The Stonehenge Expressway: an eloquent emblem of a failed transport policy

Guest author, Tim Marshall, Emeritus Professor of Planning at Oxford Brookes University, explains why he is not in favour of the Stonehenge proposal and puts the A303 Expressway in the context of national transport planning policy. Professor Marshall is a planning academic, formerly a planning practitioner with a lifetime interest in archaeology. He writes independently of The Stonehenge Alliance.

The following article is based on Professor Marshall's response to Highways England's A303 Stonehenge consultation last March.

"We need to move urgently to a more considered approach […] not one locking us even deeper into the fossil fuel era." Photo: Visitor Centre car park overflows onto the grassy verge on an average, slightly overcast, Tuesday in August at

Stonehenge World Heritage Site, 2017, Stonehenge Alliance

I have read all documentation produced by the Department for Transport and consultants and fail to see that any rational case has been made. I oppose the whole project to make an Expressway. We need to move urgently to a more considered approach to transport planning, a transport system based on long term sustainability, not locking us even deeper into the fossil fuel era.
There is now a general policy to push Expressways across England with remarkable similarity to schemes discussed in the 1970s. There is little or no research evidence for the rhetorical claims in DfT and Highways England documents that massive road investments such as this will make a difference to economic productivity or support claims for transport, community or environmental gains. The improvement to "cultural heritage" claim is particularly doubtful and disturbing, given the failure to consider the landscape impacts across the whole Stonehenge area in the long term.

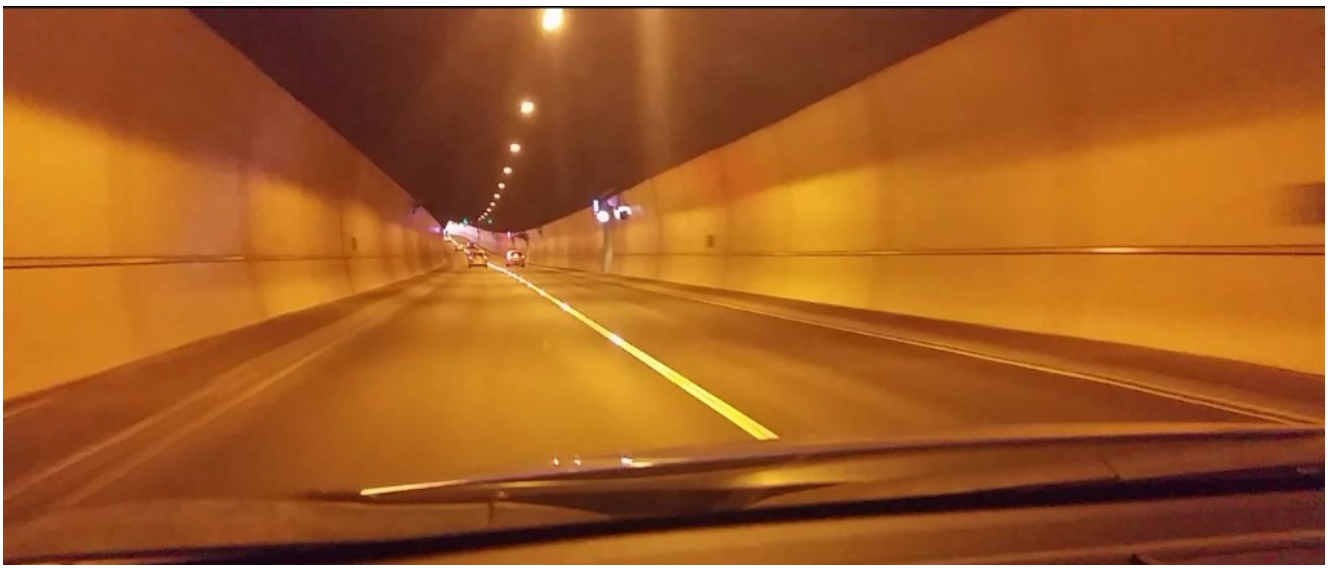
The arguments against the cost effectiveness of the present approach have been rehearsed many times since the early 1990s and retain all their validity unlike the 2013-2014 DfT studies on which the present proposals are based. These were very clearly too limited in their brief and scope, with almost a built-in order to come up with road expansion schemes. The absence of consideration of real long term sustainable alternatives invalidates the post 2013 studies. A much more open study is needed for the whole south west region, with a particular focus on the sub-region of the World Heritage Site, linking the largest population centres in south east England to the south west.

