



## **Avebury World Heritage Site Steering Committee**

**Meeting on Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

**11am – 12.30pm, Microsoft Teams**

### **Notes**

#### **1.0 Introductions and apologies**

- Committee members were introduced to AC, the new WHS Partnership Manager and MC the new Assistant County Archaeologist.

#### **2.0 Agree minutes of last meeting & matters arising**

- Minutes from the last meeting were agreed.

#### **3.0 A303 DCO update (Andrew Clark, Highways England)**

- Background: The A303 Stonehenge upgrade is the first and most significant along the A303 corridor. There will be 8 miles of new dual carriageway and a 2-mile stretch of tunnel under the Stonehenge landscape.
- As of 2016 Highways England estimated the project to cost of 1.7 billion pounds.
- Benefits perceived: Highways England feel that the project will transform setting of the Stonehenge landscape by removing the sight and sound of the A303, this will also enable greater north/ south connectivity. A side benefit of the projects would be the opportunity to enhance local wildlife, ecology and biodiversity.
- On the 12<sup>th</sup> November 2020 the Secretary of State granted the DCO. Moving into the next stages, Highways England have brought on board an archaeological contractor who will both protect and mitigate the archaeology. The preliminary works contractors are assessing potential local highway diversions and amendments. Ecological site clearance and mitigation works are been planned for. The contract for the design and build of the main work is out to tender. Within the next week, archaeological research advise workshops are starting – these are required by the DCO.
- Next steps: The DCO announcement in late November 2020. In late spring 2021 archaeological and preliminary work will start. The period in-between the two will be to ensure all paperwork is in place before any works start. By the end of 2021 the main works contractor will be announced and the mobilisation and discharge of DCO duties is expected by late 2022/ early 2023.

- There is an estimated construction period of 5 years up until 2028. After this the main works contractor will be on site for a further 5 years to downgrade the existing A303 road to a public right of way.

Partner Comments:

- Historic England's stance has been made public on their website. They are working closely with Highways England to ensure the scheme is carried out in the best way possible.
- JD from Kennet Valley Parish Council stated that the scheme is supported generally by Wiltshire Council. However, JD questioned from the perspective of the local councils, how will the local area be supported. AC stated that Highways England are, through designated funds, working in partnership with Wiltshire Council to help improve roads and paths in the local area. Within the next 3 to 5 years, it is anticipated that there will be 350 million pounds available nationally for environmental improvements.
- MPK from Wiltshire Council's Archaeology Service stated that the council has supported the scheme subject to various caveats and their response has gone out on press release. There are many issues in respect of the scheme – e.g., the inspectors report differs from the decision made by the Secretary of state. However, no matter the views the Archaeology team are committed to making sure all mitigation work is carried out to the best possible standards.
- NS from the National Trust wished to reiterate their press statement. The national Trust welcome the decision made by the Secretary of State and are continuing to focus on working with other organisations to ensure the scheme delivers on its promises to protect the WHS and bring benefit to both people and nature.
- CS from ASAHRG expressed their disappointment at the decision in the face of the recommendation given by the planning inspectorate. There is scope for a legal challenge to the decision.
- KF from the Avebury Society stated that there are fundamental issues; the Secretary of State ruled against the advice of the inspectors and, in doing so, has contradicted the World Heritage Convention, national planning policy and the Stonehenge & Avebury WHS Management Plan. Looking forward this has severe consequences that could potentially result in the loss of World Heritage Site status.
- HO from the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty expressed disappointment, particularly in the fact that endorsement of the scheme by Highways England has been used to overturn the recommendation by inspectors. Regardless of any benefits the harm to the WHS and the landscape will be dramatic.

