

Salisbury Joint Transportation Team
The Council Offices, 37 Endless Street
Salisbury
Wiltshire SP1 1DP

Geoff Hobbs, Assistant Transport Planner
direct line: 01722 434 581
email: ghobbs@salisbury.gov.uk
web: www.salisbury.gov.uk

Report

Report subject: A303 Stonehenge Improvement Scheme Review & Consultation

Report to: Northern Area Committee

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Author: Geoff Hobbs

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to give an overview of the five route options being put forward for the A303 at Stonehenge, which are the subject of public consultation by the Highways Agency, and to provide an opportunity for members to comment on the proposals. These comments will be taken to Cabinet on 5 April, who will develop a response to the consultation.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The Highways Agency (HA) is responsible for the A303 and is the promoter of the Stonehenge Improvement scheme. In October 2005, the Department for Transport (DfT) announced that there would be a detailed review of the options to ease congestion on the A303 and improve the setting around Stonehenge. The review was deemed necessary because of a significant increase in the estimated costs of the proposed 2.1km bored Stonehenge tunnel (the Published Scheme hereafter) – from £284m at the time of the Public Inquiry to the latest estimated outturn cost of £470m. This cost increase is attributed to a combination of problematic geology (soft, weak chalk), rise in civil engineering plant costs, high groundwater levels and higher estimates from utility companies.
- 2.2 The review has so far completed three of its six steps. The HA's consultant team have:
- updated the costs and benefits of the Published Scheme put to the Public Inquiry;
 - updated the costs and benefits of the alternative options put forward at the Public Inquiry, allowing a like-for-like comparison to be made with the Published Scheme;
 - Identified a shortlist of alternative options judged worthy of further detailed consideration in pursuing the Government's objectives for the scheme.



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The current (fourth) stage is a wide ranging 13-week public consultation on the key findings from the three above steps. The HA's consultant team have identified five options worthy of further consideration, which are being presented to the public. All five options include the provision of a bypass for the village of Winterbourne Stoke and a flyover at Countess Roundabout. The five options and their total costs (including land purchase) are:

- 1.) The Published Scheme (2.1km dual-bored tunnel) - **£510m**
- 2.) Northern Route – dual carriageway above ground apart from short section of (cut & cover) tunnel close to the Steel Houses - **£283m**
- 3.) A Southern Route – dual carriageway completely above ground - **£246m**
- 4.) Cut and Cover Tunnel (2.1 km dual – similar to Published Scheme in impact) - **£389m**
- 5.) A Partial Solution (leaving A303 as single carriageway past Stonehenge as it is now, closing A344 junction at Stonehenge Bottom and changes to the A303/ A360 junction) - **£159m**

- 2.3 The current period of public consultation has involved a three day public exhibition in Salisbury between the 9th and 11th of February. At this event and via the HA website, the public have been invited to complete a questionnaire on the five options. Copies of the questionnaire have been sent to postcodes in the vicinity (including Amesbury, Bulford, Durrington, Larkhill and Winterbourne Stoke) and are available from Bourne Hill, Salisbury and Amesbury Libraries and main service stations along the A303 corridor. The closing date for receipt of the consultation questionnaires and any other feedback is Monday the 24th April 2006.
- 2.4 As part of this the District council has been consulted on the proposals and will provide a response at the Cabinet meeting on 5 April. Before making a response the Cabinet has requested the views of this committee on the proposals.
- 2.5 Each of the five options needs to be considered against overall value for money, compatibility with the Stonehenge World Heritage Site Management Plan and plans for a new visitor centre, environmental impacts, relief of congestion on the A303, affordability and deliverability.
- 2.6 Following the completion of the public consultation stage, the review will progress to a full assessment of the performance of each of the five options against the above considerations. The final stage will be the preparation of a report to ministers on the results of the consultation exercise and the performance of each shortlisted option. Ministers will then make a decision on the way forward. Should the published scheme be taken forward, then the HA would look to start construction in 2008. Should the cut and cover or partial solution option be pursued, the HA would expect to publish draft orders and an environmental statement in 2007 with a Public Inquiry likely to be held in 2008, with construction starting in 2009. Were the northern or southern route to be taken forward, draft order publication would be by 2008, with a Public Inquiry held in 2009, with construction to start in 2010.

3. Wider Planning Context

- 3.1 The A303 Stonehenge Improvement addresses two issues:-

- The impact of traffic and roads on Stonehenge and the World Heritage Site.
- The problems of road safety and congestion on the existing A303 through the village of Winterbourne Stoke and at the junctions with the A360, A344 and A345.

