Jacobs AECOM

A96 Corridor Review Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

SEA Screening Report

SCREENING REPORT

STEP 1 – DETAILS OF THE PLAN

Responsible Authority:	Box 1. Transport Scotland
Title of the plan:	Box 2. A96 Corridor Review
What prompted the plan: (e.g. a legislative, regulatory or administrative provision)	Box 3. The key strategic drivers for the plan are: • National Transport Strategy 2 (NTS2, 2020 update); • Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 (STPR2); and • Scottish Government and Scottish Green Party Parliamentary Group Cooperation Agreement and shared policy programme, August 2021.
Plan subject: (e.g. transport)	Box 4. Transport
Screening is required by the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005. Based on Boxes 3 and 4, our view is that:	☑ An SEA is required, as the environmental effects are likely to be significant: Please indicate below what Section of the 2005 Act this plan falls within ☑ Section 5(3) ☐ Section 5(4) ☐ An SEA is <u>not</u> required, as the environmental effects are unlikely to be significant: Please indicate below what Section of the 2005 Act this plan falls within ☐ Section 5(3) ☐ Section 5(4)
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STEP 2 – CONTEXT AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PLAN	
Context of the Plan:	Box 5. The Scottish Government's Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR), published in 2008, set out a number of transport priorities for the Inverness to Aberdeen corridor to be met by 2032. These transport priorities included: rail enhancements, new stations at Kintore and Dalcross, strategic park and ride at Dyce, upgrading of the A96 to dual carriageway between Inverness and Nairn, a bypass of Nairn, a new bridge at Inveramsay, and a targeted programme of measures to reduce accident severity. In 2014 a Strategic Business Case (SBC) for the dualling was published. The SBC considered a range of options for improving transport links, recommending that full dualling of the A96 between Inverness and Aberdeen was the best performing option in terms of the transport planning objectives and the STAG criteria considered. In 2015, a Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB) Stage 1 Assessment for the initial development and assessment of broadly defined improvement strategies for the upgrade of the A96 to a Category 7A all-purpose dual carriageway was published. An SEA was also carried out at this time, with the final Environmental Report published in 2015 and the Post Adoption Statement published in 2016. In August 2021, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Green Party Parliamentary Group agreed to work together over the next five years to build a green economic recovery from COVID, respond to the climate emergency and create a fairer country. As part of this cooperation, a shared draft policy programme - the Bute House Agreement - has been agreed. The Bute House Agreement includes a commitment to a transport enhancements programme on the A96 corridor that improves connectivity between surrounding towns, tackles congestion and addresses safety and environmental issues. The current plan is to fully dual the A96 route between Inverness and Aberdeen, but the Bute Hose Agreement commits to conducting a transparent, evidence-based review to include a climate compatibility assessment to assess direct and indirect impacts on the climate and the environment. This will report by the end of 2022. The planning and policy context for the plan is summarised in the following key plans, legislation and processes. ▪ The second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2). Transport Scotland is currently undertaking the second STPR to inform the Scottish Government's transport investment programme in Scotland over the next 20 years (2022 – 2042). STPR2 is due for completion in 2022. STPR2 takes a national overview of the transport network with a focus on regions and will help deliver the vision, priorities and outcomes that are set out in the new National Transport Strategy (NTS2)(see below). Transport options to address problems, opportunities and objectives for the A96 Corridor Review Study Area have been considered in STPR2, but the Cooperation Agreement and shared policy programme requires a discrete project focused on the A96. This includes a STAG Appraisal, a DMRB Stage 1 Assessment, SEA, Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) and various social and equality assessments. ▪ National Transport Strategy (NTS2); The NTS2 provides the national transport policy framework, setting out a clear vision of a sustainable,

inclusive, safe and accessible transport system which helps deliver a healthier, fairer and more prosperous Scotland for communities, businesses and visitors. It sets out four key priorities to support that vision: reduces inequality; takes climate action; helps deliver inclusive economic growth; and improves health and wellbeing.

- Climate Change Plan Update
  The Scottish Government published "Securing a Green Recovery on a Path to Net Zero: Climate Change Plan 2018–2032 – update" in December 2020 (Scottish Government, 2020c) which reflects the ambition of the new targets set in the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019. These comprise the reduction of Scotland's greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2045 at the latest, with interim targets of at least:
  - 56% by 2020;
  - 75% by 2030; and
  - 90% by 2040.

