

Transport
for NSW

Great Western Highway Upgrade Program

Blackheath to Little Hartley Preferred
Option Report

May 2022



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Acknowledgement of Country

Transport for NSW acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we work and live.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal people and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of NSW.

Many of the transport routes we use today – from rail lines, to roads, to water crossings – follow the traditional Songlines, trade routes and ceremonial paths in Country that our nation's First Peoples followed for tens of thousands of years.

Transport for NSW is committed to honouring Aboriginal peoples' cultural and spiritual connections to the lands, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.

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0.2	Revised version with Transport comments included
0.3	Revised version with Transport comments included

1. Definitions

Term	Definition
Amendment Report	A report outlining the amended design for the project, as a result of submissions made during the EIS exhibition period.
Biodiversity	Refers to the ecosystem of flora and fauna.
Carriageway	Roadway for vehicles.
DPE	Department of Planning and Environment
Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)	An Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) assesses identified environmental and social impacts of a state significant infrastructure project and recommends mitigation measures for the impacts.
Geotechnical	Geotechnical engineering studies the behaviour of earth materials.
Hydrological	The study of movement, distribution, and management of water including surface water and groundwater.
Level crossing	An intersection where a railway line crosses a road or path.
Multi-Criteria Analysis	A multi-criteria analysis is a systematic approach to identify and compare different options by using weighted criteria to give each option a score.
Portal	The entry and exit points for a tunnel.
Proponent	The party who puts forward a project.
Rail underpass	A train tunnel that typically passes under a road.
Secretary's Environmental Assessment Report (SEARs)	The environmental assessments required to be undertaken for the EIS by the proponent of the project, as determined by the Secretary of the Department of Planning and Environment.
Submissions Report	A report on the submissions received during an EIS exhibition period, the responses, and how submissions have been considered for the development of the design.
Topography	The study of forms and features of land surfaces.
Viaduct	A specific type of bridge that consists of a series of arches, piers or columns supporting a long elevated railway or road.

2. Executive Summary

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this report is to summarise how the preferred option for a tunnel between Blackheath and Little Hartley as part of the Great Western Highway Upgrade Program (the Upgrade Program) was selected. The report describes strategic options considered and the two shortlisted options that were developed and assessed at an Options Assessment Workshop in February 2022.

2.2 Preferred option

Following a feasibility assessment which comprised of engineering and environmental investigations and an option assessment workshop a tunnel between Blackheath and Little Hartley has been determined by Transport for NSW (Transport) as the preferred option to take forward to the next stage of the project.

In summary, the key features of the preferred option include:

- Two identical (twin) tunnels, one eastbound and one westbound, around 10.6 kilometres long, generally to the south of the existing Great Western Highway and Mount Victoria.
- Two lanes of traffic flow in each tunnel, to separate traffic and increase safety.
- Road shoulders to allow vehicles to stop safely without interrupting traffic flow.
- A possible tunnel depth of up to 200 metres below ground at the deepest point to the south of Mount Victoria.
- Tunnel operations facility including ventilation systems, drainage management, signage, lighting, and emergency evacuation systems.

2.3 Great Western Highway Upgrade Program - Blackheath to Little Hartley

In 2010, Transport consulted on a preferred option for an upgrade of the Great Western Highway between Mount Victoria and Lithgow. This consultation process confirmed a combination of tunnels and viaducts to bypass Mount Victoria and Victoria Pass, and the alignment was adopted into the Local Environment Plans of Lithgow and Blue Mountains City Councils.

In 2019, the State Government committed funding towards the upgrade of the road corridor between Katoomba and Lithgow and Transport began consultation on strategic options for this upgrade. Transport considered four strategic alternatives for the upgrade of the Great Western Highway between Blackheath and Little Hartley:

- do nothing
- Bells Line of Road upgrade
- Main Western Railway Line (rail) upgrade
- Great Western Highway upgrade.

The preferred strategic alternative was identified as the upgrade of the Great Western Highway. Four options were then considered to support the preferred strategic alternative of upgrading the Great Western Highway:

- minimum scope option
- surface upgrade option

- two tunnel option – Blackheath and Mount Victoria tunnel bypasses
- Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel option – one tunnel bypass of Blackheath and Mount Victoria.

