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George McDonic MBE
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CMS 266212/asg
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Dear Mr McDonic,

Thank you for your letter of 21 May drawing my attention to recent announcements regarding Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS) and its environs.

Stonehenge is one of England's most valued and popular heritage assets, and the UK Government places great importance on the stewardship and protection of this and all of our World Heritage Sites. I was delighted to learn that the Stonehenge Visitor Centre recently won a prestigious Europa Nostra Award, and I note the citation recorded that:

"The Jury recognised that the opening of the Stonehenge visitor centre in 2013 was the fulfilment of many years of hard work to find a solution to traffic and visitor problems for this outstanding World Heritage Site. They admired the new building, designed by international architects, discreetly out of view of Stonehenge, and the interpretation based on major programmes of research into the archaeology and early history of the area. The partnership formed between English Heritage and the National Trust to manage the approaches to the monument is a fine example of cooperation between the UK's two leading conservation bodies."

The announcement by Government in December 2014 was for funding to investigate the design and environmental impact of a tunnel of *at least* 2.9km on the A303 at Stonehenge. Currently no length has been agreed for the tunnel, nor has the location of the tunnel or its portals been decided. I would like to reassure you that no approval will be given for any scheme until a full impact assessment has been carried out. Any proposed scheme for the tunnel will be subjected to extensive public consultation and rigorous examination within the planning system, including assessment against the relevant ICOMOS guidance on heritage impact assessment to ensure that any impact on the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site is taken into consideration.

As no scheme is yet available for assessment, it is premature to contend that it will lead to the destruction of the site's archaeology or setting. It is important that judgement is reserved until there is a scheme to assess, and the UK Government has committed to working closely with UNESCO and their advisors ICOMOS throughout this



process. To this end, we have invited a UNESCO mission to visit the site in late 2015 to ensure that they are involved in the discussions at the earliest possible stage.

The traffic problems at Stonehenge WHS have been a widely recognised issue for many years. Currently the A303 bisects the WHS landscape, negatively impacting on the setting of Stonehenge and other significant prehistoric monuments within the WHS. As far back as 2007, UNESCO expressed regret that the A303 Road Improvement Scheme, which contained a proposal for a 2.1km tunnel, had been cancelled due to the cost, and urged that a solution be found to the traffic congestion in the WHS. The removal of the roads surrounding Stonehenge is therefore a long-standing objective which took a major step forward with the closure and grassing over of the A344 in 2013 as part of the Stonehenge Environmental Improvements Programme. Placing the A303 in a tunnel at this point now offers the opportunity to significantly enhance the setting of Stonehenge, and to finally address the traffic problems and reunite the ancient landscape.

I note that in your publicity material, you encourage those reading to write directly to UNESCO to urge their intervention in the tunnel scheme. As outlined above, any proposed scheme will include a heritage impact assessment in line with ICOMOS guidance, and my Department will maintain an ongoing dialogue with UNESCO from the earliest stages of the scheme, so that they are well sighted on the proposals as they develop and have the opportunity to comment. Beyond that, UNESCO does not have a remit to intervene in the UK planning system through which the scheme will progress. Directing such correspondence to UNESCO, even before a scheme is available for assessment, therefore serves no useful purpose, and rather risks damaging the UK's international reputation by conflating anxiety about what might happen in the future with genuine and current threats to our World Heritage Sites.

If you are minded to continue to urge the public to write letters regarding Stonehenge WHS, these would be better directed to the UK Government, where the facts can be properly addressed and clarified where needed, and from where any pertinent information can inform the planning process. My officials stand ready to discuss these issues with you or other interested parties, and can be contacted at Hannah.Jones@culture.gov.uk

There is a consensus across all interested parties that the outstanding universal value of Stonehenge and Avebury WHS must be protected for this and future generations. My Department will be closely monitoring the development of the tunnel scheme as it progresses, and will continue working to ensure that the site's international heritage value is taken fully into consideration in any scheme that comes forward. Any further correspondence on this matter should be directed to the Heritage Minister, Tracey Crouch.

Yours sincerely
John Whittingdale

Rt Hon John Whittingdale OBE MP
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport