

A303 Stonehenge Redetermination Response

Barry Garwood

Overview

The Secretary of State (SoS) for Transport has issued a [Statement of Matters](#) regarding the A303 Stonehenge road scheme between Berwick Down and Amesbury, on 30 November 2021. The Applicant, Highways England has subsequently produced a response. Relevant documents are published on the [Planning Inspectorate](#) website. Now an [Invitation to Comment](#) by 4 April 2022 has been issued to Interested Parties.

Background

Following various rounds of consultation, a single scheme consisting of a Winterbourne Stoke northern bypass and a tunnel under part of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS), with tunnel portals and a deep cutting within the bounds of the WHS, was brought forward to the Examining Authority (ExA), for a Public Examination by a Panel of five Planning Inspectors, commencing 2 April 2019.

During the process, the World Heritage Committee, sitting at the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 2019, issued [Decision 43 COM 7B.95](#) which:

“Notes with concern that although the current scheme, which is now subject to the Development Consent Order (DCO) examination process, shows improvement compared with previous plans, it retains substantial exposed dual carriageway sections, particularly those at the western end of the property, which would impact adversely on the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property, especially its integrity, and therefore encourages the State Party to not proceed with the A303 route upgrade for the section Amesbury to Berwick Down project in its current form;”

The [Examining Authority's Report](#) for the SoS was issued on 2 January 2020.

Section 7.5.21 stated that:

“The ExA disagrees with the Applicant as to the extent of the public benefits that would be delivered. In totality, it does not consider that substantial public benefit would result from the Proposed Development. In reaching that view, the ExA has had regard to all potential benefits including any long-term or wider benefits. In any event, those public benefits which have been identified, even if they could be regarded as substantial, would not outweigh the substantial harm to the designated heritage asset.”

Section 10.3.1. stated their Recommendation:

"For all the above reasons and in the light of the ExA's findings and conclusions on important and relevant matters set out in this Report, the ExA recommends that the SoS should not make an Order granting development consent for the application."

On 12 November 2020, the SoS issued a Development Consent Order (DCO) for the scheme to proceed.

The World Heritage Committee, sitting at the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 2021, issued [Decision 44 COM 7B.61](#) stating that it:

"Regrets that the Development Consent Order (DCO) has been granted for the scheme; and therefore, further considers in conformity with Paragraph 179 of the Operational Guidelines that the approved A303 improvement scheme is a potential threat to the property, which - if implemented - could have deleterious effects on its inherent characteristics, notably to its integrity;

"Notes moreover that in the event that DCO consent was confirmed by the High Court, the property warrants the inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger;"

This DCO was subject to a Judicial Review in the Royal Courts of Justice, brought by the group Save Stonehenge World Heritage Site Limited, before The Hon. Mr Justice Holgate.

The [Judgement](#), quashing the DCO, was handed down on 30 July 2021.

"The claim for judicial review succeeds to the extent I have indicated. The claimant is entitled to an order quashing the SST's decision to grant development consent and the DCO itself."

The grounds for the Judgement were that the scheme would result in substantial and irreversible harm to heritage assets and that there had been a failure to adequately consider alternative routes.

Alternatives

Route to the North of the WHS

In my submissions to the Examination, I made a number of suggestions for alternative routes, including a route to the north of the WHS, included as [Annex A Northern Alternative](#) [REP3 – 071]. These are further detailed in [Deadline 4 Submission](#) [REP4 – 064] and include the suggestion for a simple Winterbourne Stoke bypass, as well as recognition that Route F010 and the Parker Route have some merit.

These submissions were picked up in the [Examining Authority's Report](#) section 5.4.44:

"Mr Barry Garwood set out his proposed alternative northern route outside the WHS route at Appendix A to his summary of submissions at OFH2 [REP3-071]. At ISH6, He stated that this was treated dismissively as probably being in the range of northern routes considered by the Applicant. However, those routes would all cut across part of the WHS whereas his suggestion would not. It includes a Winterbourne Stoke bypass as well as a bypass for Shrewton and Bulford; the two villages most affected by rat-running. He considers that more attention should be given to alternatives and these should include surface routes outside the WHS and the possibility of building a simple Winterbourne Stoke bypass without the need for huge embankments to dispose of tunnel excavations. Sections of tunnel under sensitive areas outside the WHS could also be considered [REP4-064]."

