

## Northern Roads Collaboration Joint Committee

### REPORT TO NORTHERN ROADS COLLABORATION JOINT COMMITTEE – 10 DECEMBER 2021

#### A9/A96 DUALLING PROGRAMMES – LOCAL AUTHORITY ROLE AND RESOURCES

#### 1 Recommendations

The Joint Committee is asked to:

- 1.1 Note the progress of the Transport Scotland Dualling programmes for the A9 and A96 up to 19 August 2021;
- 1.2 Note the commitments relating to the A96 Dualling Programme within the SNP/Green Agreement as published on 20 August 2021;
- 1.3 Consider and discuss the implications for affected authorities of the statements relating to the A96 Dualling Programme; and
- 1.4 Ask officers to formalise a Business Case that sets out the opportunities for collaboration and information sharing to ensure the best outcomes for neighbouring communities, future maintenance and traffic management of the existing road network associated with both the A9 and A96 Programmes.

#### 2 Background/Discussion

##### Dualling Programme Current Position

- 2.1 The Scottish Government has committed to completing the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness by 2025 and the A96 between Inverness and Aberdeen by 2030. A report was brought to the Joint Committee on 27 November 2019 (Item 8) setting out the position at that time.
- 2.2 This report provides a high level update on the various elements of those 2 programmes and sets out the challenges and options for the affected Authorities as the works progress.
- 2.3 The phasing for individual elements of the dualling programme will become more certain during the future stages of design and development work being progressed by Transport Scotland. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity reiterated the Scottish Governments commitment to the delivery of both dualling programmes in spring/summer 2021.
- 2.4 Both programmes have been divided into sections for the purpose of design and assessment with different design consultants responsible for each section. A summary of the current progress on each section is outlined in following sections of the report.

## **A9 Dualling Perth to Inverness**

- 2.5 The route requires dualling between 11 sections:
- A9 Luncarty to Pass of Birnam - Open
  - A9 Pass of Birnam to Tay Crossing – In preparation
  - A9 Tay Crossing to Ballinluig – Draft Orders Published
  - A9 Pitlochry to Killiecrankie – Draft Orders Published
  - A9 Killiecrankie to Glen Garry – Draft Orders Published
  - A9 Glen Garry to Dalwhinnie – Draft Orders Published
  - A9 Dalwhinnie to Crubenmore – Draft Orders Published
  - A9 Crubenmore to Kincaig – Draft Orders Published
  - A9 Kincaig to Dalraddy - Complete
  - A9 Dalraddy to Slochd – Draft Orders Published
  - A9 Tomatin to Moy – Draft Orders Published
- 2.6 The new dualled stretch between Kincaig and Dalraddy, opened in September 2017. Construction of the second section between Luncarty and Pass of Birnam was substantially completed and opened to traffic in Autumn 2021.
- 2.7 Design work on the remaining 9 schemes is progressing with Draft Orders now published for 8 out of 9 sections (95%) of the dualling programme.
- 2.8 The commitment to the A9 Dualling Programme seems to remain unaltered at the time of writing of this report.

## **A96 Dualling Inverness to Aberdeen**

- 2.9 The A96 dualling has been divided into 4 sections with progress on each outlined as follows (based on the position pre 19 August 2021):
- 2.9.1 A96 Inverness to Nairn including Nairn Bypass - Draft Orders Published
- Draft Orders published November 2016.
  - Public Local Inquiry October and November 2018.
  - Reporters submitted their report to Scottish Ministers on 17 October 2019 and the decision was published in February 2021.
- 2.9.2 A96 Hardmuir to Fochabers – Preferred Route Option announced
- Route options assessment work on the Western Section between Hardmuir and Fochabers completed.
  - Preferred option announced December 2018.
  - Detailed design and assessment work on the preferred option underway.
  - Publication of Draft Orders for formal comment could have been expected in 2022 based on expected 2 years of preparation work and the impact of the pandemic.

### 2.9.3 A96 East of Fochabers to East of Huntly – Awaiting start

- Design consultants to be appointed.
- Route options assessment to be undertaken.

