



## Campaign Against the Levels Motorway

[savethegwentlevels@gmail.com](mailto:savethegwentlevels@gmail.com)

[www.savethelevels.org.uk](http://www.savethelevels.org.uk)

c/o Gwent Wildlife Trust, Seddon House, NP25 4DY

# JULY 2020 NEWSLETTER

## A word from CALM's co-chairs

Welcome to the latest CALM newsletter – the first since last year's historic and altogether magnificent decision by Mark Drakeford, First Minister of Wales, not to proceed with the M4 Relief Road.

The First Minister appointed a commission – the South East Wales Transport Commission, chaired by Lord Terry Burns – to investigate the current transport needs of the region and to recommend alternatives to road building. The first formal statement from the Commission has been released – see below.

In CALM we've been considering our role. It's clear that we're still needed. There's still a lobby out there demanding more roads. We need to be here to keep countering those demands.

The current administration in the Senedd (formerly the Welsh Assembly and renamed this year) is very much in favour of all the things we love in CALM – trains, buses, cycling, walking, flexible work patterns etc – but we know how the political landscape can shift in a heartbeat. So, we remain vigilant.

But for the moment it's pretty much all good news.

*Catherine Linstrum & Rob Hepworth*



Catherine & Rob celebrating the M4 decision at the GWT Derek Upton Centre at Magor Marsh in July 2019

## The Burns Commission interim report

It's great that the Burns Commission is facing up to the immediate and longer term needs of south-east Wales by proposing real improvements to public transport and active travel, including the new backbone of a local rail route connecting Cardiff, Newport and Bristol. Exporting the genuine emissions problem in central Newport by destroying the wildlife and beauty of the Gwent Levels was never the right solution. Our own generation must solve the Climate and Biodiversity Emergencies. We need rock-solid,

green solutions not a return to outdated road building. The interim report from Terry Burns' expert commission is a decisive step in that direction.

CALM endorses Burns' central conclusion that we need a Network of Alternatives to reduce unsustainable single person commuting by car. CALM agrees that the post-Covid period should be used as a "breathing space" to establish this Network. The report envisages a revitalised commuter rail service at the core of an integrated public transport and active travel network, matching car use in reliability and cost. St Mellons, West Newport, Llanwern and Magor will be four of the new stations on the line. We also applaud the suggestion of a cycle route linking Cardiff and Newport.

The detailed analysis of travel patterns and projections in the report also shows once again why the motorway was the wrong solution. It shows more clearly than ever that congestion results from decades of mistaken policies in which new housing, factories and shops were located to favour car-only transport while buses and trains were sidelined, especially in Newport. The local authorities must cooperate regionally in future to make sure these mistakes are never repeated.

We call on Welsh Government to mobilise the investment resources needed, with a task force at Transport for Wales. Scrapping the motorway saved over £2 billion so we *can* afford the alternatives as a priority now. The new Network of Alternatives should also encourage inward investment to Newport as a healthy and attractive City, re-engineered for the future we all face.

The Commission's conclusions are in five documents which you can access [here](#). The first document has all the key findings but the other four are worth skimming as they contain valuable new information especially about actual transport usage and public attitudes.

We expect to see urgent implementation of the Commission's plans.



Recently-fledged Little Egret on the Gwent Levels – one of the many species which now has a much better future thanks to the #NoNewM4 decision © Rob Waller

## Gwent Levels wildlife 2020

Well, we may all have been on lockdown but our wildlife has not. It has been able to go about its business unhindered by Covid-19. In particular it has been able to flourish without disturbance from a new M4 crashing through its home. If the Welsh Government's decision just over a year ago had gone the other way then the bulldozers would be in now, forever sweeping away thousands of years of history along with habitats for species such as the Water Vole, Otter, Cetti's Warbler and the Shriill Carder-bee.



**Kingfisher at Magor Marsh © Rob Waller**

Our Gwent Wildlife Trust reserves at Magor Marsh and Great Traston Meadows have remained open and enjoyed by scores of people looking for relief from cabin fever and Zoom meetings. Grandparents and grandchildren, young families, keen naturalists and folk just out for a stroll have been able to enjoy the peace, fresh air and sheer joy of getting up close to all aspects of nature as spring has unfolded. They have seen families of cygnets take to the water, a growing colony of nesting Little Egrets, flowers and insects galore. Marsh Harriers are now nesting on the Levels. In some spots we regularly hear the boom of the Bittern. Barn Owls are flourishing too.

Spring 2020 has been special for less road traffic noise, no aircraft noise and – thank goodness – no road building. We have been able to experience nature, under the wide skies of the Levels, better than ever before.

Rob Waller



**A local female Marsh Harrier with nesting material © Rob Waller**

## Our sustainable transport revolution

Walking and cycling (together known as 'active travel') provide huge benefits and incur very low costs. They enhance health and well-being and air quality, whilst reducing carbon emissions and transport inequality and making streets safer and more convivial. Compared to road-building, active travel infrastructure is relatively cheap and gives much higher economic benefits.

