

Press release: Heritage experts welcomed to Stonehenge World Heritage Site

Highways England has today (5 March 2018) welcomed international heritage experts to show their updated plans to build a road tunnel near Stonehenge developed to minimise the impact on the World Heritage Site.

A delegation from the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) are on a three-day fact-finding mission to see how the designs of the proposed 1.9-mile long road tunnel will bring together the World Heritage Site landscape currently split by the A303 between Amesbury and Berwick Down.

Derek Parody, Highways England Project Director, said:

As well as removing the traffic bottleneck at Stonehenge and addressing the rat-running issue through villages, our proposed scheme will remove the sight and sound of traffic from the iconic monument and reduce intrusion in the wider world heritage site.

We've been working closely with heritage groups to best develop the route to minimise the impact on Stonehenge and the surrounding landscape.

These groups have been key, along with environmental, archaeological and geophysical surveys, to our building our knowledge and understanding of this unique landscape and helped us develop the design of our preferred route.

Since the tunnel route plan was announced in September, Highways England has continued to work with heritage groups including the National Trust, Historic England, English Heritage, and experts in the field, including the Stonehenge Scientific Committee – a body of leading independent archaeologists – to ensure a new route is built sensitively to the World Heritage Site.

The route was carefully chosen to avoid monuments and barrow groups, and Highways England's modified plans also included moving the position of one of the entrances to the tunnel to avoid conflicting with the Winter Solstice alignment.

A public consultation is being held until 6 April and outlines for the first time initial designs for the tunnel.

It will show how the £1.6bn scheme will restore the tranquil environment and setting of the Stonehenge monument and surrounding landscape by removing the sight and sound of the busy road.

This major investment will support economic growth and tourism in an area where congestion and slow journeys have long had a negative impact on the region's economy.

The scheme is part of a £15 billion road investment programme. The Government is committed to upgrading all remaining single carriageway sections of the A303/A358 between the M3 and M5 to dual carriageway standard, starting with three schemes: the A303 at Stonehenge, the A303 between Sparkford and Ilchester; and the A358 between the M5 Taunton and the Southfields Roundabout on the A303.

In the meantime, anyone wanting further information on the scheme and the current consultation can visit the [scheme website](#).

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.

News story: Slovakian Air Force Firefighters train in the UK

Six Slovakian Air Force firefighters have undergone training in the UK to learn vital skills needed to tackle major aircraft fires.

Held at the Defence Fire Training and Development Centre in Manston, Kent, the week-long course for one of our key NATO partners included learning incident command techniques and aircraft firefighting tactics.

A mixture of British military fire safety personnel and MOD civilian experts provided the training, which is needed because the UK and its NATO partners often land aircraft in Slovakia.

Staff Sergeant Michal Fusi, of the Slovakian Air Force firefighting service, said:

In Slovakia we don't have the these kind of facilities, so when the opportunity came up to come to the UK we took it. This is a big experience for us and a chance to improve our skills, it is very

beneficial for us. We will be able to pass on the skills we have picked up here to our colleagues back home.

The training included classroom and live firefighting exercises which featured a variety of retired RAF aircraft donated to the facility including a Nimrod, Tornado, Harrier Jump Jet, Jaguar, Sea King and Lynx helicopters.

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The training area also featured fire simulators such as a “fire wall” and one that is shaped like a large aircraft with seats inside, which can be used to mimic aircraft such as a C-17 Globemaster.

The Defence Fire Risk Management facility at Manston is used for training firefighters across all three services, with more than 3,000 people passing through its doors every year.

Area Manager Ken Cross, the brigade training manager at Manston, said:

We are delighted to have them here. With many British C-17 aircraft landing in Slovakia as part of NATO, the offer of training was extended. Our facilities replicate realistic fire conditions.

The Slovaks loved every minute of what has been a busy and interesting week. They have learnt quickly and are very energetic. They are very, very good firefighters.

It is hoped that this course, the first time that the Slovaks have done this training in the UK, will lead to further opportunities for fire safety personnel from their country to come to Manston.

