

4a Fraserburgh and Peterhead to Aberdeen Strategic Transport Study

o Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update regarding progress with the Fraserburgh and Peterhead to Aberdeen Strategic Transport Study and to make recommendations regarding the next stages for the study.

o Background

Members will be aware that an appraisal has been undertaken to look into strategic transport options for improvements on the corridor between Fraserburgh and Peterhead to Aberdeen.

As previously reported to Board, a consortium of consultants (SIAS, Peter Brett Associates and Energised Environments) has conducted a Part 1 Appraisal, following Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidelines (STAG). This has included public and stakeholder consultations, and focused on identifying issues and problems, agreeing objectives and an initial high level appraisal of how seven strategic options best address the problems and achieve the objectives. These included three road options, two bus-based options and two rail options.

At its meeting on 3 August, the Nestrans Board considered a report outlining the consultants' findings and updated the Board on discussions with local authorities and other partners into the summary of key findings.

o Further Discussions

Bus Operators

Officers have met with the Managing Director of Stagecoach Buses in North Scotland who currently operate the commercial bus services on this corridor, about the principle of potential services and what influences could improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public transport operations on the corridor and the potential impact of other interventions.

It was recognised that road enhancements could offer improved journey times and reliability, and bus priorities would further support bus services. Limitations of the current road system, particularly the junction at Toll of Birness were identified by the operator as a key concern.

It was also indicated that a major capital investment in a new rail option would detract from the bus market and could be detrimental to ongoing commerciality of bus services. In particular, it was suggested that a new rail option from Ellon to Dyce would negate any opportunities for bus services between the Buchan corridor and Ellon direct to Dyce or the airport. It was also suggested that rail often requires continued subsidy, whereas bus services can be provided commercially with no public funding support.

Rail Operator

Discussions have been held with Abellio ScotRail in relation to Options 6 and 7, the consideration of new or reopened railway lines.

These discussions indicated that Abellio believe that much more detailed work is required to understand the actual construction and operating costs to provide a service which people would use in sufficient numbers for it to be viable. This is not necessarily unusual at the level of detail associated with STAG 1.

Although the STAG 1 appraisal is fundamentally subjective, some initial estimates of costs and possible projected patronage have been included to support the assessment. In general terms, and subject to more detailed scrutiny, ScotRail felt that the capital and operating costs contained in the consultants' pre-appraisal report are underestimated and that revenue, at least at the high end of range, is overstated.

Questions were raised by ScotRail on whether the projected patronage and potential revenue estimates are realistic (between 150,000 and 500,000 passengers per year, providing revenue in the region of £1.6-£4.4million per year). At the higher end of these estimates, these projected demand levels are dependent on customers from Peterhead and Fraserburgh railheading at Ellon, but more work would be required to support such an assumption.

Transport Scotland

Transport Scotland have been involved in this project as members of the client group from the start and are co-funding have provided a financial contribution towards the assessment, which is being undertaken in compliance with Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG). Since Transport Scotland are the responsible authority for trunk roads and for rail, their input and support is obviously vital to the project and any appraisal should be carried out to their satisfaction.

The STAG 1 appraisal will need to demonstrate the Business Case against agreed transport planning objectives in order to justify taking dual carriageway or railway proposals to a more detailed level of assessment. Transport Scotland have suggested that the evidence presented on problems and opportunities does not support the objectives and does not justify taking forward the detailed study of major road and rail interventions at this stage.

Scottish Ministers' priorities for investment are set out in the Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR), which was published in 2008 and the Infrastructure Investment Plan (IIP) published in 2011. The STPR recognises the need to optimise road network improvements and includes A90 Aberdeen-North East Scotland as one of eight corridors for active route management and targeted individual investments, but has not committed to major upgrade. The IIP committed to major infrastructure projects such as dualling the A9 and A96, but does not make specific reference to the A90 Buchan corridor.

There is therefore no commitment presently in existing policy documents to support major upgrades of transport infrastructure in the study area, meaning there is no existing funding stream and minimal prospects of funding being secured in the short-term for a project which is not aligned to such strategic documents.

Transport Scotland suggest that further consideration of the corridor north of Aberdeen should be in the context of the City Region Deal appraisal with a fully updated ASAM model post-AWPR opening. This has been suggested to better explore the rationale for interventions on the corridor and more suitably complete the evidence base and renew the objectives.

o Next steps

SIAS, PBA and Energised Environments have submitted their STAG 1 appraisal report and this has been reported to Nestrans Board and constituent local authorities. Further discussions have since been held with Transport Scotland, bus operators and Abellio ScotRail to gauge their initial reactions to the report and to ascertain the next steps in developing this project.

