

## **Report to Partnership Meeting 7<sup>th</sup> February 2025**

### **RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY**

#### **A96 Corridor Review Consultation**

#### **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

This report introduces the public consultation on the A96 Corridor Review and invites Members to consider the key areas that HITRANS should include in submitting a response.

#### **Background**

The Scottish Government established a commitment to dual the A96 between Inverness and Aberdeen by 2030 through the Infrastructure Investment Plan in 2011.

In August 2021, the Scottish Government committed to take forward a transport enhancements programme on the A96 corridor that improves connectivity between surrounding towns, tackles congestion and addresses safety and environmental issues.

It was agreed as part of this process that the programme would be reviewed and include a climate compatibility assessment to assess direct and indirect impacts on the climate. Statutory assessments would also be undertaken that include a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and social and equality related Statutory Impact Assessments (SIAs).

The A96 Corridor Review covers the transport corridor from Raigmore Interchange at Inverness to Craibstone Junction at Aberdeen. The review has been carried out in accordance with the Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG) and considers all transport modes including active travel, public transport, rail and road transport.

The review has considered transport problems and opportunities within the A96 corridor as well as the effects of the global climate emergency and the recovery from COVID-19 on how people work and travel along the corridor. The transport appraisal aspect of the A96 Corridor Review has assessed the performance of interventions (or package of interventions) against specific Transport Planning Objectives (TPOs), the five STAG criteria and also covered the deliverability, affordability and public acceptability elements associated with each intervention (or package).

The option for A96 Full Dualling has also been appraised to assess its performance against current appraisal criteria. The A96 Dualling Inverness to Nairn (including Nairn Bypass) scheme has been excluded from the scope of the A96 Corridor Review as it already has ministerial consent.

The detailed appraisal stage of the Review has now concluded and its draft outcomes have been published for public consultation. A copy of the **A96 Corridor Review Draft Summary Report** is included as Appendix A to this report.

Representatives of the A96 Corridor Review Team from Transport Scotland have also been invited to present at the HITRANS Partnership Meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2025.

## A96 Corridor Review

Links to the A96 Corridor Review and online Storymap can also be found at this link <https://www.transport.gov.scot/our-approach/strategy/a96-corridor-review/>. The deadline for responses to the public consultation is 21<sup>st</sup> February 2025.

The A96 Corridor Review states that it has “considered all relevant transport modes within the A96 corridor, including roads-based transport, rail, public transport and active travel modes. The draft outcomes of the A96 Corridor Review’s appraisal and assessment work sets out that a package of interventions (referred to as “Refined Package”) across a range of modes of transport have been identified as the best performing in terms of the assessment criteria.”

It states that “this Refined Package aims to maximise the level of potential benefits by combining the best performing interventions considered within the Review whilst optimising investment within the corridor and delivering the best value for money.”

The Refined Package includes eight options, which are listed below along with a description and a selection of their key benefits. All individual interventions are assumed to be introduced corridor wide; where specific locations are identified at this stage, these are noted.



### Active Communities

Delivery of networks of high-quality active travel routes and placemaking improvements within key communities along the A96 corridor such as Nairn, Forres, Elgin, Lhanbryde, Mosstodloch, Fochabers, Keith, Huntly, Inverurie, Kintore and Blackburn. These active travel interventions would:

- Drive modal shift and reduce the need to travel unsustainably
- Help reduce the number of short-distance car journeys
- Improve air quality in town centres, contributing to Scotland’s net zero emissions target
- Contribute to place-making and 20-minute neighbourhoods
- Deliver improvements to physical and mental wellbeing of those who adopt active travel modes
- Potentially deliver economic benefits through increased cycling and walking tourism

### Improved Public Transport Passenger Interchange Facilities

Improvements to public transport passenger facilities, including accessibility and quality enhancements at bus stations and railway stations. Improvements are likely to include smaller scale interventions such as placemaking enhancements, improved wayfinding, enhancements to

the waiting environment and / or improved accessibility, including lifts and step-free access, however, they may also include the construction of new interchange facilities. These interventions would:

- Deliver accessibility and inclusivity enhancements to the public transport network
- Contribute towards Scottish net zero emissions targets by encouraging the use of public transport Encourage modal shift away from car
- Improve actual and perceived user safety and security
- Promote interchange between sustainable travel modes

### **Investment in Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and Mobility as a Service (MaaS)**

Improved access to flexible travel opportunities in locations with low bus network connectivity or where conventional fixed route services may not be suitable or viable. Includes digital transport service improvements. New DRT and MaaS would:

- Improve travel accessibility and inclusivity by delivering more flexible transport options for those without access to a car or with limited transport options
- Result in faster journeys and increased affordability for users due to improved integration of modes Encourage modal shift away from car
- Pilot a corridor-wide DRT and MaaS scheme, combining flexible services with a digital transport platform

### **Linespeed, Passenger and Freight Capacity Improvements on the Aberdeen to Inverness Rail Line**

Three distinct improvements to the railway between Aberdeen and Inverness - linespeed improvements to reduce end-to-end journey times to two hours (currently approximately two hours and 25 minutes), the provision of passing loops to enable a more frequent passenger service and the provision of freight facilities to enable intermodal freight growth. These rail interventions would:

- Deliver faster and more frequent journeys
- Improve access to key settlements containing a rail station
- Enhance reliability and network resilience
- Improve connectivity between communities along the corridor
- Contribute towards Scotland's net zero emissions targets by encouraging the use of public transport Encourage modal shift away from car
- Enhance freight capacity by introducing intermodal facilities

### **Targeted Road Safety Improvements**

Improvements to the A96 Trunk Road to address both real and perceived road safety concerns. This could be achieved through the provision of improved overtaking opportunities, junction improvements and improvements to the alignment of the carriageway at targeted locations along the route. These safety interventions would:

- Increase road safety through reduction of accidents and their severity
- Improve resilience and reliability through reduction of disruption during incidents
- Deliver economic benefits due to improved reliability and less road closures

### **Elgin and Keith Bypasses**

Provision of a bypass around the towns of Elgin and Keith. These bypasses would:

- Improve safety, resilience and reliability of the A96
- Improve air quality in the town centres
- Support access to tourism and employment opportunities
- Improve connectivity between towns
- Deliver economic benefits for all car users through shorter journeys, reduced congestion and fewer delays

- Potentially increase attractiveness of active travel and enhance placemaking by reducing through-traffic in town centres, thus facilitating the Active Communities intervention
- Address real and perceived severance within these communities by removing through trips

### **A96 Electric Corridor**

Improve the provision of alternative refuelling infrastructure and facilities along the A96 corridor and its interfacing local roads. The Electric Corridor would:

- Support the decarbonisation of the transport sector
- Improve resilience and standard of charging infrastructure along the route
- Increase confidence and uptake of using zeroemission vehicles
- Contribute towards Scotland's net zero emissions targets
- Improve air quality across the corridor

### **HITRANS Response to the A96 Corridor Review Consultation**

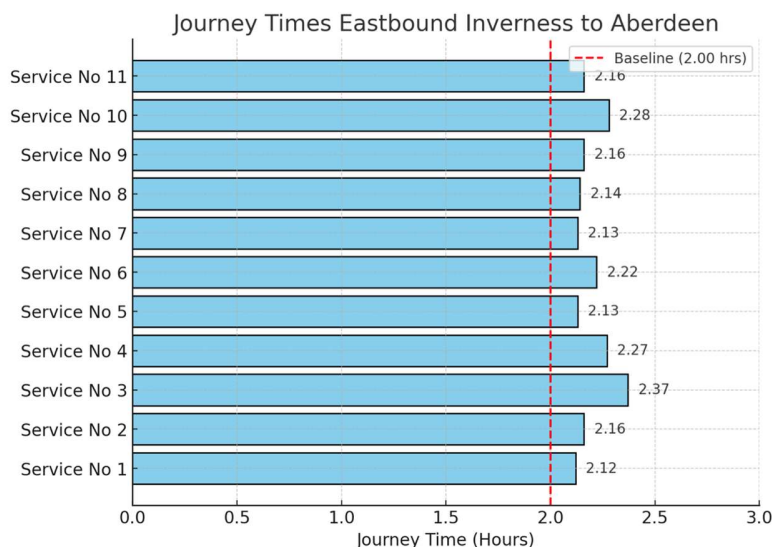
A copy of the core consultation questions is attached as appendix B at the end of this report. A link to the full online survey for the public consultation can also be found at <https://shorturl.at/pv1pN>.