The two tunnel option and the Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel option were shortlisted to minimise environmental and social impacts, including to the Blue Mountains National Park and World Heritage Area, and in response to feedback received from the community and stakeholders.

During 2020, Transport consulted with the Blackheath Co-Design Committee (BCC) about the four broad route options for the upgrade at Blackheath. The BCC advised that their preferred option was a tunnel bypass of Blackheath. With the selection of the Evans Lookout Road entry and exit point as the preferred southern tunnel portal for Blackheath, Transport announced investigations into the feasibility of an option to extend the tunnel from Blackheath to Little Hartley in May 2021.

A tunnel between Blackheath and Little Hartley would deliver further benefits for the environment, the community and road users than two shorter tunnels beneath the villages of Blackheath and Mount Victoria.. The tunnel would be between a portal south of Evans Lookout Road, in Blackheath, and the base of Mount Victoria, at Little Hartley, bypassing both Blackheath and Mount Victoria. The tunnel would allow the Great Western Highway Upgrade Program to deliver a safer tunnel route with a gentler gradient, improving travel times and resilience and reducing vehicle emissions.

2.4 Feasibility assessment

Feasibility of the Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel option was informed by engineering and environmental investigations, feedback from the community obtained during consultation processes, and an option assessment workshop which reviewed the preliminary design against the project objectives.

It was determined that the Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel would best deliver the project objectives and benefits for the community and road users, specifically:

- **Less disruption to traffic:** As most of the construction work would occur underground, the minimisation of surface works would reduce the construction impacts on traffic.
- **Construction impacts:** the Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel would be constructed within a shorter timeframe and smaller footprint than other options considered. Spoil removal would avoid impacts to the local communities at Blackheath and Mount Victoria.
- **Property and land use:** the Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel would reduce property acquisition impacts to Mount Victoria.
- **Reduced environmental impacts:** with only two portals and the highway route moved underground, there would be less impacts on National Park.
- **Safer journeys:** a straighter, more direct route between Blackheath and Little Hartley, would enable a modern design and safety improvements delivering a safer and higher-quality dual carriageway. The separated roadways will reduce the likelihood of accidents.
- **A more reliable connection:** A tunnel with dual lanes in either direction between Blackheath and Little Hartley creates additional travel options, which increases the resilience of the road when responding to traffic incidents or natural disasters.
- **Decreased congestion:** The Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel would remove key congestion points which occur during peak periods such as long weekends and holidays and would enable better flow of traffic.

- **Travel time savings:** The Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel would divert through traffic from the Central West from the townships of Mount Victoria and Blackheath, improving travel times by reducing congestion and avoiding traffic lights and lowered speed zones.
- **Operation:** Operational traffic noise would be reduced by the diversion of traffic to the additional road network underground.

2.5 Next steps

Transport will continue to develop the concept design for the Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel option. This design would include enough detail to enable an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to be prepared.

The EIS will be placed on public exhibition for a minimum of 28 days and the community will be invited to make formal submissions.

The Department of Planning and Environment would prepare the Secretary's Environmental Assessment Report and provide it to the Minister for Planning, who would then decide whether to approve the project.

Transport will keep the community informed during the environmental assessment and approval process.

