

## Petition: Support the M4 Relief Road Black Route

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 9 Hydref 2018  
Petitions Committee | 9 October 2018

### Research Briefing:

Petition Number: P-05-838

Petition title: Support the M4 Relief Road Black Route

Text of petition:

We call on the Welsh Government to continue with its plans to build the M4 Relief Road along the proposed Black Route, and following the announcement that the Welsh Government will table a debate on the M4 plans later this year, we call on the National Assembly to support the project.

The need for a new motorway around Newport is overwhelming with the congestion around the Brynglas Tunnels negatively impacting on businesses and people from across South Wales. The first proposal for a relief road was published in 1991, almost 30 years ago. Although the failure to take action over three decades isn't solely to blame, we believe it hasn't helped the economic well-being of the current generation and has contributed towards:

- The employment rate in Wales being an average of over 3% lower than the UK employment rate since the mid-1990s.
- The Welsh GVA per head being consistently lower than 75% of the UK average since the late-1990s with most recent figures showing that Cardiff's GVA per head is the lowest of the four UK capital cities.

The Welsh Government's analysis from March 2016 finds that a new M4 around Newport will improve connectivity within South Wales and with the rest of the UK which will:

- Reduce journey times bringing particular benefits to logistics firms and 'just in time operations' who currently face regular disruption and associated costs.
- Save South Wales businesses an estimated £34m a year in transport costs.
- Increase access to employment for residents and expand the size of the accessible

workforce for businesses.

- Increase the GVA of South Wales by £39m per annum through increased productivity.
- Create access to new employment sites around Newport with capacity for 15,000 jobs and improve access to sites adjacent to the existing M4 which are held back due to regular congestion.
- Improve the perception of Wales for visitors and as a location for investment.

Please change the status quo of the last 30 years and support the government's Black Route proposals for the M4 Relief Road so that we can improve the economic well-being of future generations across South Wales.

## Background

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 M4 relief road would be the Welsh Government's biggest infrastructure project to date.

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 2016 a substantial number of documents, marking a key stage in the planning and delivery process for the project, were published. 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. 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 with the Welsh Government anticipating that, if the project were to proceed, the new section of motorway would be complete by the end of 2021 and the reclassification of the existing motorway complete by the end of 2022.

In anticipation of the 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 for the relief road 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. Upon conclusion of the inquiry, a report will be issued to the Welsh Ministers on the inspector's findings and recommendations. The Welsh Ministers will then consider this report to decide whether the scheme should go ahead with or without modifications. The inspectors report is not binding on the Welsh Ministers.

The inquiry closed in April 2018, with all of the related documents and information [available to view online](#).

## Support and objections

The proposals for the M4 have regularly made headlines with a number of objectors and supporters, this was emphasised by the inspector's [opening remarks](#) (PDF 205KB) to the inquiry which summarised the main grounds for support and objections to the proposed 'Black Route'.

The inspector stated that at that time **around 200 unique pieces of correspondence had been submitted from individuals, companies and organisations (mainly across South Wales) which 'clearly expressed support'**. Supporters of the proposed scheme, as summarised by the inspector in his opening remarks, believed it would:

- Regenerate the city of Newport;
- Improve air quality;
- Improve the local and national economy;
- Remove barriers to investment in the area;
- Improve access to Newport Docks and industrial areas;
- Remove unsatisfactory junctions; and
- Provide a modern high quality strategic route.

The inspector **also noted that there were 'something in the order of 340 unique [objections](#)'**. In his opening remarks the inspector summarised the main themes behind the objections. Objectors believed that the scheme cannot be justified on the grounds of:

- Value for money;
- Current air and noise pollution;
- Its effects on an historic landscape;
- Its impact on the environmentally rich and established Gwent levels and on wildlife;
- Its impact on sites of special scientific interest and designated special areas of conservation;
- Potential for alternatives to be developed that would be satisfactory in terms of road transport less costly and damaging to the environment or to local communities; and
- An incompatibility with the goals of the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*.

In December 2017, [the Cabinet Secretary issued a statement regarding objections made by Associated British Ports \(ABP\) concerning Newport Docks](#). The statement outlined that a:

collaboration between [the] Welsh Government and ABP has developed a detailed scope of enabling works to integrate Newport Docks with the M4 Project...[the works mean that] the opening date of the new section of motorway is now forecast to be autumn 2023, although consideration is being given to phasing of opening sections in 2022.

The local authority, Newport City Council, agreed it's [position at a full Council meeting in November 2017](#). The Council:

accepts the current Public Inquiry as the legitimate forum for investigating outstanding issues regarding the proposals for an M4 Relief Road. Council has previously expressed support for the M4 Relief Road as a way of easing traffic congestion in and around Newport and trusts that the Public Inquiry will reach a balanced conclusion taking into account transport, environment, public and business concerns in Newport and South East Wales. Council calls on the Welsh Government to make a decision on the project and its funding as soon as possible after the current process is concluded.

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.

### 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 the Welsh Government 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 '[Objector's 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.

## Welsh Government Action

In his letter to the Chair of the Petitions Committee, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Transport highlights that the Welsh Government is awaiting:

the inspector's report, which, once received, will be given due consideration before the statutory decision making process is concluded.

The Cabinet Secretary also highlights that a debate will take place in Plenary before a final decision is made by the Welsh Ministers. This was also outlined in a [statement by the Cabinet Secretary in April 2018](#) which was issued to announce that the public local inquiry had closed. The statement outlined that upon receiving the inspector's report:

the Welsh Ministers must complete the statutory process. The next steps will be announced, alongside publication of the inspectors' report for all to see. In recognition of the importance of this matter to the whole of Wales, we have 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.

## National Assembly for Wales Action

The M4 relief road has 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](#).

There have also 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](#). A motion was tabled in the name of Rhun ap Iorwerth AM that:

the Welsh Government should not commit to financing the proposed M4 relief road without a meaningful vote on a substantive motion in the Assembly following the conclusion of the current public inquiry.

The motion was not agreed. However an amendment tabled in the name of Julie James AM was agreed that:

the National Assembly for Wales recognises that a public inquiry by independent inspectors into the M4 corridor around Newport project is still underway and nothing should be done to prejudice the outcome of the inquiry, the inspectors' report or the statutory process.

However, it has since been [stated that the Assembly will have a vote](#) on the matter although further detail on the form the vote will take and whether it will be binding on the Welsh Ministers has not been announced.

At the time of writing this brief, a date for the Plenary debate and vote has yet to be announced. On 13 September 2018, [Adam Price AM tabled a question](#) asking the First Minister to make a statement on the proposed plan for the M4 relief road. The First Minister's response stated that the Welsh Government:

expect to receive the Public Inquiry report shortly. That, plus the decision on the Statutory Orders, will be the subject of the debate and vote in this chamber before the final decision whether to proceed with construction.