The Stonehenge proposal: £1-2 billion

“In a landscape which has endured through the centuries with minimal extra aggression, there is no case for spending recklessly on such heavy handed interventions in the twenty first century.” Image: Still from consultation video, Highways England.

Spending between 1 and 2 billion pounds on the A303 scheme (likely to have a half life of perhaps 20 years) may be one of the least economical (in the real sense) uses of societal resources I have seen in a lifetime of involvement and teaching in relation to the built environment. Such road expansion whether with tunnels, dual carriageways, “Expressways” or “smart motorways” will look as foolish and failed as many previous policy disasters. In a landscape which has endured through the centuries with minimal extra aggression, there is no case for spending recklessly on such heavy handed interventions in the twenty first century.

Tunnelling



“The knowledge that a heavily trafficked road is running underground […] will affect the appreciation of the monument and overall experience…” Image: Inside Hindhead tunnel, Stonehenge Alliance.

The massive tunnel portals, wherever they are placed, will affect the whole district to a dramatic extent. For many visitors the knowledge that a heavily trafficked road is running underground through the Stonehenge district will affect the appreciation of the monument and overall experience as much as the present road. The damage to archaeological remains and ecological systems is often as great as, if not greater than, the alternatives. Tunnelling should in my view be used much more selectively than is now being considered.
The whole Stonehenge and Avebury area is one that needs the most careful treatment, seen within a temporal frame of not decades, but centuries (if not millennia). Almost yearly now archaeological finds and associated historical re-assessments are showing up the limits of the present boundaries. Over coming decades it is likely that more and more people will want to visit these areas. Sustainable modes of transport need to be designed to allow these visitors to appreciate the whole area.

Only modal shift can be the long term response

What should be done instead? Over a million visitors are apparently being very effectively catered for now. Visitors

are struck by the very high level of experience which is affected little by the presence of the A303. When we compare the cost of the 2013 visitor centre package (£27 million) with this road scheme, the difference is so large as to be absurd. Just a miniscule portion of the money saved by not making any major road changes would finance a state of the art set of public transport schemes to make the Stonehenge and Avebury zones non-car access friendly – largely by supporting buses, and train services where practical. Over a period of 10 to 15 years these efforts could create a showpiece for a more sustainable approach to World Heritage Site management. It will take resources and time to make this shift. In the meantime, the A303 can continue to function with its current levels of traffic, until an effective public policy starts to remove the pressure from this artery.

The present proposal is essentially a panic measure which future generations will look back on with horror. If built, it would be an eloquent emblem of the failed British transport policy – a star exhibit for the prosecution. We need to understand the effects on succeeding generations and wider ecosystems.

I hope that there is still time for a full independent review to give a credible regional answer to the challenges of transport policy in this area.

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Highways England's Chief

Executive snubs UNESCO's advice

Jim O'Sullivan, Chief Executive, Highways England

UNESCO cautioned the Government last July that Highways England's proposals for a 2.9km (1.8-mile) tunnel and new 4-lane carriageway located within the Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS) were inadequate and highly damaging, saying:

> *"It is not considered satisfactory to suggest that the benefits from a 2.9km tunnel to the centre of the property can offset the significant damage from lengths of four-lane approach roads in cutting elsewhere in the property."*

The international body's advice to the Government was to explore further options: a surface bypass to the south of the property or longer tunnel options "to remove dual carriageway cuttings from the property".

In a recent interview published in Local Transport Today 'UNESCO's views rebuffed' (18 August 2017, subscription, in full as PDF here), Highways England's Chief Executive Jim O'Sullivan declared himself satisfied that UNESCO's criticism

doesn’t prompt a rethink:

> *“I don’t think so, I mean we have the support of the major stakeholders.”*

The “major stakeholders” referred to are presumably Historic England, English Heritage and the National Trust.