The Applicant's response regarding alternatives sets out reasons for rejecting other routes. Concerning my submissions, they have said:

"8.1 An alternative route to the North of the WHS was proposed by Mr Garwood [REP3-071].

8.2 Applicant's Position / Reason not to progress the alternative.

This route would be contained within Corridor A which was rejected at Step 2 of the option identification and selection process. See Chapter 5 of the TAR [REP1-031] and section 4.2 of the SAR [REP1-023].

Corridor A would reduce severance within the WHS, and could also result in some benefit to the WHS. However, the harm it would cause to the setting of the WHS and key assets within it (e.g. Durrington Walls) mean substantial harm to the OUV of the WHS is probable and, on balance potential harm to the OUV of the WHS would outweigh the benefits associated with the removal of the A303. The corridor may also adversely affect Nationally and Internationally (European) designated nature conservation sites including parts of Salisbury Plain SPA/SAC.

Corridor A has the potential to adversely affect communities and land within the settlements at Larkhill, Durrington and Bulford.

The decision making process used at Step 2 of the option identification and selection process is explained in the Applicant's response to Written question AL.1.15 [REP2-024]. Written question AL.1.15 related to Corridor G, but the same process also applied to Corridor A.

The performance of Corridor A was found to be very poor in the following areas:

- Client Scheme Requirements, Environment and Community (See TAR paragraph 5.2.118)*
- Historic Environment (See TAR paragraph 5.2.122)*
- Biodiversity (See TAR paragraph 5.2.127)*

Overall corridor assessment summary can be found in the TAR Table 5.7. which concludes as: "Given the overall poor environmental performance and the poor fit against the CSRs, it was recommended that this corridor was not taken forward for further consideration."

8.3.3 Heritage. A new heritage asset, the Larkhill Causewayed Enclosure, that contributes to the OUV of the WHS, was discovered in 2016 as part of the Army Rebasing programme at Larkhill, just to the north of Corridor A. The new heritage asset was considered in Chapter 6 of the ES [APP-044] and as Asset Group AG39 in the Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) [APP-195] for the DCO Scheme. The option is still assessed as: "substantial harm to the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the WHS is considered probable" from Corridor A (TAR section 5.2.122

8.4 Other than as described in Section 8.3 above, the circumstances around route Corridor A have not changed since the original DCO decision on 12 November 2020.

The only significant change in circumstance relates to the newly discovered heritage asset at Larkhill that contributes to the OUV of the WHS. This discovery further strengthens the decision not to progress routes in Corridor A.

The Applicant's position therefore remains unchanged: that Corridor A and any route options within Corridor A should not be taken forward for further consideration."

The Applicant recognises that such a route to the north would have some benefit, including reducing severance of the WHS. The proposed route would follow the route of the existing Packway along the northern boundary of the WHS, so the suggestion that it would be likely to cause substantial harm to the OUV of the WHS does not necessarily follow.

While it would inevitably lead to increased traffic in the vicinity of Durrington Walls and other heritage assets, such as the newly discovered Larkhill Causewayed Enclosure, any such harm would be considered less than substantial. There would be no need to take any new land from the WHS, nor would there need to be any deep cuttings.

In that respect, it would appear to have considerable advantage over the proposed tunnel scheme, which would inevitably result in substantial harm to the WHS and its OUV, particularly at the western end.

Another major advantage of this route is that would provide bypasses for Shrewton and Bulford, two villages currently affected by rat-running. It would also provide a much needed Winterbourne Stoke bypass, which could follow the existing landform, without the large embankments that are proposed with the tunnel scheme in order to dispose of excavated material. This would be a much better outcome for the village, as the road would be less intrusive, both visibly and audibly.

Consideration should also be given to the idea of building this route as a single carriageway in the vicinity of the WHS, with a further branch from the Winterbourne Stoke bypass feeding into the existing A303 to the east of the village.

This would allow light traffic to continue to use the road past Stonehenge, enjoying the magnificent views of the monument, perhaps with a reduced speed limit.

It would also greatly reduce traffic passing the Blick Mead mesolithic site, at the eastern end of the WHS, which almost certainly extends under the existing dual carriageway, perhaps allowing for more of it to be uncovered in future.

