M1/Westlink: a road too far

“...a ‘predict and provide’ approach, in which road capacity is increased to match forecast traffic growth, is environmentally unsustainable, unaffordable and self-defeating.”

Scottish Executive Strategic Roads Review 1999

Roads Service has announced their intention to expand the capacity of the M1/Westlink. The main elements of the scheme are new slip roads at Dunmurry; widening the M1 and Westlink to three lanes in each direction as far as Grosvenor Rd and building flyovers at Broadway and Grosvenor Rd. The cost is estimated at £35 million and is to be financed through the proceeds of the sale of Belfast Port as set out in the Chancellor’s Initiative.

- Decisions prior to devolution were taken with no public consultation and without the input of elected representatives.
- Roads Service claim that the scheme will deliver a range of economic benefits - claims for which the Government’s own advisors have found little evidence.
- No serious consideration has been given to alternatives based on public transport, walking, cycling and freight priority.
- The scheme will relieve congestion in the short term but will generate new traffic causing greater congestion within a few years.
- It will cause higher levels of local air pollution and increase carbon dioxide emissions.
- Appraisal methods employed do not conform to those now commonly used in England, Wales and Scotland.
- The flyovers at Broadway and Grosvenor Road will exacerbate the existing physical barrier between west Belfast and the city centre.
- The sliproads at Dunmurry will directly endanger local school children.
- The northern end of the Westlink will remain as two lanes while the rest of the system will be three lanes thus creating a classic bottleneck.

The Economy

As the Assembly faces some hard choices on public expenditure, a key question must be will £35 million expenditure deliver commensurate economic benefits. Roads Service claims that its proposals are “essential to the continued economic development of Belfast and
Northern Ireland.” Yet the government’s own Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment (SACTRA)\(^1\) can find no evidence to support this as a general view on transport infrastructure. Indeed it points to evidence that major roads projects can have the effect of ‘sucking’ economic development from a region or a locality as firms find it increasingly possible to service the region in question from a base at some distance. SACTRA emphasise that only rigorous assessment of the effects of a road scheme, and an examination of alternatives, can reveal whether it will deliver economic benefits or disbenefits.

Not only are the claimed economic benefits of road building highly questionable but the economic benefits of public transport investment have been ignored. For example, evidence from Los Angeles has shown that 85 cents of every dollar spent on petrol leaves the regional economy. In contrast, out of every dollar that buys a fare in public transport, 80 cents goes in transport workers’ wages which go on to generate $3.80 of goods and services in the region.\(^2\)

Impact on the economy must not be confused with the cost benefit analysis carried out by Roads Service on the scheme. The conclusion of the draft report\(^3\) is that the scheme shows a net present value of £93.5m (1994 prices) over a 30 year period. This is NOT the value of the scheme to the economy but is based on aggregating time savings to vehicles (each minute saved by a vehicle is valued at approximately 5 pence) and savings from accidents (a life is currently valued at approximately £950,000). Clearly these are purely arbitrary figures and transport planners in Scotland, England and Wales now use this methodology only as part of a much broader appraisal. (See below)

### 3 lanes into 2 don’t go!

The scheme as proposed comprises three traffic lanes in each direction from the Black’s Road junction of the M1 as far as Divis Street. Thereafter it narrows to two lanes. The same happens in the opposite direction. It is difficult to see how any vehicle’s journey will be speeded up from one end of the Westlink to the other if for one mile the road space available is the same as at present. The effect will be that traffic travelling northwards will be speeded up only to wait at the bottleneck. In a rare moment of common sense Roads Service has decided that to cut two extra lanes through this sub-ground level section would be unjustified. The logical course is therefore not to widen any of the Westlink to three lanes.

### Alternatives

#### Flawed appraisal

The only alternatives to this scheme examined by Roads Service have been either ‘do nothing’ or a range of road widening options. Public transport, traffic restraint, walking and cycling options have not been assessed as alternative means of achieving the schemes’s objectives. This is despite the fact that the 1999 Northern Ireland Transport Policy Statement ‘Moving Forward’\(^4\) promised: “New appraisal frameworks for assessing and comparing different solutions to transport problems...” which would ensure that “...key policy decisions are taken within an appraisal framework which takes account of all relevant transport, environmental and social factors.” Such appraisal is now common practice in Scotland, England and Wales and has been developed as ‘multi-modal’ studies which are exactly what their name implies. All transport modes are considered for their potential contribution to a transport problem and the optimum balance is chosen. This is in marked contrast to Roads Service’s approach to the M1/Westlink which offers only a road based solution to a road problem.

### Freight Movement

One important way in which the scheme is expected to contribute to economic development is through the easing

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of freight access to and from the Port of Belfast. Assuming that faster movement of freight would indeed be beneficial to the economy, it does not follow that creating extra lanes and flyovers is the best way to do it. This is especially true when the new road space created will be quickly taken up with new traffic generated by the very existence of the new space, a phenomenon described by SACTRA as induced traffic and which underpins the current emphasis on integrated transport in Scotland, England and Wales.

Rather than spend £35m, the benefits of which will be indiscriminately targeted at all vehicles, an alternative which Roads Service has not considered is allocating a greater amount of the existing road space to freight traffic. For example, one lane in each direction could be reserved for freight and buses. Freight priority of this kind is working in both Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Southampton and may be able to serve as a model for Belfast.

