

March 2007



**Friends of
the Earth**

Briefing

STONEHENGE, THE A303 AND THE SOUTH WEST'S "SECOND STRATEGIC ROUTE"

This spring the Government is expected to announce its preferred option for upgrading the A303 trunk road at Stonehenge. This briefing:

- introduces the background to this decision
- puts this section of the A303 into the context of the route as a whole
- recommends some practical measures for transport in the vicinity of Stonehenge that are compatible with its status as a World Heritage Site and with the need to move rapidly towards a "low carbon" economy.

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BACKGROUND

Stonehenge is a world-renowned site: an icon of British and European prehistory and a source of wonder to millions who visit each year. In archaeological terms, the famous stones are centrepiece of a remarkable survival - an entire ritual landscape used and developed over thousands of years.

Stonehenge was added to the list of World Heritage Sites – a United Nations designation – in 1976. The essential connection between the stones and the surrounding landscape was recognised and the whole site is 5 km across, incorporating processional routes, numerous barrows (ancient burial sites) and other features. This is the landscape that is crossed by the A303 trunk road from London to Exeter.

Two policy aims now clash at Stonehenge: the protection and management of the World Heritage Site for future generations, and the long-standing ambition to upgrade the A303 into a continuous dual carriageway from London to the South West.

Over the last decade the Highways Agency and English Heritage have promoted a scheme to dual the A303, with the central section of just over 2 km in a tunnel. It is a "compromise" in which the World Heritage Site clearly comes off worse. The greater part of the road widening would be above ground and large new flyover junctions would intrude on east and west ends of the site. The road would descent to massive tunnel portals, lit night and day, and would increase the volume and speed of traffic across the World Heritage Site. If it was built, this scheme would be the largest yet human construction in the Stonehenge landscape.

The Stonehenge Alliance was formed by archaeology, environment and transport groups, including Friends of the Earth, to resist the tunnel proposal. Nevertheless it was approved by a planning inspector following a Public Inquiry in 2004. It would have proceeded had not highway engineers found that the chalk on which the Stonehenge landscape sits was softer and wetter than they supposed, increasing the cost of building and maintaining the tunnel enormously.

Late in 2005 the Government announced that it would "review" the options for the A303 at Stonehenge. The options presented however consisted of the tunnel scheme whose £500 million price tag had led to the review in the first place, then three which had already been rejected at earlier stages in the proceedings: moving the A303 north or south of the World Heritage Site, or an even more destructive "cut and cover tunnel" closer to (in parts actually above) the surface. Finally a "partial solution" was presented which appeared to pre-suppose that the A303 across the World Heritage Site would eventually be dualled. All were rejected by the Alliance; by ICOMOS-UK who are advisers to Government on World Heritage Sites; and by the National Trust, a key player since they own much of the land on which road construction would have to take place.

THE A303 "SECOND STRATEGIC ROUTE"

Despite the very obvious links between them, the Stonehenge scheme and the A303 as a whole have never been examined together. A major transport study, SWARMMS¹, looked into options for road and rail routes between London and the South West, but under Government instruction assumed that the Stonehenge section would be dualled. The 2004

¹ South West Area Multi Modal Study

Public Inquiry assumed that the rest of the A303 would be.

The impression sometimes given by proponents of various road schemes at Stonehenge is that it is the last remaining obstacle in a greater plan to create a continuous high speed motorway and dual carriageway link from London to Exeter.

This is far from being true. The project to dual the remaining A303 west of Stonehenge requires a total of 6 separate road schemes, totalling over 45 miles in length, which the SWARMMS consultants advised would cost a total of £140 million. This soon proved to be a gross under-estimate. In late 2005 the cost was put at £575 million, excluding Stonehenge and Winterbourne Stoke. At that time the cost of the Stonehenge scheme, 2 km tunnel included, was estimated to be £512 million, so the whole "Second Strategic Route" could come in at well over £1 billion.

To put this sum in context, in 2005 the treasury advised regional bodies in the South West that the total indicative budget for all transport schemes across the whole region for the next ten years was £865 million. Clearly the A303 upgrade would barely be feasible on this timescale even if there were no competing priorities.

The reality is that there are many competing projects with a stronger claim on limited transport funding. Rapid growth is planned for most of the South West's major settlements in the next 20 years. Advice from regional bodies to Ministers in January 2006ⁱ stated that, "*The South West region is aspiring to reshape the priorities for transport investment, particularly to encourage sustainable growth in its key settlements*", and notes that "*there is significant congestion in many of these locations ... sustainable growth will require significant additional investment in transport infrastructure.*" The Government Office for the South West and its partners themselves conclude that the majority of A303 schemes "*may well prove to be longer term priorities for the region but which are under developed or not sufficiently focussed on top level priorities to be included in the proposed programme to 2016*". The most advanced timetable envisaged for the "Second Strategic Route" is that one out of the seven component schemes may be started within the ten years' funding allocationⁱⁱ.