Heavy vehicles and drivers wishing to avoid delays could then follow the route along the northern boundary of the WHS.

This would allow two lanes in each direction, broadly fulfilling the aim for a dual carriageway, while absolutely minimising the need for any further intervention within the WHS. It would also allow for the proposed mile-a-minute journeys between London and the South-West, by avoiding the current bottlenecks through the WHS and Winterbourne Stoke.

In regard to designated nature conservation sites, care could be taken to choose an exact route that avoids such sites as far as possible, along with other known heritage assets, in order to minimise any harm to them.

Such a route would inevitably be much cheaper to construct than a tunnel and cuttings, as well as reducing severance and avoiding any substantial intervention within the WHS.

Route F010

The route to the south of the WHS, known as F010, is considered in [Alternatives](#) Section 5. It was not taken forward to public consultation, as it is a longer route that would have environmental impact, particularly in the Avon valley area and would not interact well with the existing road network.

However the plans, shown in detail in [Appendix F.3](#) of the TAR [REP1-037], indicate grade separated junctions with the A360 and A345, suggesting that it would connect well with other main roads and avoid the minor roads in the Avon valley.

Although the land required would be greater than that for a route through the WHS, there would be little or no impact on OUV. The additional length would be minimal, adding probably less than a minute to journey times compared with a tunnel through the WHS and would be comparable with, or better than other alternatives.

Perhaps the largest drawback of route F010 is the crossing of the Avon valley to the north of the Woodfords. Given the nature of the terrain, it would need to be a high level bridge crossing that would have little direct impact on the river Avon itself. Traffic noise could be mitigated by screening, although there would inevitably be some impact on the tranquil setting of the valley.

The Parker Route

The [Parker route](#) [REP3 – 083], as presented by Colonel Graham Parker is longer than some of those considered. It does have additional potential as a Salisbury northern bypass and could feed directly into the A36 to the west, which could in turn be upgraded as far the existing junction with the A303. It stays well away from the WHS, so would have no impact on OUV, although it might affect the setting of Old Sarum.

Longer Bored Tunnel

I am not personally in favour of a longer tunnel, which would be more costly and result in the need to dispose of even more excavated material, as well as being an unpleasant route for drivers.

It would be detrimental to the Chalk aquifer that forms the lifeblood of the Stonehenge landscape, potentially affecting the hydrology of Blick Mead. Many of those for whom the landscape holds a spiritual value would see it as a desecration.

However, even this option has some merit over the proposed tunnel scheme, in that it would avoid a deep cutting and portal at the western end of the WHS.

World Heritage Convention

[Stonehenge, Avebury and Associated Sites](#) was first inscribed into the World Heritage Convention in 1986, with a minor boundary change in 2008, while its Statement of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) was subsequently adopted in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in 2013.

The [World Heritage Convention](#) sets out the duties of State Parties to protect sites within their terrain.

Article 4 states:

"Each State Party to this Convention recognizes that the duty of ensuring the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage referred to in Articles 1 and 2 and situated on its territory, belongs primarily to that State. It will do all it can to this end, to the utmost of its own resources and, where appropriate, with any international assistance and co-operation, in particular, financial, artistic, scientific and technical, which it may be able to obtain."

Article 5:

"...each State Party to this Convention shall endeavor, in so far as possible, and as appropriate for each country:

(a) to adopt a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programmes;"

Article 6:

"1. Whilst fully respecting the sovereignty of the States on whose territory the cultural and natural heritage mentioned in Articles 1 and 2 is situated, and without prejudice to property right provided by national legislation, the States Parties to this Convention recognize that such heritage constitutes a world heritage for whose protection it is the duty of the international community as a whole to co-operate.

Outstanding Universal Value

The [Statement of Outstanding Universal Value](#) (OUV) was retrospectively adopted in [REDACTED] (see p. 226).

The Statement of OUV notes:

“There is an exceptional survival of prehistoric monuments and sites within the World Heritage property including settlements, burial grounds, and large constructions of earth and stone. Today, together with their settings, they form landscapes without parallel. These complexes would have been of major significance to those who created them, as is apparent by the huge investment of time and effort they represent. They provide an insight into the mortuary and ceremonial practices of the period, and are evidence of prehistoric technology, architecture and astronomy. The careful siting of monuments in relation to the landscape helps us to further understand the Neolithic and Bronze Age.”