The risks of a henge-centric outlook

Although Government can ignore UNESCO’s advice, doing so could lead to Stonehenge being placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger. This would not only bring international disgrace upon our country and those responsible for protecting our heritage, but also cause outrage amongst eminent archaeologists, historians, writers, architects, artists and a legion of thinking people throughout the world.

Nonetheless, Mr O’Sullivan considers the scheme an improvement:

> *“A lot of people feel that these [our plans] safeguard that monument and make it much better than it is at the moment.”*

Apparently, Mr O’Sullivan’s main concern is the Henge monument, already safeguarded on our behalf by English Heritage. He is, perhaps, unaware that the Stonehenge WHS extends over some ten square miles which the Government is committed to protect under the terms of the World Heritage Convention – along with its Outstanding Universal Value as expressed at the Site’s inscription in 1986.

It is this wider Stonehenge landscape that contains huge potential for future research, a landscape in which the people who constructed the Henge lived, farmed and buried their dead. It is for the quality and magnitude of surviving evidence of the activities of our prehistoric ancestors over some two thousand years that this whole area is considered by UNESCO

and, incidentally, the "major stakeholders" Mr O'Sullivan mentions, as a "landscape without parallel".

Should Orcadians not object to the Stonehenge Expressway?

Commenting on the unpublished results of the consultation last spring, Mr O'Sullivan suggests that the analysis will be characterised by those who are in favour living near the A303 versus those who object living elsewhere.

> *"When you look at the people who are in favour of us doing something they are the people who live somewhere on that corridor and they know the situation is desperate. When you look at the people who object they are, like UNESCO, from all over the world. The fact that somebody living on the Orkneys (sic) has an opinion but it's somebody else's problem is something we have to weigh-up in the consultation."*

Neither Orcadians, nor lovers of heritage, locally or around the world, would deny that steps should be taken to improve local people's quality of life, but not by damaging an internationally important heritage site. We might also point out that Highways England's proposal to widen the road is a £1.4bn short term solution that takes us back to the vicious circle of road building in the 1980s when environmental vandalism such as that seen at Twyford Down was common practice.

Road widening might achieve traffic relief for a decade or so, less if it is promoted as an alternative route to the M4/M5 to reach the South West from London and the South East. Further, when incidents caused closure of the new dual carriageway or tunnel there would be misery for many local villagers.

If Highways England thinks it perfectly acceptable to dig up great swathes of a World Heritage Site against the advice of UNESCO what hope is there for our heritage? Is nothing sacrosanct?

What Mr O’Sullivan needs to weigh up is whether it is better to damage a WHS for ever and suffer international disgrace on the one hand, or to follow UNESCO’s advice and properly reconsider the proposal on the other. Either way, the eyes of the world will be watching, including people who live in Orkney and value their own Neolithic WHS and its emerging links with Stonehenge.

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We would like to thank Local Transport Today for giving us permission to publish their article.

Please consider supporting our petition to prevent further damage to the Stonehenge WHS.

UNESCO: Reprieve for Stonehenge WHS?

41st Session of the World Heritage Committee in Kraków, Poland, 2017. Top table Chair (Poland) with Rapporteur and specialist advisors from ICCROM, ICOMOS and IUCN. Facing at individual tables are the WH Committee members, elected for 4 years. Ranged behind them are delegates from the State Parties including the UK . An ambassador is shown speaking on camera.

UNESCO'S World Heritage Committee [1] has called on the UK Government to rethink plans to build a 2.9km tunnel for a widened A303 past Stonehenge. Representatives on the Committee from 21 countries agreed with UNESCO's 2017 Advisory Mission's report that the benefits of a 2.9km tunnel to the centre of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS) cannot be offset against the damage it would cause to other parts of the Site.

Stonehenge Alliance representatives were present to hear the decision that firmly signalled to the UK Government that the

Outstanding Universal Value of the WHS must be fully respected.