The World Heritage Site Management Plan (WHSMP) was drawn up in 2000 to provide an overarching policy framework for the Stonehenge World Heritage Site. The Management Plan is adopted Supplementary Planning Guidance by Salisbury District Council.

- 3.2 The main objectives of the WHSMP are to be realised through the Stonehenge Project. The partners to the Stonehenge Project (The Department for Culture, Media and Sport, English Heritage, The

National Trust, the Department for Transport and the HA), confirmed their commitment in 1999 by issuing a joint mission statement with Salisbury District Council and Wiltshire County Council:

“To restore the dignity and isolation of Britain's greatest prehistoric monument, and enable people to enjoy and appreciate it fully by:-

- Removing visual impact and noise of roads and traffic from the vicinity of the Stones;
- Reuniting Stonehenge and its surrounding monuments in their natural chalk downland landscape setting;
- Creating the conditions for improved bio-diversity with flowers, butterflies, birds and insects flourishing;
- Providing improved access, enabling people to roam freely and at no cost throughout the World Heritage Site (WHS); and
- Building a new world-class visitor centre outside the WHS at Countess East.”

3.3 The Stonehenge Project has three principle components:-

1. A new visitor centre north east of Countess Roundabout
2. A land use management plan.
3. The A303 Stonehenge Improvement.

A planning application for a new visitor centre was refused by Salisbury District Council in 2005 and English Heritage have lodged an appeal. At the time of writing this report the Council's Planning and Regulatory Panel has, on review of the refusal reasons (as part of the appeal process), invited English Heritage to resubmit the application. English Heritage's response, as to whether it will be resubmitting the application, is awaited. Provision of Heritage Lottery funding towards construction of this facility is secure subject to planning consent and approval for the A303 Stonehenge Improvement. The A303 Stonehenge Improvement must be delivered to enable the objectives of the other two components to be realised. It is in view of this special context of the scheme, namely the potential to improve the setting of Stonehenge at the heart of the World Heritage Site, that the Government has designated the overall project an “exceptional environmental scheme” with at least one third of the costs coming from heritage sources.

4. Issues for Discussion

General Issues

- 4.1 The main impacts of the five options have been summarised in the Highways Agency consultation leaflet “*A303 Stonehenge Improvement Scheme Review – Public Consultation January 2006*” which is attached to this report as **Appendix 1**.
- 4.2 Reference should also be made to the Highways Agency “*A303 Stonehenge Improvement Scheme Review – Stage 1 Report January 2006*” which is attached to this report as **Appendix 2**. This provides more background on each of the five options, and explains why most of the alternative routes proposed at the Public Inquiry are not recommended. It also explains why the Partial Solution involves a combination of the Countess flyover, A344/A303 junction closure and Winterbourne Stoke Bypass together, as any of these schemes on their own would lead to further problems. This section of the report summarises the impact of each option in terms of environmental, economic and community effects and broader planning issues which have not made explicit within the HA consultation leaflet (**Appendix 1**).
- 4.3 English Heritage insists that any A303 must follow the existing natural contours within the World Heritage Site. The northern and southern routes, if progressed will not utilise methods of screening or bunding normally used to minimise the impact of a new road on its surroundings. This will mean that parts of these routes will be visible from the stones. It also means that if the Cut and Cover option is

pursued, the top of the covered part of the tunnels would form a man-made feature in the landscape within Stonehenge Bottom, which would be visible from the stones. This is because the depth of the cut and cover is shallower than a bored tunnel and Stonehenge Bottom is the deepest depression on the route.

- 4.4 The National Trust, who own sizable parts of the land within the World Heritage Site (WHS) around the stones, have issued a press release stating that they do not support any of the five options. Certain sections of land under their ownership is what is termed “inalienable land”, which means it cannot be compulsorily purchased or bought without the Trust’s agreement, unless the HA was to seek approval from Parliament.

Option Specific Issues

4.5 The Published Scheme (2.1km twin bored tunnels)

Environment – Of the five options, most closely meets the objectives of the World Heritage Site Management Plan. It is acceptable to English Heritage and the National Trust, who despite favouring a longer tunnel, have been prepared to accept it.

Economy – Allows delivery of the visitor centre and upgrade of congested section of A303 to dual carriageway of strategic importance to South West region. Ministers consider the cost of this option to be prohibitively expensive as a result of the higher expected outturn costs, which have come to light since the Public Inquiry in 2004.