While the expression '*landscapes without parallel*' is much quoted, including by those who favour the tunnel scheme, it is often used out of context. It is clear from the Statement of OUV that it is not just the individual monuments, but also their settings and relation to the landscape that provide the Outstanding Universal Value for which the WHS is recognised.

As such, any major intervention within the WHS, such as a cutting and tunnel portals, would cause substantial harm to both the WHS and its OUV. While it is true that the ultimate responsibility for the heritage asset lies with the State Party in which it lies, it is also true that it has global significance.

For many, it is the most important prehistoric site in the World and needs to be preserved. This position is held by the World Heritage Committee, the Examining Authority and the High Court. Every effort should be made to find a solution that causes minimal, or no harm to the WHS and its environs.

The Statement of OUV recognises the extent of the heritage asset: *“The setting of some key monuments extends beyond the boundary. Provision of buffer zones or planning guidance based on a comprehensive setting study should be considered to protect the setting of both individual monuments and the overall setting of the property.”*

In particular, the ExA heard evidence that the area to the west of the Stonehenge WHS boundary is rich in archaeology and there is a desire to extend the WHS boundary to reflect this. The harm caused by a tunnel scheme would not end at the western boundary of the WHS, even if the tunnel were to be extended.

It is imperative that a solution be found which does not cause substantial harm to this globally significant heritage asset. It is recognised that no solution is ideal.

The statement of OUV notes: *"The presence of busy main roads going through the World Heritage property impacts adversely on its integrity. The roads sever the relationship between Stonehenge and its surrounding monuments, notably the A344 which separates the Stone Circle from the Avenue.*

.....Roads and vehicles also cause damage to the fabric of some monuments while traffic noise and visual intrusion have a negative impact on their settings. The incremental impact of highway-related clutter needs to be carefully managed."

Since the adoption of the Statement of OUV, work has been completed to remove the A344 from the immediate vicinity of the Stonehenge stone circle.

The Statement of OUV says of the A303: *"The A303 continues to have a negative impact on the setting of Stonehenge, the integrity of the property and visitor access to some parts of the wider landscape. A long-term solution remains to be found."*

The A303 is considerably further from the monument than the old A344. [Stonehenge Alliance presented evidence](#) to the ExA that noise levels at peak times are as much to do with visitors as they are from the road.

While there is some severance of the WHS resulting from the presence of the road, it is the level of modern traffic using it, rather than the long standing surface route itself that is the principal cause of this.

Provision of an alternative route outside the WHS would greatly improve this situation, without necessitating complete removal of the road.

Discussion

It seems clear that there is no ideal route for a new road running east – west in the vicinity of the Stonehenge WHS. However, bringing just one route forward for examination suggests that the SoS may be suffering from tunnel vision.

By proposing a scheme for a bored tunnel with portals within the WHS, the SoS is at odds with the findings of the World Heritage Committee, The Examining Authority and the High Court, as well as the vast majority of Interested Parties who presented views to the Public Examination.

A route to the north of the WHS would bring further traffic and noise to Larkhill in particular, although Larkhill is an army camp that could be partially relocated, probably at much lower cost than constructing a tunnel.

A route to the south of the WHS would undoubtedly bring some disturbance to the peaceful Avon valley, although mitigation such as screening could be put in place.

Either of these options would leave the WHS intact and be cheaper than a tunnel, while adding minimal length to the route.

In dismissing all such schemes as not meeting the required criteria, without bringing them forward for Examination, the Government is apparently excluding all options other than a tunnel, without giving them adequate consideration.

The tunnel proposal would cause irreversible harm to the WHS that it purports to protect, which is manifestly absurd.

The Stonehenge landscape is unique and the State has obligations under the World Heritage Convention to protect it.

While I acknowledge that it is ultimately a matter of jurisdiction for the State to decide how to fulfil its obligations, the permanent destruction of this unique prehistoric site is a heavy price to pay to for a slightly shorter journey time.

There are growing concerns over Climate Change. The Greenhouse Gas emissions from construction and operation of a dual carriageway between London and the South-West will compound the problem.

While policy may be to replace fossil fuelled vehicles with electric ones, even these are not carbon free, as the construction emissions are high. There are also issues with the sourcing of raw materials for battery production, as well as the need to provide power for charging.