The Government must "explore further options with a view to avoiding impacts on the Outstanding Universal Value of the property", including a southern bypass for the A303 or a longer tunnel "to remove dual carriageway cuttings from the property". [2]

Kate Fielden, Hon. Sec. to the Alliance and representative for RESCUE and CPRE Wiltshire said:

> *It is very heartening that our concerns about the A303 widening project that we have voiced over many years are now being addressed by UNESCO.*
>
> *It is to be hoped that the Government will wish to adopt a more considered approach at Stonehenge that meets the demands of the 1972 World Heritage Convention for conservation, protection and rehabilitation of the whole WHS for future generations to enjoy.*

Kate Freeman from Friends of the Earth South West and manager of the Alliance's social media said:

> *The UNESCO report was critical of the inadequacy of meaningful involvement of the top archaeology specialists and the wider community, including ourselves.*
>
> *We look forward to engaging positively in future discussions about solutions for the WHS.*

The Government has seven months in which to demonstrate its commitment to our country's most iconic World Heritage Site.

World Heritage Watch

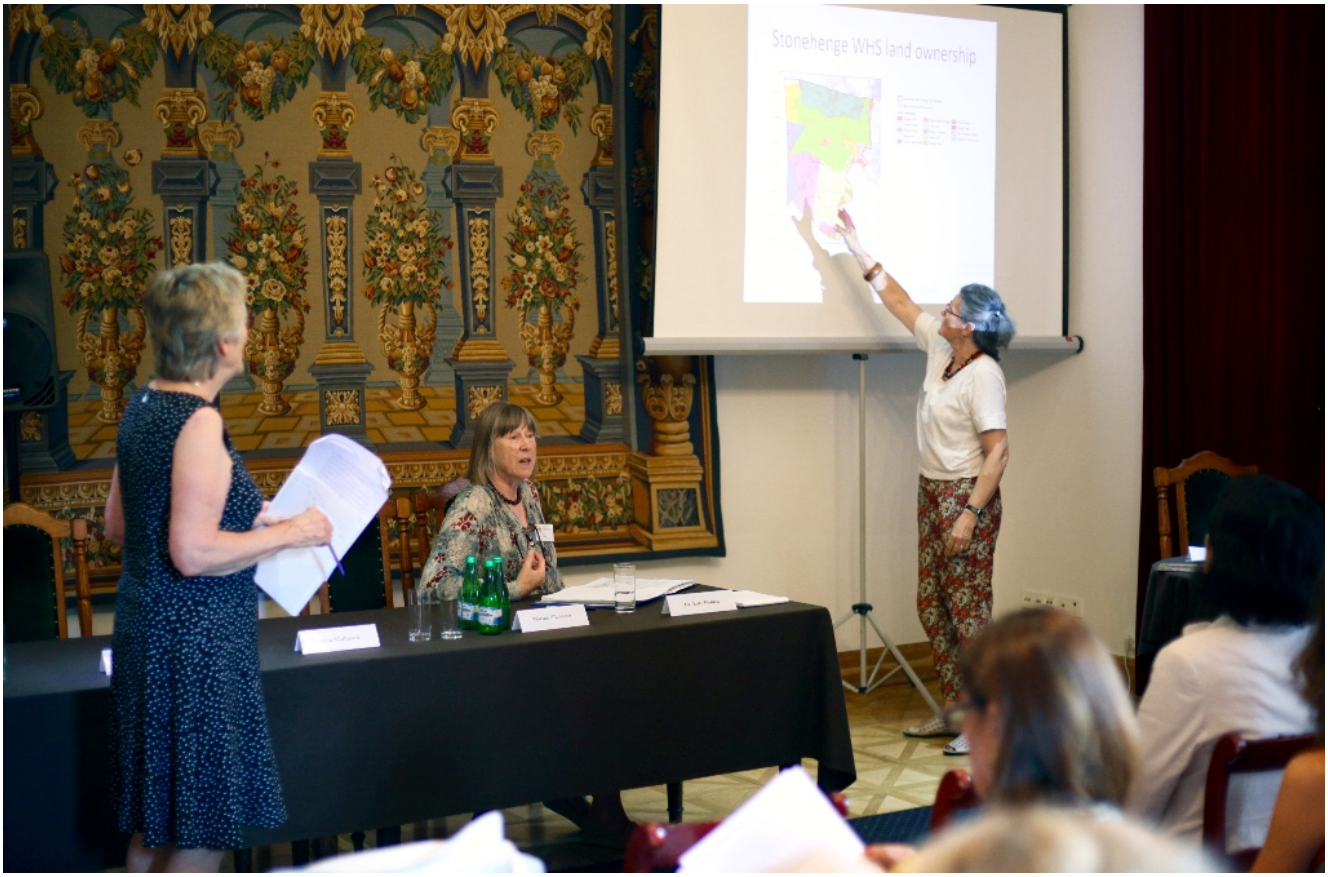
Last month the Stonehenge Alliance was invited to join World

