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7th April 2023

Dear Mr Stewart

A90 Ellon onwards and the Toll of Birness

Congratulations on your appointment. You will know that I founded the Why Stop @ Ellon? Campaign in 2013 and you have probably travelled on that stretch of road many times and will have a good knowledge of it in particular the dangers around the Toll of Birness. I had penned this letter to your predecessor but hope this will provide you with the evidence as to why this stretch of the A90 is in dire need of urgent attention.

Mr Salmond made a promise to the residents back in 2006 and I quote, "Banff and Buchan MP Alex Salmond has vowed that if he becomes Scotland's first minister next year, the first decision he will make is to dual the road between Ellon and Peterhead. SNP leader made the sensational promise on Friday afternoon, stating that if party became the largest in Scottish Parliament, then within 100 days a decision would be made to construct a dual carriageway opening Buchan to the rest of the country."

Promises made and broken do not help our fragmented infrastructure and, as you know, the railway doesn't exist for us after Aberdeen. The residents of the North East feel forgotten and left out. They see millions of £'s spent in the central belt on all types of infrastructure and all we appear to be neglected. So, please can you, as a local, re-look at this before any further life changing injuries or fatalities affect the lives of more people and their families. Speak with NESTRANS, they have just carried out another stakeholder survey and therefore have more up to date information, below is a flavour of what my submission said.

"I was so very disappointed to hear your announcement concerning the A90 Ellon onwards and more particularly about the Toll of Birness junction and felt compelled to write to you with the specific issues.

A90 Ellon to Toll of Birness

The opening of the AWPR and the linked Balmedie-Tipperty dualling has been transformational however, it has led to significant congestion at times around the two entrances to Ellon and the dualling becomes a bottleneck on the trunk road between the southern and northern roundabouts at Ellon. These junctions are no longer adequate for the volume of traffic which uses them daily and threatens the future prosperity of Ellon and towns to the north by potentially limiting the development opportunities that these towns need to grow and be sustainable.

For over 10 years I have campaigned under the banner of “Why Stop at Ellon” for a full dualling of the A90, firstly to the Toll of Birness and thereafter, North towards Peterhead and Fraserburgh. The opening of the AWPR has shown what dualling a route can do for intra-regional travel and for ensuring shorter and more importantly reliable journey times for freight hauliers and business.

The Toll of Birness Junction

The Toll of Birness has an appalling and tragic safety record, caused through a fatal combination of the geometry of the approaching roads which makes judging the speed and distance of approaching traffic from the north and south difficult and combined with the speed of traffic on the A90 and the volume of traffic which makes egressing from the junction from the Mintlaw direction at times very challenging especially for the long-articulated HGVs which serve the fishing, fish processing and agricultural industries in and to the north of Mintlaw including farms which supply a significant proportion of Scotland’s retail egg market. There have been several fatal accidents at this junction during my time as a Councillor, all attributable to the design and operation of this junction hence my long-standing campaign to upgrade and re-design the Toll of Birness.

The A90 North of the Toll of Birness to Peterhead and to Fraserburgh

This is the northern end of the A90 Trunk Road from Edinburgh to Fraserburgh. It has long been an important strategic link from the northern most parts of the north east of Scotland to the central belt motorway network and the rest of the UK. It has lagged significantly behind much of the rest of the Trunk Road network especially when you compare the volume of heavy goods vehicles and the importance of the industry located to the rest of Scotland and the UK. The output of this region is vital to the UK food supply as well as exporting to Europe and internationally, it therefore punches well above its weight in terms of population density and geographical peripherality. The transport network simply does not reflect the economic importance of the region and that if nothing else is a compelling argument for addressing the long-overdue upgrading of these key routes to the north east of Scotland.

The A952 to Fraserburgh

The A952 has an interesting history, being as it was formerly part of the northern trunk road network to Fraserburgh and then joining the A98 which continued the trunk road to Fochabers and onto Inverness. Driving the A952 now and especially at night or in inclement weather it is astonishing to think this was ever a Trunk Road, given how far its standard lags behind modern Trunk Road standards. This is clearly, perhaps cynically why it was de-trunked, along with the A98, at a stroke demoting Fraserburgh and Banff/Macduff in the national transport hierarchy. Any doubt about this can be absolved by looking at the National Transport Strategy and Strategic Transport Projects Review – if the road is not a trunk road, and you do not happen to be on a trunk road you simply are airbrushed out of national transport policy, at least in terms of any significant investment in upgrading or even safety.



