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The Scottish Parliament
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26 February 2021

Dear Jamie,

A9 Dualling Perth to Inverness and A96 Dualling Inverness to Aberdeen

Further to First Minister questions on 10 February where the First Minister confirmed the Scottish Government's commitment to the A9 and A96 Dualling programmes, I have been asked to provide a further update on progress to date.

We are the first administration to commit to dualling both the A9 and A96 and we remain absolutely committed to completing both programmes. These ambitious programmes are a significant undertaking which require careful, in-depth planning and design to ensure that we deliver the right schemes and keep impacts on the environment to the absolute minimum. The Scottish Government continues to invest in both of these programmes with work well underway.

It has been particularly pleasing to confirm that Transport Scotland has now started procurement of the construction contract for the next section of A9 Dualling between Tomatin to Moy. Once complete, the scheme will provide nearly 20 miles of continuous dual carriageway to the south of Inverness, allowing safer, more reliable and shorter journey times. More immediately, this investment will provide a vital boost to the construction industry as we support its recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is expected that following a robust procurement process, the contract will be awarded in the second half of 2022. Meanwhile, ground investigation works, which are a key step towards construction of this section, are planned to commence as soon as possible over the coming months.

Turning to the remainder of the A9 programme. Although the design and development process has been somewhat protracted by the impacts of COVID-19, we are continuing to ensure that local communities have their chance to input into the final design. We are also engaging with stakeholders and the construction industry to help finalise a procurement strategy that will allow us to progress the remaining sections. We expect this process to

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conclude in summer 2021 when we will be able to provide an update on next steps towards delivery of this important programme.

Contrary to some media reporting which has unfortunately misunderstood the position, this market consultation is a very clear demonstration of our full commitment to the A9 Dualling and our equally strong commitment to good governance and responsible use of public funds.

It is imperative that we continue to explore opportunities to take forward elements of the route as they become ready to construct, as we have confirmed. However, we must do so in a way that allows the market to deliver these complex schemes whilst managing impacts to the travelling public and providing good value for money. The ongoing engagement exercise is therefore crucial to our next stages of programming and will allow us to determine the most efficient delivery model for the programme. Again, we expect to be in a position in summer 2021 to confirm or meaningfully update what is now a very challenging target completion date.

We are also continuing to progress our ambitious plans to dual the A96 between Inverness and Aberdeen, delivering around 88 miles of upgraded road. Following a Public Local Inquiry and recommendations made by the Reporters, Scottish Ministers have recently given the go-ahead for completing of the statutory procedures for the A96 Dualling Inverness to Nairn (including Nairn Bypass) scheme.

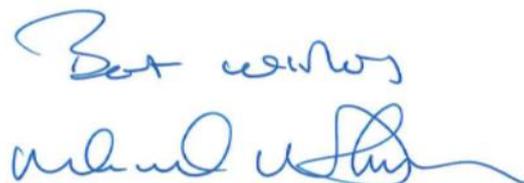
This significant decision now clears the way for us to publish Made Orders for this scheme and we are pushing forward with the necessary preparatory work to achieve publication by this summer. Subject to there being no challenge to Made Orders this would complete the statutory process for the scheme and allow us to acquire land required to build the scheme.

At the same time preparatory work is also underway to bring forward advance works, for example invasive archaeological survey work, following completion of the statutory process and acquisition of land.

This huge milestone for the programme leads the way for other sections of the route to follow as we continue to advance the detailed development and assessment of the preferred options for the Hardmuir to Fochabers and East of Huntly to Aberdeen schemes. Delivery of each section of the A96 programme can only commence if approved under the relevant statutory procedures and thereafter a timetable for progress can be set.

Dualling the A9 and A96 underlines our commitment to connecting Scotland's cities with a high quality transport system that will generate economic growth. When complete these ambitious programmes will bring many benefits to local communities, businesses and road users living, travelling and working along the routes including reduced journey times, improved journey time reliability, improved road safety and opportunities for active travel.

I trust this update is of assistance.



MICHAEL MATHESON

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