Heritage Watch (WHW) formed four years ago to support and enhance civil society's engagement with UNESCO's decision making process. WHW held a two day forum immediately prior to UNESCO's annual WH Committee meeting. This year's Forum included some 30 organisations from around the world who, like us, are fighting to safeguard their local World Heritage Sites from damage. The forum was addressed by high level representatives from ICOMOS, IUCN, and the World Heritage Centre as well as an academic researching the accountability and politics of the WH Committee.

The Forum experience was remarkable in giving us the opportunity to make friends and helpful contacts; and to learn about other World Heritage disasters and how they are being dealt with. We also gained useful knowledge about the workings of the WH Committee.

Representatives of NGOs from around the world raising awareness of World Heritage Sites under threat. Villa Decius, Kraków, June – 1 July 2017 Photo: Elena Belokurova/World

Heritage Watch, Villa Decius, Krakòw.



Presentation by Stonehenge Alliance to World Heritage Watch Forum, Krakow Photo: Martin Link/World Heritage Watch, Villa Decius, Kraków.

Lobbying: Portuguese Ambassador H.E. Senhor José Filipe Mendes Moraes Cabral with WH Watch founding Chair Stephan Dömpke and Kate Fielden, Hon Sec of Stonehenge Alliance at International Congress Centre, Kraków.

NOTES

1. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee is made up of members from 21 countries who meet annually to consider nominations for WHSs put forward by the Paris based Secretariat, the World Heritage Centre, and to make recommendations based on specialist Mission reports on the condition of WHS properties. The Committee has powers to place Sites on the “at risk” register or to delist them.

The management of five UK WHSs was criticised in reports to the WH Committee: Cornish and West Devon Mining Landscape, the Forth Bridge, The Palace of Westminster, Stonehenge, and Liverpool Maritime Mercantile City. The last, Liverpool WHS,

remains on the “at risk” register for a further year.

2. The Report to the WH Committee and its now adopted decision on Stonehenge can be found here.

Dear Candidate, I have 3 questions for you…

An A level history student from near Stonehenge who has signed our petition was filmed this week asking all UK candidates to protect the Stonehenge World Heritage Site from further damage, rightly pointing out that

> *“This is my heritage! What message will you send to future generations?”*

The three questions asked, that you might like to pose as well, are:

> *“If elected will you*
>
> 1. *Strongly oppose any further damage to the Stonehenge WHS, especially from road building?*
> 2. *Seek to strengthen protection for our WHSs through legislation?*
> 3. *Argue for less damaging alternatives to road building*

The General Election is your opportunity to quiz candidates and influence the decision not to turn the A303 through Stonehenge World Heritage Site into a 4-lane ‘expressway’

within one of the world's most famous prehistoric landscapes.

The second question highlights the weakness of World Heritage Sites in the UK, which have no legal protection, unlike National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Look out for hustings advertised in local papers and radio stations as well as their Facebook and Twitter feeds. They are not always well advertised so check out t**his crowd-sourced list of local hustings** and search by constituency name.

All your candidates can be found by **post code or constituency on the BBC election site here**.

Let us know how you get on!

Two questions to candidates #GE2017

The general election is your chance to ask your prospective candidates questions and ensure they understand that protecting the whole of Stonehenge World Heritage Site is important to you.

[The following two questions will be reviewed when manifestos and list of all candidates have been published].

1: Protection of UK World Heritage Sites

Unlike Australia, which has legislation to protect its World Heritage Sites, our World Heritage Sites are vulnerable to development such as the road scheme at Stonehenge because they are not fully protected in planning law.

