

Report to Partnership Meeting 6 February 2009

**STRATEGIC TRANSPORT PROJECTS REVIEW
HITRANS POSITION**

SUMMARY

The details of the Scottish Government's proposals for setting priorities for capital investment in nationally significant land based transport projects, the STPR, were reported to the Board at its last meeting on 9 January. This report proposes the position and actions HITRANS should take to best support the delivery of nationally significant land based transport services and infrastructure across the highlands and islands, working in partnership with Government, its Agencies, Councils, and other stakeholders in the transport sector.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Board welcome the priority given to investment in transport services and infrastructure within the Highlands and Islands as included in findings of the Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR), support Government and its Agencies in developing and delivering these investment priorities and strategies, and continue to argue to case for prioritisation and recognition of those nationally significant interventions included in the HITRANS Transport Strategy and Draft Delivery Plan not include in the STPR..

DETAIL

The Board considered a Report presenting the findings of the STPR at its meeting on 9 January and debated these in the light of its their fit with the HITRANS Transport Strategy and the extensive research done by HITRANS and Partners on the economic benefit that would accrue for part or all of the Highlands and Islands should changes in nationally significant transport provision be implemented. This report summarise the consensus expressed at the meeting and suggests the position HITRANS should take in supporting of delivering of the findings of the STPR and other land based priorities identified as part of the process of developing the HITRANS Transport Strategy and the related Development Plan.

The major intervention proposals which will impact significantly on the Highlands and Islands included in the priorities set by the STPR are as follows:

Rail

Project 7 – Reconfiguration of the National Rail Timetable

Potentially significantly reduces train journey times between Inverness and the Central Belt and Aberdeen

Project 12 – Rail System Enhancement

Activities such as replacing and upgrading signaling and adding new passing loops of track and double track will improve the current rail system substantially on services to and within the Highlands and Islands.

Project 17 – Highland mainline rail Improvements

This work between Inverness and Perth together with the removal of freight train speed limits below 75mph should reduce journey times by around 35 minutes.

Project 19 – Rail Improvements between Inverness and Aberdeen

This project aims to Introduce reduced journey time and increased frequency (one per hour overall and 2 per hour at the western end) by providing new loops, line speed improvements, dual track sections, and a station at Dalcross.

HITRANS welcomes all of the above as potentially a significant step in improving connectivity between the Highlands and Moray with Aberdeen, and the central belt while encouraging greater modal shift away from private cars and long distance road based freight.

Road

Project A82 - Targeted Road Improvements

Widening of selected locations between Tarbet and Inverarnan and between Corran Ferry and Fort William. Other improvements include climbing lanes, overtaking lay-bys, and the introduction of safety cameras.

HITRANS welcomes the commitment to invest on the route but is concerned that the suppression of economic growth, that has been demonstrated that the A82 imposes on the West Highlands and Islands, may well not be overcome by these commitments, depending on the details of any proposals. HITRANS would seek an early meeting with Scottish Government and Transport Scotland to clarify their intentions and offer to work in partnership to deliver the necessary works.

Project 4 – Road Safety Improvements in North and West Scotland

To improve road safety and reduce accidents the project comprises measures including road widening, climbing and overtaking lanes, junction improvements and other safety related measures on the A9 north of Inverness, A835, A82, A87, A830, A887 and the A96.

HITRANS welcomes the commitment to improve safety on these routes and would welcome the opportunity to engage with Government and Transport Scotland to establish common standards and safe overtaking capacity along each route to be implemented as part of the on-going trunk maintenance/ road reconstruction programme. HITRANS is concerned that in assessing the need for investment on these routes recognition of the economic benefit the routes provide to Scotland's sustainable economic growth has not been included as a criteria for future investment, as without appropriate investment on these routes, the economy of much of the remote rural and island areas of Scotland will continue to decline relative to their more accessible counterparts in the rest of the country.

Project 5 –Route Management

This is a package of works to develop and build on the Transport Scotland programme of route management on the A83, A85, and A828.

HITRANS would wish further information on what physical measures are intended to be delivered through this project and would seek an early meeting with Government and Transport Scotland to discuss. HITRANS would offer the same comment on this Project as those on Project 4, and would seek to work in partnership with Government, Transport Scotland and the local Councils to deliver meaningful benefits in terms of the economy and road safety.

Project 16 – A9 Upgrade from Dunblane to Inverness

This project includes a number of major improvements on this key route including junction improvements and dualling of the remaining sections of the route between Perth and Inverness. The phasing of the work prioritized investment south of Perth and between Perth and Blair Atholl.