In the UK, the huge benefits of active travel have rarely been translated into policy, let alone into practice. But in Wales the sands are shifting, as signalled by the Welsh Government's forward-looking decision on the M4 Corridor Around Newport. Mark Drakeford's government has sustainable travel high up the political agenda, guided by Lee Waters, Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport (and former Director of Sustrans Cymru).

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis has also had a dramatic effect on transport. Demand for transport to work and city centres has plummeted, and may never return to what it was, with increased home-working and internet shopping. The pleasures of quieter streets have been demonstrated with remarkable clarity.

Emergency funding for active travel measures by the Welsh Government in June 2020 (to the tune of £15.4m, including £0.6m for Newport) was one outcome of this. The use of this funding is most striking in Cardiff, where the numerous measures include making Castle Street somewhere for walking and cycling rather than four lanes of heavy traffic. In July, Newport joined Cardiff and Swansea by receiving over £2m to develop its active travel network.

The Burns Commission Interim Report also sees the importance of active travel, identifying how it can contribute to reducing peak time traffic on the M4. The report also refers to road user charging, the enhancement of the South Wales main line, bus lanes and priority for buses, and more integrated public transport – with improved interchanges between modes, through ticketing, and timetabling.

Many other new Welsh Government policies also comprise building blocks of a sustainable transport system – all of which will have a significant impact on the problem of congestion on the M4 and the quality of life in Newport. In June it was announced that 20 mph is to become the default speed on urban roads in Wales, saving lives and encouraging active travel. Plans are well-advanced to tackle pavement parking, which makes pedestrians lose out to cars. A review of bus regulation in Wales has been undertaken by Transport for Wales, with legislation to follow. Planning Policy Wales was revised in December 2018 to prioritise active travel. And the Welsh Government's 2017 change to their strategic transport procedure (WeITAG) should ensure that traffic-generating, inequality-widening and environmentally destructive schemes (such as that for a new M4), should never emerge again.

Transport for Wales (TfW), the arms-length body that ran the rail franchise bid, now has enhanced responsibilities, notably regarding buses and active

travel. Crucially, it is responsible for the South Wales and North Wales Metros – multi-modal rail systems that integrate heavy and light rail networks with other modes of transport. We are seeing the start of massive public expenditure on sustainable transport in Wales, which should bring enormous benefits to everyone.

At the heart of these changes is the Wales Transport Strategy, which will go out to consultation this Autumn. This will drive decarbonisation of transport. This strategy provides the opportunity for government funding to be allocated to projects that shift the 'modal split' – moving journeys away from cars to public transport, cycling and walking instead.

We are seeing a transport revolution in Wales. This long-term agenda will change travel habits, improve health and save our environment. These long-overdue shifts are framed by Government policies regarding greenhouse gas emissions, air quality and reversing the decline in biodiversity. But they are finally happening. CALM applauds the vision of the Welsh Government to enhance social life and protect wildlife with its policies of sustainability.

Hugh Mackay

### A view saved!

A point often overlooked in the M4 campaign was that a monstrous new motorway flyover spanning the Usk would mar the wonderful vistas loved by many Newport residents, as shown below. Can you imagine what it would look like with a concrete flyover dwarfing and obscuring the magnificent 1906 Transporter Bridge? We can all be grateful that this view is now safe.



### A bit of Boris bluster

You may have heard the Prime Minister's in the House of Commons on 8<sup>th</sup> July, interpreted by the media as a commitment to overrule the First Minister's decision not to build the new M4. This was a shock and clearly caused a lot of anxiety for our supporters. On the face of it, it was a disaster.

But closer analysis suggests that we can put the barricades back in the garden shed for the moment.

It was only an oral response to questions in the House, not an official announcement. Liz Saville Roberts MP complained that Simon Hart had been painting a very downbeat picture of Wales and its economy. Johnson leapt to Simon Hart's defence and said that he was "boosterish" (is there even such a word?) for the future of Wales and that the Government was committed to "levelling up" (that phrase again) throughout the whole of the UK, including Wales.

He then went on to say: "We will do the things, by the way, that the Welsh Labour Government have failed to do, such as unblocking the Brynglas tunnels and allowing that proper M4 bypass, which has long been

needed. We will provide the Vicks inhaler to the nostrils of the Welsh dragon and get Wales moving."

The Conservatives have always supported the new M4. David Cameron loved the idea – remember he said that the Brynglas tunnels were "a foot on the windpipe of Wales?" It's one of their campaign pledges. It's the kind of thing that they hope can win votes. It's simple, straightforward – unblock the Brynglas tunnels, build a motorway, the economy will boom. It's a mantra that even Boris Johnson can remember. He's already used the blocked nostrils and Vicks analogy before – at the launch of the Conservative manifesto for Wales in November – so it's clearly one in his back pocket that he can pull out and wave around to prove that he cares about the economy of Wales.



His comment came on the day of the Chancellor's July statement in which £500m was pledged to help Wales. That's not going to buy an M4 relief road. And there's nothing to suggest anywhere else that overruling the Senedd is on the Government's agenda at all. Technically they could. They could ignore the Sewel Convention and pass

legislation to build the road. But do they really want to create more discord between Wales and Westminster? And – crucially – do they really want to spend £2bn from their post-Brexit, post-Covid piggy bank on a jar of Vicks?