Six Slovakian Air Force firefighters have undergone training in the UK to learn vital skills needed to tackle major aircraft fires.

The UK and Slovakia have longstanding ties, as evidenced most recently in February, when Air Vice Marshal Edward Stringer represented the UK at the funeral service of Major-General Ivan Otto Schwarz, the last surviving veteran of the Second World War Czechoslovak Squadron.

And in September 2017, the Chief of Defence Staff Sir Stuart Peach visited Slovakia to reaffirm the strong bilateral defence and security relationship that our two countries share.

News story: Met Office Chief Executive stands down

Nick Jobling, currently Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer, is now interim Chief Executive with immediate effect, pending the appointment of a permanent Chief Executive in due course.

This will ensure continued leadership of our world-class national meteorological service.

Met Office operations and services are wholly unaffected by this decision.

Press release: PM speech on housing to set out changes to planning rules

Theresa May will today [5 March 2018] warn developers who are too slow to build houses that their past record could count against them when they bid for new planning permissions.

The Prime Minister will also highlight the “perverse incentive” in the bonus structure of some house builders which does not encourage them to build homes that are affordable.

In a speech in London, the PM will say the government is “rewriting the rules on planning” to help developers and local authorities build more properties – restoring the dream of home ownership.

The new planning rules will make the system fairer and more effective by streamlining the process, cutting red tape and ending barriers to building.

While progress has been made in building more homes – over 217,000 new homes were built last year – the PM will say “for decades this country has failed to build enough of the right homes in the right places”.

Speaking at a national planning conference in London, the Prime Minister is expected to say that we “cannot bring about the kind of society I want to see, unless we tackle one of the biggest barriers to social mobility we face today: the national housing crisis.”

She will say “in much of the country, housing is so unaffordable that millions of people who would reasonably expect to buy their own home are unable to do so” and the “failure to match demand with supply really began to push prices upwards”, and “higher prices brought with them higher rents”.

"The result is a vicious circle from which most people can only escape with help from the Bank of Mum and Dad. If you're not lucky enough to have such support, the door to home ownership is all too often locked and barred."

She will go on to say:

I still vividly remember the first home I shared with my husband, Philip. Not only our pictures on the walls and our books on the shelves, but the security that came from knowing we couldn't be asked to move on at short notice.

And because we had that security, because we had a place to go back to, it was that much easier to play an active role in our community. To share in the common purpose of a free society.

That is what this country should be about – not just having a roof over your head but having a stake in your community and its future.

The Prime Minister will warn that "the gap between permissions granted and homes built is still too large."

She will say that, when used incorrectly, planning rules can create barriers to building, tying up councils in red tape and allowing some developers to game the system. Once planning permission is granted, a variety of factors can slow down delivery and the Oliver Letwin Review is looking at explaining the gap.

The PM will say:

this government is rewriting the rules on planning. With the major overhaul being published today, we're giving councils and developers the backing they need to get more homes built more quickly...The reforms driven forward under our last Prime Minister led to a great and welcome increase in the number of planning permissions granted. But we did not see a corresponding rise in the number of homes being built.

The new rules will see around 80 of the proposals set out in the Housing White Paper implemented, including using land more efficiently, fast tracking planning permissions into homes, giving greater certainty to local authorities and putting local plans in place to give communities more control.

The Prime Minister will be clear that "it's also time for builders and developers to step up and do their bit."

She will say "the bonuses paid to the heads of some of our biggest developers are based not on the number of homes they build but on their profits or share price."

In a market where lower supply equals higher prices that creates a perverse incentive, one that does not encourage them to build the homes we need.

The Prime Minister will highlight some areas where action could be taken, such as:

allowing councils to take a developer's previous rate of build-out into account when deciding whether to grant planning permission. I want to see planning permissions going to people who are actually going to build houses, not just sit on land and watch its value rise. Where councils are allocating sufficient land for the homes people need, our new planning rulebook will stop developers building on large sites that aren't allocated in the plan – something that's not fair on residents who agree to a plan only to see it ignored.

She will continue "I expect developers to do their duty to Britain and build the homes our country needs."