Journey time and Journey Time Reliability

I would be interested to see how journey times compare to other routes of a similar character with similar important economic centres of importance. Peterhead is the UK's whitefish capital with Fraserburgh not lagging far behind. The ability to transport fresh and processed fish and seafood to its markets especially in Europe in a timely fashion is critical and all too often the risks of being unable to do this due to the lack of resilience on these routes Fraserburgh and Peterhead are two of our priority regeneration towns and have the opportunity to capitalise on developments such as the offshore wind industry due to their deep water and accessible and strategically placed harbours. In order to attract inward investment the transport links to the rest of the network require to be adequate and currently they are not.

Safety

I have outlined above the concerns regarding the Toll of Birness specially however both the A90 and A952 have poor safety records with the number of head on collisions on these routes' demonstrative of a frustration and risk taking around overtaking due to the lack of opportunities for overtaking and the platooning effect of a large proportion of HGV traffic moving at below the average speed for the classification of road. In addition, much of the network is significantly below standard in both design and quality of maintenance and surfacing. The lack of edge lining on the A952 combined with many sharp and unrelenting bends makes it a particularly unpleasant prospect to drive in the dark, fog or inclement weather. The lack of resilience in the routes is evident from the number of times both roads are closed during the year due to collisions and other incidents and the long, and often unsuitable diversion routes required.

Quality and extent of public transport options

Due to the absence of a rail network public transport options are limited to bus travel, private hires and taxis being unrealistic prospects for such long journeys. The cost from Peterhead and Fraserburgh to Aberdeen is simply extortionate and really limits economic opportunities for anyone who does not own or cannot afford or isn't able to have a car. The buses suffer the most from diversions due to incidents on the roads, from journey time reliability and from overall extremely long journey times to Aberdeen in particular. The nature of the routes and the volume, speed and behaviour of traffic make them wholly unsuitable for any form of active travel."

For all the reasons above I would ask that you take another look at this corridor as it is the engine room of the North East and the contribution this area makes to the Scottish economy is huge and that's why connectivity is key and improvements to the infrastructure are so essential. Alison Irvine from Transport Scotland visited on behalf of the then Minister, when she saw the Toll junction she was horrified and being told it was the last one of its kind in Scotland couldn't believe it hadn't been updated .. speaks volumes about the neglect of the North East,

Yours sincerely

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2 June 2023

Dear Gillian,

Thank you for your e-mail and attached letter dated 7 April 2023 regarding multiple issues surrounding North East transport, in particular The Toll of Birness Junction and the A90 to Peterhead and to Fraserburgh. I have noted the points raised in your letter and I will deal with these in turn:

A90 Ellon to Toll of Birness

Regarding the AWPR, Transport Scotland is planning to undertake an evaluation of this scheme this year. This will be in line with [Scottish Trunk Road Infrastructure Project Evaluation \(STRIFE\) Guidance](#), comparing conditions after opening with forecasts of the differences made during project design and development. The evaluation will consider scheme objectives; operation, including traffic flows and journey times, environment; safety; economy; integration; accessibility and social inclusion and cost to government. The completed evaluation report will be published on Transport Scotland's website in due course.

The second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2), published on 8 December last year, did consider proposals to dual the A90 north of Ellon. However, after an extensive evidenced based process with substantial stakeholder and public consultation, dualling was not recommended. STPR2 has been undertaken in line with the Sustainable Investment Hierarchy, which aims to reduce the need to travel unsustainably and prioritises making best use of and enhancing existing infrastructure, before investing in new capacity.

Nevertheless, STPR2 states, under recommendation 32, that continued and increased investment in the trunk road and motorway network (over and above current maintenance levels) to keep the network reliable and resilient for road users should be delivered, which will, of course, apply to the A90. A Delivery Plan, which will set out a strategy for implementation of the STPR2 recommendations within

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the current fiscal climate is currently in production.

In the meantime, Transport Scotland continue to work collaboratively with regional and local stakeholders across the country to develop the detailed understanding of locations on the trunk road network which require to be addressed under Recommendation 32. This is currently taking the form of working with Nestrans Regional Transport Partnership who have commissioned consultants to undertake an initial evidence review of this corridor (including the Toll of Birness junction) through funding allocated through the Aberdeen City Region Deal. Most recently (on 31 March this year) Transport Scotland officials attended an engagement session focussed on problems and opportunities for the Toll of Birness and will continue to engage with and support this work as it progresses.

The A90 North of the Toll of Birness to Peterhead and to Fraserburgh

In December 2008, the Scottish Government published its first Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR). This evidence based and objective led transport appraisal, did not identify a requirement to significantly upgrade or dual the A90 north of Ellon. Instead, the outcome of STPR concluded that there was a need to maintain and operate these routes safely, in the context of a route management strategy. It was noted that this would include a variety of localised improvements that could be undertaken in tandem with, and driven by, the trunk road maintenance contracts.