  The transport chapter of the Plan sets out context around the current situation and how the shift to home working may become a longer-term trend. Coupled with the focus on 20-minute neighbourhoods, the Plan notes the opportunity to capitalise on these to reduce the need to travel, and, when travel occurs, for it to be focused on more sustainable modes. The Plan includes the following statement in relation to transport: "By 2032 our roads will contain no new petrol and diesel cars and vans; we will have decarbonised our passenger railways; and we will have begun work to decarbonise challenging transport modes such as HGVs, ferries and aviation. Car kilometres will have reduced by 20%, and sustainable transport will be the instinctive first choice for people."
- Agenda for Cities, "Scotland's Cities: Delivering for Scotland" (Scottish Government). This set out the vital contribution that Scotland's major population centres can make in delivering the Government Economic Strategy. The Agenda identified connecting cities with strong, reliable and resilient transport infrastructure as a key characteristic to support growth. Published alongside this was the Scottish Government's Infrastructure Investment Plan, providing an overview of plans for infrastructure investment over the coming decades. To complement the Agenda for Cities, the investment plan contains a commitment to complete the dual carriageway network between all Scotland's cities by 2030.
- National Planning Framework 4 (NP4) (Scottish Government). This includes an action entitled 'Strengthen resilience and decarbonise connectivity' (Action 8). This action describes the need to adapt key routes due to the impacts of climate change alongside creating a strong network of charging points and improvements to the A96 to improve safety.
- Infrastructure Investment Plan for Scotland
  The Scottish Government published the Infrastructure Investment Plan for Scotland 2021/22 to 2025/26 (IIP) on 04 February 2021. The IIP was published within the COVID-19 timeframe and is strategically aligned to address the impacts of the pandemic and those from the UK's exit from the

	European Union. It also draws on inputs from the work of the Infrastructure Commission for Scotland. The vision of the IIP is that "our infrastructure supports Scotland's resilience and enables inclusive, net zero, and sustainable growth." The IIP identifies the need for investment in infrastructure to provide an effective response to both COVID-19 but also to the key longer-term trends of climate change, technological developments and demographic change. The IIP is based on an investment hierarchy, as recommended by the independent Infrastructure Commission for Scotland, which complements the hierarchy outlined in NTS2. The new common investment hierarchy prioritises enhancing existing assets ahead of new build, which on a sequential basis comprises: determine future need; then maximise use of existing assets; then repurpose and co-locate; and finally replace or new build. The IIP includes a list of major projects and programmes for reporting to public audit. Under the 'Strengthening Connectivity' projects and programmes theme, there is a commitment to providing 'phased improvements to the existing A96 from Inverness to Aberdeen (including the Nairn Bypass)'. ▪ Nestrans 2040 Regional Transport Strategy. This sets out the transport strategy for north-east Scotland. It references the 'Improvements to the A96 corridor between Aberdeen and Inverness' and the need to upgrade and improve safety and congestion on the remainder of the A96 corridor between the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route (AWPR) and Inverurie. ▪ Other Regional and Local Policy Documents; such as the Local Development Plans, and Regional Economic Strategy for the north east, which set out non-transport specific objectives and priorities, but for which transport plays a key role in both the enabling and delivery of their outcomes.
Description of the Plan:	Box 6. The Scottish Government and Scottish Green Party Parliamentary Group Cooperation Agreement confirmed there would be a transparent, evidence-based review to include a climate compatibility assessment to assess direct and indirect impacts on the climate and the environment.
What are the key components of the plan?	Box 7. The key plan components comprise a transport enhancements programme on the A96 corridor that improves connectivity between surrounding towns, tackles congestion and addresses safety and environmental issues. This will include: • Bypassing of Elgin, Inverurie and Keith, accompanied by measures to remove through-traffic from town centres; • Targeted road safety improvements where needed, for example between Fochabers and Huntly and Inverurie to Aberdeen; and • The development of the A96 "Electric Highway". Other transport interventions that do not fall under these three categories may also arise from the STAG process and these will also be considered in the SEA. The

	Inverness to Nairn (including Nairn Bypass) section of the A96 is a committed scheme and will not be included in the A96 corridor review or the SEA.
Have any of the components of the plan been considered in previous SEA work?	Box 8. Yes. The STPR1 SEA (Jacobs, 2008) included an assessment of the upgrading of the A96 to a dual carriageway, an assessment of a targeted programme of A96 safety measures and assessment of three alternatives: a) New Bypasses around Nairn, Keith and Elgin; b) A96 Road Safety Improvements and c) Rail Improvements between Inverness and Aberdeen.[1] The A96 Dualling Programme SEA (Halcrow, 2014) assessed alternative dual carriageway options for the Inverness to Aberdeen corridor. The Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) for North-East of Scotland (NESTRANS 2040) policies RD1 (to support full dualling of the A96 to Inverness) and RD7 (remainder of A96 to be upgraded to modern dual carriageway standard including grade separated junctions) were also assessed at a high level in the RTS SEA. The RTS SEA was published in July 2020.
In terms of your response to Boxes 7 and 8 above, set out those components of the plan that are likely to require screening:	Box 9. All the key components listed in Box 7 will require SEA screening to consider their interactions and potential for significant environmental effects.

