



A96 Dualling Programme Strategic Environmental Assessment

**Tier 2 Environmental Report
Non-Technical Summary**

May 2015



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Document: TSEA96/NTS/02

Transport Scotland

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A96 Dualling Programme: Strategic Environmental Assessment

Document History

A96 Dualling Programme

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

Tier 2 Environmental Report

Non-Technical Summary

Transport Scotland

This document has been issued and amended as follows:

Version	Date	Description	Created by	Verified by	Approved by
1.0	April 2015	Draft report for client comment	HC/AC/ GG	HC	JF
1.1	April 2015	Revised following client feedback	HC/AC/ GG	HC	JF
1.2	May 2015	Issue version	HC/AC/ GG	HC	JF

Limitations

Halcrow Group Ltd, now known as CH2M HILL has been instructed to provide a Strategic Environmental Assessment of the A96 Dualling Programme on behalf of Transport Scotland.

The assessment is based on the information that has been made available at the time of publication and this Environmental Report is presented as a consultation document. Any subsequent additional information arising during the public consultation period may require revision or refinement of the conclusions.

It should be noted that:

- The findings within this report represent the professional opinion of experienced environmental scientists, sustainability consultants and other specialists. CH2M HILL does not provide legal advice and the advice of lawyers may also be required.
- All work carried out in preparing this report has utilised and is based upon CH2M HILL's professional knowledge and understanding of current relevant European Union, UK and Scottish standards and codes, technology and legislation. Changes in this legislation and guidance may occur at any time in the future and may cause any conclusions to become inappropriate or incorrect. CH2M HILL does not accept responsibility for advising of the facts or implications of any such changes.
- This report has been prepared using factual information contained in maps, documents and data prepared by others. No responsibility can be accepted by CH2M HILL for the accuracy of such information. All maps, illustrations and other sources of data are credited where appropriate.
- Every endeavour has been made to identify data sources, where appropriate. Additional data sources are listed in the baseline for reference.
- This report represents the independent views and recommendations of the consultants conducting the analysis, and may not necessarily reflect the opinions held by Transport Scotland.

A96 Dualling Programme: Strategic Environmental Assessment

A96 Dualling Programme SEA – Key Facts

Responsible authority	Transport Scotland – MTRIPS Directorate.
PPS title	A96 Dualling Programme.
What prompted the PPS	Strategic review of the Inverness to Aberdeen transport corridor following a refocus of national policy and changes to planned development on and adjacent to the corridor in recent years. A Strategic Business Case (SBC) identified the dualling of the A96 provided the best infrastructure intervention.
PPS subject	Transport infrastructure.
Period covered by PPS	Delivery programme to target completion by 2030.
Frequency of updates	Live programme – ongoing review.
Area covered by PPS	The Inverness to Aberdeen transport corridor.
Purpose and/ or objectives of PPS	<p>The Programme objectives for dualling the A96 between Inverness and Aberdeen are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To improve the operation of the A96 and inter-urban connectivity between the cities of Inverness and Aberdeen and their city regions through:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– reduced journey times;– improved journey time reliability; and– reduced conflicts between local and strategic journeys.• To improve safety for motorised and Non-Motorised Users through:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– reduced accident rates and severity; and– reduced driver stress.• To provide opportunities to grow the regional economies on the corridor through:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– improved access to the wider strategic transport network; and– enhanced access to jobs and services.• To facilitate active travel in the corridor.• To facilitate integration with public transport facilities.• To reduce the environmental effect on the communities in the corridor.
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A96 Dualling Programme: Tier 2 SEA Environmental Report – Non Technical Summary (NTS)

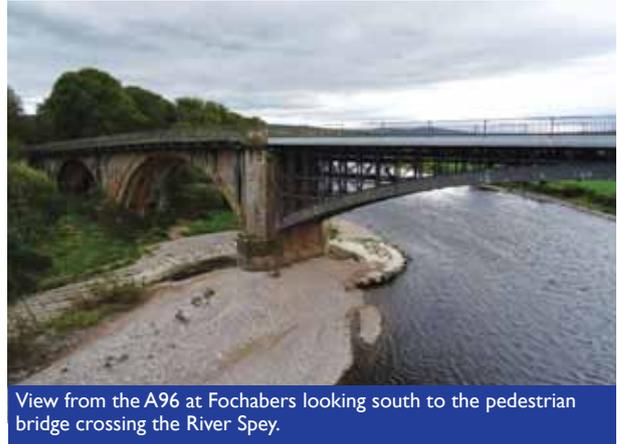
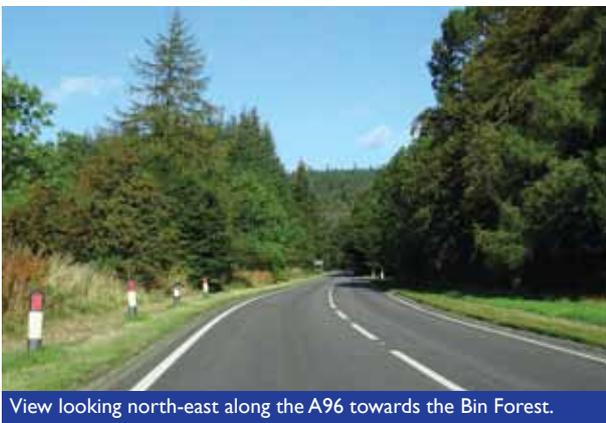
I. Introduction

In 2008, the Scottish Government published the 'Strategic Transport Projects Review' (STPR) which set out transport investment priorities over the period to 2032. The review contained a number of options for the Inverness to Aberdeen transport corridor, including preliminary analysis of an option for full dualling of the A96 between Inverness and Aberdeen. This option was not taken forward as alternative interventions were considered sufficient to address the corridor objectives at that time.

In 2011, two key documents were published by the Scottish Government signifying a change in policy: 'Scotland's Cities: Delivering for Scotland' (the Agenda for Cities) and the 'Infrastructure Investment Plan' (IIP).

The Agenda for Cities sets out the vital contribution that Scotland's major population centres can make in delivering the Government's Economic Strategy and identifies the aim to connect our cities with strong, reliable and resilient transport infrastructure.