**Public Transport**

Although Roads Service propose to include a dedicated bus-lane for part of the route, the overall result of the scheme will be to make car commuting more attractive in the short to medium term (before congestion grows to reduce traffic speeds to their current levels). This is likely to mean a modal shift from bus and rail to cars as opposed to the other way around, robbing our beleaguered public transport system of its precious passengers.

An investment of £10m on three more trains on the Lisburn to Belfast route, on the other hand, could help attract more customers, thus providing car commuters with a decent public transport alternative. Friends of the Earth welcomes the recent statement by Minister for Regional Development, Peter Robinson, whose “aim is to reduce the number of car journeys on our roads by encouraging more people to use public transport.”

Channelling the vast majority of the planned expenditure on the M1/Westlink towards public transport would have precisely that effect.

**Environmental Justice**

**Air Pollution**

Recent Government figures show that although there has been a marginal improvement on last year, Belfast remains in the bottom 10 out of 34 sites across the UK. As pollution from domestic coal has fallen, progress is being offset by the rapid growth in traffic levels. It is claimed that cleaner vehicle engines will improve air quality but although there may be some short term improvements, forecast traffic growth (which the M1/Westlink scheme is designed to accommodate) will soon offset the progress made.

Allowing such traffic growth will also mean that Northern Ireland will fail to play its part in meeting the UK’s international obligations to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

**Equality**

It is worth bearing in mind that air pollution does not affect the population equally. Fundamental questions of environmental justice are raised by the fact that at the last census 89% of households in one of the wards most affected by the Westlink did not own a car. Car owning commuters from dormitory towns and leafy suburbs are visiting their pollution on non-car owning inner city residents. Meanwhile £35m is to be spent on the M1/Westlink while public transport, upon which those without cars are dependent, suffers from serious under-investment. This is a clear example of public policy being heavily skewed towards the better off and it is doubtful whether such a policy can be consistent with Government policy on Targeting Social Need or under equality legislation.

**Flyovers**

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From local residents’ point of view the proposals for flyovers at Broadway and Grosvenor Road appear to make life easier for pedestrians who will no longer have to cross busy roundabouts. In reality the environment beneath a six-lane urban flyover is typically a hostile one. The flyover supports and ‘landscaped’ areas can provide shelter for a variety of threats to pedestrians including drug abusers, alcohol abusers and muggers. They are often also used as impromptu public toilets.

But it is not just a question of a worsening pedestrian environment. Both flyovers will create large physical barriers between the areas to the west of the Westlink and Belfast city centre. They will effectively finish the job of isolating west Belfast from the rest of the city which was commenced with the building of the Westlink in the 1970s. Is this really our vision of Belfast in the 21st century?

Dunmurry children

The addition of south facing sliproads onto the M1 at Kingsway will have a severe impact on the local environment and particularly on local children. The new on-slip will run adjacent to St Anne’s primary school playground where children will be subject to the high levels of pollution caused by accelerating traffic.

Children walking to and from Dunmurry and three schools on the east side of the M1 currently enjoy a safe route to school with no complex junctions to negotiate. The addition of the slip roads will create four new road crossings including two for traffic exiting the motorway at speeds which are likely to be frequently well above the limit. Thus what was a relatively safe pedestrian environment is now to be transformed into what many parents will view as a ‘no-go’ area for their children. Those families who have car access will drive their children to school, creating more traffic and more danger, while those children without cars must take their chances in a much deteriorated environment.

Whose decision?

The expansion of the M1/Westlink between Dunmurry and Grosvenor Road has been planned by Roads Service for a number of years. In 1995 they carried out an appraisal of the scheme in the hope that it would be financed by the private sector under the Private Finance Initiative. No serious private sector interest emerged. In May 1998, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown announced a package of measures for Northern Ireland including £87m of road building schemes. These included £35m to be spent on the M1/Westlink expansion. No consultation took place as to how the Chancellor’s bonus might be best spent. The then DOE merely proffered a list of road schemes and their wishes were immediately granted.

A more democratic course might have been to ear-mark the funding for transport in general and leave time to assess the best way of spending the Chancellor’s windfall. MLAs might feel, as do many members of the public, that there is no reason why the proceeds of the sale of Belfast Port should be allocated to the M1/Westlink over other pressing transport priorities.

Avoiding the public

Having successfully avoided any public consultation at the crucial financing stage, the Roads Service went on to publish its Environmental Statement on Stage 1 of the project and commence the related statutory public consultation on 2nd July 1999. Stage 2 of the project commenced its consultation period on 26th November 1999. Despite these attempts to hide behind summer holidays and Christmas and Millennium celebrations, considerable public opposition has grown to the proposals, especially in Dunmurry and west Belfast.

Roads Service has also sought to quash opposition to its proposals by splitting the project into two stages. This has the effect of doubling the workload and expense for objectors and presents them with the prospect of fighting two public enquiries on the same scheme.
An opportunity

Clearly none of this poor practice can be laid at the door of the new Minister. Mr Robinson does have the power, however, to ensure that transport policy is not dictated by unaccountable decisions taken some years ago.

*Friends of the Earth recommends that the Minister takes this opportunity to announce a review of the M1/Westlink scheme and commission a full ‘multi-modal’ study on the transport corridor from the M1 to Belfast Port. In this way his vision of “a more balanced sustainable and effective transport system for the whole of Northern Ireland” can be achieved.*

Friends of the Earth,
40 Wellington Park,
BELFAST BT9 6DN,
Tel 028 9066 4311
Fax 028 9066 0727
E-mail: foe-ni@foe.co.uk
Website: www.foe.co.uk

7 New Coleraine Transport Centre, DRD Press Release,
7 January 2000.