

Keith Brown MSP submission of 4 December 2023

Inquiry into A9 Dualling Project

A9 Dualling

I write in response to the Committee's request for information regarding the advice I received on the progress of the A9 dualling project during my time as the Minister for Transport and Veterans, and subsequently, as Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities. The Committee also sought my reflections on the evidence that the Committee has heard to date.

My own recollections of the information date from nearly 6 years ago, when I left the Scottish Government, and go back as far as 12 years ago, when I was reappointed as Minister for Transport in 2011. I think it quite likely that it will not be possible to recall all the conversations, views discussions etc that may have taken place. In addition, as a backbench MSP I am no longer able to call upon the resources of the Scottish Government to collate and marshal the information requested, and neither can I call upon any advice regarding commercial or any other confidentiality requirements that may be applicable. Nevertheless, I will seek to do what I can, and have sought access, according to my entitlement as a former Scottish Minister, to view relevant Scottish Government documents.

Edinburgh Trams Project

It is worth noting that one of the earliest votes I participated in, in my time in the Parliament, was on the issue of the Edinburgh Trams project. The incoming SNP Government had announced its intention to cancel this project. This was opposed by all the Opposition parties who subsequently, through a vote in Parliament, obliged the Government to spend £500 million on the Tram project. It seems likely that this huge sum may otherwise have been available to make earlier and more substantial progress on dualling the A9, prior to the 2025 target date being announced around, 4 years later.

A9 Dualling

As someone raised in Edinburgh, but with Grandparents and extended family in the Highlands, I have used the A9 regularly, either as a car passenger or driver since the 1960s. I am familiar with the road and the need for it to be upgraded.

I became Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change in December 2010 during the major weather shock of that winter. I was reappointed to the Scottish Government in May 2011 as Minister for Housing, Transport and Veterans. During the following years I had responsibility for several major infrastructure projects, including, to varying extents, the A9. By 'varying extents' I mean that I was not the Minister responsible when working to Alex Neil, as the relevant Cabinet Secretary. Mr Neil, as related in his evidence to the Committee, was responsible for the early formulation and adoption of the project and for early progress in relation to financing and planning the project, and for its inclusion in the Government's Capital investment programme. I was copied in on much of the correspondence, albeit not as 'top copy', reflecting that responsibility for the project lay, primarily with Mr Neil. This changed when Nicola Sturgeon became the relevant Cabinet Secretary, whereupon she agreed, as is common practice, the 'division of responsibilities' within her portfolio, that meant I became lead Minister for the project. I remained lead Minister for the rest of my time as Transport Minister and subsequently as Cabinet Secretary until I left the Government in June 2018.

A9 as element of large Infrastructure programme.

It is important, in my view, to consider where the A9 2025 commitment sat within the wider, extensive, infrastructure programme of that time. I would suggest that the years from 2010 to 2018 saw the largest infrastructure programme in Scotland, particularly in transport infrastructure, in living memory.

Of these perhaps the largest was the Queensferry Crossing. I was involved and responsible for this project from early on in its development, having proposed the necessary legislation in Parliament. Subsequently I was the lead Minister for the Project and saw it through the entirety of its construction right through to its conclusion, when it was completed, at between £300 million to £400

million below budget. I think having a single Minister in charge throughout a project, which is of course difficult in the political environment, produces advantages in terms of focus and momentum. I oversaw the entirety of the Borders Railway project, the longest new railway line in the UK for over 100 years. I was involved in the bulk of the approval, planning and construction process for the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route, as well as overseeing the award of the biggest contract let by the Scottish Government, for Scotland's railway services, in 2015, and for the largest railway project in recent times; the Edinburgh-Glasgow Improvement Project. In addition to these projects this period saw the conclusion of the large scale M74 completion project and the M90 Project, latterly this included the project to complete the upgrading of the western section of the M8 which ensured it was built to full motorway standard between Edinburgh and Glasgow. Finally, this period also saw the introduction of RET (**Road Equivalent Tariff**) for many of our ferry services and the re-letting of the CHIFS (**Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services**) and Northern Isles ferry service contracts.

This huge range of large projects provides the context for the environment within which the A9 project (a project bigger than any of the projects mentioned above) was initiated. Indeed, it is worth recording that each of the 'stages' of the A9 upgrading, were said by Transport Scotland to represent a 'Major Project' in their own right, such is the scale of the overall programme.

I have had the opportunity, over a brief period, to review some of the papers relevant to my involvement in the A9 dualling project.

I was not involved in the Cabinet discussions which gave rise to the 2025 timescale, nor the projected costs, but was advised of these by the Cabinet Secretary to whom I reported at the time, Alex Neill.