The second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2), published in December 2022, came to a similar conclusion noting that the priorities for investment in Scotland's trunk road network are on improving road safety and reliability and adapting the network to deal with challenge of climate change rather than any large-scale interventions for the A90 north of Aberdeen. In coming to that conclusion, STPR2 concluded that dualling of the A90 north of Ellon was not in keeping with the Sustainable Investment Hierarchy. Instead, more targeted measures to improve road safety, reliability and adapting the trunk road network to deal with the challenge of climate change were recommended in the final report.

The A952 to Fraserburgh

As you have correctly stated the A952 to Fraserburgh is not part of the Trunk Road network within Scotland and therefore as Minister for Transport I have no locus over the operation of this road. I would further note that STPR2 was clear that it was not a review of the extent of the trunk road but rather focussed on the necessary future investment priorities. To be clear, Transport Scotland have no plans to include the A952 in the Trunk Road network...

Journey time and Journey Time Reliability

Our trunk road Operating Companies are required to undertake a series of activities aimed at improving journey time reliability by minimising the risk of unplanned disruption to the operation of the trunk road network. The Transport Scotland Manual for the Management of the Risk of Unplanned Network Disruption provides direction to Operating Companies on managing and mitigating the effects of disruptive events, such as those caused by weather events. The manual requires Operating Companies to develop and implement disruption risk processes which are informed by the formal recording of all previous events, as they occur. This includes severe weather-related events such as high winds, flooding, snow, and ice.

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Safety

In relation to safety, the Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that our trunk road network, including the A90, is safe and efficient for all road users. The Scottish Government has invested over £250 million on the maintenance of the A90 since 2007/2008. Transport Scotland undertakes an annual assessment of the safety performance of the entire trunk road network, including the A90. This assessment considers accident patterns and rates in the form of Route Accident Reduction Plans (RARP) and screens all locations where three or more personal injury accidents have occurred in a three-year period.

This ensures that full consideration is given to accidents that may be spread along a specific corridor. Further investigations are then carried out and, where appropriate, mitigation measures are prioritised for delivery.

I recognise the local concerns regarding the Toll of Birness junction, which is why Transport Scotland, through the above assessment process, has installed two interactive signs in 2017 with a third interactive sign to supplement the northbound signs erected in 2021. These signs alert drivers to vehicles exiting the junction ahead and encourage drivers to drive within the speed limit. Other work involved an additional northbound advance direction sign. We will evaluate the effectiveness of this measure before considering any further improvements. The Scottish Government currently have no further road safety improvement plans at the A90 Toll of Birness, however, this will be monitored through the ongoing Annual Road Safety Review process. Furthermore, I would note that Aberdeenshire Council has identified a need for upgrades to the junction in order to mitigate the impact of development. In line with National Planning Framework 4, this is a matter for the Council and developers. STPR2 or the Road Safety Review process does not supersede the need to for the Council and developers to do this.

On the local road network, the Scottish Government's Road Safety Improvement Fund for this financial year (2023-24), will provide an initial £7.5 million of funding to Scotland's 32 local authorities. This will support casualty and risk reduction through the implementation of safe system measures that underpins Scotland's Road Safety Framework to 2030.

Quality and extent of public transport options

Individual bus operators use their own commercial judgement to decide on the service routes, fare structure and frequency. However, you may also be interested to know that the Scottish Government is progressing a Fair Fares Review to ensure a sustainable and integrated approach to public transport fares that supports the future long-term viability of a public transport system that is accessible, available, and affordable for people throughout Scotland. The review is considering both the cost and availability of services and the range of discounts and concessionary schemes which are available on all modes including bus, rail, and ferry to ensure our public transport system is more accessible, available, and affordable, with the costs of transport more fairly shared across government, business, and society. Transport Scotland's Bus Partnership Fund (BPF) is also supporting the development of a proposed Aberdeen Rapid Transit system for the region. This includes bus priority on associated transport corridors into the city, one of which extends to Ellon. The North East Bus Alliance is currently taking forward this work. £12.2m of BPF funding has been awarded to the Alliance to date.

Through our Just Transition Fund for the North East and Moray, the Campaign for North East Rail (CNER) in partnership with Aberdeen Chamber of Commerce (AGCC) has been awarded up to £250,000 for the delivery of a Railway Feasibility Study.

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Officials are working with CNER / AGCC supporting them through the creation of a Strategic Business Case for addressing the challenges and opportunities identified relating to the connections to and between Ellon, Fraserburgh, Peterhead and Aberdeen.

I hope this response underlines that the Scottish Government are committed to ensuring access to an affordable, accessible, safe, and resilient transport network throughout the country, including the North East. I recognise the contribution the area makes to the Scottish economy and the importance of its connectivity. We know that the challenges ahead are significant, and we must balance the needs of all our society together in achieving a fairer, greener, and more prosperous Scotland.

Yours sincerely,



KEVIN STEWART

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