

6th December 2007

A303 Stonehenge Improvement Scheme

Statement by Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Tom Harris):

Making best use of taxpayers' money is essential in the allocation of funding to transport schemes. With that in mind the Government announced in 2005 that it planned to commission a review of options for the A303 Stonehenge improvement after a substantial increase in the estimated cost of the proposed 2.1km bored tunnel scheme. The approved budget for the scheme when it was taken to Public Inquiry in 2004 was £223m. The latest reported cost estimate is £540m which reflects a number of factors including unexpectedly poor ground conditions, more stringent requirements for tunnelling work and rapid inflation in construction costs.

The review identified a shortlist of possible options, including routes to the north and south of Stonehenge. After careful consideration we have now concluded that due to significant environmental constraints across the whole of the World Heritage Site, there are no acceptable alternatives to the 2.1km bored tunnel scheme. However, when set against our wider objectives and priorities, we have concluded that allocating more than £500m for the implementation of this scheme cannot be justified and would not represent best use of taxpayers' money. I am today placing the final report of the Review on the department's website.

I am therefore today withdrawing all the draft Orders which were considered at the Public Inquiry and I have instructed the Highways Agency to withdraw route protection for the complete scheme including the proposed bypass of Winterbourne Stoke.

The Government recognises the importance of the A303 Stonehenge Improvement scheme and that today's announcement will come as a considerable disappointment for the scheme's supporters. The Highways Agency will investigate possible small scale improvements to the A303 as part of their overall stewardship of route. The department also plans to discuss with the South West region the implications of this decision for the wider strategy for improving the A303/A358 corridor to the M5 at Taunton.

In addition, the department will work with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and English Heritage on their plans to take forward in consultation with other stakeholders a review of the World Heritage Site Management Plan and to consider alternative options for the development of new visitor facilities at Stonehenge in the light of our decision on the A303 improvement. This further work will include examination of the case for closing the junction of the A344 with the A303 as part of the investigation of options for improving the setting of Stonehenge, taking into account the wider heritage and environmental needs, to which the Government remains committed, for this iconic World Heritage site. The decision will be subject to a detailed assessment and public consultation, but we recognise the importance of this issue to the sustainability of the World Heritage Site.

The Government remains committed to working with stakeholders in investigating options for improving the environment of Stonehenge, including new visitor facilities, and exploring possible small scale measures to improve traffic flows and safety along this section of the A303.