Cancellation of Stonehenge road welcomed!

Stonehenge Alliance Press Release



The Stonehenge Alliance [1] has welcomed today's announcement by Chancellor Rachel Reeves to cancel the £2.5bn A303 Stonehenge scheme [2] as a "low value, unaffordable commitment" [3].

The Stonehenge Alliance believe the road should have been binned in 2020 when it was recommended for refusal, after a six month examination, for the damage it would cause to the World Heritage Site [4]. However, the previous government's obsession with road building resulted in it approving the scheme despite acknowledging that it would cause permanent and irreversible harm to the World Heritage Site. It was also grotesquely expensive, but even based on National Highways' own figures the economic case for building was fatally flawed. The road scheme would have been lucky to create 50 pence in

economic benefits for every £1 spent [5].

John Adams, chair of the Stonehenge Alliance said:

“This is a vindication of all the work of so many people over so many years from supporters around the world. National Highways’ misguided project was called out for what it was: low value and unaffordable. It was also highly damaging. Now that it has been scrapped, we need to move on. As soon as the budget is there, we need to ensure, as a priority, that local traffic is better managed and rail access to the South West improved.”

Tom Holland, historian and president of the Stonehenge Alliance, said:

“This is wonderful news. This entire monstrous project, a proposal to drive a gash of concrete & tarmac through our most sacred prehistoric landscape, should never have got off the drawing board. That cancelling it will also save £2.5 bn is obviously an additional perk.”

– ENDS –

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Notes to editors:

[1] The Stonehenge Alliance supporter-organisations are: Ancient Sacred Landscape Network; Campaign to Protect Rural England; Friends of the Earth; Rescue, the British Archaeological Trust; and Transport Action Network.

[2] The £1.7bn is from around 2017 and is clearly out of date as can be seen by this answer to Danny Kruger MP's Parliamentary question (12 March 2024). This admits that even in 2018, the construction cost was estimated to be £1.9bn with maintenance costs of £8m a year. With construction inflation being so high since then, it is likely that the combined total cost of the scheme is over £2.5bn and that's before it runs into any difficulties tunnelling in phosphatic chalk.

[3] Rachel Reeves outlined her proposals this afternoon to Parliament. When she spoke on transport starting from 15:47, she said Labour would not go ahead with the A303 Stonehenge scheme, but she didn't say cancel. However, in the published policy paper the scheme is listed as cancelled (section 3.2)

[4] The Examination Report, dated 2 January, 2020 and written by five planning inspectors, who presided over a six month examination, recommended that the application be refused. It was published on 12 November, 2020, when the Secretary of State made his first decision to approve the scheme.

[5] The scheme's economic case depends on National Highways claiming that the scheme would deliver £1bn in heritage benefits. But given the Examination Authority recommended refusal for the 'permanent and irreversible' harm it would cause the World Heritage Site (see [4] below) and the Secretary of State's acceptance that the scheme would have a significant impact, this is no longer credible.

National Highways has also tried to boost its economic case by ignoring costs already spent and increasing benefits without providing any evidence for its claims. Even so, the scheme would only deliver at best 50 pence in benefits for every £1 spent. See page 4 onwards of Stonehenge Alliance's rebuttal of National Highways change to its economic assessment.

Are National Highways' provisions for the rare stone-curlew on the Salisbury Plain secure?



A pair of fledgling goggle-eyed stone-curlew on the Salisbury Plain Special Protection Area. Image copyright: Stonehenge Alliance

Stonehenge Alliance comments on National Highways' planning application for a replacement stone-curlew, prompted journalist, Gareth Huw Davies, to ask in this guest article:

> ***"At a time of declining biodiversity, should we deliberately risk degrading a complex mesh of natural life in favour of a road scheme?"***

The first casualty of National Highways' multi-billion-pound

scheme to plunge the A303 in a tunnel under the Stonehenge World Heritage site is likely to be a strange, rare bird of the night, as insignificant and retiring in the historic landscape as the stones are massive and dominant.