It is clear that stakeholders, including businesses, community groups, local authorities and politicians have differing views on priorities and there is considerable variance in these views, which has been reflected in the consultants' report and the level of interest in the subject. Recognising this breadth of opinion, and the fact that a full appraisal is a huge commitment, it is felt necessary to properly align all of the detail required before proceeding to a STAG 2 appraisal.

It is suggested that further work be undertaken on some key aspects in order to address the concerns and issues of the principal stakeholders. The focus of this work would be to widen and deepen the evidence base which supports the rationale for intervention, but also to provide definition on the actual package of measures that would subject to future detailed appraisal.

1. Additional consideration of the strategic business case for major investment.

This would include further assessment of the identified problems to demonstrate their significance in the context of the national network. On the road network, the standout issues that were identified principally stem from the operational performance of the A90 north of Ellon, including delays and driver frustration caused by lorries travelling at 40mph; issues related to road safety, particularly in and around Toll of Birness; and accessibility to and from Aberdeen City centre and other employment nodes. Knock-on consequences relate to economic and development impacts, and public transport impacts. There is also the potential to further assess "strategic growth" issues on the corridor (at Ellon and north of Ellon), although this may be better delayed until a revised ASAM model is available in early Spring 2017 and the planned Cumulative Transport Assessment undertaken.

It is proposed that additional work be undertaken at this time to consider:

- a) The perception versus reality of delays, platooning and impact on journey times across the day, probably in the form of surveys and analysis, focussing north of Ellon to Peterhead and Fraserburgh;
- b) Analysis of available data from the Real-time bus system;
- c) Consideration of corridor issues against the Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR) objectives and Transport Scotland's own policies, particularly in the light of an anticipated review of National Transport Strategy and refresh of STPR commencing in the coming months;
- d) Consideration of the corridor against other roads in Scotland in terms of casualty rates per mile, average journey times, reliability of journey times, etc.

2. Further consideration of the Feasibility and Demand considerations in terms of the rail options, focussing on Ellon-Dyce option.

In particular, this should provide a clear steer on which of the options or elements are considered to be "non-starters" and should be ruled out at this stage from further consideration as being unlikely to meet the study objectives within the timescale of the Regional Transport Strategy (to 2035);

It is suggested that some limited, further analysis be undertaken to refine feasibility, costs and demand for any rail solution, between Aberdeen/Dyce/Ellon. This would entail outline

feasibility study, building on the views of rail advisors, the existing STAG 1 work, and some elements of the Kintore Station business case work to define with more confidence feasibility issues (and their significance), uncertainties, operational and capital cost estimates, and further refinement of rail demand. This would be done at a level such that any future STAG 2 appraisal could be undertaken to an appropriate level of confidence. It would likely be a consultant study, requiring a blend of rail engineering, rail operations, and elements of rail demand forecasting. As above, it may be prudent to seek a comparison from other rail schemes including Borders rail and to ascertain comparative business cases and projected/out-turn data from now opened schemes. This commission should also address the question of alternative options, such as guided bus and the relative costs/benefits of heavy rail, light rail or guided bus.

3. Development of a package of measures to indicate what is considered to be a worthwhile option for a Road Package.

This would involve a commission to further develop what the possible road improvements might actually consist of – for example, it may include dualling between Ellon and Toll of Birness, a new grade-separated junction at Toll of Birness, junction enhancement at Cortes, and elements of an incremental upgrade, suggesting further junction improvements, climbing lanes, overtaking lanes that are feasible and worthwhile. This would be a high level exercise to provide a better understanding and definition of the possible elements worthy of STAG 2 assessment in future years, which might provide a priority list of which elements can be delivered in short/medium and longer time scales. Indicative costs should also be provided, but without detailed refinement or economic analysis at this stage, which would be elements of a future STAG 2 detailed appraisal.

It is suggested that these three pieces of work should be carried out by specialist consultants, with an estimated financial requirement in the region of £80,000 in total. This sum can be accommodated in the approved Nestrans budget for the project within the financial year 2016/17.

o Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board:

1. Notes the contents of this report and the key stakeholder input on the Options and Packages considered;
2. Agrees to instruct the further pieces of work outlined above and the elements suggested;
3. Authorises officers to commission appropriate consultants to undertake the work, through the Scotland Excel framework; and
4. Report back to Nestrans Board with the outcomes of these studies.

RD 22 September 2016