Community – Does not pass within close proximity of more than a few residential properties, allows almost unimpeded recreational enjoyment of wider setting of Stonehenge. Concerns were raised at the public inquiry by the emergency services about fire risk within a 2.1km bored tunnel, but these concerns were overridden by the benefits of the scheme on the WHS.

4.6 Northern Route

Environment – Removes A303 from core of WHS. Separates Stonehenge from Woodhenge and other monuments. Significant amount of above ground road building within WHS – contrary to objectives in WHSMP. Land train route to / from visitor centre would pass over the new road at point of cut and cover tunnel. Traffic travelling on the northern route would be visible from the stones at about three separate locations.

Economy – Allows delivery of visitors centre and A303 dualling. Cost higher than Southern Route or Partial Solution, but significantly cheaper than Published Scheme and Cut and Cover option.

Community – Significant noise nuisance and other amenity impact for up to 300 properties (and visual impact for 100 properties) at Larkhill. Junction of A303 with A360 would be moved from Longbarrow crossroads to a site near Airman’s Corner. Allows recreational enjoyment of core of WHS but limits ability to roam freely across road route due to severance effects.

4.7 Southern Route

Environment – Removes A303 from core of WHS. Separates Stonehenge from southern part of WHS including monuments around Normanton Down. Significant amount of above ground road building within WHS – contrary to objectives in WHSMP. The tops of high-sided vehicles on the route would be visible from the stones at one location.

Economy – Allows delivery of visitor centre and A303 dualling. Cost higher than Partial Solution, but significantly cheaper than Published Scheme and Cut and Cover option and slightly cheaper than Northern Route.

Community – Much less visual and noise impact on properties than Northern Route. Allows recreational enjoyment of core of WHS but limits ability to roam freely across road route due to severance effects.

4.8 Cut & Cover Tunnel

Environment – Removes A303 from core of WHS over 2.1km long section at the centre of the site. Unites the setting of WHS and meets WHSMP objectives almost as fully as the Published Scheme (with exception being the top part of the tunnel forming a man-made feature in Stonehenge Bottom due to the reduced depth of excavation on this part of the alignment). This method would cause significant disturbance and damage to sub-soil archaeology. This could be minimised by careful selection of the route alignment. Regardless of which alignment is followed the excavation works would have an adverse visual impact on the setting of the stones and the WHS for the duration of the construction work.

Economy – Allows delivery of visitor centre and A303 dualling. Cost is second highest after the published scheme. There is a risk that ministers will deem that cost is not affordable or value for money. Ministers may be wary of future cost increases in light of this happening with Published Scheme.

Community – As with Southern Route and Published Scheme, does not pass within close proximity of more than a few residential properties. It allows almost unimpeded recreational enjoyment of and access to wider setting of Stonehenge unlike Northern or Southern routes.

4.9 Partial Solution

Environment – Does nothing to meet objectives of WHSMP. Setting of stones would remain as unsatisfactory as today.

Economy – Allows delivery of visitor centre, but does nothing to address congestion on single carriageway section of A303 past the stones, contrary to the recommendations of the SWARMMS, (South West ARea Multi-Modal Study) for this to form the main route between London and the South West. Would risk delaying all proposed upgrades to other single carriageway sections of A303 west of Wylve. Costs the least of all five options.

Community – Likely to result in considerable amounts of rat-running by commuters and other motorists at peak times to avoid congested single-carriageway section of A303 past the stones. This would affect Larkhill, the A345 Countess Road and the B390 between Shrewton and the A36 at Heytesbury. Would preclude unimpeded recreational enjoyment of and access to wider setting of Stonehenge due to visibility of road from stones and severance effect of existing road. The HA's consultants estimate that during the course of an average day approximately 600 vehicles would use the Countess Road, The Packway through Larkhill and the A360 through Shrewton as a route to avoid the A303 past Stonehenge. This would be higher on summer weekends and as traffic levels using the A303 corridor rise.

5.0 **Conclusion & Recommendations**

- 5.1 On balance, the Partial Solution would appear to be unacceptable because it fails to address the most intractable part of the problem – mainly the congestion on the A303 and removing the road from the immediate setting of the stones. This option, were it to be pursued, would raise the prospect of unwelcome rat-running through nearby villages as motorists seek to avoid the bottleneck past the stones. As it would not lead to the realising of the objectives of the WHSMP, it should not be supported.

