

# Inquiry into A9 Dualling Project – Chris Miller submission

## INTRODUCTION

I understand the Public Petitions Committee has upgraded this matter to become a Holyrood Committee Inquiry. However, the most important action is to accelerate the dualling programme.

Following completion of the 'Luncarty to Pass of Birnham section' in August 2021, no further construction work followed on. It seems it could be fully 6 years since that date before the next section (Tomatin to Moy) is opened in 2027. In the meantime, those using the A9 continue to have worries about their journeys.

## STRESS OF JOURNEYING ON THE A9

There have recently been a number of comments on the Petitioner's Facebook group about the stress involved in undertaking journeys on the A9. Worrying about the various difficult junctions, the potential accident risks or delays that might impact on A9 journeys is stressful. Perhaps electronic signage might help by displaying the anticipated journey times between key points plus details of roadworks or incidents.

When there is a stoppage, the roads on the alternative diversionary routes are often unsuitable for the density of traffic and size of vehicles using them. Recent press reports highlight the adverse impact on communities on the "back roads". The resultant delays hold up all users and create a poor environmental footprint for the A9. Will the alternative routes be reviewed?

The frustrations of speed differentials were well described by a representative of IAM RoadSmart in an article in the Press & Journal on 9 September 2023. Also, there seem to be more reports of vehicles travelling the wrong way on some of the dual carriageways.

The frustrations are well summed up in a typical comment on the Petitioner's Facebook group:- *"Some terrible driving on the whole A9. People driving at 45 mph. Then they hit the dual carriageway and put their foot hard down. Catch up other slow ones at the end of the dual section and they accelerate to stop you overtaking and slam brakes on to 45mph once it finishes. I'm sure they do it to annoy people."*

## **A9 SAFETY GROUP**

The A9 Safety Group seem to have a limited public visibility. The last available minutes on their website appear to be 4 years old, from 18 April 2019 published on 23 October 2019. Safety is one of the critical issues.

I have submitted comments onto the Group's '*contact us form*' on their website but have not received any acknowledgement or response.

Has the Group conducted an audit of the existing road (junctions, signage, speed limit identification, lay-bys, etc.)? The new electronic signage introduced along the A9 seems to have come in for criticism. Was there public consultation prior to its installation? Please can the profile of the A9 Safety Group be clarified, and could it include public representation?

Users of the A9 have their own opinions about how things might be improved (often posted onto the Facebook groups) but there doesn't appear to be any centralised system for submitting suggestions. Is it time for an open central public reporting mechanism outwith Transport Scotland to be set up?

## **TRANSPORT SCOTLAND**

When suggestions are put to Transport Scotland, such as installing 60/70mph signage to indicate the single and dual carriageway sections, technical objections are put forward.

These objections were recently reiterated by Transport Scotland in correspondence with the Inverness Courier, dated 24 August 2023. The letter indicates reliance must be placed on the Highway Code. However, it also acknowledges that Transport Scotland has made exceptions to this rule on other roads so 60/70mph signs could be utilised on the A9. This seems a simple, sensible, and cost-effective response by many road users to the current situation of a route "*not fit for purpose*" (see report of comments by Transport Secretary Màiri McAllan at the Inverness Courier A9 Crisis Summit). Can this be investigated? Perhaps some independent person could advise on this idea.

Transport Scotland have said they are aware of the confusion for vehicle navigation systems arising from the "trial" 50mph HGV roundel signage and said Bear are researching alternatives. However, we have not yet been told about the solution.

## **ROAD SAFETY SUMMARY**

I would have thought there was a requirement for Transport Scotland to organise a full safety audit of the existing situation. In particular, where does the legal responsibility for safety on the A9 road infrastructure rest in light of the Transport Secretary's description of the situation as "*not fit for purpose*"?

It looks as though it could be quite a long time before what is probably one of the more dangerous single carriageway sections at Birnham and Dunkeld will be dualled, so perhaps urgent interim improvements are needed there.

## **CONCLUSION**

Please forgive me if I have missed any of the numerous documents on the various websites that might have addressed some of my questions.

I am grateful to the Petitioner, Laura Hansler, for her determination and stamina in pushing forward her petition and to others campaigning for the A9 upgrade, and for the Committee's work on pursuing this. I look forward to learning the outcome, particularly about any proposed safety measures until such time as the dualling programme is completed. I do hope that the Committee will look at the roles of Transport Scotland and the A9 Safety Group and that these organisations will be encouraged to engage with the A9 road users and fully consult on all their proposals.

The petition is focussed solely on the A9 but there are also other Highland roads urgently requiring attention including much needed bypasses on the A96 for both Nairn and Elgin. Aberdeen to Inverness traffic should not have to drive through the middle of Elgin and Nairn in 2023. Perhaps a wider conclusion in your findings could be to press Transport Scotland to also consider "publishing" a strategy for all the Highland routes to bring them up to modern standards, as part of its engagement with the public.