

The Company of Proprietors of Whitchurch Bridge

Established by the Whitchurch Bridge Acts 1792 and 1988

The Toll House
Whitchurch Bridge
Pangbourne
Reading
RG8 7DF
15th September 2011

To: Mr T Wyatt
Development Manager Team Leader (Applications)
South Oxfordshire District Council
Benson Lane
Crowmarsh Gifford
Wallingford
OX10 8NJ

Dear Mr Wyatt

Planning Application S Oxon P11/E0743 FUL / West Berks Application 11/00984/LBC

We are in receipt of the latest letter from English Heritage dated 6 September regarding this application, and wish to make the following comments in response

1. The Company of Proprietors of Whitchurch Bridge is responsible by Act of Parliament for maintaining for ever a bridge over the River Thames from Whitchurch in the County of Oxford to Pangbourne in the County of Berkshire, and for rebuilding it should it become unsafe for travellers or vehicles
2. We have considered the proposal that is the subject of this application in great detail over many years, working with the Oxfordshire County Council Bridges Department and their highly qualified engineers, backed up by further detailed engineering reports from Jacobs. These reports have made it very clear to us as the organisation responsible for the bridge at Whitchurch that the current condition of the structure is highly unsatisfactory and that the only resolution of the situation is the proposed reconstruction plan. This has been the subject of several meetings and discussions with officers of both S Oxfordshire and W Berkshire councils over the past few years culminating in the submission of the current application
3. It would be totally irresponsible for us as a public body charged with the provision of a safe crossing over the Thames at Whitchurch to go against the fully considered and long standing advice of the OCC bridge engineers, who are responsible for every bridge in Oxfordshire and have every engineering qualification and technical back up to the highest possible standards
4. It is in our view irresponsible of English Heritage to seek to put the total preservation of a structure that has long ago exceeded its design life above the interests of the public at large, the responsibilities of the bridge owners, and the relevant engineering expertise as above. The English Heritage "plan" is neither practical nor viable. Furthermore, it would effectively mean that the bridge would need to be closed permanently in order to "preserve" it, which is unacceptable under our statutory responsibility. Quite apart from our own

concerns on safety and viability, our insurers have made it clear that they can maintain cover only if we follow appropriate engineering advice, and if the bridge is uninsurable it cannot be kept open.

5. It would likewise be irresponsible of officials or councillors to prejudice the existence of a safe crossing at Whitchurch in favour of the self-serving comments of a special interest group who have demonstrated that they do not understand the clearly expressed facts as attested by a whole body of technical expertise. These experts are unanimous in their advice that the bridge is terminally damaged and cannot be fixed. Our proposed reconstruction would preserve the key elements and historic character of the listed bridge structure whilst ensuring its full and safe performance to the requisite current highway standards and thus secure its long term future as an operational river crossing.
6. It should be perfectly clear to anyone that if it had been possible for us to go ahead with a repair plan that would cost less than one half of the £4m we are prepared to commit then we would readily have taken this option: however it has been ruled out of the question time and again by our expert advisers

We as responsible bridge operators with statutory obligations cannot be put in an invidious position by English Heritage or anyone else of being asked to preserve a structure when we have been formally advised in writing that it is potentially unsafe and becoming more so as successive structural surveys have demonstrated .

Therefore councillors and officials should be in no doubt of our concerns on these points, they should understand that the future of the bridge itself is at stake, and they should be aware that we will follow every channel both through appeals procedures and through the media if necessary to ensure that the issues are clearly understood and addressed.

Sincerely



MJ Beckley, MA, FCCA
Chairman, Company of Proprietors of Whitchurch Bridge

Cc: Ms Hazel Evans
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David Simpson – Temple Group Ltd