Key Issues

- Sensitive balancing of tourism infrastructure and conservation of a World Heritage Site
- Sustainable building and site development
- Wide benefits and improvements for World Heritage Site cultural landscape
- Comprehensive Options Appraisal process to inform selection of optimum site location for new visitor facilities
- Co-ordination of Environmental Impact Assessment process and multi-disciplinary team
- Extensive pre-application consultations with statutory bodies to agree scope/requirements for the EIA process

Purpose of the project

Stonehenge is one of the most important and most frequently visited monuments in Britain. It is also an international icon, and attracts visitors from all over the world. However, the inadequacy of the existing visitor facilities and poor presentation of the site has been a concern for a long time, as has the setting of Stonehenge itself, confined by roads and the current existing visitor facilities. At the time of its inscription as a World Heritage Site (WHS) in 1986, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Committee asked for the closure of the A344. English Heritage’s Stonehenge Environmental Improvements Project is designed to address these concerns.

The aim of the Project set by Ministers is ‘to deliver, within the framework of the revised World Heritage Site (WHS) Management Plan 2009, environmental improvements including new visitor facilities and interpretation of the WHS, in keeping with Stonehenge’s status as a WHS, by 2012’.

The objectives of the Project are to deliver:

- An improved landscape setting for Stonehenge;
- A new, sensitively designed and environmentally sustainable Stonehenge visitor centre; and
- Better interpretation of the Stones and the Stonehenge WHS.

Description of the project

The Scheme proposals comprise construction of New Visitor Facilities on land adjacent to the existing A360/A344/B3086 road junction at Airman’s Corner and provision of a Visitor Transit System to provide access to the Stonehenge Monument along the route of the current A344 road; construction of a New Roundabout junction at Airman’s Corner, including realignment of the B3086 to its original (pre-1964) route where it joins the junction; decommissioning and removal of the Existing Visitor Facilities, including car parking, near the Stonehenge Monument leaving only a minimal Operations Facility and emergency toilets; and decommissioning and removal of the A344 road between Byway 12 and Stonehenge Bottom. The Project also involves improvements to the roundabout at Longbarrow Crossroads; and restricting motorised recreational vehicles on Byways within the WHS.
Lessons learnt

The EIA process was key to assisting decision-makers in understanding how the Scheme would deliver substantial environmental benefits for Stonehenge and the WHS.

The assessment demonstrated that the proposed removal of the A344 and existing visitor facilities at the Stones would provide a significantly improved landscape setting for Stonehenge, The Avenue and other monuments in the WHS that are affected by the current access arrangements. It also showed how the Scheme would further improve the visitor experience through provision of better interpretation of the Stones and the Stonehenge WHS in the form of new exhibition and education facilities, and enhanced opportunities for access and interpretation in the wider landscape.

The New Visitor Facilities at Airman’s Corner, which are not visible from most of the WHS including the Stones, would replace the existing facilities at Stonehenge with a higher quality and more environmentally sustainable development, sensitively designed to respect the environmental considerations of the proposed site. Lessons for the EIA of New Visitor Facilities in a cultural landscape WHS include:

- minimise as far as practicable adverse impact on the WHS, its setting and the attributes of its Outstanding Universal Value;
- avoid adverse impacts on significant features of nature conservation interest, including internationally and nationally designated wildlife sites;
- minimise as far as practicable adverse impacts on the character of the landscape;
- avoid constraining future opportunities for improvements to the setting of monuments and sites in the WHS landscape as far as practicable;
- minimise adverse impacts on local communities by siting facilities remote from residential properties;
- make use of land which has been previously disturbed by development wherever possible;
- make use of land that has been demonstrated as having no significant archaeology above or below ground; and
- make use of existing infrastructure so enabling new access roads and transit routes to be minimised.

Lessons learnt cont.

The environmental effects of a range of alternative sites for new visitor facilities were considered by a comprehensive Options Appraisal process. All the options involving the relocation of visitor facilities away from the current site would involve some form of infrastructure, and a degree of adverse environmental impact is to be expected given the environmental sensitivity of the WHS. Where some adverse environmental effects are unavoidable as a result of the Scheme, the assessment demonstrated that these can be reduced, as far as practicable, through sensitive and sustainable design, and the provision of construction and operational mitigation measures. Of all the sites considered, Airman’s Corner was considered to offer the best balance in terms of environmental impact, deliverability and visitor benefits.

Demonstrating through the EIA that the proposed mitigation measures set out in the Environmental Statement, together with the substantial benefits to the WHS as a whole - in terms of improvements to the setting of Stonehenge and other monuments, visitor facilities, access and presentation of the Site - would outweigh the disbenefits was critical. The assessment showed that these disbenefits do not have significant adverse effects on the Outstanding Universal Value of the WHS, nor on archaeological sites of national or international significance, and many of them would be reversible.

Proactive, open and extensive pre-application consultations were undertaken throughout the development of the Scheme with representatives of the local community, statutory bodies and other stakeholder groups. This was key to ensuring that potential environmental issues of concern were taken into consideration in the Scheme design and EIA process.

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