wrong. We haven't seen hide nor hair of them - it seems that, despite multiple invitations, they are loathe to leave the rarefied air of County Hall for us here in south Wiltshire - unless, of course, a Prime Minister, or US President, pitch up and can be grovelled to..

We hope the planning Inspectors will take a more balanced view of the whole scheme and give appropriate weight to the views of those who live here now and will in the future, compared, to those long dead and those who merely pass through the area.