The IIP outlined plans for infrastructure investment over the coming decades and includes a commitment to complete the dual carriageway network between Scotland's cities by 2030, including full dualling of the A96 between Inverness and Aberdeen.



In 2014, Transport Scotland undertook a strategic appraisal of the Inverness to Aberdeen transport corridor to build upon the evidence base of the STPR and seek opportunities to address the growing economic and transport demands along the corridor.

The appraisal informed the A96 Dualling Inverness to Aberdeen Strategic Business Case (SBC), which concluded that dualling the A96 provided the best infrastructure intervention option for the corridor.

A Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the A96 Dualling Programme proposals has been undertaken in compliance with the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005.

The purpose of SEA is to ensure that potential environmental effects are considered from the earliest stages of A96 Dualling Programme development.

Purpose of this NTS

This document provides a non-technical summary of the 'A96 Dualling Programme Tier 2 SEA Environmental Report'.

The NTS will also be used to support 2015 public exhibitions, as outlined in Section 6.

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2. The SEA Approach

The A96 Dualling Programme SEA has adopted a two-tier approach (see Figure 1) to ensure that effective environmental assessment has been integrated throughout programme development.

Tier 1 SEA informed the work associated with the A96 Dualling Inverness to Aberdeen SBC where a number of 'Strategic Intervention Options' were appraised. This ensured that potential environmental effects were robustly examined alongside economy, accessibility and social inclusion, safety, and integration topics.

The SBC concluded that, overall, full dualling between Inverness and Aberdeen was the best way to meet the future needs of those living, working and travelling along the A96 transport corridor in the 21st century.

The Tier 1 SEA Environmental Report was published for consultation on 25 September 2014 and the consultation period closed on 6 November 2014.

The SBC and Tier 1 SEA reports can be downloaded from Transport Scotland's website at:

www.transportscotland.gov.uk/a96dualling

Tier 2 SEA considers a range of broadly defined 'Improvement Strategy Options' for the A96, which have been developed via a separate Preliminary Engineering Services (PES) workstream, to consider alternative means of providing dual carriageway connectivity between Inverness and Aberdeen.



Figure 1 Overview of tiered approach to SEA.

The SEA considers the potential effects of infrastructure options within the Inverness to Aberdeen transport corridor on a series of environmental constraints categorised against the following SEA topic headings:

- Biodiversity;
- Soils and Geodiversity;
- Water and Flooding;
- Air;
- Population and Human Health;
- Historic Environment; and
- Landscape.

In order to effectively identify, collate and assess key environmental issues and constraints along the route, the SEA has adopted a GIS (Geographical Information Systems) mapping approach.

This has focused on designations and constraints for a 15km-wide study area between Inverness and Aberdeen, broadly following the route of the existing A96 trunk road and the rail line between the cities.

Using environmental data, and a review of the relationship between the A96 Dualling Programme with other relevant plans and programmes, a series of assessment criteria were developed to guide the SEA team on identifying the potential for significant effects, or possible benefits, of options. The criteria were reviewed throughout the assessment process as new datasets became available.

It should be noted that the SEA has focused the assessment on the section of the A96 from east of Auldearn (east of Nairn) to Aberdeen. This is following the announcement of a preferred option for dualling the Inverness to Nairn (including Nairn Bypass) section of the A96 in October 2014.

3. Character of the Inverness to Aberdeen Corridor

The Inverness to Aberdeen transport corridor passes through the Highland, Moray, Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire local authority areas (see Figure 2).

The A96 trunk road provides strategic connectivity between smaller rural settlement areas and Inverness, Nairn, Forres, Elgin, Fochabers, Keith, Huntly, Inverurie and Aberdeen.

Key A96 characteristics include:

- western and eastern limits have been upgraded to dual carriageway standard, with the remainder generally rural single carriageway with some overtaking lanes;
- limited overtaking opportunities – vehicle speeds are regularly constrained by HGVs, which are restricted to a maximum of 40mph;
- higher than average fatal accident rates and accident clusters in some sections;
- congestion approaching and through urban areas and communities, with regular delays at pinch points such as Nairn, Elgin and Inveramsay Bridge north of Inverurie;
- the majority of existing accesses and junctions are at-grade;
- predominantly rural surroundings, with extensive areas of agricultural land;
- a range of sensitive designated natural heritage areas and cultural heritage features including battlefields, scheduled monuments and listed buildings; and
- areas subject to flooding risks, both from surface watercourses and coastal flooding.

