

Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body

Board Meeting

Paper E

Date **25th March 2025**

Title of report: **Alternative approach to the A303**

Purpose of report: **To approve the letter to the Secretary of State for an alternative package approach to the A303**

Recommendations:

The members of the Board are recommended to:

- I. Approve the letter to the Secretary of State in Appendix One.

1. Background

- 1.1 On 29 July 2024 the Government announced that it had cancelled the A303 Stonehenge Tunnel scheme. The A303 Stonehenge improvement scheme emerged from the long-standing need to enhance road capacity and improve journey time reliability on the A303 and wider A303/A358 corridor.
- 1.2 With its cancellation the Western Gateway is concerned about the lack of consideration given to the impact on network resilience across the wider region. Furthermore the Economic Impact Study for the scheme undertaken in 2019 identified that an improvement to the whole A303/A30/A358 corridor would result in Gross Value Added (GVA) benefits to the region of almost £40 billion.

2. Alternative approach

- 2.1 The decision to cancel the A303 Stonehenge Tunnel scheme was without the identification or clarification of alternative options. A package of alternatives to the Stonehenge Tunnel is needed to deliver the benefits it would have brought and provide more choice for the user as well as address existing severance, resilience and safety issues.
- 2.2 As part of a potential package approach which will need to include bus and active travel measures the Western Gateway is working with Network Rail on enhancing services and capacity on the West of England Line between Salisbury and Yeovil. This is part of the wider London Waterloo to Exeter route which is a parallel transport corridor to the A303 to the South West and

links to the Devon Metro proposals. Additionally there are interventions from the recently published Wiltshire Strategic Rail Study for new and more frequent services and the need for the additional platform at Westbury to provide the capacity. Westbury business case work is in the Western Gateway's programme for 2025/26.

- 2.3 Rail can only be part of the solution. Nonetheless a package approach with the opportunity to deliver rail enhancements at its heart will help to deliver some of the benefits that Stonehenge Tunnel would have had as well as promote more choice and more sustainable travel.
- 2.4 In January 2025 Board Members were circulated the 'Connecting South West England: in place of A303/A358 widening' report produced by the Stonehenge Alliance. The report recognises the connectivity needs of South West England still need to be addressed and in particular through better rail services. The Salisbury to Exeter (West of England) line is recommended for acceleration of current plans to improve the route. Greater integration of bus and rail services is called for and more national cycle routes and local active travel networks. Whilst the report does not mention the Western Gateway work on the Salisbury to Yeovil stretch of the West of England Line or that funding is in the programme for 2025/2 for the additional platform at Westbury business case the measures in the report are broadly in line with those of the Western Gateway. What the report does not sufficiently address are the issues of resilience, safety and severance.

3. Letter to the Secretary of State

- 3.1 Based on the need for an alternative approach and drawing on the Western Gateway's work it is proposed for the Chair of the Western Gateway to write to Heidi Alexander, Secretary of State for Transport. The draft letter for approval by the Board is in Appendix One.

4. Consultation, communication and engagement

- 4.1 The Senior Officers Group, with officers from all the Western Gateway's constituent authorities and the Chair and Vice Chair, has been consulted on the letter to the Secretary of State.

5. Equalities Implications

- 5.1 Delivering an alternative approach to the A303 will open up new travel opportunities, improve accessibility for everyone and contribute to decarbonising transport. No adverse impact on any protected groups is expected.

6. Legal Considerations

- 6.1 The Western Gateway STB remains an informal non-statutory partnership.

7. Financial considerations

7.1 There are no financial considerations.

7.2 The West of England Combined Authority following Board approval in March 2020 and reaffirmed in September 2024 remains the accountable body.

8. Conclusion

8.1 The Board is asked to agree the recommendation set out at the beginning of this report.

Appendix One: Draft letter to the Secretary of State

Contact Officer

James White, Technical Lead Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body

Appendix One: Draft letter to the Secretary of State on the A303 Stonehenge Tunnel Scheme

Dear Secretary of State

As the Chair of the Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body I am writing to you following the announcement made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 29th July 2024 that the A303 Stonehenge Tunnel scheme is cancelled.

I acknowledge given national finances that a difficult decision on Stonehenge had to be made but it does appear to be one without wider consideration to its impact and putting an alternative plan in its place.

The A303 Stonehenge improvement scheme emerged from the long-standing need to enhance road capacity and improve journey time reliability on the A303 and wider A303/A358 corridor. With its cancellation the Western Gateway is concerned about the lack of consideration given to the impact on network resilience across the wider region and east west connectivity. Furthermore the Economic Impact Study undertaken for the scheme in 2019 identified that an improvement to the whole A303/A30/A358 corridor would result in Gross Value Added (GVA) benefits to the region of almost £40 billion.

A package of alternatives to the Stonehenge Tunnel is needed to deliver these benefits and provide more choice for the user as well as address existing severance, resilience and safety issues. Bus and active travel measures will be needed. As part of a potential package approach I draw your attention to work being undertaken by Network Rail on behalf of the Western Gateway on enhancing services and capacity on the West of England Line between Salisbury and Yeovil. This is part of the wider London Waterloo to Exeter route which is a parallel transport corridor to the A303 to the South West and links to the Devon Metro proposals. Additionally there are interventions from the recently published Wiltshire Strategic Rail Study for new and more frequent services. This includes an additional platform at Westbury to provide some of the capacity needed. The Western Gateway will be funding the Strategic Outline Business Case work for Westbury from its 2025/26 programme.

We recognise rail is only part of the solution. Nonetheless a package approach with the opportunity to deliver rail enhancements at its heart will help to deliver some of the benefits that Stonehenge Tunnel would have had as well as promote more choice and more sustainable travel

The Western Gateway would welcome the opportunity to engage with the Government, Wiltshire Council and partners, including National Highways, Network Rail, English Heritage, and the National Trust, to find a way forward to deliver a package approach to the A303.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Manda Rigby
Chair of the Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body