Do you think that World Heritage Sites in the UK should have the same legal status as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks to ensure their protection from inappropriate development?

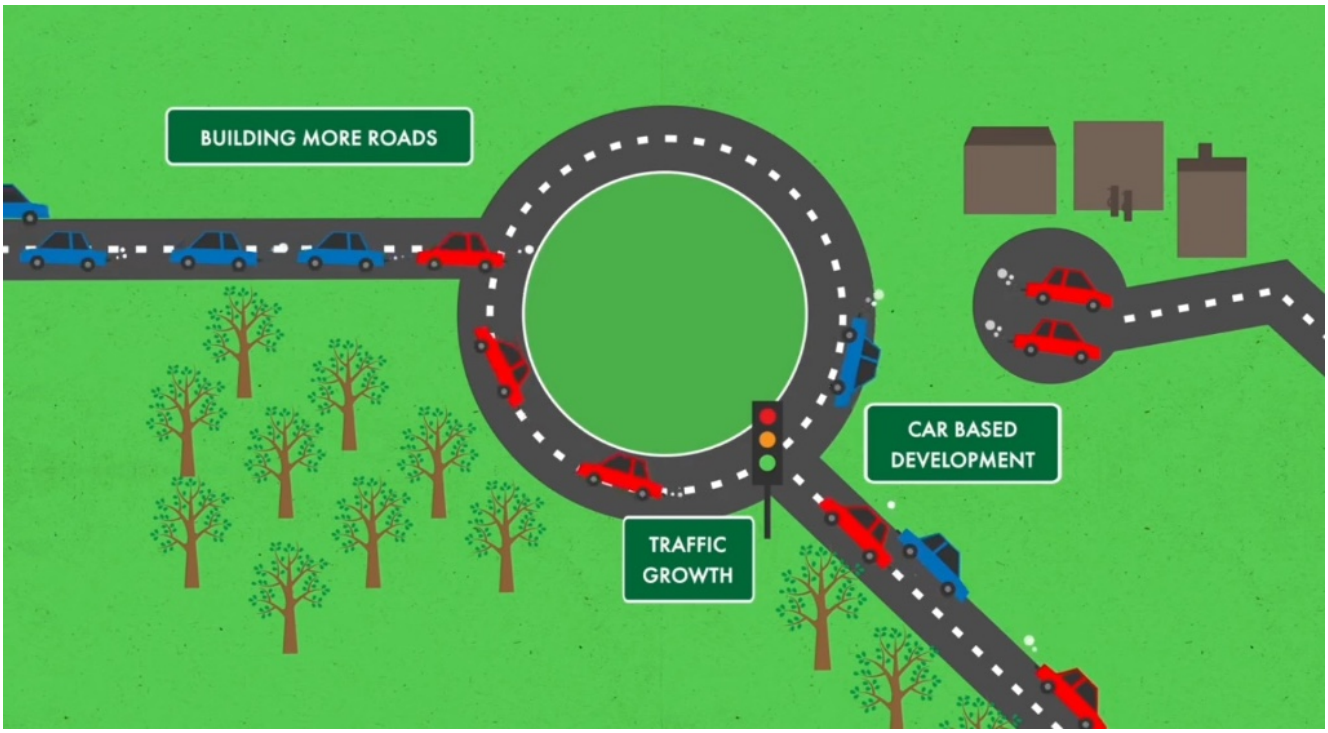
Newbury bypass in construction 20 years ago. An example of a dual carriageway that did not deliver hoped-for benefits. http://www.bbowt.org.uk/blog/bbowtblog/2016/04/01/newbury-bypass-20-years-road-environmental-ruin-or-recovery

2: Stonehenge road scheme

Stonehenge World Heritage Site is at risk of permanent damage from a short tunnel and 4-lane highway, contrary to the World Heritage Convention. Yet studies repeatedly show that road widening does not bring about hoped-for benefits.*

If elected, will you object to the Government's plan to widen the A303 by Stonehenge as part of an Expressway to the South West?

* New roads increase traffic, damage special places, and lead to little or no economic regeneration says *The End of the road? Challenging the road-building consensus* – review of road schemes by CPRE, April 2017



Road widening increases traffic and more car based development.