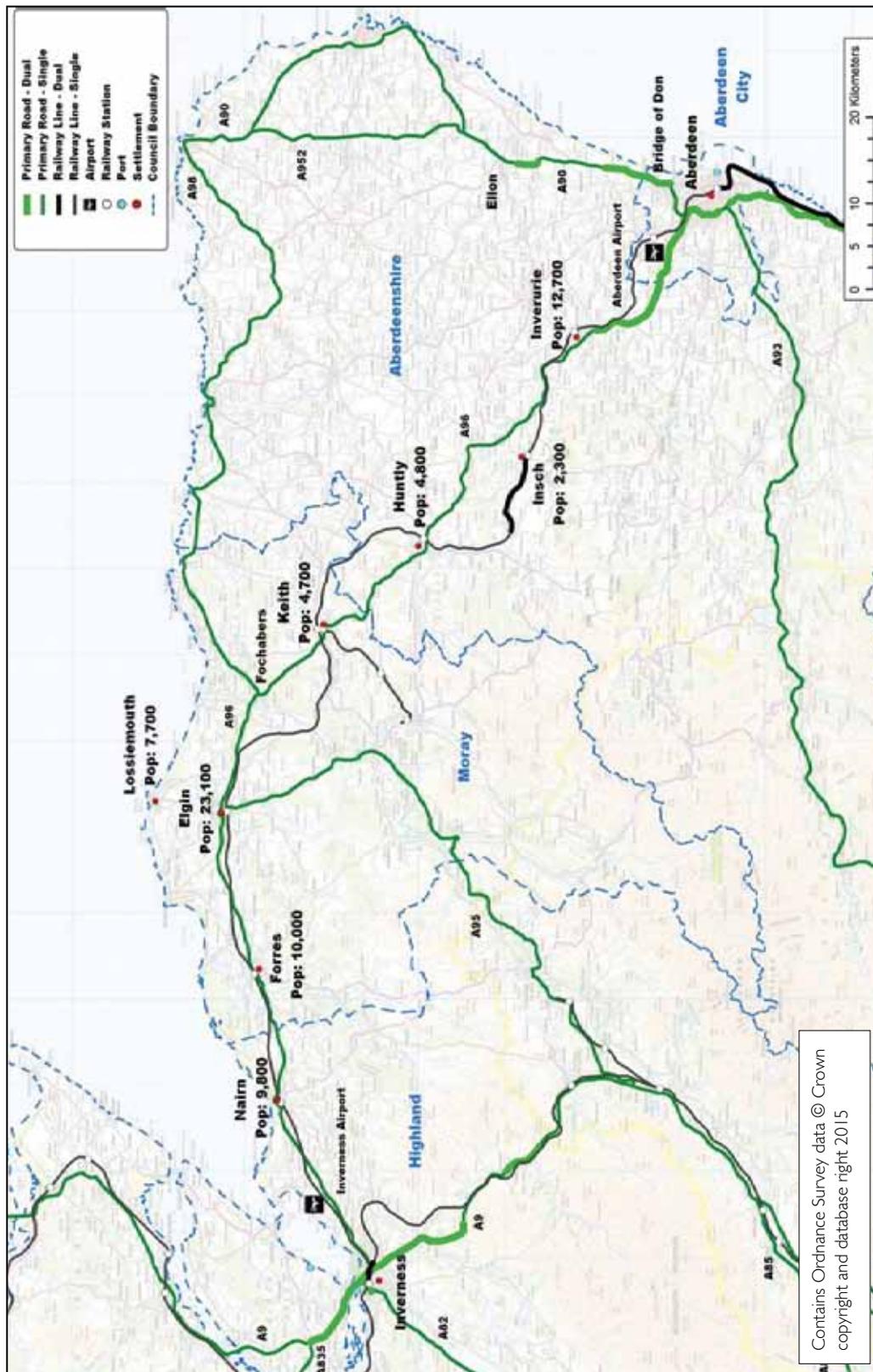
An extensive environmental data collation process informed an environmental 'profile', or baseline, of the 15km-wide study area.

Table I provides a high-level summary of this baseline, described under each SEA topic.

Table I Baseline Summary

Biodiversity, Flora and Fauna
There are a number of designations including four Ramsar sites, six Special Protection Areas (SPAs), seven Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and 32 biological Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). Scottish Ancient Woodland Inventory and Native Woodland Survey of Scotland sites are found throughout the study area, with significant concentrations (primarily of plantation woodland) around Forres and the River Spey.
Soils and Geodiversity
There are 62 geological and 14 mixed (i.e. biological and geological) SSSIs scattered throughout the study area. A wide range of soils, from Class 2 and 3 land capable of producing a wide or moderate range of crops, to poorer quality Class 6 and 7 land of little use for cultivation. Some peat deposits are found within the study area, with concentrations around Keith and the River Spey.
Water and Flooding
Main rivers include the Nairn, Spey, Findhorn, Lossie, and the Don, which cross the study area in various areas. Water quality is mixed across the rivers. The Moray Firth estuary is located to the far west of the study area. Water quality identified as 'high'. There are numerous areas identified as prone to flooding on SEPA's 200 year coastal, surface water, and fluvial flood extent maps, particularly around areas such as Forres and Elgin.
Air
One Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) located along Anderson Drive in Aberdeen. No AQMAs have been declared in Aberdeenshire, Moray or Highland Council regions.
Population and Human Health
Main population centres at Aberdeen and Inverness, with smaller population centres at various points along the study area including Nairn, Forres, Elgin, Keith, Huntly and Inverurie. The percentage of residents in Aberdeen and Inverness in very good, good, or fair health was recorded in the 2011 Census as 96.01% and 95.71% respectively. These figures are above the national average of 94.39%.
Historic Environment
Numerous cultural heritage designated sites, including: 288 Scheduled Monuments, 3096 Listed Buildings, 22 Gardens and Designed Landscapes, 27 Conservation Areas, and four Inventory Battlefields.
Landscape and Visual
There are no National Parks and no National Scenic Areas within the study area. There are 12 distinct Scottish National Heritage (SNH) Landscape Character Types (Landscape Character Assessment Level 3) within the SEA study area.

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Figure 2 Overview of the Inverness to Aberdeen Corridor.

4. Tier 2 SEA Approach

Tier 2 SEA has been aligned with Stage 1 of a multi-stage Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB) design and assessment process which will progress options refinement and analysis for the A96 Dualling Programme.

The development of broadly defined improvement strategy options by the Preliminary Engineering Services (PES) workstream, initially generated a long list of options (Options A to Q) to consider alternative means of providing dual carriageway connectivity between Inverness and Aberdeen.

It was not the objective of the SEA assessment to identify a clear option 'preference' in overall environmental terms. The SEA instead provides an increased understanding of environmental and land use constraints for each remaining option, identifying any potential for significant effects.

The outputs of this SEA will be used to ensure that the identified environmental constraints are addressed at each future design stage and inform the development of route alignment options.

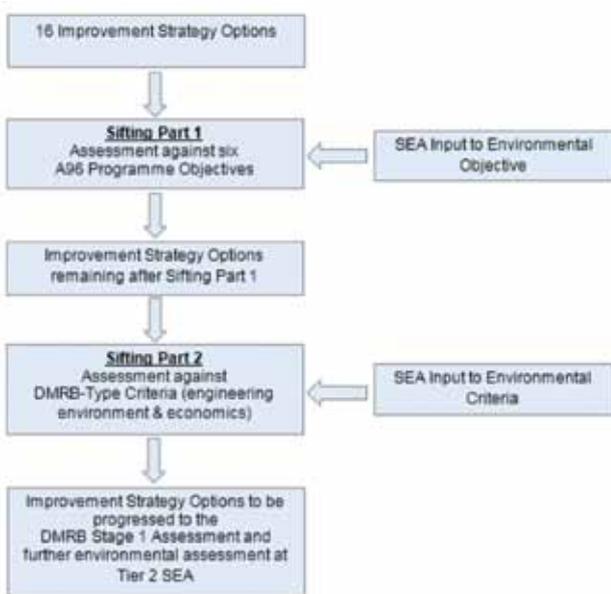


Figure 3 Improvement Strategy Sifting Process.

