

Avebury Parish Council
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Dear Mr Keith

30 June 2011

Great Stones Way proposal

Thank you for your email of 21 June. We have not had a substantive discussion about the Great Stones Way since 15 March when Ian Ritchie of FotR came to a meeting of our Council. This followed a letter our previous Chairman wrote to him on 29 January.

Ian Ritchie gave us two assurances at our meeting: an Environmental Impact Assessment would be commissioned and the GSW route would be realigned to follow the Ridgeway southwards from Barbary Castle. We have therefore been awaiting news of the EIA and, among other things, specific estimates of the numbers of extra visitors that might be attracted to Avebury, and evidence of benefits/damage to Avebury's economy.

Although FotR have accepted our requests for an EIA and the realignment of the route, our other requests have been rejected. In terms of the Area Board minutes, this letter together with our previous Chairman's letter, below, best set out the reasons for our concerns.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Williamson
Chairman

Letter dated 29 January 2011 to Mr Ian Ritchie

Dear Mr Ritchie

29 January 2011

Great Stones Way proposal

I am writing to give you the preliminary views of Avebury Parish Council on the Great Stones Way proposal. The Parish Council may wish to write again later when we have more details.

Given information currently available, the Parish Council objects to the underlying principle of the GSW proposal and also objects on three specific grounds.

The Parish makes two positive proposals: that an Environmental Impact Assessment be conducted to address the implications of the proposal, and that the route be realigned.

By way of background, about 480 people live in 225 households in the Parish.

The need for information and consultation

The Parish Council has not been sent any information on this ambitious and large scale proposal. The Council has indirectly obtained a leaflet and a note on the scheme dated 21 April 2010, but these documents lack much important detail on the proposed route of the GSW, the likely economic benefits to the community or the practical implications of the proposal. On consultation, we invited a representative of Friends of the Ridgeway to attend our recent Parish Council meeting on 18 January but he/she did not turn up.

As Avebury is prominently featured on the cover of the project's leaflet, the Parish Council is disappointed that the sponsors of the scheme have not sought to inform or consult.

Objection in principle

The underlying objective of the proposal is to increase greatly the number of people visiting Avebury and other settlements on the Great Stones Way. The Parish Council objects to this because increasing visitor numbers directly conflicts with the one of the central objectives of the World Heritage Site Management Plan:

- The WHS Plan states that 'For many years there has been agreement amongst agencies involved with the management of the WHS that visitor numbers in Avebury are at capacity levels and should not be actively increased' (para 8.2.5)
- The WHS Plan therefore aims to limit visitor numbers to present levels and avoid advertising to promote Avebury as a tourist destination
- Visitor numbers are estimated at 276,000 to 350,000 annually in the WHS Plan and at between 150,000 to 300,000 a year in the National Trust's draft management plan
- The Great Stones Way proposal states that the GSW would attract, at a conservative estimate, an extra 250,000 to 400,000 visitors a year

Such numbers would double present levels and would be directly contrary to the WHS plan.

The GSW proposal also runs counter to emerging initiatives in Avebury to introduce a greater element of managed tourism, instead of mass tourism.

Three specific issues

1. Damage to the local economy

The Parish Council is concerned that the economy of the village will be damaged:

- People walking the GSW will have little time to spend money on meals, refreshments and souvenirs in Avebury if they have to complete a 29 mile walk to Stonehenge or a 38 mile walk to Salisbury in daylight
- When arriving early and parking all day, their cars will block spaces that are currently used by tourists visiting Avebury itself, see section on car parking below. These visitors do spend money in the village, and the loss of this income will harm Avebury's economy, and be counter to the objectives of the LEADER programme
- The National Trust is an important local employer and will also suffer a significant loss of income from car parking fees for the same reason
- Any benefit to the local economy from B & B as the other principal source of income in the village will be very limited. There are only 225 households in the Parish and few of them have come forward to offer B & B despite excess demand in recent years. This is evidenced by the difficulties the Tourist Information Centre already has in finding overnight accommodation at busy periods.

The Parish therefore objects on the grounds of damage to the local economy, and notes the proposal's negative impact on the aims of the LEADER programme.

2. Damage to the monument, visitor experience and local residents' quality of life

A fragile balance has to be maintained at Avebury between the impact of large visitor numbers and:

- Archaeological damage to its monuments
- The quality of the visitor experience
- The quality of life of local residents
- The infrastructure of the village and its ability to cope

Advertising the attractions of 'the Great Stones' will inevitably attract some visitors who will not attempt to walk the GSW but will restrict their visits to the centre of the village. Others will use Avebury as a base for local circular walks. The greater the numbers of such visitors, the more their footfall will damage the monuments. Greater numbers will also reduce the quality of the visitor experience, diminish the quality of life of local residents and put further pressures on the village's amenities.