**4.0 Legacy projects update (Sarah Askham, WHSCU)**

Exploring the World Heritage Site and Beyond:

- This project looks at sustainable tourism, transport and access within the World Heritage Site and was delivered in 2020 by ARUP. A final report has been produced and which was circulated to partners. This report comprises of a series of suggestions that covers a wide range of ideas, gathered from a wide range of consultees. The report has rested over the last 6 months with no specific actions, but essentially what exists is a package of proposals from ARUP, with series of ideas lying behind them. The next steps for the project will be to build upon this first attempt by ARUP and look at what proposals are desirable, feasible and practical and how they may be funded.
- This matter was discussed at the WHS Partnership Panel on 18<sup>th</sup> November and the agreed next actions are that the WHSCU will look towards setting up a working group to source funding for joint projects that can be delivered next year. The WHSCU unit is to report to the Partnership Panel in Spring/ Summer 2021 and recommend joint projects that we should seek funding for and that can be delivered together with partners.

**ACTION:** members interested in joining the working group for EWHSB project to email SA.

**Trust Transition Project:**

- This project aims to review options for a more resilient funding model for the WHSCU which will provide a sustainable future and an increase in resources to allow it to expand the benefits it provides to the protection of the WHS, communities and partners organisations.
- At present there is an ongoing dialogue with the HLF about tweaking the spend on the project. There has been a hiatus because of COVID-19, lockdown, and a changeover in WHS Partnership Manager. In the new year there will be a focus on the governance and fundraising review, which are key aspects of the project. The project has a projected end date of April 2022.

### **5.0 World Heritage Site Coordination Unit Update (Sarah Askham, WHSCU)**

- In June the WHSCU said goodbye to the Partnership Manager, Sarah Simmonds who had been with the WHS for 14 years. Partners wished to thank Sarah for all she has done. We have now successfully recruited a new Partnership Manager, Anne Carney, who will start on Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> of December.
- A key focus of the unit's work has been the continual acting of secretariat for the Partnership Panel, Committees, Liaison group, ASHRG, SALOG and various WHS related project boards. It has also been keeping key landscape wide and strategic projects (Exploring the World Heritage Site and Beyond, the Burrowing Animals Strategy and the Setting Study) ticking along. The unit has continued to respond and comment on various planning applications within the WHS and its setting, as well as keep up communications with partners and the public via the updating of the website and media pages. Another key focus has been aiding in the Transition Project as partaking in continual discussions on approach to delivering two upcoming WHS projects: Scheduled Monuments Review and the WHS Condition Survey.
- The unit has also been involved in the examination of the byways by attending meetings for the Ridgeway Partnership. Discussion about the status of the ridgeway have been ongoing and there is

a temporary TRO in place so that damage and repairs can be examined, this should be in place until May 2022, but is yet to be decided by WC. the feeling of the group is to collate as much evidence as possible to present a case pursuing closing to off road traffic. Gill Swanton has produced a survey of the ridgeway which will be used as part of a wider report produced by the Ridgeway Partnership. This survey was requested by the Avebury World Heritage Site Steering Committee to record the above-ground features within the Ridgeway corridor and as such needs a formal sign off. All agreed to signing of the report.

- Megalith, the annual newsletter for the WHSCU will be published this month. This year, due to COVID-19 restrictions, SA decided to take Megalith online and will produce a PDF that will be emailed to partners. If members know of any group that would benefit from receiving this newsletter, please either pass it along or drop SA an email.
- The unit has also reviewed progress on the WHSMP Action Plan with the WHSPP and given updates to the Panel on the 18<sup>th</sup> November on the priority Projects, identified by the previous Partnerships Manager in February. These are: WHS Setting Study; appropriate management of byways in the WHS; halting damage to the West Kennet Avenue.

#### **Completion of the condition survey:**

- A working group is in existence for this project, but due to Coronavirus restrictions has not met since the start of lockdown. Nick Croxson from Historic England is taking lead and in discussions about funding. The project brief is nearing completion and ready for tender - tender returns are hoping to be received before Christmas.

#### **The setting study:**

- The project brief has been written, circulated, and approved. This is now waiting for funding to be secured. There may be a possibility of Legacy and Benefits funding now that the A303 scheme has consent.

#### **Examination of the byways:**

- Discussion about status of the ridgeway have been ongoing since the last Partnership Panel meeting. an archaeological report has been completed and now signed off the Avebury WHS Committee.

#### **Continual damage of the West Kennet Avenue:**

- Actions are being held up and influence at the right levels is needed to pursue road closure in line with the Avebury Transport Strategy.