This was almost certainly rhetoric, bluff and bluster, a remark made with enough detail (the Brynglas tunnels) to suggest that Johnson knew what he was talking about but not enough detail to be able to pin him down on it later. The vague "We will do the things... such as..." means that he can say later, "I didn't actually mean the M4. I meant things such as... Vicks... dragon... economy... levelling up..."

Of course we will remain vigilant, and we are confident that the Senedd will be too.

Catherine Linstrum

### A history of CALM

In September last year, a few weeks after Mark Drakeford's visionary decision to protect the Gwent Levels, I sat down as CALM's co-chair to research and write a personal account of our achievements before my memory faded. My academic background was largely in history (and archaeology). I strove to ensure factual accuracy whilst writing openly from the perspective of our campaign – or "insurgency" as Ian Rappel memorably described it – to oppose the motorway.

The result was an illustrated article published in full on the CPRW website, stretching to 35 pages including illustrations. It includes a detailed critique of the Planning Inspector's report which failed to convince the First Minister. You can access it free [here](#) although it would be very welcome if anyone donates or becomes a CPRW member on the website!

I hope the account will be judged useful in the future. As Santayana commented, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”.

Rob Hepworth



Now safe! A Gwent Levels Water Vole © Rob Waller

### FoE Cymru calls for transport vision

A new report commissioned by Friends of the Earth Cymru – [A Wales Transport Policy fit for the Climate Emergency](#) – recommends a major overhaul of the Welsh transport sector, including a transformation of the nation’s walking and cycling infrastructure, to combat the climate crisis. This report calls for everyone in Wales to have the right to Swiss-style public transport service standards and Dutch-style active travel.

### NGOs fight plans to incinerate plastic waste on the Gwent Levels

The enormous damage that an M4 bypass would have done to the Levels would’ve been compounded by the pressure for more development on the Levels that would have come in its wake. Even without a bypass we still have to combat new proposals undermining the First Minister’s decision to protect the Levels.

At present plans loom to reopen the Uskmouth Power Station as a waste incinerator. This would generate electricity by burning fuel half-composed of toxic plastic imported from England in contravention of UK & Welsh Government policies on waste and climate emissions.

Three of the major environmental bodies who cooperated in CALM to stop the M4 have already objected formally to the waste incinerator – RSPB, Friends of the Earth Cymru and CPRW. Written objections to Newport Council and Natural Resources Wales emphasised the threats to communities and wildlife from the incinerator’s poisonous emissions, both in the Gwent Levels and beyond. As well as toxic chemicals like arsenic and dioxins, the incinerator would pump out over 1.5 million tonnes of CO2 and other greenhouse gases – even more than the previous coal-fired station, mothballed in 2014.

CPRW argues that the proposals should be called in for decision by Welsh Ministers as a ‘Development of National Significance’. They conclude that “*Given the UK’s policy to close all coal-fired energy generation by 2025 to combat climate change, Uskmouth is obsolete... There should be no serious suggestion of*

*re-opening Uskmouth, and especially not when it would burn a fuel of compacted waste pellets which would be more harmful than coal. Instead we need to allow the Levels – the lungs of Newport – as well as the lungs of local people, the time to recover from past damage, rather than introducing more pollution through a waste incinerator.”* Find out more [here](#) and [here](#).

Rob Hepworth

### St Bride’s for solar energy?

Details have just appeared of a proposal to build a giant solar panel and battery “farm” on the unspoilt SSSI at St Bride’s, close to the villages of Marshfield, Wentlooge and Peterstone. The panels would cover 155 hectares - over 13% of the entire site which forms an integral part of the Gwent Levels. It is also part of the designated Landscape of Outstanding Historic Interest. You can read up on the proposal [here](#). It has gone straight to the Planning Inspectorate as it is a Development of National Significance (DNS). Welsh Government Ministers will take the final decision in early 2021. You can comment or object [here](#).

Rob Hepworth

### Shrill Carder Bee News

One of the jewels in the biodiversity crown of the Gwent Levels is the Shrill Carder Bee. This has suffered devastating reductions in numbers across the UK but they’re still surviving on the Gwent Levels.



A fantastic initiative between Natural Resources Wales, Our Living Levels, Buglife and the Bumblebee Conservation Trust is working towards monitoring them and finding out more about how to boost their numbers. August is the

time when the shrill carder bee is most active, feeding on clover and other wildflowers. So it’s vital that there’s a range of plants flowering all through the summer.

You can help by taking part in monitoring bees in your area. All the details can be found on the Bumblebee Conservation Trust [website](#). If you live on the Levels and want to be more closely involved in the shrill carder bee project contact [Catherine Linstrum](#). She’ll pass on your details to BCT who might be able to organise some activities for volunteers, Covid-19 permitting of course.

And whether you live on the Levels or elsewhere, remember to leave your garden as wild as possible – for all the birds, bugs and bees. Don’t mow that lawn!

© CALM, July 2020. With thanks to everyone who is doing so much to ensure a better future for the Gwent Levels, local people & wildlife, Wales & the world.