Sifting of Improvement Strategy Options

A set of programme objectives were developed for the A96 Dualling Programme, building on those developed for the SBC, and used as the basis for testing and sifting the improvement strategy options:

1. To improve the operation of the A96 and inter-urban connectivity between the cities of Inverness and Aberdeen and their city regions through:
 - reduced journey times;
 - improved journey time reliability; and
 - reduced conflicts between local and strategic journeys.
2. To improve safety for motorised and Non-Motorised Users through:
 - reduced accident rates and severity; and
 - reduced driver stress.
3. To provide opportunities to grow the regional economies on the corridor through:
 - improved access to the wider strategic transport network; and
 - enhanced access to jobs and services.
4. To facilitate active travel in the corridor;
5. To facilitate integration with public transport facilities.
6. To reduce the environmental effect on the communities in the corridor.

The Tier 2 SEA was integrated with the PES improvement strategy options sifting process (see Figure 3) and used an environmental constraints-led approach to assessing each of the improvement strategy options, in parallel with the objectives-led sifting approach.

The first stage of the PES sifting process (Part 1) was focused on the appraisal of the long list improvement strategy options through determining their performance against the set of programme objectives.

Sifting Part 2 comprised an assessment of the six improvement strategy options remaining after Part 1 to identify any which were significantly less advantageous than others and could be removed from further consideration.

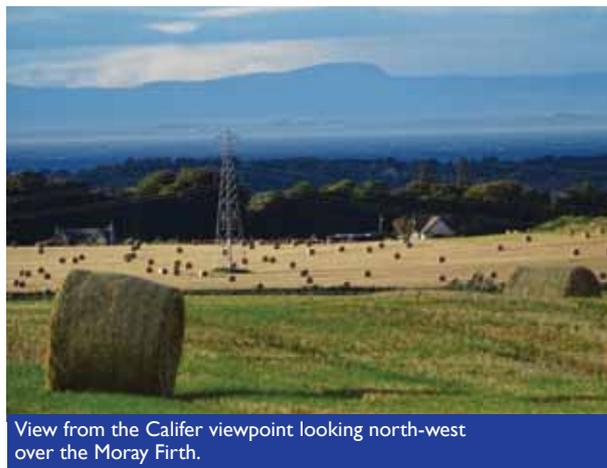
The combination of the PES programme objectives-based sifting and the SEA constraints-based assessment is considered to provide a robust, integrated approach to the selection of

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improvement strategy options for the next stage of A96 Dualling development.

For environmental assessment purposes, a buffer area was drawn on plans around each broadly defined improvement strategy option as a means of providing an indication of where the dualled A96 trunk road could be constructed.

The key issues, risks and benefits of each option were summarised and a recommendation was given on which broadly defined improvement strategy option should be taken forward for further detailed environmental assessment.



View from the Califer viewpoint looking north-west over the Moray Firth.

5. Tier 2 SEA Findings

Following completion of the Part 2 sifting process, it was determined that the following improvement strategy options should be taken forward for further detailed assessment:

Table 3 A96 Dualling Strategy Options

Option and Description	
B	Option broadly following the existing A96 corridor; with the exception of offline bypasses of settlements along the existing A96.
C	Alternative offline option between Huntly and Kintore, broadly parallel to the west of the existing A96.
D	Offline option between Kirkton of Culsalmond and Pitcaple, broadly parallel to the east of the existing A96.
N	Offline option between Forres and Fochabers, broadly parallel to the south of the existing A96.

Detailed Environmental Assessment

The environmental designations and constraints within the remaining improvement strategy option study areas (see Figure 4) were then appraised in detail and the potential effects of development of a dualled trunk road within each area was assessed against each of the topics identified for the SEA.

The assessment was also informed by the following supporting studies:

- Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA);
- Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) Screening; and
- Landscape Review.

The detailed findings of this work are presented in the SEA Environmental Report and its appendices and plans. A summary is presented in the topic based tables later in this Non-Technical Summary.

Comparative Options Assessment

A comparative assessment was undertaken between those options which provided local alternatives to one another:

For example, Option N was compared against the corresponding parts of Option B to provide an indication of the respective levels of constraint and potential for significant environmental effects. The findings of the assessment of each option can be viewed in section 6 of the Environmental Report.

The purpose of the appraisal was not to eliminate options from further consideration at this stage; rather, it is intended to help identify key issues, risks and recommendations to inform the development of alternative route alignment options at the next stage of the A96 Dualling design and assessment.