3. Preferred option

3.1 Selected preferred option

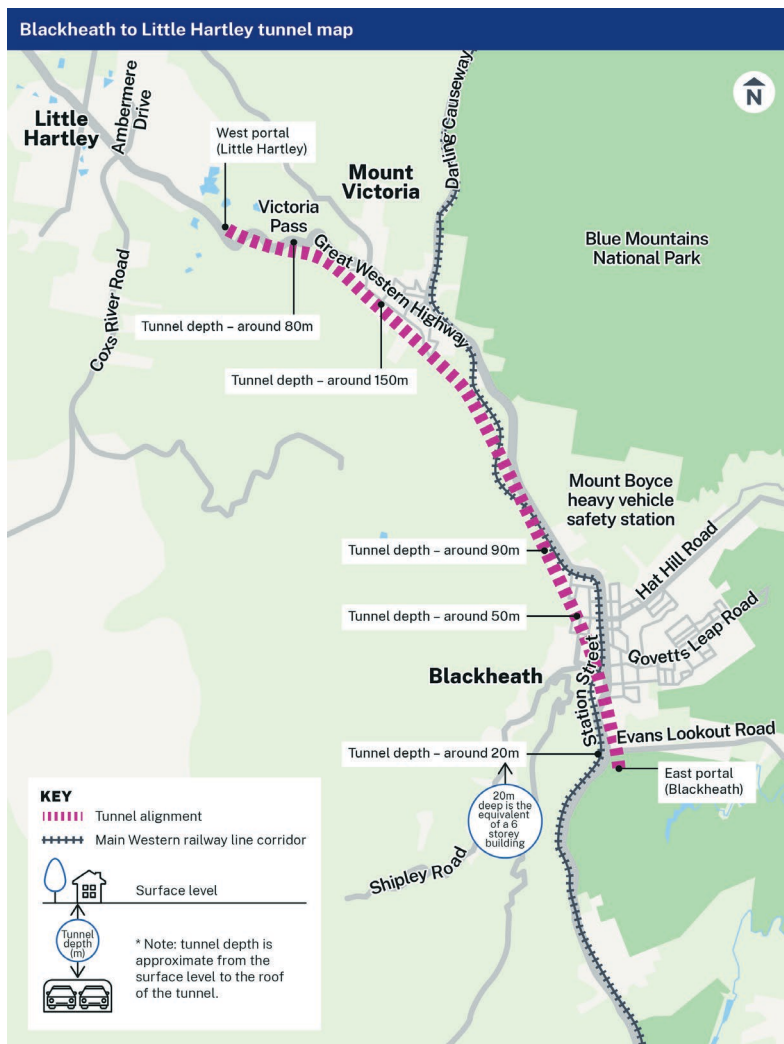
Based on the feasibility assessment the Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel has been determined as the preferred option to take forward to the next stage of the project.

In summary, the key features of the preferred option include:

- Two identical (twin) tunnels, one eastbound and one westbound, around 10.6 kilometres long, generally to the south of the existing Great Western Highway and Mount Victoria.
- Two lanes of traffic flow in each tunnel, to separate traffic and increase safety.
- Road shoulders to allow vehicles to stop safely without interrupting traffic flow.
- A possible tunnel depth of up to 200 metres below ground at the deepest point to the south of Mount Victoria.
- Tunnel operation facilities including ventilation systems, drainage management, signage, lighting, and emergency evacuation systems.

The preferred option is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Preferred option



The following opportunities have been identified to improve the preferred option and will be investigated during development of the preliminary design:

- Optimisation of the design of roads and ramp connections on the approaches to the tunnel portals in both east and west directions.
- Managing the risk of the alignment's proximity to cliffs through the design process.
- Reviewing property impacts with updated information.
- Reviewing the design against the latest environmental investigations / National Park revocation boundary and treat these as hard constraints.

3.2 Purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is to summarise how the preferred option for a tunnel between Blackheath and Little Hartley was selected. The report describes strategic options considered and the two shortlisted options that were developed and assessed at an options assessment workshop in February 2022.

Assessment criteria were developed by which to determine a preferred option using Infrastructure Australia's Guide to Multi-Criteria Analysis, and will be taken forward for further development, community consultation and environmental investigation.

4. Context

4.1 Background

The Great Western Highway Upgrade Program proposes to deliver around 34 kilometres of dual carriageway between Katoomba and Lithgow.

The Australian and NSW Governments are investing a combined \$4.53 billion towards upgrading the Great Western Highway between Katoomba and Lithgow. This includes a NSW Government commitment of \$2.5 billion towards the full upgrade between Katoomba and Lithgow and an Australian Government commitment of \$2.03 billion towards upgrading the Great Western Highway between Katoomba and Blackheath, and between Little Hartley and Lithgow.

The Katoomba to Lithgow duplication will provide major economic and safety benefits. It will improve the connection between Central West NSW and Sydney, reduce congestion, improve resilience and freight productivity, and provide a safer and more reliable journey for thousands of residents, commuters, tourists, and freight operators who travel in, around and through the Blue Mountains.

The upgrade of the Great Western Highway has been listed by Infrastructure Australia as a priority infrastructure investment which Australia needs to secure a sustainable and prosperous future.

Part of Australia's National Land Transport Network, the Highway is unique because it is used and shared extensively by local communities, commuters, tourists, and the freight industry.

Options for upgrading the Highway between Katoomba and Lithgow are constrained by steep topography, the railway line, private property boundaries, existing towns and the Blue Mountains National Park and World Heritage areas.







