I can advise that in order to develop route options for the section of the A96 Dualling betweenHardmuir and Fochabers the project team initially identified constraints within the scheme extents and then developed feasible route corridors which negotiated these constraints. Route options were then developed within each of the route corridors.

As part of the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB) Stage 2 process a high level Initial Options Assessment was undertaken to identify options to be taken forward for public consultation. The high level Initial Options Assessment used sub-criteria based on the scheme objectives to identify poorer performing options. It is important to note that this purpose of this initial sifting exercise was to identify poorer performing options and not identify or rank better performing options. Further detailed design and assessment work (including an assessment in terms of engineering, environmental, traffic and economics) will be required to identify the preferred option and it should be noted that scores allocated to the options taken forward for public consultation cannot be used to identify the preferred option at this stage. The vital feedback received following the exhibitions held in June will also be taken into account as we work towards identifying a preferred option in 2018.

The assessment sub-criteria for high level Initial Options Assessment were developed based on the scheme objectives, to provide targeted and measurable metrics for the A96 Dualling Hardmuir to Fochabers Scheme, and are listed below:

Objective 1. To improve the operation of the A96 and inter-urban connectivity

Sub-criteria

1.1 Reduced journey times
1.2 Journey time reliability
1.3 Increased overtaking opportunities
1.4 Improved efficiency of freight movements
1.5 Reduced conflict with local traffic

Objective 2. To improve safety for motorised and non-motorised users

Sub-criteria

2.1 Reduced accident rates and severity
2.2 Reduced driver stress
2.3 Reduced NMU conflicts

Objective 3. To provide opportunities to grow the regional economies in the corridor

Sub-criteria

3.1 Improved access to the wider strategic network
3.2 Enhanced access to jobs and services

Objective 4. To facilitate active travel in the corridor

Sub-criteria

4.1 Traffic reduction on old A96 that will benefit NMUs

Objective 5. To facilitate integration with Public Transport Facilities

Sub-criteria

5.1 Traffic reduction on old A96 that will benefit bus services

Objective 6. To avoid significant environmental impacts and, where this is not possible, to minimise the environmental effect on:

Sub-criteria

6.1 Communities and people in the corridor

6.1.1 Air Quality
6.1.2 Noise & Vibration
6.1.3 People & Communities
6.1.4 Policies and Plans
6.1.5 Materials

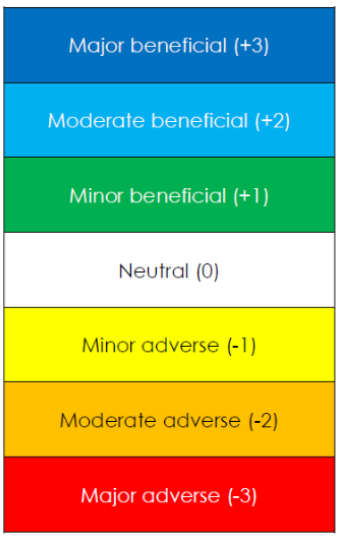
6.2 Natural and cultural heritage assets

6.2.1 Cultural Heritage
6.2.2 Landscape & Visual
6.2.3 Nature Conservation
6.2.4 Geology, Soils, Contaminated Land & Groundwater
6.2.5 Road Drainage & the Water Environment

Initial Options Assessment

Each of the 43 options developed were assessed against the scheme objectives. Assessment scores for each sub-criteria were based on a seven point scale ranging from major beneficial (+3) to major adverse (-3) and a score was allocated to each sub-criteria accordingly. Specific and detailed mitigation was generally not developed at this level of environmental assessment.

In three specific locations, pairs of sub-options exist (i.e. Orange Route north of Forres, Red Route south of Forres and Red Route south of Fochabers). The sub-options remain under active consideration but were not sufficiently different to be assessed separately in the Initial Options Assessment.



The outcome of the Initial Option Assessment is included in Appendix A attached to this letter, which shows the score allocated to each sub-criteria and collated for each objective based on an average of the sub-criteria scores. The coloured matrix within the summary table is a graphical representation of each end-to-end option made up of several different coloured elements.

These objective scores were collected and ranked, with poorer performing options at the bottom of the table. By analysing the poorly performing options, it became apparent that their poor overall score was due to certain elements within each, which had consistently poor performance. These elements were identified and have been marked with an “X”.

The assessment recommended that options containing four specific elements be deselected as a result of poor performance against the scheme objectives. These were the Yellow option, Cyan option, and an eastern element of Blue option, which all follow Stage 1 Improvement Strategy Option N. The Orange element north of Fochabers was also deselected due to its poor performance against the objectives.

It is important to emphasise that this high-level initial assessment was undertaken to identify options which performed poorly against the scheme objectives. Further design work will be required on all remaining options along with a detailed Engineering, Environmental, Traffic and Economic assessment in order to identify the best performing options and select a preferred option. This further assessment will be formally reported in a DMRB Stage 2 Scheme Assessment Report which will be prepared and published once the assessment has been completed.