Following HITRANS Partnership Meeting in Elgin in November 2023, HITRANS chair wrote to the then Scottish Transport Secretary urging that the Government seek an early go ahead for the first phase of committed works on the A96 for dualling between Inverness and Wester Hardmuir, on the eastern outskirts of Nairn, including a bypass of Nairn. The letter also highlighted that this the this full section should be constructed to dual-carriageway standard and that the bypasses of Elgin and Keith then be prioritised and also dualled.

In responding to the public consultation Members are invited to consider that HITRANS should include the following points:

- Welcome the Governments current and continued support for dualling the full length of the A96 and that it remains a key national priority.
- Note that journey times have significantly extended as traffic levels have grown making the existing route even more unfit for purpose in the hiatus on delivering the commitment.
- Welcome that the Inverness to Wester Hardmuir section including the Nairn Bypass is outwith the Review but seek commitment for this section to be urgently progressed with deadlines for the commencement published at the earliest opportunity. Welcome that we note this reflected in National Transport Strategy Delivery Plan.
- Request that as per the A9, the Government develops a clear plan for the A96 and this should include key dates.
- A dual carriageway standard Elgin Bypass should be prioritised for delivery as soon as possible and to follow on from completion of the committed work on Inverness to Wester Hardmuir.
- Suggest using agreed line of A96 dualling to create an Elgin Bypass from Alves to Mosstodloch that could connect with existing A96 at the Mosstodloch Roundabout.
- Progress Keith Bypass as the next priority again developed based on agreed route and to dual carriageway standard.

- Removing the A96 from the key settlements is urgently needed to reduce the multiple negative impacts arising from providing strategic traffic with no alternative route. These include: congestion: community severance and increased air pollution that discourages walking and cycling in these towns that in turn exacerbates the problem: and increased local and strategic journey times and reliability for all including public transport.
- Removing the Trunk Road from settlements such as Nairn, Elgin and Keith provides the opportunity to enhance their town centres and reimagine the corridor. In each of these towns the A96 has resulted in buildings turning away from the busy trunk road and create an unattractive car orientated environment that severs the communities on either side. HITRANS has included the development of sustainable travel masterplans that will seek to reimagine the trunk road corridor in these towns that will encourage more walking, cycling and public transport. These improvements should be delivered in tandem with dualling to ensure these benefits are fully realised.
- Road safety benefits from reducing driver frustration can only be achieved by providing adequate overtaking opportunities to address the impact of significant volumes of agricultural and HGV traffic on corridor.
- Welcome proposals for establishing the A96 as an Electric Corridor that will help encourage transition to cleaner vehicles.
- The business case for investing in the Inverness – Elgin – Aberdeen corridor can only have strengthened in the last decade of inaction in delivering these improvements with major new developments such as ScotWind and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport meaning that to service Renewable Energy and link the new energy opportunity to traditional oil and gas skills and supply chain will be more reliant on the corridor.
- Rail improvements outlined in Corridor Review are those that were committed to by Government in the 2008 Strategic Transport Projects Review. These should be delivered in parallel to dualling to ensure that rail journey times remain competitive. Rail journey times have increased since 2008. Rather than reduce towards the sub 2hour commitment average rail journey time have extended from 2hr 15 minutes to 2 hours 20 minutes.
  - In addition the last service on the route is now 2130
  - The hourly frequency has not been delivered and there are now significant timetable gaps.