The A303 schemes west of Stonehenge are not well advanced in their preparation. No detailed alignments have been published and there are likely to be difficulties with some of them. Ten miles lie within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the existing road passes close to heritage sites and ancient woodland which are nationally designated.

Whatever political arrangements for transport funding may exist in future, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the A303 "Second Strategic Route" is not a priority, not affordable, and not deliverable within a ten year time frame. There is, or should be, no pressure to rush into a "solution" to upgrade the road at Stonehenge.

THE ROUTE TO A LOW CARBON ECONOMY?

The above obstacles to the "Second Strategic Route" are practical ones to its delivery in the short to medium term. We must also question whether it should any longer be considered desirable. Research published by the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Studies for Friends of the Earth in September 2006ⁱⁱⁱ demonstrates that "*time is of the essence. Very large cuts in carbon dioxide are needed in the next 10-15 years and the policies to achieve them must be put in place within the next four years. This implies making the most of existing policies to*

get immediate and significant results."

The research suggests the necessary immediate measures include policies to

"Discourage unnecessary use of cars to reduce and reverse the growth in traffic...

presuming against planning permission for infrastructure that will lead to further

carbon dioxide emissions such as new roads".

Regional Strategies for the South West (Regional Spatial Strategy and Regional Economic Strategy) call for economic growth in the South West to be "within environmental limits", the most pressing of which must be a carbon budget.

The Regional Assembly commissioned an independent review of the policies in its draft Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS), as part of its "sustainability appraisal". This review concluded: *"Before worrying about ways the RSS can make things better, it would be sensible and prudent to ensure that it avoids making things worse. The single most important, effective and foolproof contribution the RSS can make to climate security is to refrain from adding to capacity for air and car travel. **We recommend that SWRA removes all the policies supporting road capacity and airport expansion from the RSS.**"*^{iv} (emphasis in original). This would of course include the Second Strategic Route.

TOWARDS A SOLUTION FOR STONEHENGE

Friends of the Earth and partners in the Stonehenge Alliance believe the key principles for future developments at Stonehenge are:

- Stonehenge is more important than the A303. The requirements for long term protection and management of the Stonehenge landscape – that is, the World Heritage Site as a whole – must take precedence over other considerations.
- Nothing irreversible should be done which further damages the physical fabric of the World Heritage Site. This would rule out any above ground road widening within the site boundary.
- Transport measures should aim principally to reduce traffic, carbon emissions and other adverse impacts of road transport.
- We propose the following measures, which may or may not be thought of as "intermediate", to fit in with these principles and improve the setting and experience of Stonehenge:
- Closure of the junction of the A303 and A344 and removal of the A344 between this junction and the present visitor centre. This has benefits for the safety of road travellers and removes the road which passes closest to the stones.
- Comprehensive speed management on the A303 from Countess Roundabout to the western end of Winterbourne Stoke.
- Retention of the visitor centre on its present site. Plans for a new centre at Countess are dependent on major road upgrades and associated with new infrastructure within the World Heritage Site. Removal of the A344 allows much more scope to re-design the present facilities.

- A high intensity travel plan for Stonehenge to incentivise and maximise the proportion of visitors arriving by public transport, coach, cycle or on foot
- A corridor travel plan for the A303 as a whole to reduce road traffic and its impacts.

ⁱ [South West Regional Funding Allocations Advice](http://www.gosw.gov.uk/497666/docs/220636/swrfaadvice)

<http://www.gosw.gov.uk/497666/docs/220636/swrfaadvice>

ⁱⁱ [Letter to the South West Regional Assembly and Regional Development Agency](http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/regional/strategy/rfa/response/lettertothesouthwestregional3777)

<http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/regional/strategy/rfa/response/lettertothesouthwestregional3777>

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Future Starts Here – the Route to a Low Carbon Economy"

http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/low_carbon_economy.pdf

^{iv} [Carbon emissions from the South West, and implications for the Regional Spatial Strategy,](http://www.southwest-levett-therivel.com/Carbon%20emissions%20from%20the%20South%20West%20and%20implications%20for%20the%20Regional%20Spatial%20Strategy.pdf)

[Levett-Therivel sustainability consultants With Land Use Consultants](http://www.southwest-levett-therivel.com/Carbon%20emissions%20from%20the%20South%20West%20and%20implications%20for%20the%20Regional%20Spatial%20Strategy.pdf)

[http://www.southwest-](http://www.southwest-levett-therivel.com/Carbon%20emissions%20from%20the%20South%20West%20and%20implications%20for%20the%20Regional%20Spatial%20Strategy.pdf)

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