[1] The STPR2 SEA Environmental Report (Jacobs Aecom 2022) did not include an assessment of any A96 corridor options.

STEP 3 – IDENTIFYING INTERACTIONS OF THE PLAN WITH THE ENVIRONMENT AND CONSIDERING THE LIKELY SIGNIFICANCE OF ANY INTERACTIONS **(Box 10)**

	Environmental Topic Areas										Explanation of Potential Environmental Effects	Explanation of Significance
Plan Components	Biodiversity, flora and fauna	Population and human health	Soil	Water	Air	Climatic factors	Material assets	Cultural heritage	Landscape	Inter-relationship issues		
Transport enhancements: • Elgin, Inverurie and Keith bypasses, accompanied by measures to remove through traffic from the by-passed town centre. • Targeted road safety improvements • A96 Electric highway Other transport interventions that do not fall under these three categories may also arise from the STAG process and these will also be considered in the SEA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	At this screening stage, it is not possible to rule out any of the plan's components having significant environmental effects, either during the construction or operational phase. Given the multiple, often strong, interactions between the environmental topics, it is also not possible to screen out any of the environmental topics.	Potentially significant effects include: Biodiversity, flora and fauna – Biodiversity loss, including direct or indirect impacts on designated or undesignated sites. Population and Human Health – Potentially significant noise or air quality impacts from construction machinery and traffic or operational traffic. There are also potentially significant positive effects through improved safety and reduced accident risk. Soil – Potential loss of soil during construction, erosion, surface water pollution, compaction, sealing. Water – Potential effects on the severity of flood risk at specific locations or on water quality from pollution. Air – Impacts on air quality from construction activities and from traffic during operation. Climatic factors – Transport options have potentially significant implications for greenhouse gas emissions, either through vehicle traffic, embodied carbon in construction materials, or loss of carbon-rich soils such as peat.

												Material assets – Different options will have implications for material assets, e.g. the economic viability of other built assets and key infrastructure. Cultural heritage – potential direct or indirect impacts on designated or undesignated heritage assets or their setting. Landscape – potentially significant landscape and visual impacts, including potential impacts on sensitive landscapes. Inter-relationships – There are many inter-relationships between the SEA topics – for example, the loss of soils during construction could also entail the loss of buried archaeological assets. Cumulative effects – There are potential cumulative effects on multiple SEA topics that could arise from the A96 Corridor interventions alone, or in-combination with other plans, programmes and projects.

STEP 4 – STATEMENT OF THE FINDINGS OF THE SCREENING

Summary of interactions with the environment and statement of the findings of the Screening:
(Including an outline of the likely significance of any interactions, positive or negative, and explanation of conclusion of the screening exercise.)

Box 11. The A96 Corridor Review could potentially lead to significant effects on the environment. These are likely to be both beneficial and adverse. These effects relate to all topics listed in the Step 3 table (Box 10) provided above. Although project-level Environmental Impact Assessments may be required for the preferred transport interventions that emerge from the A96 Corridor Review, an SEA will be required to ensure that the potential for significant strategic environmental effects has been assessed and strategic opportunities are identified. In this way, environmental considerations will be taken into account at the strategic level, and the SEA and its recommendations will influence the final plan. Accordingly, the SEA will set the framework for the later EIAs. An SEA will build on previous environmental assessment work that applies to the A96 corridor, particularly the STPR2 SEA (2022), the Nestrans 2040 Regional Transport Strategy SEA (2020) and the A96 Dualling Programme SEA (Halcrow, 2014; CH2M, 2015 and 2016).

A strategic Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) will be undertaken in parallel with the SEA, to identify if there are likely to be any significant effects on biodiversity-designated European sites, i.e. Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) designated under the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) designated under the Birds Directive (2009/147/EEC). This will ensure the A96 Corridor Review complies with the Scottish legislation that transposes these European Directives - the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 (as amended). The HRA will inform the ecological baseline and assessment in the SEA and will also inform and signpost any future project-level HRA work that may be required.

A more detailed SEA methodology, including the assessment of significance referred to in Step 3 of this screening report, will be provided in the SEA Scoping Report.

When completed send to: SEA.gateway@scotland.gsi.gov.uk or to the SEA Gateway, Scottish Government, Area 2H (South), Victoria Quay, Edinburgh, EH6 6QQ.