

PE2132/B: Publish a timeline for the dualling of the A96 between Inverness and Nairn by Easter 2025

Cabinet Secretary for Transport written submission, 16 May 2025

Thank you for your letter dated 28 April 2025 regarding petition number PE2132: Publish a timeline for the dualling of the A96 between Inverness and Nairn by Easter 2025.

I would like to reassure the Committee that the Scottish Government is committed to improving the A96. The current favoured position is to fully dual the A96 and we are already starting the dualling process from Inverness to Nairn, including the Nairn Bypass.

Following the publication of Made Orders last year, which completed the statutory process for the scheme, my officials at Transport Scotland have been pressing ahead with the procedural steps to take forward the final stage of the process to acquire the land required to construct the scheme.

As I advised the committee during my appearance on 2 April 2025, the procedural steps to make this happen have now been completed, marking another key milestone for the project and a further strong sign of the Scottish Government's commitment to deliver this project. I can advise that the Scottish Ministers have taken title to the land which has been acquired through the General Vesting Declaration (GVD) process on 21 April.

We also continue to progress the work to determine the most suitable procurement option for delivering the schemes and thereafter a timetable for progress can then be set in line with available budgets.

The Government's preference would be to deliver the scheme using capital funding, but because of erosion to our capital budget, we need to look at all possible ways of delivering the road improvement. It is fundamental that contracting authorities allow sufficient time to properly consider the range of procurement routes available for any given project. This is important to ensure that the chosen procurement option generates sufficient competition to maximise value for money, delivers against the objectives of the intervention and complies with all statutory and regulatory requirements.

A market consultation was launched on 24 February 2025 to inform further decision-making for completion of A9 Dualling and also to seek industry views to inform development of the procurement approach for the A96 Dualling Inverness to Nairn (including Nairn Bypass) and A9/A96 Inshes to Smithton projects. The feedback received from this market consultation will be important for developing the approach to procuring and constructing the A96 Dualling Inverness to Nairn (including Nairn Bypass) scheme.

As part of this work, consideration will be given to the feasibility and attractiveness of combining with adjacent schemes to form larger contracts or splitting the scheme and delivering through smaller contracts, for example the Nairn Bypass.

It is expected that the work to determine the most suitable procurement option and develop the business case will closely align with the Mutual Investment Model (MIM) assessment work being undertaken on the A9 Dualling, with the decision on the use of MIM for the A96 Inverness to Nairn (including Nairn Bypass) being considered alongside or following the A9 decision, which is currently expected later in 2025. We will also include consideration of delivery options for the adjacent A9/A96 Inshes to Smithton scheme (part of the Inverness and Highland City Region Deal) as part of this work.

In regards to your reference to comments by the Auditor General on the use of MIM, whilst the Committee has not identified specific comments that it is referring to, I note from comments at the time of publication of the report “Privately financed infrastructure investment” that the Auditor General recognised that ‘The Scottish Government has accepted the costs of using these contracts to increase total infrastructure investment’ and called for the Scottish Government ‘to be clearer about the additional costs of investment associated with using privately financed contracts for specific projects’. The Government will, of course, set out the basis on which it makes decisions on the use of MIM contracts once those decisions are taken.

I hope this is of assistance.

Yours Sincerely,

FIONA HYSLOP
Cabinet Secretary for Transport