

Petition: Protect the Gwent Levels and stop the proposed M4 motorway

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 27 Tachwedd 2018

Petitions Committee | 27 November 2018

Research Briefing:

Petition Number: P-05-850

Petition title: Protect the Gwent Levels and stop the proposed M4 motorway

Text of petition:

Please drop plans to construct the M4 motorway across the beautiful Gwent Levels and invest in public transport instead.

Why is this important?

The current plans to extend the M4 motorway will put otters, rare bees and wildflowers at risk. It would cut across the 'Amazon Rainforest' of Wales, the Gwent Levels, which is a haven for wildlife. Traffic around Newport needs to be improved but it would be better for Wales and the environment if the Welsh government invests in public transport instead. If we want to protect the environment for future generations we need to come up with alternatives to big polluting motorways. The Assembly's own environmental regulator and advisory body, Natural Resources Wales, is against these plans.

The Welsh Government is the highway authority for the Welsh trunk road and motorway network in Wales and is responsible for maintenance and improvement of the network, including the M4. Proposals to increase capacity on the M4 around Newport have been discussed since the early 1990s when the UK Government identified a preferred route, broadly similar to current proposals. Although deemed unaffordable in 2009, a 2013 agreement between the Welsh and UK Governments on borrowing powers revived the project.

M4 corridor around Newport scheme

In 2014, the Welsh Government published [M4 Corridor Around Newport – The Plan](#) setting out its preferred route. In this, the Welsh Government set out plans to build a new section of motorway, known as the ‘black route’ or ‘preferred route’.

Alongside creating a new section of motorway – the ‘black route’ – the Welsh Government also proposed a range of complementary measures including:

- The reclassification of the existing M4 between Magor and Castleton;
- M4 / M48 / B4245 connections; and
- The provision of cycle and walking friendly infrastructure.

The [Welsh Government considers](#) its ‘black route’ proposals and complementary measures to be:

the sustainable, long-term solution to current social, environmental and economic problems associated with this route [and an essential part of its] vision for an efficient integrated transport system in South Wales [alongside other projects such as the [South Wales Metro](#)].

In March 2015 Friends of the Earth were [unsuccessful in their legal challenge](#) to the Welsh Government’s proposals.

The Gwent Levels

The Welsh Government’s preferred ‘black route’ option would cross an area known as the Gwent Levels in various places. The Gwent Levels is the collective name given to a number of different [Sites of Special Scientific Interest](#) (SSSIs) situated to the south of Newport, lying north of the Severn Estuary.

In March 2016, the Welsh Government published an [Environmental Statement](#) setting out its assessment of the main environmental effects the preferred option would have, and how these would be mitigated. A [non-technical summary](#) (PDF 1.51MB) was also published which highlights that the Gwent Levels:

...is an area of low-lying, flat reclaimed coastal marshes that extend up to the Severn Estuary. The Gwent Levels are designated both for their historic landscape and ecological interest. The Gwent Levels are dissected by an extensive network of tide-locked freshwater drains, locally known as reens, and smaller ditches... It is for these ecological features that the Gwent Levels are designated as SSSIs. The Welsh Government, in accordance with its duties under environmental legislation, has used reasonable endeavours to conserve and enhance the features of the SSSIs during the design of the Scheme.

Project to date

Alongside the Environmental Statement, a substantial number of other documents were also published in March 2016, marking a key stage in the planning and delivery process for the project. Ten public exhibitions were also announced where members of the public were able

to inspect draft orders, environmental information and other associated reports and materials. A [previous blog post by the Research Service](#) contains more information on these reports.

Following the public exhibitions, in June 2016 the then Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure Ken Skates, [announced in Plenary that](#):

All the responses have been carefully reviewed. There are significant issues that must be given careful consideration before I reach a final decision on whether to proceed with construction...**I have therefore decided that a public local inquiry should be held** [emphasis added by Research Service]. An independent inspector will review the need for the scheme and consider all environmental, social and economic factors. They will hear evidence and examine the technical experts as well as hearing from supporters and objectors...to inform a final decision on whether to proceed to construction.

Public local inquiry

The public local inquiry was due to begin in Autumn 2016 and in anticipation of this inquiry, the Welsh Government set out its statement of case in August 2016. [Part 1 \(PDF 2.23MB\)](#) of its case details an overview and justification of the scheme. [Parts 2 and 3 \(PDF 2.35MB\)](#) detail a summary of objections received and an outline of the Welsh Government's response.

In October 2016, the Cabinet Secretary [announced that the inquiry was delayed](#) due to the need for revised traffic forecast modelling to be completed. A [further update was given in December 2016](#), where the Cabinet Secretary stated that he had taken a 'fresh look' at the proposals. This took place in light of revised traffic growth data and the Welsh Government's latest proposals for the [South Wales Metro](#), along with duties required under the [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#). The Cabinet Secretary stated that he had also taken a fresh look at alternative routes including 'the much discussed 'blue route' (more information is included later in this briefing)' but believed that 'the proposed M4 Project remains...the long-term, sustainable solution'.

The inquiry began on 28 February 2017 with an independent inspector appointed to consider evidence in a transparent, fair and impartial way. In his [opening remarks](#) (PDF 205KB) to the inquiry, the inspector highlighted the vast number of pieces of correspondence that had been received expressing either support for, or objections to, the proposed 'black route'. The inquiry closed in April 2018, with all of the related documents and information [available to view online](#).