### 2.9.4 A96 East of Huntly to Aberdeen – Route options assessment

- Route options assessment underway.
- Initial options published and emerging reduced number of options presented at exhibitions in October 2018 – attracted over 1500 responses.
- Further reduced number of options presented to public in May 2019 – attracted over 800 responses.
- Preferred route option published December 2020.
- Detailed development and assessment of the preferred option will take approximately 2 years to complete.

## **Impact of SNP/Greens Agreement of 20 August 2021**

2.10 Following a period of discussion an Agreement between the SNP and Greens was published on 20 August 2021. The text relating to the A96 Dualling programme is as follows;

*“The Scottish National Party and Scottish Green Party have and will maintain distinct positions of the dualling of the A96. However, as part of this agreement, the Scottish Government will take forward a transport enhancements programme on the A96 corridor that improves connectivity between surrounding towns, tackles congestion and addresses safety and environmental issues.*

*This will include:*

- *dualling from Inverness to Nairn.*
- *bypassing of Nairn, Keith, Elgin and Inverurie accompanied by measures to remove through traffic from the by-passed town centres.*
- *targeted road safety improvements where needed, for example between Fochabers and Huntly and Inverurie to Aberdeen.*
- *the development of an A96 “Electric Highway”.*

*The current plan is to fully dual the A96 route between Inverness and Aberdeen. We agree to conduct a transparent, evidence-based review to include a climate compatibility assessment to assess direct and indirect impacts on the climate and the environment. This will report by the end of 2022.”*

2.11 It is not yet clear whether the climate compatibility review which will be undertaken by 2022. However the Transport Minister has indicated in a recent Holyrood debate that the Nairn bypass and dualling to Inverness section would not be part of that review because it had already passed through a full planning process and rigorous planning inquiry.

## **The Councils' Experience**

- 2.12 Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Councils' previous experience with the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route (AWPR) and Highland and Moray Councils' experience of the A9 Dualling and A96 programmes thus far have been shared by officers across the authorities over the last 2 years.
- 2.13 There is a need for those local authorities affected by significant trunk road schemes to be prepared and to have an awareness of the demands that such large scale project place upon Roads and Transportation services. There are benefits in engaging early in the process of design and contract preparation to ensure that the benefits of the schemes delivered are maximised for local communities.
- 2.14 Aberdeenshire Council had to put in place 2 full time Principal Engineers to ensure that it met its obligations as the Local Roads Authority in working with the construction phase of the AWPR. The engineers coordinated a range of activities and responses and pulled in other resources across the authority. Aberdeen City's experience was different in that external consultants were brought in to support roads officers in managing the consultation and compliance process with the contractor and Trunk Roads Authority. Either way there was a significant resource required to ensure that they met their statutory obligations, protected the local road network in the short and long term and allowed the projects to progress.
- 2.15 These requirements and pressure on the Local Authority teams will remain no matter the form of upgrades and alterations that are brought forward by the Trunk Road Authority. If the review work for the A96 Dualling as announced on 20 August 2021 results in a changed approach then our teams will continue to have a key role in taking any new proposals forward.

## **Issues to consider**

- 2.16 In the ongoing discussions across the 3 authorities directly involved a number of common and critical issues have emerged:
- 1) Resourcing the liaison and consultation function within the Council;
  - 2) Retaining, allocating or acquitting appropriate design expertise and sufficiently experienced staff at appropriate level of seniority to negotiate with contractors and Trunk Roads Authority;
  - 3) Ensuring that the layout, location and design of junctions best serve the surrounding communities and work effectively without putting additional strain on the existing network, especially at peak times;
  - 4) Managing the Consult and Comply process to ensure side roads which become Local Authority roads comply with Council's own Roads Construction Consent standards and that departures from the Council's standards are properly agreed and signed off;

