

Northern Roads Collaboration Joint Committee

REPORT TO NORTHERN ROADS COLLABORATION JOINT COMMITTEE – 10 DECEMBER 2021

STOCK TAKING EXERCISE

1 Recommendations

The Joint Committee is recommended to:

- 1.1 **Note the feedback from sessions with officers from Transport Scotland, each Local Authority and 3 Regional Transport Partnerships;**
- 1.2 **Consider the suggestions and options in paragraphs 2.5 to 2.12; and**
- 1.3 **Consider whether a similar exercise should be undertaken with the Elected Member representatives on the Joint Committee between December 2021 and February 2022 to allow findings to be reported back in March 2022.**

2 Background/Discussion

- 2.1 Given that the Northern Roads Collaboration Joint Committee and the supporting Officer Group have been in place on a formal basis for approximately 3 years, it was felt that it was an appropriate time to undertake an informal stock taking of views from officers before any more formal exercise may be offered to the members of the Joint Committee.
- 2.2 Calls took place during May, June and July between the lead officer supporting the Committee and officers from each of the 7 local authorities that cover the Northern Roads Collaboration area, the Chief officers of the 3 main Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) whose areas include the 7 local authorities in the collaboration plus officials from Transport Scotland who have been our key contacts.
- 2.3 The purpose of this exercise was to gauge views on how the Northern Roads Collaboration has been performing at an operational/officer level and also as a Joint Committee. In particular the following specific points were put to all of those interviewed;
 - what was working well;
 - what was not working as well, and
 - how could the collaboration be improved?
- 2.4 As expected, each contributor had their own views and perspective but there were some common themes that came out of the discussions. These are set out in paragraph 2.5 to 2.12.

Good support for the Officer Group and the Joint Committee but could be better

2.5 There was good support for the Officer Group, with the Joint Committee seen as important to enable the Officer Group's work. The benefits of the joint working across this group of officers included:

- The group had strengthened recently.
- There were some examples of cashable and non-cashable benefits.
- Early meetings were very operational, now more balanced between operational and strategic.
- Good group of officers in the north, not a lot of formal collaborations, but informally the officers are working well and supporting each other.
- Enjoy the group discussions.
- Very worthwhile group to discuss common issues.
- Everyone in same boat, which is reassuring in a way.
- This is the benefit of the Northern Roads Collaboration officer group, to speak to like-minded colleagues.

2.6 Views on the role and operation of the Joint Committee included:

- Politicians are not so linked up as the officers and so not as clear on what to collaborate on.
- Very limited opportunity for discussion outside of Joint Committee sessions.
- Members may need to follow it through (in their own organisations) with resources to allow collaboration.
- Difficult to get budgets committed to support work.
- Committee may need to set a more strategic direction.
- Often light agendas.
- Councillors have seen opportunities and brought forward requests for reports/workstreams.

2.7 Interestingly on the last bullet point when officers were asked where the Northern Roads Collaboration could focus, they also added more areas of work over and above that already suggested by the Joint Committee and in the Activity Plan.

Lack of Resources

2.8 This was a common theme. There did not appear to be any slack in any roads related section within any local authority to pick up some work on behalf of any other partner. This was always seen as one of the key benefits of the collaboration and it is disappointing, though unsurprising, that there is not an option for greater collaboration at the moment.

2.9 The lack of resources was also an issue when it came to supporting the work of the Joint Committee. Officers were unable to take on projects and reports due to the commitments of the "day job". Comments included:

- Staff within the local authorities and RTPs is limited.

- Collaboration needs staff time and it is not there.
- Real shortage of staff, no succession planning in place (within local authorities).
- Struggle to commit enough quality time.
- When volunteers are asked for too often there is a wall of silence.
- Day job has to take priority over Northern Roads Collaboration.
- Needs to be supported. Working at edge of the desk is not enough.

Working Together

- 2.10 Whilst Councils could not undertake work on behalf of others it was a common theme that all partners were facing similar asks, bidding for the same funding streams and always seeking good value for money. All officers felt there was potential for sharing of bids and even a joint team to look at putting together bids on behalf of partners for say road safety, active travel, Levelling Up Funds etc. This would save resources overall by developing a core specialist function within the Northern Roads Collaboration.
- 2.11 In a similar vein, officers see opportunities around policies and standards which could be standardised or shared to minimise overall workload across the Northern Roads Collaboration. Again this would need Officer Leads to be identified and core funding put in place.
- 2.12 More topic specific and localised opportunities exist to work together. Highland, Moray and Aberdeenshire Councils could look at setting up a team to manage expectations of Transport Scotland and their consultants, as well as meet the statutory duties as road authorities for all aspects related to the A9 and A96 dualling (even given recent announcements on the pause in A96 work). There is a key role for the Northern Roads Collaboration Joint Committee to help make this happen and existing frameworks could be used.
- 2.13 One key example raised by almost all the interviewees was the EV workshop and the Member Officer Workshop/Group that will result from it. It was seen as a model way to address an issue with challenges that is facing all of the partners. Since the discussions and the previous Northern Roads Collaboration Joint Committee, this topic has moved on with the Scottish Government via Scottish Futures Trust now looking to develop joint working arrangements.