- Note that Forres Bypass has been omitted yet traffic on the existing Forres Bypass suffers from congestion, is very high in volume and separates the Rail Station from the town rendering it dysfunctional as a Bypass. We would request its reinstatement as part of a Dualling Programme Commitment.
- The proposed improvements to public transport are welcomed but generic. HITRANS could work with the consultants to develop a prioritised action plan for improving public transport facilities and interchange on the A96 corridor.
- Highlight that the survey does not enable respondents to prioritise the improvements identified in the A9 Corridor Review.

### RTS Delivery

Impact - Positive

Comment – Many of the improvements proposed in the A96 corridor review are identified as key longstanding priorities in both the current and updated Regional Transport Strategy. However, the RTS also recognises that dualling the full corridor is required to fully realise benefits such as reduced congestion and journey times, improved road safety and air quality in bypassed towns.

### Policy

Impact - Positive

Comment – Complementary investment in the Inverness to Aberdeen rail service is essential for it to remain competitive for the majority of journeys and ensure that any road improvement doesn't lead to any increase in overall car mileage.

### Financial

Impact – Positive

Budget line and value – No direct impact. A96 Dualling Corridor Review and previous work recognises the positive regional economic impacts of investment in the strategic transport network of North East Scotland.

### Equality

Impact – Positive

Comment – A96 Dualling and wider investment in the strategic transport network would help improve the regions economic competitiveness. Wider improvements would also help improve the accessibility of the region for those without access to a private car and reduce severance within the towns that are currently impacted by strategic traffic passing through them including Nairn, Elgin and Keith.

### **Recommendation**

Members are invited to:

1. Note the report.
2. Consider the priority areas HITRANS should include in responding to the A9 Corridor Review.
3. Approve that Officials share a final version of the draft response for approval ahead of it being submitted prior to the consultation deadline on 21<sup>st</sup> February 2025.

Report by: Neil MacRae  
Designation: Partnership Manager  
Date: 7<sup>th</sup> February 2025

## Appendix B: A96 Corridor Review Public Consultation Survey

### Section 1: A96 Corridor Review

**Question 1:** How did you hear about this round of consultation on the A96 Corridor Review?

- Social media post
- Poster
- Newspaper/online news site
- Transport Scotland website
- I had the project website bookmarked
- Google search
- Google alert
- Word of mouth
- Other

**Question 2:** To what extent are you satisfied with the outcomes of the A96 Corridor Review?

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neither satisfied/nor dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied
- Don't know/not applicable

**Question 3:** How satisfied are you with the Refined Package?

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neither satisfied/nor dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied
- Don't know/not applicable



**Question 4:** What interventions are your priority/priorities within the Refined Package? *(Select all that apply)*

- Active Communities
- Improved Public Transport Passenger Interchange Facilities
- Investment in Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and Mobility as a Service (Maas)
- Linespeed, Passenger and Freight Capacity Improvements on Aberdeen to Inverness Rail Line
- Targeted Road Safety Improvements
- Elgin Bypass
- Keith Bypass
- A96 Electric Corridor

**Question 5:** Do you feel that the Refined Package will improve your experience of living, working and travelling along the A96 corridor?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know/not applicable

**Question 6:** Do you have any further comments?

Enter your answer

## Section 2: Strategic Environmental Assessment and Statutory Impact Assessments

**Question 7:** Please note here any comments you wish to make on the overall findings of the Draft Strategic Environmental Assessment Environmental Report for the A96 Corridor Review.

Enter your answer

**Question 8:** Are there any particular environmental issues, problems or opportunities you would like to mention that you feel have not been captured within the Draft Environmental Report? If so, please note them in the comments box below.

Enter your answer

**Question 9:** Do you have any feedback or comments on the draft Equality Impact Assessment, Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment and/or Fairer Scotland Duty Assessment? If so, please note them in the comments box below

Enter your answer