

Inverness Chamber of Commerce submission of 8 January 2024

PE1992/K: Dual the A9 and improve road safety

Overview

Inverness Chamber of Commerce welcomes this petition and the consideration given to it by the Scottish Parliament. Our Chief Executive was a panel member at the Inverness Courier's "A9 Summit" in July 2023, along with the Cabinet Secretary and officials from Transport Scotland, and he took part in the public launch of the petition committee's call for evidence at Kincaig in August 2023.

Since then, the Cabinet Secretary has updated Parliament (20th December) with a renewed timetable for dualling of the A9.

The Scottish Government made a clear commitment to complete the dualling of the A9 by 2025. It is our view that the primary reason for failing to meet this deadline was a lack of commitment. We can't know whether that lack of commitment was from Government Ministers or from officials at Transport Scotland, but there is sufficient expert evidence to support the notion that the original timetable was achievable. The lack of commitment has been exacerbated by procurement methods that sought to pass an unreasonable level of risk to contractors.

The lack of progress has limited the growth potential of Highland businesses and has, almost certainly, led to loss of life that could have been avoided.

Others have submitted responses to this petition that cover the issues of procurement and loss of life. Our role is to comment on behalf of the business community, but we note that the whole community served by the A9 feel let down by the lack of commitment from Scottish Government that would have seen the A9 dualling completed by its target date of 2025.

Highland Business community response

Inverness Chamber of Commerce represents business in Inverness and the wider Highlands, and we have received many comments about dualling the A9 from across all sectors

including tourism, food, farming, health, construction, and manufacturing.

These responses fall into 3 broad areas:

1. Reality – the journey time from Inverness to the central belt is too long. The rail service journey times are longer than by car (and are getting worse) so there is an over-reliance on the A9. This applies equally to goods, staff and tourists. However, it's not only about how long the journey actually takes. The issue is that much of the route is single carriageway and has no possible diversions, so journey times are unreliable, as even a small single incident, like a broken-down car, can have a disproportionate effect on the journey time. This has an enormous cost impact to business (which is well detailed in Transport Scotland's 2016 A9 business plan).
2. Perception – the road has such a bad reputation that people are put off from coming here and from doing business with us. Tourists find other places where their journey doesn't include a "dangerous road". Businesses can be reluctant to locate here, and staff are reluctant to work here, because of the perception of how hard it is to get to anywhere else.
3. Worry - This is summed up perfectly by the business owner who said "as I get older, and the gulf increases in age between myself and younger members of the team, I find myself increasingly worrying for their wellbeing while driving on the A9". We all share that worry – whether it is about our employees or our family members – and we don't believe it's a burden shared by the rest of Scotland.

Why this is important

Connectivity to and across the Highlands is simply not good enough. As well as the A9 we also have sub-standard rail connections between Inverness and Glasgow and Edinburgh, and poor connectivity by road and rail across the Highlands and to Aberdeen.

This means that Highland businesses cannot always reach their full potential as travel time for goods (many of our leading industries rely on import or export of fresh products) and

people is too long. It also has a serious impact on our ability to attract top quality talent from outwith the area.

The Scottish Government recognises that Scotland can't reach its net zero targets without the Highlands. Whether that's wind energy, battery storage or hydrogen, most of it is going to happen in our region. And sorting the A9 is crucial for that – not only for the transport of supplies, but because of the barrier it's causing to business growth – including our ability to attract the staff we need to these essential new industries. Without completion of the A9 dualling there's a serious danger that the potential benefits of the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport won't be fully realised, and that Scotland will continue to miss its net zero targets.

Memorial to those who have lost their lives in road traffic accidents on the A9

Inverness Chamber of Commerce thinks this is a suggestion that should be taken forward if, and only if, there is support for it from the relatives of those who have lost their lives.

20th December 2023 announcement

Given the delays to date, the 20th December announcement with a commitment to full dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness by 2035 was welcome.

However, given the track record to date on delivering this project, it is being treated with scepticism by the business community. For each of the remaining 9 sections – which will now be tackled as 6 projects - we need clear dates for when design will be published, when procurement will start, when contracts will be awarded and when sections will be completed. We got some of that information, but we also need to know how we will be updated.

It was disappointing that the Cabinet Secretary sought to blame external factors, like inflation and complexity, for the lack of progress to date, when there has been plenty of expert evidence that the original deadline of 2025 was achievable.

During the debate the former Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, sought to reassure that the Scottish Government was good at delivering large scale infrastructure projects by listing projects that have been completed elsewhere in Scotland. This only strengthened the feeling within the Highland business

community that other parts of Scotland have had greater investment, and that the A9 project has never had sufficient focus.

Interim safety measures

Although further interim safety measures were mentioned, there was little detail given. The overwhelming community calls are for clear and regular signage to remind drivers whether they are on single or dual carriageway sections, and for better lighting at all junctions. It is not clear what work is planned or whether these community calls are going to be heeded. The community calls for regular speed limit signs have been rejected by Transport Scotland because they don't conform to their own technical standards. But the community of road users feel strongly that these would have a major impact.

What needs to be done - public and business accountability

To give full confidence to the business community that this new completion date for dualling the A9 will be adhered to, the Scottish Government needs to:

- Publish more milestones on the route to the 2035 completion
- Publish a timetable for regular updates
- Be clear about the further interim safety measures and listen to the community demands on these
- Engage in regular progress updates with the business community - including with construction and procurement experts who can verify progress.