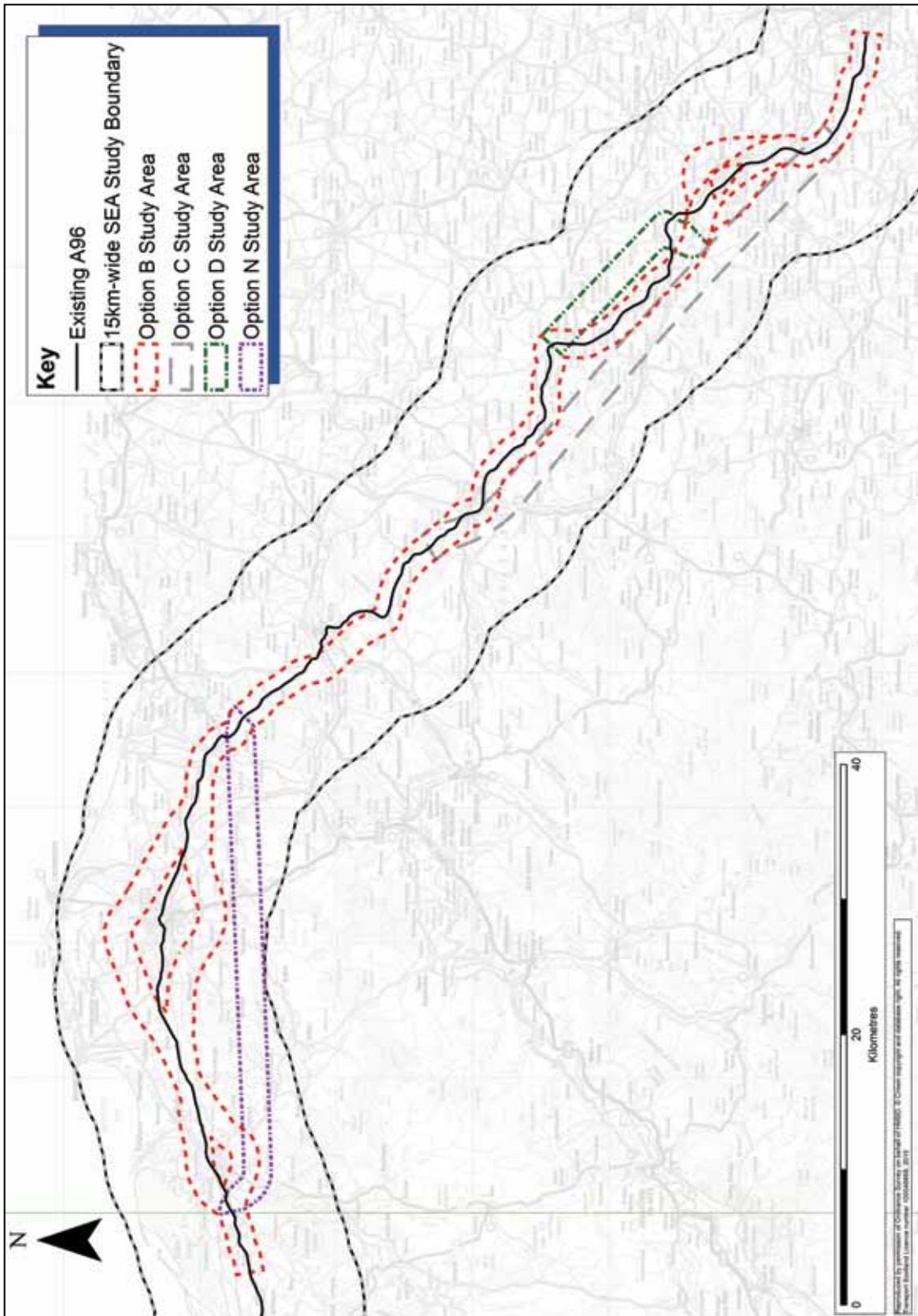


Figure 4 Overview of 2km-wide study areas applied to Improvement Strategy Options for detailed assessment.

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Cumulative Effects

The SEA considered the potential for cumulative effects between A96 Dualling and other proposals, including ports and harbours serving the offshore industry, development proposals around key towns, new enterprise areas and other major transport proposals.

The assessment identified some potential for cumulative environmental effects between A96 Dualling and local authority development allocations (e.g. new housing areas), particularly at the northern end of Option B around Elgin and Inverurie.

Potential for cumulative effects was predicted for biodiversity and historic environment receptors, primarily as urban development might act to further constrain the area available for dualling, which could make avoidance of some designated sites more difficult.

Conversely, A96 Dualling is likely to make some development allocations more attractive/viable, as well as provide improved transport links for other regional/coastal developments.

Later stages of DMRB design and assessment will continue to consider the potential for cumulative and in-combination effects at a more local level.



View of the River Spey looking north from the road bridge at Fochabers.

Mitigation and Monitoring

A range of strategic mitigation measures to help avoid, reduce or offset potentially significant environmental effects has been developed through the assessment process.

These measures have been identified at a strategic level consistent with the SEA, which deals with broad improvement strategy options rather than specific road dualling alignments.

They will be developed and assessed in more detail in the future stages of the A96 Dualling Programme.

A SEA monitoring framework will be developed at the Post Adoption Stage, which will be used by Transport Scotland through later stages of the A96 Dualling Programme, to ensure that the findings of the SEA are effectively cascaded to the later stages of DMRB design and environmental assessment.

This next section of the Non-Technical Summary presents the key findings of the assessment through a series of tables based on the environmental topics used in the SEA. It presents the key constraints identified, proposed mitigation and a summary of the comparative assessment undertaken. The detailed findings of the assessment are presented in Section 6 of the Environmental Report and corresponding appendices.

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Biodiversity, Flora and Fauna

Subjects considered: internationally designated sites: Ramsar sites, Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), National Nature Reserves, Local Nature Reserves, Ancient Woodland and Native Woodland, and locally designated Sites of Interest to Natural Science (SINS), Local Nature Conservation Sites (LNCS) and Study of Environmentally Sensitive Areas (SESA).

Key Findings: Biodiversity, Flora and Fauna	
Key Local Issues	Strategic Mitigation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nationally and internationally designated nature conservation sites are located within the corridor, primarily in the north of the A96 corridor. The River Spey SAC (and Biological SSSI) is a key constraint, crossing the corridor between Mosstodloch and Fochabers, and which would require an appropriate crossing, irrespective of the option taken forward. The Damaway and Lethen Forest SPA, and Lower Findhorn Woods SAC encroach into Options B (south of Forres) and N. The Moray and Nairn Coast SPA/ Ramsar site encroach into Option B (north of Forres), while the Loch Spynie SPA and Ramsar site encroaches into Option B (north of Elgin). It is considered that land-take from these designated sites could be avoided within the alignment options. There are a number of biological, geological, and mixed SSSIs scattered throughout the corridor. Locally designated nature conservation sites (comprising SINS in Moray, LNCS and SESA in Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City) are scattered throughout the options. Many of these sites overlap with nationally and internationally designated sites, and a number cross the breadth of option study boundaries, and may therefore be unavoidable, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Findhorn Valley SINS – Option N (west and south of Forres); Spynie SINS – Option B (north of Elgin); Spey, Garmouh – Boat O’ Brig SINS – Options B and N; Hill of Foudland SESA – Options C, D, and B; and Foudland LNCS – Options B and D. Woodland is a key constraint, with native and ancient woodlands crossing the options at multiple points, therefore some land-take may be unavoidable. For example, there is a large area of ancient woodland south-east of Fochabers, which is likely to prove unavoidable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoidance of designated sites and other important areas for nature conservation wherever possible. Watercourse crossing designs to avoid/ or minimise land-take affecting river banks and valleys in particular for crossing of the River Spey (a designated SAC). Road alignment to minimise habitat fragmentation where habitat loss is unavoidable. Road design to incorporate appropriate species crossing infrastructure to minimise habitat fragmentation and severance . Key mitigation measures could include habitat restoration and creation of new areas of native woodland. Further screening of the potential for options to affect SACs and SPAs (Natura sites) would be required at subsequent stages of design and agreed with Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH).
How the Options Compare	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The area surrounding Forres contains a number of internationally designated sites, however an alignment within any options within this section (Options B north and south of Forres, and Option N) should be able to avoid these sites. Option B south of Elgin is less constrained in terms of nationally/internationally designated sites than Option B north. Option B to the south of Forres and Elgin have greater potential to avoid locally designated sites. Options B and N at Mosstodloch would both require a crossing of the River Spey SAC and SSSI. Option C is the only option with the potential to avoid Foudland LNCS. There is, however, very little opportunity for Bennachie LNCS to be avoided within Option C, while the site is avoided by Options B and D. Options N and C are more densely wooded when compared with the corresponding sections of Options B and D. 	