Little Collaboration between Councils

- 2.14 Whilst officers were supportive of the Officers Group and the formal and informal opportunities to share information it was acknowledged there had been very little formal collaboration between any of the Councils and certainly not across the 7 local authorities. This is supported by the papers that went up to the Joint Committee over the last year which were largely information sharing or on specific topics of interest to the Joint Committee. None covered a formal collaboration between the Member authorities or proposed one for formal approval/support.

Within Councils

- 2.15 It was a key theme that beyond the officers and members involved with the Joint Committee there was little knowledge of the purpose of workings of the Joint Committee or indeed the possible opportunities and significant powers held by the Joint Committee. These powers are of course set within the context of the internal workings of each Council. An example was given that even to contribute a few thousand pounds or officer time to a collaboration project would require a time-consuming sign off process from others within their Council. This would seem to be a specific aspect that is worthy of including in any improvement plan for the Joint Committee.

National Roads Collaboration Programme

- 2.16 There was disappointment that the National Roads Collaboration Programme was no longer in place as the previous National Roads Collaboration Programme Lead (Mr Angus Bodie) and his team had provided significant support to both the Officer Group and the Joint Committee. There is now a real shortfall in the areas such as training and development that the National Programme led on. A couple of interviewees suggested the Joint Committee should look to engage someone with experience of the Roads Collaboration Programme as a consultant to support to the work of the Joint Committee.

Specific Suggestions on New Approaches

- 2.17 Several suggestions came up during the discussions on how to make the Joint Committee and Officer Group work better. The suggestions included the following:
- Employing someone with experience of the approach to Collaboration within the Roads and Transport Sector as a consultant (for reasons detailed above).
 - Engage with the Cairngorms National Park Authority on areas of mutual interest in some way such as inviting them to a specific meeting.
 - Re-Engage with Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands Councils to revisit whether they are interested in forming some alliance with the Northern Roads Collaboration Joint Committee. Orkney in particular was seen as having a lot of common issues to those being considered by the Joint Committee.
 - Use the Joint Committee and Officers Group more when reviews of some partner's operational and policy positions are underway, e.g., the recent reviews on winter maintenance undertaken in several of the more rural authorities.
 - Find a more effective way to disseminate the work of the Joint Committee into the 7 local authorities. One way was for councillors on the Joint Committee to become ambassadors for the Northern Roads Collaboration within their own organisations and similarly for officers.

- Revisit the approach to Transport Scotland for greater support in a similar way that Education colleagues have been supported in their work in their Collaboratives where much of the focus has been on the Attainment agenda. Network condition and Climate Change are probably the Northern Roads Collaboration Joint Committee equivalents.
- Officer group meetings to be less Committee Report/Agenda driven with perhaps every fourth meeting for example held as a workshop.
- Member Officer Working Groups to bring the Councillors more into the process, not just on Committee day.
- Occasional meetings to be held physically.
- Have more workshops for officers out with the core group to develop policies, standards etc and also to spread the word on the workings of the Northern Roads Collaboration Joint Committee.
- Refocus on fewer projects such as EVs for the period till the next local government elections in May 2022 (rather than the very ambitious Activity Plan) to reflect the very limited resources.

The Way Forward

- 2.18 At its meeting on 28 August 2020 the Joint Committee instructed the Lead Officer **“to commence a review of the governance arrangements for the Joint Committee and report back to the Joint Committee in due course”**. This is covered in a separate report on the agenda for 10 December 2021. This stock taking exercise can inform the governance review which is now proposed to take place post May 2022.
- 2.19 It is recommended that a similar stock taking exercise could be taken forward with the Councillors who make up the Joint Committee. This would then give an overall picture of the work of the Joint Committee that would allow formal recommendations on improvement actions to be considered in March, passed to the parent Committees pre the May 2022 Local Government elections and included in the Governance review.
- 2.20 On the basis of the first stage of the review process some of the actions/options for Members to consider would seem to be:
- 1) There is always the “Do Nothing” option and the Joint Committee and Officer Group could continue as at present. This is unlikely to be the preferred option given the concerns raised throughout this report, particularly in terms of available resources and the demands placed on officers by the Joint Committee.
 - 2) Cut back on the scale of the Activity Plan to 3 key areas, for example, and have more joint member/officer working.
 - 3) Produce a brief initial Infographic (a Communications Strategy is an item already in the Activity Plan) to get more buy-in from Directorate level in

Local Authorities which is largely lacking and to use Joint Committee members as Ambassadors.

- 4) It may be that one conclusion of this exercise would be to conclude that the Joint Committee approach is not working in its current format for roads and transport and should be formally brought to a close.
 - 5) Focus on fully developing joint staffing arrangements on issues such as A96 Dualling or ULEVs and ULEV infrastructure. These would be a positive use of the powers that the Joint Committee hold.
- 2.21 The Joint Committee's Legal Monitoring Officer within Aberdeenshire Council and Financial Monitoring Officer within the Highland Council have been consulted in the preparation of this report and their comments are incorporated within the report and are satisfied that the report complies with relevant legislation.

3 Implications and Risk

- 3.1 An integrated impact assessment is not required because the report summarises discussions between partners and does not have a differential impact on any of the protected characteristics.
- 3.2 There are no direct staffing and financial implications from the report but some of the future proposals to Joint Committee that develop from this report are very likely to have both staffing and financial implications.
- 3.3 No specific Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter.

Ewan Wallace
Lead Officer

Report prepared by Ewan Wallace, Head of Environment & Sustainability
2 December 2021