The Council objects to the proposal on the grounds of damage to the monument, a reduction in residents' quality of life and a poorer quality of visitors' experience. We also object to any advertising of Avebury as a tourist destination as being contrary to the WHS Plan.

3. Car parking

Contrary to the assertion in the leaflet we have obtained, public transport links along the GSW route are poor at present, and will deteriorate further if public expenditure cuts are imposed as expected.

The Parish Council believes that the great majority of walkers will arrive at the GSW by car. Car parking is however limited at Avebury:

- The WHS Management Plan policy on car parking is that no additional spaces be provided
- The main car-park in the village can accommodate about 275 cars. In high and shoulder seasons the car-park is often full
- If the GSW were to increase visitor numbers, within the sponsor's conservative estimate, by say 365,000 visitors a year, Avebury would receive 1,000 more visitors on an average day
- An additional 1,000 visitors would need parking for about 125 to 500 more cars a day, depending on car occupancy rates and whether walkers leave their cars at each end of the GSW to get home, or walk part way to Stonehenge and then return to Avebury.
- While 1,000 is an average throughout the year, the GSW will probably attract about three times more visitors on peak days. This would create a demand of between 375 to 1,500 extra car spaces a day, twice to five times the village's current parking capacity
- Avebury's parking problem would be further aggravated by all-day parking. Visitors currently park for about two hours on average and each space in the car park therefore accommodates several cars during a day. But most people walking the GSW would need to arrive early and leave their cars all day if they were going to complete their walk to/from Stonehenge or Salisbury in daylight. Their cars would block spaces that would otherwise be available for other tourists visiting Avebury.

The Parish Council does wonder whether it is realistic to expect as many as 250,000 to 400,000 people to walk the GSW each year. But even if these numbers are halved, the current capacity of the car park of 275 spaces would still be exceeded by an extra 200 to 750 cars a day in busy periods.

On the other hand, if the sponsor is correct and estimates of visitor numbers do turn out to be conservative, parking demand may rise to 2,000 spaces a day or more.

The Parish Council objects to the GSW scheme in view of the massive increase in car parking that the GSW proposal will require.

The need for an Environmental Impact Assessment

The Parish Council is concerned that the implications of the GSW have not been thought through and that important issues have not been addressed. The Council considers that an Environmental Impact Assessment is essential and requests Friends of the Ridgeway to undertake one as a priority. The Parish also requests that it be included in this process.

Possible re-designation as 'The Great River Avon Way'

The Parish is aware of the problems that mass tourism brings to Stonehenge as well as Avebury. The Council therefore suggests that the sponsors of GSW realign the route to avoid both monuments.

We are aware of support for GSW from Plain Action and some villages at the southern end of the GSW route. We also note that much of the proposed route follows the River Avon through Enford, Netheravon, Figheldean, Amesbury and on to Salisbury. Providing these communities agree, we suggest the route be revised and established from Upavon to Salisbury. If there were local support, it might be re-designated 'The Great River Avon Way'.

The Parish Council would be grateful if a representative of the GSW would attend a Parish Council meeting in the near future to give details of the project and to respond to this Council's concerns.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Jennifer Baldrey
Chairman

Copies by email to:

Mark Boden, Corporate Director, DNP, Wiltshire Council

Claire Perry MP

Jane Scott, OBE, Leader Wilts Council

Cllr Jemima Milton, West Selkley Ward

Cllr Stuart Wheeler, Cabinet Representative for Leisure, Sport and Culture, Wilts Council

Julian Head, Principal Regeneration Officer, Wilts Council

Sarah Simmonds, Avebury WHS Officer

Richard Broadhead, Rights of Way Manager, Wilts Council

Corinna Woodall, NWD LEADER Programme Manager

Janet Tomlin, National Trust

Kate Fielden, Acting Chairman, The Avebury Society

Mark Harold, National Trust

Susan Denyer, ICOMOS (UK)

Andrew Vines, Regional Director, English Heritage

Amanda Chadburn, English Heritage

Christopher Young, English Heritage

Henry Oliver, NWD AONB

Richard Pitts, MAVCAP

Gretchen Rawlins, Clerk, Avebury Parish Council