

20 July 2005 A303 REVIEW

On 20 July 2005 Roads Minister Dr Stephen Ladyman announced that a detailed review of the options to ease congestion on the A303 and improve the setting around Stonehenge is to be carried out.

The review is necessary because there has been a very substantial increase in the estimated costs of the proposed Stonehenge tunnel since the scheme went to Public Inquiry.

Following recent detailed site survey work carried out by the Highways Agency the estimated costs of the scheme have risen from £284m when the draft Orders were published in 2003 to some £470m. This significant increase on original costs is due to two main factors; very large quantities of phosphatic (soft, weak) chalk and a high water table, with the groundwater potentially rising to the surface at times of heavy rainfall. These factors would significantly complicate the tunnelling process and extend the overall construction period of the scheme.

Dr Stephen Ladyman, Roads Minister, said:

"The increase in scheme costs represents a significant change to the basis on which the Government originally decided to progress this scheme. Our recognition of the importance of Stonehenge as a World Heritage Site remains unchanged but given the scale of the cost increase we have to re-examine whether the scheme still represents value for money and if it remains the best option for delivering the desired improvements".

The Government plans to carry out a detailed review of the options, consulting relevant environmental interests including, in particular, English Heritage and the National Trust, before taking a final decision on the Inspector's Report. The review will also consider the implications of delaying the Stonehenge scheme for the delivery of improvements proposed for other single carriageway sections of the A303 further to the west. We will make an announcement on the way forward as soon as possible.

Further comments DCMS

David Lammy, Minister for Culture, said,

"Visiting Stonehenge was one of my first priorities as Culture Minister. Stonehenge is a World Heritage site with iconic status attracting more than 800,000 visitors each year from all parts of the Globe. Now that the Inspector's report is published we will work closely with colleagues in the Department for Transport, English Heritage and the National Trust to re-examine how we can best meet our objectives for the setting of Stonehenge. The significant increase in costs for the A303 road scheme means that we must be certain that the way ahead represents value for money. "

English Heritage

English Heritage welcomes the recommendations of the Inspector's Report and the fact that it endorses the proposed A303 road improvement scheme. By ending the stranglehold of traffic on the A303 and A344, the proposed road scheme is integral to realising the vision of re-uniting Stonehenge with its landscape and improving the experience for visitors. It also brings immense economic benefits to the South West and to the nation.

We understand why the Department of Transport is concerned about costs. It is a complex and expensive scheme. However, we continue to believe that the proposed road scheme represents the best value for money for achieving all the desired improvements while offering protection to the underlying archaeology.

We will, of course, play a full part with other interested parties in the Government's intended review. This process must give full consideration to the national and

international significance of the Stonehenge Project, and need not, in our view, be a lengthy one or delay the road scheme unduly.

National Trust

The National Trust called on the Government to use its review of the Stonehenge roads scheme to explore “creative solutions” that safeguard the central objective of reuniting the ancient stones with the surrounding landscape of the World Heritage Site.

The Trust welcomed the Government’s assurance that its recognition of the importance of Stonehenge “remains unchanged” but continues to believe that this requires a tunnel of at least 2.9km. The Trust also expressed concern that the review of options announced today should not in any way diminish the quality of the long-awaited project or delay it substantially.

The Government’s decision to review the options in the light of escalating cost increases needs to allow the broadest possible approach to addressing not just the cost implications but also the heritage requirements of what is widely seen as one of the most important pre-historic landscapes in Europe.

Fiona Reynolds, the Director-General, said: “The solution for Stonehenge should not merely address the transport issues but tackle head on the heritage and environmental challenges of this unique landscape.”