The 34 kilometre upgrade of the Great Western Highway between Katoomba and Lithgow includes:

- Surface road upgrade and duplication between Katoomba and Blackheath and Little Hartley and Lithgow (East section and West section).
- Two identical (twin) tunnels, one eastbound and one westbound, around 11 kilometres long, generally to the south of the existing Great Western Highway and Mount Victoria.
- Works to connect the tunnel to the existing road network south of Blackheath and near Little Hartley.

4.2 Program objectives

The objectives of the Great Western Highway Upgrade Program are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Great Western Highway Upgrade Program objectives

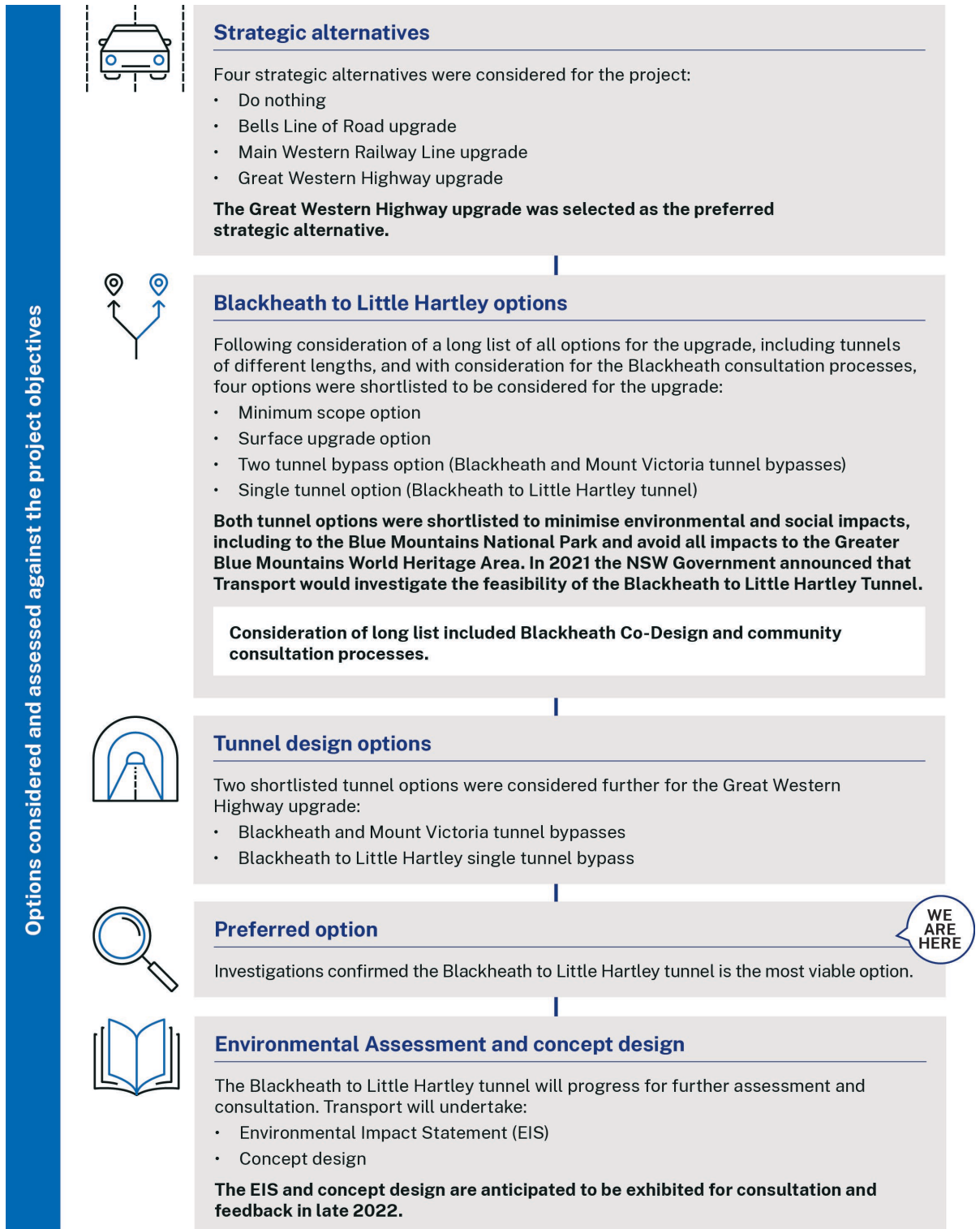
Service Need Theme	Objective	Sub objectives
Economic development/ productivity /recovery 	Improve economic development, productivity, and freight accessibility in and through the Blue Mountains, Central West and Orana regions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support economic recovery in the short term, economic development in the medium term and economic sustainability in the long term within the Blue Mountains, Central West and Orana regions through better transport connectivity • Improve the efficiency and safety of freight movement through the Blue Mountains to better link Central West and Orana region economies with domestic and international markets • Improve access and connections to tourism facilities in the Blue Mountains, Central West and Orana region.
Resilience / future-proofing 	Improve the resilience of the corridor between Katoomba and Lithgow to ensure continuity and safety of transport and essential services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable continuity of services along the corridor between Katoomba and Lithgow including during events that disrupt regular network operations • Provide capacity to meet future population growth in the Blue Mountains, Central West and Orana regions • Futureproof the corridor for emerging transport technologies and innovative solutions
Network performance 	Improve transport network performance and efficiency along the corridor between Katoomba and Lithgow to meet the needs of all our customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue Mountains, Central West and Orana regional centres, social infrastructure and other services and for all customers • Improve the overall reliability and capacity of the transport network between Greater Sydney, and the Central West and Orana • Minimise peak period congestion through the Blue Mountains • Build on and maximise the efficiency of existing infrastructure
Safety 	Improve the overall safety of the corridor for all transport users between Katoomba and Lithgow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce road crashes via safer physical infrastructure • Keep all our transport users safe by minimising potential conflicts between light and heavy vehicles, pedestrians, cyclists and local traffic • Improve road infrastructure that contributes to the safety and welfare of heavy vehicle drivers and the community
Movement & place / amenity 	Enhance the liveability and be sensitive to the unique environmental and cultural assets along the corridor between Katoomba and Lithgow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better balance of local and through traffic along the Katoomba and Lithgow corridor to provide a better overall • Improve the liveability of town centres west of Katoomba and through to the Central West and Orana region • Minimise potential impacts to the unique environmental, cultural and social value of the Blue Mountains
Value for money / Deliverability 	A value for money, sustainable and deliverable solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solution that is affordable and value is delivered by maximising project benefits at optimal cost • Deliverability and opportunities for optimisation via staging.