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Soils and Geodiversity

Subjects considered: Geological Conservation Review sites, prime agricultural land and high carbon soils.

Key Findings: Soils and Geodiversity	
Key Local Issues	Strategic Mitigation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agricultural land uses take place outwith the towns and there is potential for greater impacts on prime agricultural land in Option B north of Forres and Elgin and for parts of Options B and D between Inverurie and Colpy. Carbon rich soils are not extensive in the corridor; only in Option B to the north and south of Keith, and in part of Option C south of Insch, is more than 10% of soils classed as having a high carbon content. Severance of agricultural land and farm units is predicted to occur regardless of option selection and later stages of design and assessment would need to address this in more detail including through mitigation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Future corridor alignments to, where possible, avoid prime agricultural land. Farm accommodation works to be reviewed in more detail as design options are progressed.
How the Options Compare	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Option B to the south of Forres and Elgin (rather than to the north) potentially results in lower impacts on prime agricultural land. Options D and Option B north at Inverurie are more constrained by prime agricultural land than other options in the area. There is a minimal difference between options on the impact on high carbon soils, due to their limited extent and wide spatial distribution. 	 <p>View from the Califer viewpoint looking north over Findhorn Bay.</p>

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Water and Flooding

Subjects considered: fluvial (rivers), pluvial (surface water) and coastal flooding; watercourse crossings, groundwater; flood defence infrastructure and properties in the flood plain.

Key Findings: Water and Flooding	
Key Local Issues	Strategic Mitigation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are flood plains throughout the A96 corridor typically associated with rivers, burns and estuaries and particularly in areas of lower lying flat land. • Substantial flood risk zones are located to the north west of Forres (affecting northern variant of Option B), north east of Elgin (also affecting northern variant of Option B) and to the east and south east of Inverurie (affecting much of the northern variant of Option B and parts of its other variants). • Populated areas which typically contain large numbers of houses within the flood plain include Forres, Elgin, Inch and Inverurie. • River crossings would be needed for the new road in a number areas including (from north to south) over the rivers Findhorn, Lossie, Spey, Isla, Deveron, Urie and Don. • The assessment identified the presence of a number of existing flood defence/alleviation schemes near the route of existing A96 at Forres, Elgin, Lhanbryde and Inverurie which could be affected by the dualling; there is also a scheme proposed at Huntly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where possible, avoidance of the most extensive areas of flooding with future route alignments. • Road and bridge designs to minimise loss of storage capacity from flood plain. • Use of bridges and culverts which maintain watercourse flows without affecting upstream and downstream hydrology. • Further assess effects on flood alleviation schemes.
How the Options Compare	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Option B runs the full length of the corridor and passes through particular areas of flood risk at Forres, Elgin and Inverurie. The greatest effects on flooding and watercourses for Option B could be avoided by following the southern variants around Forres, Elgin and Inverurie. • River crossings will be needed for all options however a route following Option B north of Inverurie would involve an additional crossing of a major watercourse compared with the other options in this part of the corridor. • In some areas, Options C, D and N are less constrained by flooding and flood risk than Option B as they are typically on higher ground and involve crossings of watercourses which are generally smaller (higher in the catchment). • Options C, D and N also typically affect floodplain areas with fewer residential properties and avoid most of the potential effects on the operation of existing and planned flood defence/alleviation schemes compared with the equivalent parts of Option B. 	 <p>View from the pedestrian bridge at Fochabers looking north to the road bridge crossing the River Spey.</p>

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Population and Human Health

Subjects considered: areas of population, traffic flow and air quality, key walking, cycling and equestrian routes.

Key Findings: Population and Human Health	
Key Local Issues	Strategic Mitigation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Option B typically follows a corridor closer to the existing A96 than other options, but splits into option variants at Forres, Elgin and Inverurie. Other towns within the corridor include Fochabers (near to Options B and N), Keith (edge of Option B), Huntly (Options B and C), Inch (Option C) and Kintore (Options B and C). Air quality throughout the corridor is generally good and within statutory objective levels. Projected increases in traffic within the corridor have the potential to both increase and decrease local air pollutant concentrations depending on the final dualled route alignment. Options B and N are crossed by regionally important cycling and walking routes near Forres (National Cycle Network Route 1 and Dava Way) and near Fochabers (Speyside Way). The Dava Way and Isla Way cross Option B near Keith and Core Paths are present throughout the route and in all options assessed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Route choice to take account of proximity of operational road traffic effects on receptors in populated areas to reduce potential air quality and noise effects. Use of noise barriers to be considered in locations where road traffic could increase noise impacts at nearby properties. Road design to accommodate crossings with paths, cycleways and other non-motorised users (NMsUs) routes, with minimal disruption to their alignments. Future corridor alignments to minimise need for property demolition and land take.
How the Options Compare	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options C and N provide opportunities to alleviate traffic related environmental effects from properties in Forres, Elgin, Huntly and Inverurie; this would need to be confirmed at later stages when specific route options can be appraised. Option C however passes close to the large settlement of Inch. Provided that key walking, cycling and equestrian routes are accommodated in road/bridge designs, the potential for crossing of these routes does not significantly constrain the options assessed. 	 <p>Fochabers sign and fish sculpture.</p>

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Historic Environment

Subjects considered: Scheduled Monuments (SM), listed buildings, gardens and designed landscapes (GDLs), inventory battlefields, conservation areas in towns and local archaeological sites.