My active involvement largely started when, after a reshuffle, Nicola Sturgeon took on Cabinet level responsibility for Capital projects, albeit she immediately delegated to me the responsibility for overseeing the Project. This was in 2012.

As the Committee has heard, the early years of the project were dominated by consultations, design works and planning works, including extensive ground investigation works. The planned schedule of projects has been laid out for the Committee and I will not repeat it here. However, I would say that in addition to ensuring that the

sequential process for each Project was initiated and progressed, it is also true that then, as now, more immediate improvements to the safety of the A9 between Perth and Inverness were being considered, and indeed demanded. In the face of a concerted public and political campaign of opposition to my plans, I consulted upon and introduced two new measures, which together sought to address these concerns, in advance of the dualling projects being completed. These were the introduction of Average Speed Cameras, for the single carriageway sections, and the introduction of a new, increased, speed limit for certain larger vehicles, from 40 mph to 50mph. The latter measure was designed to alleviate frustration and related risk taking by drivers experiencing long tailbacks behind, for example, HGVs that were previously restricted to 40mph.

The evidence now before the Committee includes an assessment of the effectiveness of the first 3 years of these measures following their implementation, as compared to the preceding 3 years, and shows annual average fatalities reduced by 40%, total casualties down by 27%, and the average number of collisions down by more than 23%. These improvements, which are significant but not sufficient, were achieved at a time when there was a 13% increase in annual average traffic volumes.

The first of the A9 major projects to be completed, which occurred during my time as Cabinet Secretary, was the Kincaig to Dalraddy section which was completed largely on time, with the exception of a final (and specialist) piece of the central reservation which delayed by some weeks the final opening. The project started construction in September 2015 and completed in 2017. It has been a significant boost to safety and journey times. In 2016 briefings received from officials confirmed once again that the “A9 Dualling programme is progressing well and remains on target for the expected completion date of 2025”. At that time there were over 800 people working on the programme including engineers and many specialist apprentices.

Around this time (I think 2016) the Public Local Inquiry for the Luncarty - Pass of Birnam section concluded and allowed the making of the Road Orders for that scheme to proceed. Again, around that time, “preferred routes had been identified for the sections between Killiecrankie and Glen Garry, and ... for Dalwhinnie to Crubenmore, and these have been

displayed to the public". In addition a preferred route for the Tomatin to Moy section had also been identified.

My recollection is that this period, for me, involved many events along the length of the route to highlight public consultations/exhibitions, groundwork investigations, school visits highlighting future employment opportunities for local communities and the start, progress and completion of construction works. I recall there appeared to be real momentum being built towards the 2025 target date. Undoubtedly, the austerity programme of the UK and the associated tightening of finances, especially capital finance, was proving very challenging for the Scottish Government, but I do not recall, at any time being encouraged to slow or pause progress towards the 2025 date for this or any other reason. Indeed, design work was underway at that point on all 11 road schemes and Transport Scotland were able to advise Ministers that they were "confident we will meet ... the 2025 target date" (23/6/2016). It was also confirmed that through an effective procurement process the contract for the completion of Kincaig to Dalraddy had come in at £35 million, a saving of £15 million on the original projection. At this time 3 major design projects (each worth between £40 and £60 million) were awarded. My recollection is that this was also about the period we had invited tenders for Luncarty to Pass of Birnam.

In terms of context for what may have happened subsequently, it was during this period that I was able to jointly announce with the relevant UK Minister that there would be a three hour rail journey time between Scotland and London as a result of the UK Government's cast iron commitment to HS2!

In general terms, I would want to make it clear that, during the period of my responsibility for the A9 Dualling project, I regularly sought assurances from Transport Scotland that the 2025 target remained achievable and that the required progress was being made to ensure the target date was met. In late June 2018, shortly after I left the Government, Transport Scotland's advice to Ministers was that the project remained on track for completion by 2025.

There is no question that physical infrastructure projects can often prove very difficult, for many reasons, for Government's to bring in on time and on budget. The Committee will be familiar with the issues surrounding the completion of the two ferries commissioned by the Scottish Government through Ferguson Marine, or the Edinburgh Trams

project. At UK level the massively expensive, delayed and now truncated HS2 project, the hugely over budget and delayed Aircraft Carriers, the 40 'new' hospitals, or the replacement communication system for our Emergency Services, are illustrative examples. Changing financial circumstances (UK economic crash in 2008, Brexit, the Covid pandemic), changing market conditions and even changes in Ministerial personnel can change the expected path of these projects.

I hope these observations and recollections are helpful to the Committee. Any errors or omissions are my responsibility and not civil servants or Transport Scotland officials. If it is helpful to the Committee, I am more than willing to appear before the Committee to elaborate or explain further my recollections.