5. Alternatives and options development

5.1 Approach to identify a preferred option

The approach to identify and develop the preferred option for the upgrade of the Great Western Highway between Blackheath and Little Hartley is summarised in sections below.

Figure 2 Approach to identify a preferred option



5.2 Alternatives considered

In 2010, Transport consulted on a preferred option for an upgrade of the Great Western Highway between Mount Victoria and Lithgow. This consultation process confirmed a tunnel and viaduct bypass of Mount Victoria and Victoria Pass, and the alignment was adopted into the Local Environment Plans of Lithgow and Blue Mountains City Councils.







In 2019, the State Government committed funding towards the upgrade of the road corridor between Katoomba and Lithgow and Transport began consultation on strategic options for this upgrade. Four strategic alternatives were considered for the upgrade of the Great Western Highway between Blackheath and Little Hartley:

- do nothing
- Bells Line of Road upgrade: upgrading the Bells Line of Road corridor which runs between Windsor on the east bank of the Hawkesbury River and Bell in the Blue Mountains. The upgrade considered widening the existing road corridor to a four lane B-double capable road.
- Main Western Railway Line (rail) upgrade: upgrading the railway route which runs between Sydney Central via Lithgow to Dubbo in the central west.
- Great Western Highway upgrade: upgrading the existing two-lane Great Western Highway through the Blue Mountains to provide a four lane carriageway with two lanes in either direction between Katoomba and Lithgow.

The strategic alternatives were assessed against the project objectives outlined in Section 4.2 and summarised in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Strategic alternatives assessed against project objectives

Key: ● = meets objective ● = partially meets objective ● = does not meet objective

Strategic alternative	Project objectives					
						
Do nothing	●	●	●	●	●	●
Bells Line of Road upgrade	●	●	●	●	●	●
Main Western Railway Line (rail) upgrade	●	●	●	●	●	●
Great Western Highway Upgrade Program (Blackheath to Little Hartley)	●	●	●	●	●	●

The preferred strategic alternative was identified as the upgrade of the Great Western Highway.