HITRANS welcomes the priority set for investment on this route but would wish to engage with Government, Transport Scotland, and Highland Council to ensure optimum and early use of funds to carry out improvements which offer the best benefit to the economy of the region. A Study undertaken for HITRANS has identified that best economic benefit from improvements on the northern end of the route would be achieved by early dualling of the section between Kingussie and Aviemore, and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss with Government the possibility of taking this approach. In principle HITRANS can see no cost justification for constructing further 2+1 sections on the route if full dualling is to be achieved on any such section within a meaningful timeframe.

Project 18 - A96 Inverness – Nairn Upgrade

The Project would see the A96 between Nairn and Inverness upgraded to dual carriageway with a new link connecting the A96 with the A9 south of Inverness.

HITRANS welcomes this project which has the twin benefit of improving accessibility between Inverness, Moray and Aberdeen while facilitating the economically important development opportunities proposed along this section of the A96 corridor.

Project 22 – Targeted Road Congestion / Environmental Relief schemes

The project aims to reduce conflict between strategic and local traffic to improve road safety, reduce journey times, and reduce the impact of through traffic on local communities. Enhancements on the A96 such as a by-pass of Nairn are included within this project.

HITRANS welcomes the recognition of the issue on the A96 of the conflict between local and through traffic on this route, the only intercity route in Scotland where the trunk road still passes through major communities. The inclusion of a Nairn by-pass will clearly achieve the project aims and is welcomed. HITRANS would however wish to discuss further with Government the need for other bypasses on this route, and in particular the case for Elgin, which appears to fully meet the project criteria yet has not been specifically identified at this point within the project.

Bus

Project 8 - Strategic park and Ride

The project supports making public transport more competitive against the car and includes a proposal for a new rail station at Dalcross with Park and Ride facilities and interchange facilities with Inverness Airport.

HITRANS welcomes the recognition of the benefits of the introduction of bus priority in the Inverness area and the proposal to focus on the A96 corridor as an opportunity, a conclusion that is shared with that of the independent study commissioned by HITRANS into the subject that is nearing completion. The Partnership would welcome the opportunity to work with Transport Scotland and Highland Council to deliver such a project in an optimum location on the A96 corridor on the approach to Inverness.

The Missing Interventions

In considering the findings of the STPR in June it became clear that a number of interventions on the trunk road and highland rail networks were not included in Transport Scotland's findings.

These are discussed below with comment on how these might still be progressed

A96 Elgin and Keith by-passes

These projects are discussed under project 22 above. It is hoped that further discussion with Government and Transport Scotland will provide the opportunity to have these schemes given further consideration for inclusion within this project, particularly, Elgin, where the significant potential for developer contributions would when recognised provide a strong cost to government/ benefit ratio along with promoting significant economic benefit for Moray and surrounding areas.

A9/A82 Trunk Link Road – Inverness

This project is considered by Transport Scotland as only regionally significant within the review, and therefore not worthy of inclusion as an output. The case is still strong for providing a positive link between the A82 and A9 trunk roads outwith the Inverness city centre area, and HITRANS would wish to work with Government and the Highland Council in further considering how best this aim might be achieved.

A82 Loch Lomond to Fort William - Strategic Improvements

As identified in the commentary under Project 4, no recognition has been given within the review of the economic benefits that will be gained by strategic investment along this route. HITRANS would wish to discuss with Government the case for investment in the economic regeneration of the West Highlands and Islands and hence the A82, which Transport Scotland have concluded is not worthy of consideration as a criteria for investment in this area, in spite of the significant economic benefits at a Scotland level which have been independently identified would be gained.

Inverness – Caithness/ Orkney Far North Corridor and corridors to the West Highlands and Islands

In recent times the potential for significant sustainable economic growth in the renewable energy sector has been identified along the west and northern coasts of Scotland and in particular in the Pentland Firth. This is recognised in the late changes to the National Planning Framework 2 document, but not in the STPR where economic benefit to Scotland of investment in this corridor was not considered. Caithness is one of the most remote areas of the UK mainland and is served by both road and rail networks that do not provide acceptable access to Inverness, its key service centre. HITRANS would wish to work with Government, HIE, and key renewable sector interests to establish how maximum benefit can in time be gained from the renewable energy resources in the highlands and islands and establish and agree the extent of transport investment needed in all modes to realise the maximum economic benefit to Scotland in extracting sustainable power from the region.

Report by: Dave Duthie
Designation: Partnership Director
Date: 27 January 2009