Following the conclusion of the inquiry, a report has been issued to the Welsh Ministers on the inspector's findings and recommendations which is now being considered.

Alternative options

A number of alternatives have previously been proposed to the Welsh Government's preferred 'black route' option in developing plans for the M4 corridor around Newport. The Welsh Government consulted on a [draft Plan](#) in late 2013 which considered two 'reasonable

alternatives', namely the 'red route' (a dual carriageway to the South of Newport) and a 'purple route' (a motorway along an alternative alignment to the South of Newport).

In July 2014, the Welsh Government published an [appraisal of alternatives considered during the consultation process](#) (PDF 2.39MB). This also considered an alternative 'blue route' which would use a combination of the A48 Newport Southern Distributor Road and the former Steelworks Road on the eastern side of Newport to create a new dual carriageway.

The 'blue route' was proposed by the [Institute of Welsh Affairs](#) and [Professor Stuart Cole](#) in a [Blue Route Report](#) (PDF 814KB) published in December 2013. Supporters argue that this would be both cheaper and quicker to build than the relief road.

However, the Welsh Government's 2014 appraisal suggested that the 'blue route' would not achieve the scheme objectives, and would itself require significant investment with insufficient benefit.

An '[Appraisal of Objectors' Alternative Blue Route Proposals](#)' was published by the Welsh Government in December 2016, in light of the revised traffic modelling that was required as outlined earlier in this briefing. This appraisal concluded that:

The Blue Route would not address the identified transport related problems as well as the M4 Corridor around Newport Scheme... the Welsh Government is not promoting the Blue Route, which has been suggested by objectors. However, the Blue Route and the findings of this appraisal will be considered as part of the Public Local Inquiry into the Welsh Government's proposed M4 Corridor around Newport Scheme.

The Welsh Government's [opening statement](#) (PDF 356KB) to the public local inquiry outlined that it had 'received details of 22 alternative routes' from objectors to the preferred option during public consultation. Details of [these 22 objectors' alternatives](#) (PDF 136KB) were made available as part of the inquiry. In March 2017, the Welsh Government published its '[Objectors' Suggested Alternatives Report](#)' (PDF 56.1MB) which considered each of these alternatives. The Welsh Government was obliged to do this and to submit the report to the inspector as part of the inquiry. This report includes analysis of the impact each alternative would have on the Gwent Levels.

In September 2018, the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales [published a report titled 'Transport Fit for Future Generations'](#) proposing an alternative option to 'solve congestion around Newport' by investing the:

the £1.4bn currently earmarked for the M4 Black Route...in public transport, active travel and ensuring delivery of all phases of the South Wales Metro.

The petitioner - [Campaign Against the Levels Motorway](#) - issued a [press release in September 2018 expressing support](#) (PDF 280KB) for the alternative proposals set out in the Future Generations Commissioner's report.

Welsh Government Action

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Transport issued a [written statement in April 2018](#) to announce that the public local inquiry had closed. The statement also committed:

to a debate in Government time in the Assembly before a final decision is made by the Welsh Ministers whether to enter into contracts for construction.

On 16 October 2018, the Leader of the House and Chief Whip, Julie James, was asked in Plenary about the timescales in relation to a decision being made on the scheme. [She stated that:](#)

...the current schedule for Government business shows that there's a debate scheduled for the week commencing 4 December [2018].

On 23 October 2018, the Leader of the House was again asked about the debate and whether it will form a binding vote on the Welsh Government. The [Leader of the House stated in response:](#)

Yes...the debate and vote will be taken into account in final investment decisions...it will be in Government time. So, it's a binding vote in Government time on the Government...we promised that vote—I promised that vote... in the Assembly. And so, we will do that.

This is reaffirmed in the Cabinet Secretary's letter to the Chair of the Petitions Committee which states that the findings of the public inquiry as well as:

...the committed Senedd debate and vote, will inform the final decision on whether the project proceeds.

National Assembly for Wales Action

There have been a number of debates held on the M4 corridor around Newport in Plenary. The most recent took place in February 2018 as Plaid Cymru [tabled a debate on the proposed M4 relief road.](#)

In June 2016, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Transport [made a statement in Plenary](#) to announce that the public local inquiry would be held in relation to the scheme. Issues relating to the environmental impacts were raised and [the Cabinet Secretary stated that the Welsh Government had:](#)

identified £45 million within the project, which will be spent on environmental measures, not just to mitigate the impact of the proposed black route but, indeed, to enhance the environment.

The M4 relief road has also been discussed by various Assembly Committees.

The [Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee](#) questioned the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Transport on the scheme [during a scrutiny session held in January 2018](#). The Committee focused on the environmental impacts the proposed route would have and asked the Cabinet Secretary to outline the planned mitigation measures. The Cabinet Secretary stated:

there are major, major initiatives that'll be taking place, indeed taking place before the road is open for use, that will improve the natural environment—for example, the reed beds, the lagoons that are going to be created, the planting of new hedgerows, new woodland...fifty per cent of the road is being constructed on brownfield sites—2 per cent, yes, on the Gwent Levels. There has to be that balance between social, environmental and economic interests. We're trying to achieve that balance as much as possible.

The scheme has also been discussed in [June 2018](#) and [July 2018](#) by the Assembly's [Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee](#) as part of its [inquiry into the state of roads in Wales](#).