Few people will ever see the stone-curlew, crow-sized with a large head, yellow legs, and a haunting call. It sits perfectly camouflaged on the rolling downland by day, and probes for invertebrates in the short grass with its sharp eyes by night.

Confined to a few sites in East Anglia and Southern England, the bird is listed under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, an elite list of rare birds 'protected by special penalties'. One of its strongholds is near Stonehenge on the Salisbury Plain thanks to a conservation programme involving farmers and the RSPB over the past 20 years. [1]

The problem for the stone-curlew (unrelated to the curlew, predominantly a shore bird) is that one of its nesting sites in Winterbourne Stoke just happens to lie within the construction zone of the A303 scheme.

National Highways does not gloss over the damage the road will do to the stone-curlew breeding sites on Salisbury Plain. But the message on its website is reassuring. 'We found stone-curlews breeding in the area as part of our environmental surveys, so because it's (sic) protected we need to make special provision for them. The creation of an area of new chalk grassland will establish new habitats for wildflowers, bats, butterflies and birds, including the rare Stone-curlew.' [2]

So far, so optimistic. National Highways has applied to Wiltshire Council for permission to create a replacement breeding plot, on Parsonage Down National Nature Reserve. This would be a one hectare 'land scrape', where turf would be

removed to expose the chalk. The hope is that the migrating stone-curlews returning in the spring would, of their own volition, find this an attractive breeding habitat.

In addition, National Highways has even held out the prospect of ‘net enhancement’ by creating a further breeding plot on the RSPB’s reserve at Winterbourne Downs, eleven kilometres east of Stonehenge.

But are National Highways and their RSPB advisers being too blasé about the potential of stone-curlew finding a new safe nesting spot? Is the road promoter not being overly optimistic that it will achieve ‘net enhancement’ on new plots eleven kilometres away? These site-faithful birds will surely look closer to home. It is surprising that Natural England and the RSPB both support the application. Neither has objected to the threat of disturbance, from the A303 road scheme, to the population successfully established by the RSPB near Stonehenge where they have created the perfect habitat over many years. [3]

After all, attracting stone-curlew to new plots is not the same as introducing red kites in Southern England in the 1990s, untroubled as they boldly soar over town and countryside. Stone-curlews are known to be easily disturbed, and even if the new site were quickly colonised, the bird would face an immediate adverse factor.

Land close to the new nesting site is to be the place where contractors will dump ‘arisings’, 400,000 m^3 of chalk excavated from the tunnel and road cuttings. Objectors to the road scheme, the Stonehenge Alliance, question whether the stone-curlew could tolerate years of heavy vehicle movements and human activity close to the new plot. [4, 5]

Some might see a huge imbalance here: the fate of a rare, retiring bird which most people will never see, and may not even have heard of, set against the, so its proponents claim,

benefits of a new road created to make life easier for the public and business.

But look at it another way. In a world of severely declining biodiversity, should we risk deliberately degrading yet another piece of the complex mesh of natural life we revere so much in TV programmes, in favour of a transient, polluting form of transport which itself could become obsolete in not too many generations from now?

References and further reading

[1] RSPB (27 February 2017), The return of the stone-curlew

[2] National Highways (25 January 2024), Planning application for stone-curlew breeding plot

[3] Irvin Times (15 May 2024), The National Trust, RSPB and WWF unveiled guidance on Wednesday designed to help workers encourage their businesses to put the climate and nature crisis at the heart of decision-making.

[4] Taylor et al (2007), Work on disturbance factors to Stone Curlew on Salisbury Plain quoted in Sharp et al (2008), The effect of housing development and roads on the distribution of stone curlews in the Brecks: Evidence to support the Appropriate Assessment of development plans and projects in Breckland

[5] Comments by the stone-curlew specialist advising Stonehenge Alliance can be found on p9 Appendix 2 **here**. At the time of publication, National Highways' application had not been determined by Wiltshire Council.

Listen to the stone-curlew

Stone curlews have been nicknamed Goggle-eyed plovers, Thick knee and Wailing heath chickens. Listen to their call at dusk and dawn here: BBC Radio 4 (30 April 2014), Tweet of the day



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