

# Written Ministerial Statement

*The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.*

## Department for Infrastructure

### **ANNOUNCEMENT OF DECISION ON HOW TO PROCEED WITH THE FLAGSHIP A5 WESTERN TRANSPORT CORRIDOR DUAL CARRIAGEWAY PROJECT, INCLUDING RELEASE OF THE FINAL ADVISORY REPORT FROM THE PLANNING APPEALS COMMISSION AND DEPARTMENTAL STATEMENT, AND THE MAKING OF THE NECESSARY STATUTORY ORDERS**

*Published at 7.30pm on Wednesday 2 October 2024*

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure):**

#### Decision

I wish to inform Members, following agreement today with Executive colleagues, of my formal decision to proceed with the Flagship A5 Western Transport Corridor (A5WTC) dual carriageway scheme, in part, at this time, reflecting the recommendations arising from the public inquiries held in 2016, 2020 and 2023.

#### Background

The A5 Western Transport Corridor (A5WTC) dual carriageway scheme was recognised as a Flagship Project by the Executive in 2015 and has been a long-standing commitment of the Executive and the British and Irish governments.

The whole scheme is approximately 85 kilometres in length, extending from New Buildings to south of Aughnacloy where the existing A5 joins with the N2 at the border with the South. It would provide a continuous new dual carriageway, generally parallel with the existing A5 corridor, with a number of junctions that would facilitate access to the various towns, villages and hamlets along the route corridor, currently served by the existing A5, as well as links to other strategic routes.

We are all sadly familiar with the news reports about the 57 fatalities between April 2006 and April 2024 and there are hundreds more injuries suffered that do not grab the headlines. Lives, families and communities devastated on such a frequent basis by the loss of a friend or loved one.

The experience of the adjoining A4 dualling scheme tells us that we can be confident that an improved safety profile will be delivered on the new A5 dualling scheme.

A key objective of the scheme has always therefore been to improve road safety, but it is also about improving journey times and journey reliability to meet the needs of a modern society. The new dual carriageway is also of significant strategic importance to the North West region and our wider island, helping to tackle regional imbalance, improving the economy, job prospects and prosperity, and connecting communities.

In its opening remarks to the public inquiry of 2023, the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) commented that it wanted to bring to an end the long saga of the A5 scheme. I now also want to bring an end to that uncertainty in so far as is within my power to do so.

#### The way forward.

My decision today is to proceed with approximately 55 kilometres of new dual carriageway from a junction just south of Strabane (to be known as Junction 8) to the proposed junction close to

Ballygawley (to be known as Junction 15), and to include a short westward extension of the existing A4 dual carriageway to join to the new road. This amounts to nearly two thirds of the scheme's full length. The implementation of this part of the scheme will be phased to reflect the readiness of construction contracts and the availability of funding.

My decision is in line with Recommendation 30 of the PAC's final advisory report from the 2020 and 2023 public inquiries, which recommended that, subject to certain conditions, my Department proceeds with this part of the scheme.

#### Committed to remainder of the Scheme

I wish to reassure Members that I remain fully committed to progressing the entirety of the scheme and to taking a statutory decision on whether to proceed with the remaining parts, from New Buildings to south of Strabane, and from Ballygawley to the border south of Aughnacloy, later. My Department continues to work to progress these remaining parts.

#### Decision considerations

In making my decision, I have considered the PAC's final advisory Reports from the Public Inquiries held in 2016, 2020 and 2023, all representations made, all advice received from public authorities, all environmental information, the results of transboundary consultations, policy considerations and all other information and materials relating to the scheme, and having eliminated the risks of adverse effects of the scheme upon Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas, following appropriate assessments of those risks.

#### PAC Conclusions

My Department concurs with the conclusion of the PAC that this part of the scheme would have large beneficial effects on road safety, journey times and economic competitiveness, and significant beneficial effects on the balancing of regional

infrastructure provision. My Department also concurs with the PAC that, for this part of the A5WTC, the substantial benefits offered by the proposed off-line dual carriageway outweigh the adverse environmental effects and also justify any interferences with the human rights of individuals who may be affected by the scheme.

#### Departmental Statement

In deciding to proceed with part of the scheme at this time, my Department has set out in detail within the Departmental Statement, the consideration which has been given to the recommendations of the PAC. My decision to proceed is also subject to the commitment of my Department to carry out the mitigation measures and the other works and conditions summarised in the Departmental Statement that are relevant to this part of the scheme.

#### Appropriate Assessment

Having regard to the relevant portions of the Environmental Statement 2016, Environmental Statement Addendum (ESA) 2019 and ESA 2022, the updated August 2024 Reports to Inform an Appropriate Assessment and the consultation responses to these assessments, the recommendations of the PAC and all other advice and environmental information, the likely significant environmental effects of the Proposed Scheme have been assessed and the information presented is sufficient to inform judgements reached with regard to the decision to proceed with this part of the scheme.

The Appropriate Assessment which has been undertaken is reflected in the reports which will be published with my decision. In light of the content of the reports, it is considered that the construction and operation of this part of the scheme would not by itself, or in combination with other known plans or projects, adversely affect the integrity of SACs, SPAs and Ramsar sites in view of their conservation objectives.

### Making of the Statutory Orders

In line with my decision to proceed, I have also instructed my officials to make the necessary Direction Order, the Vesting Orders and the Stopping Up of Private Accesses Order relevant to this part of the scheme, my Department being satisfied that members of the public and others concerned have been given reasonable opportunity to express their opinion. My decision and these Orders will be subject to my Department's commitment to carry out the mitigation and other works referred to in the Departmental Statement.

### Local Economy and Job Opportunities

My decision today will come as welcome news for the construction industry as well as the local and wider economy. A peak of around 450 jobs in the construction sector is anticipated, further supplemented by the subcontractor/supply chain which will ebb and flow over the delivery period. There will also be a considerable focus on social value by incorporating targeted recruitment and training opportunities for both young and long-term unemployed. This will provide upskill and re-skill opportunities

for the employment market within the civil engineering industry and will leave a positive legacy behind following scheme completion.

### Concluding Comments

It is now 17 years since this scheme was first proposed. Since then, there have been multiple consultations with the general public, directly affected landowners and with the relevant statutory authorities. There have been public inquiries in 2011, 2016, 2020 and 2023 (the latter being reconvened from the 2020 inquiry), providing opportunities for everyone to express their opinion.

The 2023 public inquiry examined in detail schemes put forward as alternatives to the A5 dualling, including those put forward by the main group of objectors to the scheme. The PAC has concluded that all those alternatives presented would unacceptably compromise the scheme objectives and/or provide an inadequate response to the needs of the Western Transport Corridor. I concur with this conclusion and I firmly believe that this scheme can save lives and protect the people who must rely on use of this road on a daily basis.

I very much hope that everyone can now get behind this much needed and long-awaited scheme in the interests of the greater good of our communities and of future generations.

**I want to put on record my heartfelt thanks to my officials for their hard work and dedication to get this over the line.**

**Today is in honour of all those who have lost their lives or who have been seriously injured on this road. We pay tribute to them and to those who campaigned so tirelessly in their memory for this upgrade to proceed.**

Further information on my decision, the Departmental Statement, the PAC Report of October 2023 and associated documents will be available for viewing via my Department's website [www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk](http://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk) or the scheme specific website [www.a5wtc.com](http://www.a5wtc.com).