Along with developers, councils also need to ensure local communities are at the heart of the process and they know what infrastructure they will be getting and when. The PM will be clear developers and councils need to work together to meet their communities' needs in a more joined up way.

The Prime Minister will urge councils to "do all they can to find sites, grant planning permissions and build homes" including through adopting a new nationwide standard that shows how many homes authorities need to plan for in their area.

She will say "our new rules will also see to it that the right infrastructure is in place to support such developments" and the planning changes will also allow more affordable homes prioritised for key workers, including nurses, teachers, and firefighters, and the PM is today enabling local authorities to prioritise these workers.

But the Prime Minister will also be clear that the "answer to our housing crisis does not lie in tearing up the Green Belt."

She will announce that the government is maintaining existing strong protections, "so that authorities can only amend Green Belt boundaries if they can prove they have fully explored every other reasonable option for building the homes their community needs." There will also be stronger protections for ancient woodlands and historic coastlines.

Only 10 per cent of England has been built on and only 13 per cent is covered by Green Belt – the purpose of which is to prevent urban sprawl. The PM will be clear that developers and local authorities must only allocate Green Belt sites for development for exceptional reasons. Should development have to go ahead it must first make use of brownfield sites, and where land is removed,

they must create new spaces.

This major overhaul to the National Planning Policy Framework, the first in six years, will be launched today to provide a comprehensive approach for planners, developers and councils so they can build the homes this country needs.

The plans will be consulted on over the next 8 weeks – with a final version expected to be published in the summer.

Statement to Parliament: Minister **Field statement on visas to Burma for** **the International Development** **Committee (IDC)**

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Like him, I am deeply disappointed that the Government of Burma have not granted visas for members of the International Development Committee. That displeasure has been communicated to the Burmese authorities. The Committee does vital work, providing oversight of UK aid programming in Burma and beyond.

The hon. Gentleman, who is the Chair of the International Development Committee, was due to travel on 27 February, with the rest of the Committee due to travel on 28 February. When no decision on visas was received by early yesterday morning, the Committee understandably cancelled the Burma leg of its visit. I understand that the Committee will continue with the second element of its trip, namely to travel to Bangladesh to review the Department for International Development's work there, including support for the Rohingya refugees displaced to Cox's Bazar and the vicinity.

My officials were informed this morning that the IDC's visa applications had been formally denied. Burmese officials have indicated three reasons for the refusal: first, that there is an extended public holiday in Burma; secondly, that access to Rakhine state remains restricted for security reasons; and finally—I think the Chair of the IDC mentioned this in a press release yesterday evening—that they were unhappy that individual members of the IDC had signed a letter calling for the senior general of the Burmese army to be held to account for Burmese military behaviour in Rakhine.

It is right that the House takes a close interest in this sort of crisis, and I know that all Members present will continue to do so. The Government fully support the work of the International Development Committee and have been active in supporting this visit. DFID Burma worked closely with the IDC to develop a comprehensive itinerary covering a range of projects in-country.

The British ambassador to Burma, Andrew Patrick, and other FCO officials pressed repeatedly for visas to be approved, both in Burma and through the Burmese embassy in London. I myself spoke over the telephone to the Burmese ambassador yesterday morning to raise the status of the visas. That demonstrates just how seriously the FCO takes this matter, not least as a courtesy to the House. I understand that you, Mr Speaker, wrote to the Burmese ambassador, and that he intends to reply formally to set out the reasons for the refusal.

Through DFID, the UK is one of the largest single donors to the refugee crisis in both Bangladesh and Burma. Our aid is making a big difference. The first tranche of UK funding is providing emergency food to some 174,000 people and safe water and hygiene to more than 138,000. Following a diphtheria outbreak in the refugee camps, we deployed the UK's emergency medical team of more than 40 specialists to save lives.

This decision to deny visas is highly regrettable and will prevent the Committee from seeing some of DFID's work at first hand. However, this Government must and will remain committed to supporting Burma's poorest and most vulnerable people. Working with DFID, we will ensure that the Committee has access to all the information it needs to scrutinise the programme in Burma effectively.