- 5) Managing the temporary traffic management consultation and certification process on existing network and any disruption caused by construction;
- 6) Monitoring and managing impact on existing network of significant additional load movements – notably surface and verge condition and traffic management. Ensuring dilapidation surveys are carried out, agreed and appropriate compensation negotiated;
- 7) Ensuring appropriate maintenance and condition of de-trunked network when handed over and that maintenance regimes are maintained to appropriate levels during construction;
- 8) Implications for core paths, access, Non-Motorised Users (NMU) and public transport along corridor and impact of changes on neighbouring communities;
- 9) Design and extent of side road network which falls to local authorities for future maintenance;
- 10) Drainage design and future responsibilities including Sustainable Drainage Systems (SUDS) ponds;
- 11) Implications for route management and signage for new network and existing network; and
- 12) Consultation with communities and elected members and managing expectations of both.

### **Options for collaboration**

- 2.17 Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City's experience of the AWPR lead its officers to the conclusion that future trunk road projects will require significant dedicated resource from Local Authorities. Highland Council are experiencing that issue now as a result of the projects along the A9 and A96 corridors. This is occurring at a time when roads and transportation resources are already stretched through the impact of COVID-19 and the hardest winter for 10 years.
- 2.18 The officers in the 3 authorities in the Northern Roads Collaboration Joint Committee who are affected by the dualling programmes have been giving consideration to pooling and sharing resources to manage the Local Authority input to these projects.
- 2.19 Through a regular forum they have been sharing experience, advice and technical guidance but the resource required to meet their statutory obligation individually is such that the officers are of the strong view that progress of the dualling projects will be affected.
- 2.20 Officers will now take forward a more formal piece of work to set out the level of resource which is anticipated will be needed to meet the demands over the coming 18 to 24 months across the 3 Local Authority areas.

- 2.21 Whilst the pressure will initially be greatest within the Highland Council area the progress of the work along the A96 corridor will also show an ongoing requirement for input from each Local Authority. Officers are of the view that, even if the national review work moves away from dualling as a principle, there will still be a need for extensive Local Authority input to address the strategic road transport issues along the A96 corridor.
- 2.22 The formal work will take the experience of Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Councils on AWPR and the more recent situation with Highland Council on the A9 to determine the scale of joint working that may meet our needs as Local Authorities. The initial thoughts from officers on the high level estimate of the core need across the 3 Local Authority areas could be for a team of around 5. This would still see specific support from wider Council teams on matters such as planning, flooding and active travel.
- 2.23 The formal work on the makeup of such a team could look like and the level of funding which would be required requires to be put into a Business Case. In doing this work officers will also set out the estimated costs if each authority were to take this forward separately over the same period. There would be different approaches that could be taken to establishing a team but the most effective one would be to establish a lead authority. Each partner could then commit to funding on an annual basis and/or seconding members of staff as appropriate.
- 2.24 Transport Scotland have been made aware of this issue and the likely impact on the progress of the projects.
- 2.25 Officers from Transport Scotland have been consulted in preparation of this report.
- 2.26 The Joint Committee's Legal Monitoring Officer within Aberdeenshire Council and Financial Monitoring Officer within Highland Council have been consulted in preparation of this report and had no comments to make and are satisfied that the report complies with relevant legislation.

### **3 Implications and Risk**

- 3.1 An integrated impact assessment is not required in relation to this report as the proposals do not have a differential impact on any of the protected characteristics.
- 3.2 There are significant staffing resource implications for authorities affected by trunk road projects if authorities are to manage the workload expectation in terms of consultation and to ensure that projects deliver greatest benefits without undue unforeseen implications for local communities and the local road network. These projects will lead to additional lengths of carriageway becoming de-trunked which will place a resource demand on authority roads budgets.
- 3.3 The potential savings associated with taking a collaborative approach to consultation and compliance on trunk road projects will be set out as part of

the formal work to produce a Business Case for the joint working arrangements.

- 3.4 The risks of failing to engage effectively with major trunk road projects is that what is delivered is suboptimal in terms of the surrounding communities the dualled roads serve and a risk that unnecessary revenue burdens are placed on authorities inheriting new side roads, drainage systems and detrunked carriageways and footways.

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