As it was determined that the upgrade of the Great Western Highway would address the identified project need and is consistent with the project objectives, it was progressed.

5.3 Great Western Highway upgrade options

Four options were considered to support the preferred strategic alternative to upgrade the Great Western Highway:

- **Minimum scope:** this option would include:
 - A rail underpass and removal of the existing level crossing at Bundarra Street in Blackheath village to reduce significant queuing that currently occurs at the intersection of Govetts Leap Road and the Great Western Highway, largely due to the presence of traffic signals and the Blue Mountains rail line level crossing on Bundarra Street.
 - Minor upgrades between Blackheath and Little Hartley, to address significant queuing currently occurring at the intersection of Govetts Leap Road and the Great Western Highway.
 - This option did not consider widening the Great Western Highway between Blackheath and Little Hartley, nor did it consider improvements to the steep grades traversed by the road corridor at Mount Victoria.
- **Surface upgrade option:** this option would include:
 - Surface road widening from two to four lanes between Blackheath and Little Hartley bypassing of Mount Victoria village and Victoria Pass via five bridges and two tunnels (up to 1.4 kilometres long).
 - A rail underpass and removal of the existing level crossing at Bundarra Street in Blackheath village to reduce significant queuing that currently occurs at the intersection of Govetts Leap Road and the Great Western Highway.
 - Northbound off-ramps and southbound on-ramp for Darling Causeway located at the south of Mount Victoria to provide for travel between Sydney and Bell via the Great Western Highway.
 - This option would require property acquisition along the existing Great Western Highway, and vegetation removal including from within the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area and National Park to widen the existing road, and would result in significant amenity impacts to communities from increased operational traffic noise on the road network.
- **Two tunnel option – Blackheath and Mount Victoria tunnel bypasses:** this option would include:
 - A tunnel underneath Blackheath (the Blackheath tunnel) that bypasses the surface road network.
 - A tunnel underneath Mount Victoria (the Mount Victoria tunnel) that bypasses the surface road network.
 - Road surface widening from two to four lanes, between the Blackheath and Mount Victoria tunnels.
 - Northbound off-ramps and southbound on-ramp for Darling Causeway located at the south of Mount Victoria to provide for travel between Sydney and Bell via the Great Western Highway. The ramps would still require construction of a bypass road of Mount Victoria to connect to Darling Causeway.
- **Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel option – one tunnel bypass of Blackheath and Mount Victoria:** this option would include:
 - A tunnel that bypasses the surface road network between Blackheath and Little Hartley, also providing a full duplication of the Great Western Highway from Blackheath to Little Hartley.







During 2020, Transport consulted with the Blackheath Co-Design Committee (BCC) about four broad route options for the upgrade at Blackheath. The BCC advised that their preferred option was a tunnel bypass of Blackheath.

Broader community consultation on the preferred option for Blackheath confirmed that the community preferred a tunnel bypass between portals south of Evan’s Lookout Road and near the existing Mount Boyce heavy vehicle safety station.

The four options were considered against the program objectives and summarised in Figure 4.

Figure 4 Great Western Highway Upgrade options assessed against project objectives

Key: ● = meets objective ● = partially meets objective ● = does not meet objective

Project Options						
Minimum scope	●	●	●	●	●	●
Surface road upgrade	●	●	●	●	●	●
Two tunnel	●	●	●	●	●	●
Single tunnel	●	●	●	●	●	●

The two tunnel bypass option and the Blackheath to Little Hartley single tunnel option were shortlisted as options that minimise environmental impacts to the Greater Blue Mountains National Park, World Heritage Area and responds to community and stakeholder feedback.

5.4 Tunnel option to take forward to feasibility

With the selection of the Evans Lookout Road entry and exit point as the preferred southern tunnel portal for Blackheath, Transport announced investigations into the feasibility of a tunnel between Blackheath and Little Hartley in May 2021.

A tunnel between Blackheath and Little Hartley would deliver further benefits for the residents of the Blue Mountains and the Central West in comparison to individual tunnel bypasses of Blackheath and Mount Victoria.