Key Findings: Historic Environment	
Key Local Issues	Strategic Mitigation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are designated historic assets throughout the A96 corridor, including scheduled monuments, listed buildings, conservation areas, inventory battlefields and gardens and designed landscapes. • A future dualled route could affect both the structure and/or setting of cultural heritage assets (designated and non-designated), which presents particular challenges for avoiding all sites. • There are a large number of non-designated cultural heritage assets recorded on Moray and Aberdeenshire Historic Environment Records (HER). The value, nature and extent of these cannot be fully considered at this stage of assessment. • There are a large number of non-designated assets recorded across all options, which indicates that there are likely to be concentrations of areas with archaeological potential identified at later stages of assessment. • Validated and reliable HER data was not available for Aberdeen City for the assessment, resulting in a small gap in understanding of the potential archaeological resource at the southern extent of the corridor. • Particular constraints include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Dallas Dhu Distillery SM and listed buildings (Options B and N); – Gordon Castle and Keith Hall GDLs, associated listed buildings and scheduled monuments (Option B); – Williamston House and Newton House GDLs and associated listed buildings (Options B and D); – Harlaw Inventory Battlefield (Option B); and – Picardy Stone scheduled monument and Property in Care (Option C). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the first instance, avoidance of designated and non-designated cultural heritage assets with future road alignments to preserve their structure and setting in situ. • Where preservation of remains in situ is not possible (in the case of non-designated assets), a range of measures may be undertaken to mitigate and offset the adverse impacts on the archaeological resource. • Further analysis of the extent and significance of non-designated archaeological sites would be undertaken when more defined corridor options are available to understand the potential impacts of road development and mitigate these appropriately.
How the Options Compare	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are historic environment assets within all option areas which have the potential to be directly and/or indirectly affected through dualling; generally, there is a higher number and density of assets from south of Huntly towards Inverurie and Aberdeen. • While Option B north around Forres has a risk of impacts on the town's conservation area, it is less constrained than the southern variant and Option N which include the high value assets associated with Dallas Dhu Distillery. • Option N avoids Gordon Castle GDL and the conservation area around Fochabers which constrain Option B. • Option D has fewer constraints than the corresponding part of Option B around Colpy, avoiding Williamston House GDL, Kirkton Farm A Listed Building, Mummer's Reive cairn and Woodside hut circles SM. • The variants of Option B around Inverurie are more constrained by historic environment features than the corresponding part of Option C. • Option B north of Inverurie is more constrained than other variants due to the location of Harlaw battlefield and Keith Hall GDL. 	

A96 Dualling Programme: Strategic Environmental Assessment

Landscape and Visual

Subjects considered: local landscape designations, landscape character; taking account of key contributing elements to the landscape such as landform, woodlands, settlement and infrastructure, landscape sensitivity, properties and settlements which could form visual receptors to dualling.

Key Findings: Landscape and Visual	
Key Local Issues	Strategic Mitigation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no national landscape designations within or adjacent to the corridor. • The existing A96 is an established part of the local landscape and therefore is an existing feature which reduces its sensitivity. • At the northern end of Option B, around Forres and Elgin, the landscape consists mainly of flat lowland agricultural land, with some large areas of woodland that should be avoided where possible. Generally the scale of the landscape can absorb the inclusion of a new road without a major detriment to the quality and character of this landscape. • Around Fochabers the landscape character is more hilly and wooded, then undulating to the east. There are large areas of woodland to the east which may be difficult to avoid through dualling. • The landscape between Keith and the Glens of Foudland is generally of a hilly, open character with patches of woodland and individual dwellings and farms. Some of this woodland, for example around Bin Forest, would be difficult to avoid as a result of dualling through challenging and hilly terrain. • To the south of the corridor past Glens of Foudland, the landscape is generally of gently rolling terrain and agricultural land which is sensitive to change due to its openness. • Any new elevated structures required to cross watercourses, or the railway line, would have a permanent effect on the character of the landscape and would therefore require careful design. • There are three locally designated Areas of Great Landscape Value (AGLVs) to the north of the corridor; one associated with the River Spey, another with Pluscarden Abbey and one with the River Findhorn. • The northern end of the corridor is constrained by setting impacts on historic features such as Dallas Dhu Distillery south of Forres. • At the southern end of the corridor, there are a large number of scheduled monuments and listed buildings which contribute to landscape character and sensitivity. Keith Hall GDL contributes to a very sensitive landscape east of Inverurie which could be impacted by the northern variant of Option B in this location. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoidance of important areas for landscape wherever possible, taking account of other constraints including visual receptors in properties and settlements. • Minimise impacts on key features and their setting, as well as on the structures of the landscape which contribute to its character and sensitivity including native woodlands, historic buildings and shelterbelts. • Respecting topography when developing future alignments so that road designs flow with the contours of the land and the road sits out of sight of visual receptors wherever possible. • Follow Transport Scotland's Fitting Landscapes guide. • Mitigate landscape and visual aspects of new road infrastructure (e.g. junctions) through well designed screen planting using native species typical of the area. • Take account of other road elements including positioning of signs and lighting columns.
How the Options Compare	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Option B stretches the full length of the corridor; passing through a range of landscape types and sensitivities and potential effects on landscape of variants to the north and south of Forres and Elgin are not predicted to be significantly different; the extent of visual impact will depend on more detailed alignment work. • Option N includes all three AGLVs and is more constrained than Option B, with greater potential for significant landscape effects, in particular through the Speyside area to the east. • Option C passes through a relatively remote landscape with little in the way of settlement and other infrastructure and dualling within this option would be predicted to have significantly greater effects on the character of the landscape than for the equivalent length of Option B. • At Inverurie, the northern variant of Option B has a significantly greater risk of affecting landscape than the other variants of Option B in the area. 	

