

THE STONEHENGE ALLIANCE

Chairman, George McDonic, MBE, BL, DIPLTP, FRTPI, DPA, FFB

From the Hon. Secretary, Dr Kate Fielden

The Rt. Hon. Grant Shapps, MP
Secretary of State for Transport
Department for Transport
Great Minster House, 33 Horseferry Road
London SW1P 4DR

20 January 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

An Open Letter: A303 Stonehenge: Amesbury to Berwick Down Expressway Scheme

I write on behalf of the Stonehenge Alliance,[1] a group of non-governmental environmental and archaeological organisations. We oppose the highly damaging A303 Stonehenge Expressway Scheme which is heavily criticised by UNESCO's World Heritage Committee.

The Scheme offers very poor value for money, would cause significant harm to the World Heritage Site, and poses a high risk in proposing to tunnel through weak Phosphatic Chalk.

Our specialists gave evidence to the 2019 Examination into the Scheme (Case Summary attached).[2] Their more detailed evidence is held in the Examination Library.[3] We hope you might be minded to consider the following particular concerns in reaching your decision on the Scheme.

Value for money The Scheme is considered by Highways England to be low value for money, each £1.00 of expenditure being expected to generate £1.08 of benefits. Most of the total claimed benefits derive from a seriously flawed cultural heritage valuation without which the Scheme would be poor value for money indeed at a mere 21 pence return for each pound it would cost to construct. These matters, along with rising costs and only partial corridor upgrade, are highlighted in the Reports of the National Audit Office (20 May 2019) and the Public Accounts Committee (3 July 2019).

Cost overruns Information released to us by Highways England, via FoI (December 2019), confirms our consultant hydrogeologist and geotechnical specialist's advice that unpredictable and extensive vertical and horizontal zones of very poor quality and weak Phosphatic Chalk in the western area of the proposed tunnel and cutting route clearly demonstrate the extreme difficulty of tunnelling through the highly variable Rock Strength of the Chalk bedrock. Much information is still lacking on the expected highly adverse ground and groundwater conditions that would be encountered during tunnelling. All of these major geological, hydrogeological and geotechnical "unknowns" could lead to very significant amounts of downtime and cost overruns if the project goes ahead. Presumably such costs would have to be borne by the public purse.

International Commitments UNESCO's 2019 World Heritage Committee condemned the A303 upgrade in its current form. Should the Scheme go ahead as proposed, not only would

the UK Government be in breach of its International World Heritage Convention obligations but there is also a strong possibility that Stonehenge's World Heritage status would be withdrawn. Cultural vandalism on such a scale at this iconic heritage site would inevitably bring international disgrace.

Climate change In their 2019 Progress Report to Parliament, the Committee on Climate Change stated that "Transport is now the highest-emitting sector and must be a key contributor towards the reductions in greenhouse gas emissions needed over the period to 2030."

Parliament has declared a Climate Emergency and set a legal target for net zero emissions by 2050. The decision on the Stonehenge Scheme sits squarely within this frame. If built, the extra speed and volume of traffic created would have a high carbon impact, assigned a negative value of £86 million by Highways England. This is likely to be an underestimate and if properly costed would further undermine the economic case for the Scheme.

Conclusion The scheme is very expensive, carries a high risk of unforeseen problems and cost overruns, would cost far more than it could ever realise in benefits and would cause significant damage to the World Heritage Site, possibly placing its UNESCO designation in jeopardy.

Failure to provide a Strategic Environmental Assessment of upgrading the Stonehenge section along with other intended A303 upgrades has denied the public true understanding of the full impact of these schemes and, indeed, of more sustainable possible alternatives.

Government Departments are being asked to look again at value for money. We therefore urge you to reject the present A303 Stonehenge Scheme which represents a significant waste of public resources and would result in lasting harm and few economic benefits.

I look forward to receiving your reply.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Kate Fielden
Hon Secretary to the Stonehenge Alliance

Attachments

Stonehenge Alliance Summary of Case to A303 Stonehenge Examination

Notes

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 Stonehenge Alliance's Summary of Case may also be accessed via the National Infrastructure Planning A303 Stonehenge website at <https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/wp-content/ipc/uploads/projects/TR010025/TR010025-001707-Stonehenge%20Alliance%20-%20Summary%20of%20Case.pdf>.
3. For the A303 Stonehenge Examination website Library, please see <https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/projects/south-west/a303-stonehenge/>.