### **6.0 Reports from Partners on implementation of WHS Management Plan and related projects**

*Verbal updates on progress on actions and related projects since our last meeting (Written updates on actions on spreadsheet with WHSCU)*

- National Trust: The Avebury landscape is open. Due to COVID restrictions there has been an impact on resources and staffing, but the priority is to ensure a limited impact to conservation work. There is a strong ranger and countryside team in operation along with two archaeologists and a

curator working at Avebury. Throughout lockdown there has been a rise in heritage crime which has manifested in small scale graffiti, fire damage and a significant amount of metal detecting on scheduled monuments. National Trust are working closely with partners to combat this issue.

- North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty: there is an update on action 32, which relates to landscape strategy, dependent on progress of setting study. At the last update the AONB did not have enough fundraising capacity to engage, but capacity is now in place. This action is not yet in the priority work programme as they are waiting on Setting Study. Action 55, which relates to farming and sources of funding for conservation, now has potential arising from AONB and National Park funding by DEFRA for land management schemes. In Avebury the Space for Nature group are working closely with other farmer led groups to engage and encourage land management schemes.
- Wiltshire Council: within the Heritage Services, lockdown has coincided with several staff changes. This has meant delays to attempts to recruit for the vacant positions and the recruitment process has taken much longer than normal due to financial implications of the pandemic. Council staff have been redeployed, but the core Heritage Service team remains in post and.
- Historic England: Staff are working remotely with partners to tackle issues associated with the rise in heritage crime. The Bristol office is moving and will no longer be in Queens Square. Regarding action 27, the condition survey, the brief has been written and ready for tender. Historic England have decided to move away from a consultant-based project plan, in favour of locally focused community engagement groups supplemented by volunteer training. Source of project funding are still being identified; however Historic England will put in 60% of the cost and welcome suggestions for the remainder.

Apologies given from Natural England and Visit Wiltshire.

### **7.0 Parish Council and Farmers' Group Updates**

- Robin Butler sent apologies.
- SN – There have been lots of issues surrounding the ridgeway this year, particularly from illegal raves. There were upwards of 40/ 50 vehicles along the ridgeway on the bank holiday and at solstice and there is a real concern that this has raised the profile of these events. The parish council are working with all organisations involved to find a solution to this problem, however damage is being escalated by the trial bike riders coming in from the byway.
- DB – Avebury Parish Council are looking to reduce speed limits on the Beckhampton road as you come into Avebury. Concerns over the status of the ridgeway are strongly echoed but there are no further updates.
- KF – There is very little to update members on for the Avebury society, but thank you to everyone for the opportunity. The talk on the Sarsen stones next weekend has been cancelled and will be re-scheduled for spring.

### **8.0 Report from/to the Stonehenge and Avebury WHS Partnership Panel**

HO – The Partnership Panel met last week, and a major item of business was its chairmanship. Wiltshire Council offered members 3 options: to recruit a new chair, maintain continuity by postponing the process for a year or extended the current chairs tenure for another full term. The current chairs tenure had previously come to an end in spring and so had already been extended for another year. For this matter the majority opinion of members was that we should move to recruit a new chair of the Partnership Panel ASAP. Unfortunately, Wiltshire Council are unable to lead the recruitment process due to resource constraints brought about by the A303 and COVID, however the North Wessex Downs AONB have agreed to lead on the recruitment.

#### **9.0 Report from Avebury & Stonehenge Archaeological and Historical Research Group**

CS – ASAHRG have met a few times since the last committee meetings, the latest being an informal meeting over zoom organised by Amanda Chadburn and Susan Greaney. A main concern was over the reduction of National Trust staff at Avebury, but we are pleased to hear that the curator at the Avebury Museum is continuing with their role. There were reports on various research updates including the excavations at Folly Hill and the West Kennet Palisades. Publications have come out for the Stonehenge riverside project and are now available to look at freely on the website.

#### **10.0 Information exchange and AOB**

CS – wanted to formally thank Sarah Simmonds on behalf of the partnership for her work and contribution to the WHS. All members agreed and noted their thanks.

#### **11.0 Date of next meeting**

- Friday 17<sup>th</sup> September