6. What Happens Next?

Completing the SEA

The Environmental Report presenting the detailed findings of the SEA has been published for consultation (see below).

Following the public consultation period, all comments received on the A96 Dualling Programme will be considered by Transport Scotland and the SEA team.

The SEA will be concluded through preparation of a Post Adoption Statement which will:

- explain the whole SEA process and how it has been integrated with the A96 Dualling Programme;
- summarise the key findings of the public consultation process;
- set out how the A96 programme has been influenced by the SEA and by the feedback from consultation; and
- set out finalised Monitoring Framework.

A96 Dualling Programme Development

The current work on the A96 Dualling Programme will conclude with the final report from the Preliminary Engineering Services (PES) team and the SEA documentation.

This is consistent with the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB) Stage 1 approach.

Once Transport Scotland has completed all necessary decision making procedures on the dualling programme, they will determine how to procure the next stages of design, engineering, traffic, economics and environmental work.

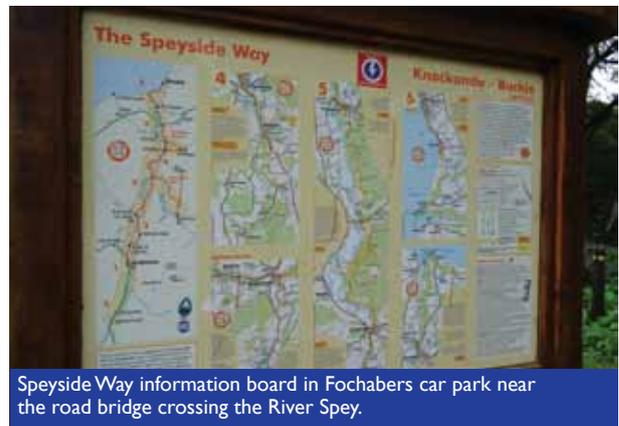
The work would be undertaken in accordance with the next stage of DMRB (Stage 2) and ultimately lead to identification of a preferred route option for A96 Dualling for design and assessment at DMRB Stage 3.

This is a process which would take several years to complete and the level of environmental input and assessment will increase in detail as the stages progress.

Figure 5 outlines the key stages of DMRB and the linkages with SEA and future environmental impact assessment (EIA) work.



View from Dummuies looking north towards the A96 and Fourman Hill.



Speyside Way information board in Fochabers car park near the road bridge crossing the River Spey.

A96 Dualling Programme: Strategic Environmental Assessment

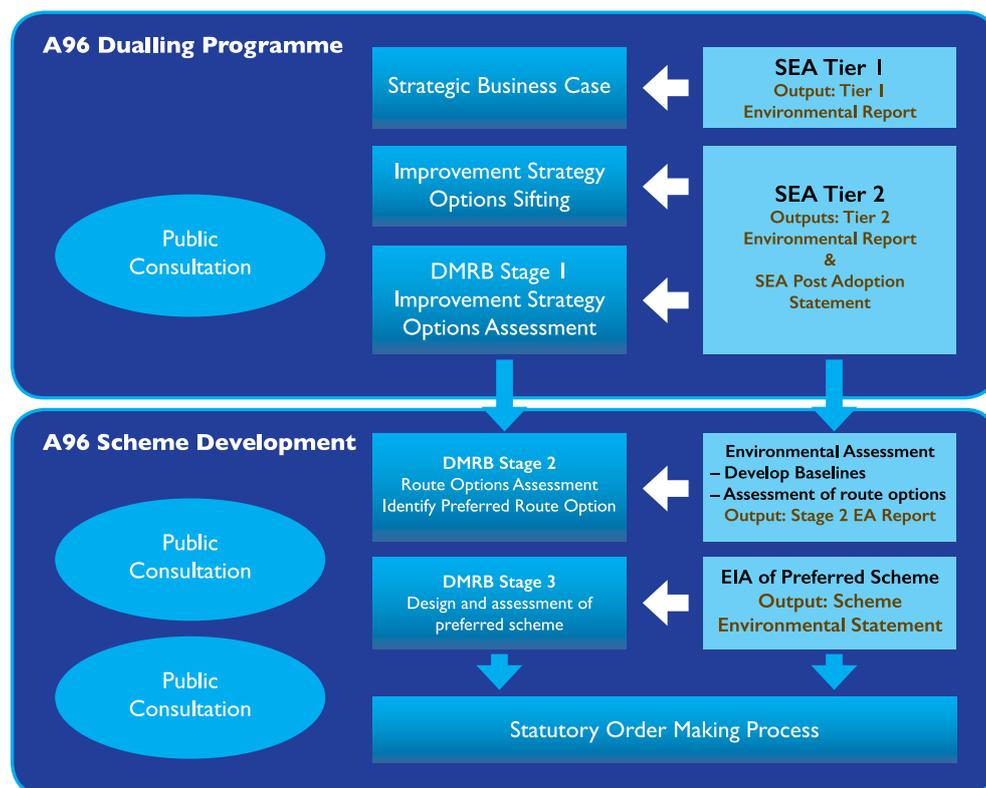


Figure 5 How SEA integrates with future A96 Dualling Programme DMRB design stages.

Environmental Report Consultation Period

To help maintain progress on the wider A96 delivery programme, a six-week consultation period has been agreed for the Tier 2 Environmental Report. The consultation period will run from 11th May to 22nd June 2015.

Comments and feedback on the SEA Environmental Report and Non-Technical Summary are welcome from the public.

Written feedback is welcomed and should be addressed to:

A96 Dualling Team
 Transport Scotland
 Buchanan House
 58 Port Dundas Road
 Glasgow
 G4 0HF

Email: a96dualling@transportscotland.gsi.gov.uk

Statutory consultees should respond via the Scottish Government SEA Gateway.

Consultation Feedback Review

Following the closing date of the Environmental Report consultation period, all written feedback will be collated to inform a final review of the SEA findings and recommendations.

A record of feedback and how it has been taken into consideration will be documented in the SEA Post Adoption Statement.



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