The tunnel would begin at a portal south of Evans Lookout Road, in Blackheath, and emerge at the base of Mount Victoria, at Little Hartley, bypassing both Blackheath and Mount Victoria. It would allow the Great Western Highway Upgrade Program to deliver a safer tunnel route with a gentler gradient, improving travel times and resilience and reducing vehicle emissions.

It was announced that, should the investigations into the Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel determine that it was not viable, Transport would proceed with separate tunnel bypasses of Blackheath and Mount Victoria.

6. Feasibility of the Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel option

6.1 Preliminary engineering and environmental investigations

The following investigations were undertaken to inform the development of the preliminary design and feasibility of the Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel option:

- geotechnical
- biodiversity
- hydrological
- traffic
- heritage.

6.2 Evaluation workshop

An option assessment workshop was held on 7 February 2022 to:

- Review the outcomes of previous designs and studies to determine whether the conclusions were considered valid in light of further information and design development.
- Review the Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel option against agreed assessment criteria.
- Collectively agree on the relative rankings against the agreed criteria.
- Confirm the preferred option.
- Discuss opportunities to further optimise and improve the design of the preferred option based on discussions from the workshop.

6.3 Feasibility outcome

The Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel option was evaluated against the program objectives outlined in Section 4.2. Based on the project objectives and the feasibility studies, it was determined that the tunnel between Blackheath and Little Hartley would deliver the project objectives and benefits for the community and road users. Specifically, the benefits would include:

- **Less disruption to traffic:** As most of the construction work would occur underground, the minimisation of surface works would reduce the construction impacts on traffic.
- **Construction impacts:** the Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel would be constructed within a shorter timeframe and smaller footprint than other options considered. Construction traffic would be minimised in Blackheath and Mount Victoria.
- **Property and land use:** the Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel would reduce property acquisition impacts to Mount Victoria.
- **Reduced environmental impacts:** with only two portals and the highway route moved underground, there would be less impacts on National Park.
- **Safer journeys:** a straighter, more direct route between Blackheath and Little Hartley, would enable a modern design and safety improvements delivering a safer and higher-quality dual carriageway. The separated roadways will reduce the likelihood of accidents.

- **A more reliable connection:** A tunnel with dual lanes in either direction between Blackheath and Little Hartley creates additional travel options, which increases the resilience of the road when responding to traffic incidents or natural disasters.
- **Decreased congestion:** The Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel would remove key congestion points which occur during peak periods such as long weekends and holidays and would enable better flow of traffic.
- **Travel time savings:** The Blackheath to Little Hartley tunnel would divert through traffic from the Central West from the townships of Mount Victoria and Blackheath, improving travel times by reducing congestion and avoiding traffic lights and lowered speed zones.
- **Operation:** Operational traffic noise would be reduced by the diversion of traffic to the additional road network underground.

7. Next steps

Transport will continue to develop the design of the Little Hartley to Blackheath tunnel option. This design would include enough detail to enable an assessment of the likely environmental, social and economic impacts and form the basis of the EIS.

An EIS is undertaken for all state significant infrastructure in accordance with the NSW Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) Secretary's Environmental Assessment Requirements (SEARs).

The following studies will form part of the EIS:

- air quality
- biodiversity
- business, land use and property
- climate change risk
- design, place and movement
- flooding
- health and safety
- heritage (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal)
- noise and vibration
- protected and sensitive lands
- social
- soils and contamination
- sustainability
- transport and traffic
- waste
- water (hydrology and quality).

The EIS will be placed on public exhibition for a minimum of 28 days. During the public exhibition period the community will be invited to make formal submissions on the EIS. The Secretary for the DPE will provide copies of all submissions made to Transport as the proponent.

The Secretary will require Transport to respond to issues raised in submissions through a Submissions Report, and an Amendment Report (where required) to outline any proposed changes to the project.

The Secretary may make the Amendment Report publicly available in accordance with section 5.17(7) of the NSW Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 if the changes to the project are considered significant.

DPE will prepare the Secretary's Environmental Assessment Report and provide it to the Minister for Planning, who would then decide whether to approve the project. If approved, the Minister will outline the conditions of approval for Transport to adhere to during construction and operation of the project.

Transport will continue to keep the community informed and will continue to provide regular updates during the environmental assessment and approval process.



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