- 5.2 The Northern Route option whilst addressing the two aforementioned key objectives raises concerns about the affect of a new road in such close proximity to existing dwellings. It would greatly compound the overall impacts of the Stonehenge Project on the residents of the Steel Houses in Fargo Road. The impact of the land train on these residents was one of the principal reasons for refusal of the visitor centre application, however it is considered that such impacts would pale into the background should the northern route for the A303 be chosen. Considering the reluctance of English Heritage to countenance use of bunds and other noise reducing features within the WHS, these adverse impacts on the local community would appear unacceptable. Furthermore the HA's consultants have yet to work out the full detail of how the land train route would cross the A303. It is proposed that this would be achieved through slightly extending the proposed section of cut and cover tunnel. The fact that the proposed route would be visible from the Stones at three separate locations would also be a concern.
- 5.3 Whilst the Cut & Cover option appears to best address the environmental objectives of the WHSMP, it may come at an unacceptably high cost to ministers, or be deemed at risk of further cost overruns. With sensibly designed landscaping to the tunnel roof at Stonehenge Bottom, it is considered that this option could potentially most closely deliver the shared aspirations of removing all the impacts of the roads on the setting of the Stones as required by the WHSMP. There are however serious concerns over the archaeological harm that such a method of construction may cause. If an alignment can be chosen that minimises these impacts, then this has to be seen by the Council as a very favourable option in helping to realise its objectives for the WHS.
- 5.4 The southern route option raises a number of concerns. As with the northern route, it would break virgin turf within the WHS. It would create a new division between monuments within the WHS and the landscape. Perhaps even more controversially, it would have an impact on untouched Scheduled Ancient Monuments contrary to the WHSMP. The proposed route would also result in adverse impacts on nature conservation, affecting an RSPB reserve.
- 5.5 It would appear on examination of the options that the option most likely to achieve the objectives set by the DfT for the review of overall value for money, compatibility with the WHSMP and plans for a new visitor centre, environmental impacts, relief of congestion on the A303, affordability and deliverability is the Cut & Cover option. If the District Council's objectives are taken into account, where the value for money offered by the five options is an issue for the Department for Transport and not a key District Council concern, then the best option remains the Published Scheme.
- 5.6 It is recommended that:
- the Council welcomes the public consultation as part of the Stonehenge Improvement review and reiterates its desire to see the A303 through the WHS upgraded to dual carriageway standard in a form which results in a significant improvement to the setting of the stones.
 - SDC remains supportive of the Published Scheme involving 2.1km bored tunnel as the best option to deliver both the critical infrastructure and environmental improvements to Stonehenge, the surrounding area and the WHS.
 - Members make a recommendation of support for the cut and cover tunnel option as second best alternative should the deep-bore tunnel option not be progressed, subject to the following caveats:
 - (i) That the route and alignment must be chosen which minimises archaeological damage to the WHS.
 - (ii) The roof of the tunnel is sensitively landscaped and contoured so as to blend inconspicuously with the landscape within Stonehenge Bottom.

6.0 Implications

Financial : The improvement of the A303 would benefit businesses in South Wiltshire, encourage development at Solstice Park and boost tourism through the new visitor centre.

Legal : The Council has adopted the Stonehenge World Heritage Site Management Plan as Supplementary Planning Guidance. This sets out the Council's support for improving the setting of

Stonehenge. The five proposed options meet the objectives of this document to varying degrees. Each option facilitates the provision of the proposed visitor centre at Countess East, which is currently the subject of a planning application to the District Council.

Human Rights : None in relation to this report.

Personnel : None in relation to this report.

Community Safety : None in relation to this report.

Environmental : Each of the five options carries varying degrees of adverse environmental impacts on the Stonehenge World Heritage site.

Council's Core Values : Promoting a thriving economy; Communicating with the public; Being environmentally conscientious; Wanting to be an open learning Council and a willing partner.

Wards Affected : Amesbury West, Amesbury East, Durrington, Till Valley & Wylye will be directly affected, the whole of the rest of the District would be affected indirectly.

Consultation : Details contained in the report.

Background Documents:

Electronic Link to **Appendix 1**:

http://www.highways.gov.uk/roads/documents/Stonehenge_Leaflet_web_version.pdf

Electronic Link to **Appendix 2**:

http://www.highways.gov.uk/roads/documents/Scheme_Review_Stage_1_report1.pdf
