

Nethy Bridge and Vicinity Community Council submission of 4 April 2023

PE1992/C: Dual the A9 and improve road safety

First of all many thanks for the opportunity to address you with our concerns surrounding the A9, its importance, its safety and the timescale for its reconstruction.

While I am chairman of the Nethy Bridge and Vicinity Community Council I am replying here for, and on behalf of, all community councils and community associations in Badenoch and Strathspey. Our area, Badenoch and Strathspey with a population of circa 14,140 in June of 2021, encompasses the A9 from the summit of Slochd in the north to Drumochter summit in the south and comprises of 12 individual community councils. We have within Badenoch and Strathspey some 42 or 38% of the A9's total 112 miles between Inverness and Perth. Being locally based with all CC members having to live within their respective CC boundaries we feel we are closest to the population of our villages and towns and are becoming more and more aware of the growing anger and frustration within these communities at the lack of progress and to be quite honest the hollow words and promises made, and which are now being renegeed upon regarding the upgrade of the A9.

The A9 is the main artery running from north to south through the heart of the country, it is the spine of Scotland from which, north of Perth, most other main roads radiate. It carries most of our goods and products north while being responsible for much of the exports from the Highlands and Islands south. It carries our whisky to the south along with all manner of Highland manufactured foodstuffs while bringing north everything required for daily life from new cars, oil platform components, to food, clothing and building materials. No wonder there are so many large lorries on the route. Through Badenoch and Strathspey we see an average of 8000 vehicles using the road per day.

In 2014 an experiment was started with HGV's being allowed to travel at 50mph on the road as opposed to the national limit of 40mph as a means of increasing the flow of traffic and reducing tailbacks. While this was welcome it did not resolve the issue. We now have the main route to the north or south with a 50mph HGV speed limit. As it is a single carriageway with oncoming traffic it means that all vehicles following an HGV have to travel at their speed, it being unsafe most of the time to

overtake, you are travelling at the speed of the slowest vehicle - 50mph. This in itself leads to frustration among following drivers and leads to 'miscalculations' and dangerous driving caused by frustration when long convoys form. We doubt if the central belt would accept their main road linking Glasgow with Edinburgh being restricted to 50mph.

Over the years we have seen an ever increasing, but varying, number of fatal and serious accidents. In the 13 year period between 2009 and October 2022 there have been 117 fatalities from a total of 805 serious (as classified by Police Scotland) accidents giving an average of nine deaths per year and 62 serious accidents. Last year alone in Badenoch and Strathspey there were 9 fatalities, tragically including two incidents where three people lost their lives in each. These included locals, tourists and lorry drivers. This is simply unacceptable. These are our families, our friends, our visitors and our service providers. While we fully accept that dualling the road would not stop all accidents it would certainly reduce the number of head on incidents. Of these accidents there was serious driver error with overtaking, confusion of junctions by foreign drivers and other forms of incident. As well as the enormous human impact on all the families and friends of victims of both fatal and non-fatal accidents there is also the large financial burden which each one causes, not only from the huge cost of the accident and its investigation but also from the huge delays to all other traffic on the road. While no delay is worth an injury or death it has to be remembered that for each road closure of 8 to 12 hours for investigation there is a huge knock-on effect to travel and delivery of goods. We must remember also that for many parts of the road, Slochd and Drumochter in particular, there are no viable alternatives other than travelling via Aberdeen which involves an additional eighty miles of driving, one hundred of it on the equally dangerous A96. The route via Spean Bridge and Fort William has been proven to be unsuitable with accidents occurring and large vehicles becoming stuck on verges on the route during diversions.

There is now a growing feeling of unease and reluctance among many local and highland people from even travelling on the road. Raigmore Hospital, Inverness is our nearest (and only major) hospital which covers as far south as Drumochter meaning that all patients, both inpatients and outpatients for their appointments have to travel this road, most by car due to the sparse public transport which in itself highlights the fact that in areas like this a car is not a luxury but a necessity. Fortunately, many patients are able to make use of the community transport company

based in Aviemore which relies heavily on volunteers using their own vehicles.

In all this we have not yet mentioned tourism. It can be argued that this is the Highlands most important industry but being so it involves thousands of tourists using the road annually, most from countries who drive on the other side of the road and therefore have different road junction layouts to Scotland and the rest of Britain. Many are driving motorhomes with which they are not familiar while many others are towing a caravan, again with a reduced legal speed. This all adds to anger and impatience from following drivers. Between Perth and Inverness there are no fewer than 20 changes of road layout from 4 to 2/3 lanes and vice versa etc. with respective changes in speed limits. This all adds to driver confusion. On sections of the road which are currently dualled you cannot see the other carriageway due to the topography. While this certainly adds interest to the road it also causes a lot of confusion to drivers, particularly at night and to those unfamiliar with the road layout. It is quite easy to forget exactly where on the road you are and therefore whether you are on dual or single carriageway. It has been known for drivers to think they are still on dual carriageway only to meet oncoming traffic with disastrous and tragic results.

In recent years as a country, we have seen some major infrastructure developments namely the Borders Railway, the Queen Elizabeth Crossing, improved roads in both Edinburgh and the new Aberdeen peripheral road, Glasgow has had extensions to the M74 and other motorway and trunk road improvements. These improvements can be set against only two sections of the A9 being completed, and many years ago now, the full improvement of the Mallaig to Fort William road (A830). In 2007 the SNP made a commitment to dual the entirety of the A9 from Inverness to Perth and was followed up with a promise in 2011 by ministers to have the work complete by 2025. For many years now those of us in the Highlands have known that this has been unattainable and simply impossible but it has only recently been confirmed by the former Transport Minister, Jenny Gilruth, that this is now longer possible. We need clarity and a renewed assurance that the work will be carried out in the shortest possible timeframe while also allowing the work to be done to the correct standard.

The constant 'kicking down the road' of the proposals is fueling increased anger and resentment in the highlands that we are being ignored and are simply a backwater. Again would the central belt accept this? As a group we think not.

We fully and positively encourage your committee to hold an inquiry and I would be very happy to give oral evidence to a hearing.

Yours faithfully,

Sandy McCook

Chairman,

Nethy Bridge and Community Community Council

but representing all Community Councils in Badenoch and Strathspey.