

Highways England announces archaeological specialists for A303 upgrade near Stonehenge

The transformational scheme is still awaiting its Development Consent Order (DCO), and Secretary of State for Transport Grant Shapps announced earlier in the summer a revised deadline of 13th November for the decision, following a six-month Public Examination in 2019.

To ensure programme timescales are maintained in the meantime, Highways England has selected Wessex Archaeology, one of the largest contractors in the sector, to undertake its Archaeological Mitigation Contract work.

The contract has been awarded now to enable Wessex Archaeology to start their pre-planning, with fieldwork not expected to start until late spring 2021, should planning consent be granted for the scheme.

The company, responsible for England's motorways and major A roads, has also awarded an £8.5 million Preliminary Works Contract to Osborne through its Collaborative Delivery Framework.

Highways England Project Director Derek Parody said:

The World Heritage Site (WHS) around Stonehenge is a heritage site of national and international importance and the scope of the archaeological contract announced today is unprecedented for Highways England, reflecting the importance of the WHS and surrounding landscape.

Building on thorough evaluation work carried out before the DCO application was submitted, the archaeological mitigation strategy is being developed in consultation with specialist advisors from Historic England and Wiltshire Council, the National Trust and English Heritage, and with input from a scientific committee of independent experts.

Wessex Archaeology have an extensive track record of work in connection with the Stonehenge landscape, we want to ensure that all archaeological remains are preserved and recorded, and we are delighted to announce that they will be undertaking this specialist work.

The contract award in no way pre-empts the granting of a Development Consent Order and while we await the Secretary of State's decision, we need to progress the procurement to ensure the project is in the best position it can be in to proceed thereafter.

The Archaeological Mitigation Contract involves archaeological evaluation and recording, ahead of and during construction work, and will also deliver a major programme of public archaeology and community engagement (PACE) to make the archaeology of the scheme accessible to all. This will involve local schools and community interest groups, as well as Wiltshire Council, the National Trust and English Heritage.

Caroline Budd, Chief Operating Officer at Wessex Archaeology, said:

Wessex Archaeology is very proud to be an ongoing part of the integrated A303 team, and we welcome the chance to be involved in such a significant road improvement scheme. This project enables us to continue our work towards the sensitive management and interpretation of one of the UK's most important historic landscapes, and ensure that both local communities and the general public can benefit from a greater understanding of this fascinating place.

As part of the Preliminary Works Contract, Osborne will deliver ecological mitigation work, site clearance, associated highways alterations and utilities work, such as modifications to the Rolleston junction, safety improvements to the A303 east of Amesbury and water main installation.

Osborne project director Chris Hudson said:

Osborne has significant experience working collaboratively with Highways England and local stakeholders on a wide variety of challenging projects. We are looking forward to undertaking this essential project safely and efficiently keeping inconvenience to neighbours and travelling public to a minimum.

Highways England is also currently progressing the procurement process for the Main Works contract and participating in dialogue with bidders before they submit their final tenders. The preferred bidder is expected to be announced in late 2021.

Highways England's proposed £1.7 billion upgrade of the A303 between Amesbury and Berwick Down includes:

- 8 miles of free-flowing, high-quality dual carriageway
- a twin-bore tunnel two miles long underneath the World Heritage Site, closely following the existing A303 route, avoiding important archaeological sites, and avoiding intrusion on the view of the setting sun from the stones during the winter solstice
- a new bypass to the north of the village of Winterbourne Stoke, with a viaduct over the River Till valley
- new junctions with the A345 and A360 either side of the World Heritage Site

The scheme will unlock congestion along this vital A303 route, conserve and enhance the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site and benefit the local and regional economy by providing skills and job opportunities for businesses large and small.

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.