

Stonehenge and the A303 Improvement Public Consultation

16 June 2006



The UK National Commission for UNESCO urges the UK Government to seek, without delay, to proceed with implementing the Published Scheme for the A303 at Stonehenge.

Importance of Stonehenge

Stonehenge is an iconic site and has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1986. It is one of the few UK sites immediately recognised by the local, national and international community.

It is used as a symbol of Britain as a cultural tourism destination. A far higher proportion of the one million annual visitors attracted to Stonehenge are from overseas than any other heritage site outside London.

Stonehenge is an important heritage site in its own right, a collection of prehistoric monuments that are without parallel on a global basis.

The Published Scheme

What is it? The Published Scheme was recommended by an independent Inspector following a full statutory public inquiry in 2004. It involves (i) a grade-separated junction with the A360 at Longbarrow Crossroads and (ii) a 2.1km bored tunnel running south of the existing A303, with the portals beyond the horizon from Stonehenge.

UK National Commission's Assessment: It presents the best balanced option for achieving a sustainable solution to meet the objectives of the Stonehenge WHS Management Plan, the principles of the UNESCO Convention concerning the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972) and deriving substantial public benefit.

- The Scheme was recommended in the independent Inspector's Report (2005), which found that it appropriately balanced gains and impacts.
- It is the only option presented that could be completed within the next five years, if started promptly, and stands the chance to be ready for the Olympics in 2012.
- It will meet the objectives of the WHS Management Plan and remove the sight and sound of traffic from Stonehenge.
- It will enable public access and will "balance the primary aim of protecting the archaeological landscape with other interests such as access, farming, local interests and nature conservation".
- It will facilitate the construction of a new visitor centre outside the WHS based on planning permission submitted.
- The UNESCO World Heritage Committee has reviewed plans for Stonehenge and has supported the Scheme.

A Time for Immediate Action by the Government

Tourism & Economics. Part of the economic benefits of the Olympics will derive from the promotion of the UK as a quality tourist destination. The matter of enhanced access to Stonehenge and the South-West of England must be addressed now. It is a unique opportunity to maximise the economic benefits of the nation's heritage and to enhance economic value to the immediate area and the wider region.

Leadership & Setting Examples. The UK has an excellent reputation for leadership in setting standards, not only in cultural heritage matters, but in other international duties. It is important that the UK continues to send out positive messages in fulfilling its international commitments. The resolution of the 'national disgrace' that has been the visitor experience at Stonehenge in time for the 2012 Olympics and for longer-term gain by commissioning the implementation of the Published Scheme and the enhancement of this iconic World Heritage Site would be such positive message.

A Time for Immediate Action by the Government (cont'd)

Fairness & Safety. Further delay is unfair to local residents and businesses and visitors, and fails to address safety and congestion issues. The A344 where it crosses the Avenue immediately adjacent to Stonehenge presents a dire and dangerous experience for visitors. This has been one of the key issues which the UNESCO World Heritage Committee have been concerned over since 1986.

World Heritage Status. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee has expressed concern that no progress in resolving the A303 Stonehenge Improvement scheme has been made and requested that the UK Government provides an update report by the beginning of 2007.

Stonehenge's World Heritage Site Status

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee decides whether a property is inscribed on the World Heritage List. It also examines the state of conservation of inscribed properties.

The World Heritage Committee has looked at plans for Stonehenge over successive years and has supported the Published Scheme. It also asks governments to take action when deemed required, failing with the properties will be considered for the List of World Heritage in Danger pending further decisions.

In its last meeting in July 2005, the Committee expressed concern on the fact that no progress in resolving the A303 Stonehenge Improvement scheme has been made and requested that the UK Government provides an update report by beginning of 2007.

Obligation of UK as State Party to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention

The UK ratified the UNESCO World Heritage in 1984. Stonehenge was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1986. Since then, the Government has stated its commitment to improving public access to Stonehenge and its surroundings, and to enhancing its environment by removing the nearby roads. Twenty years have passed and the issues remain.

The UK National Commission recognises that the Government does not take its international duties lightly. The UK has an excellent reputation as an international leader in setting standards of excellence for the management of cultural heritage assets. The Stonehenge WHS Management Plan was praised in 2000 by UNESCO's World Heritage Committee for its high quality and is used as a model for other inscribed sites. The actions of the UK over the management of its own cultural heritage of "outstanding universal value" will be closely scrutinised by the international community and should maintain the highest practicable standards.

The Government's implementation policy must balance the need to protect as much of the UK's cultural heritage as is possible (given its importance), with the need to be confident that the regime established is sustainable and takes account of the requirements of living and working landscapes.

Role of the UK National Commission

The UK National Commission for UNESCO is an independent body and the Government's principle adviser on policy and matters relating to UNESCO. Its members are independent experts, nominated for membership by their respective organisations but acting in their own rights. It acts as the focal point between UK Government and civil society and UNESCO.

Consideration of the A303 Scheme Improvement Consultation falls within the remit of the National Commission's Culture Committee, which has examined this matter in detail, because of the potential impact on the Stonehenge, Avebury and Related Sites WHS. In preparing the response, the Culture Committee has undertaken steps to ensure that the Committee is informed from a wide variety of sources and opinions, as well as drawing expert advice from the Committee:

- A presentation by the Highways Agency's Project Sponsor was arranged on 1 March during which Committee members discussed and raise questions with the HA
- Committee members stated and clarify the positions of their nominating and/or affiliated organisations and confirmed that they would be acting in their own rights when providing expert advice on the Stonehenge issue
- A site visit was made by a number of Committee members on 5 April to inspect the route options and meet with the National Trust, the owner of much of the central part of the WHS
- Committee members attended local public meetings, attended (chairs one introductory session) a seminar hosted by the Society of Antiquaries (over 90 experts from the heritage sector participated); sought opinions from individuals including representatives of bodies opposing the published scheme and local landowners, and consulted relevant documents
- The HA presentation and relevant information have been made available on the National Commission's website

The National Commission submitted its formal response to the Highways Agency's public consultation on 19 April 2006. For more information about the UK National Commission and read its submission, visit www.unesco.org.uk