

A Start to Transport Upgrades at Last

Inverness Courier – 2 March 2007

At long last it appears that decision makers are beginning to take notice of Inverness's transport needs.

After years of little or no investment in infrastructure, it seems that some significant spending is finally coming our way. The city's southern by pass, which we report today is likely to come in at about £100 million, has been pushed to the top of HiTrans' agenda and looks to have the critical support of transport minister Tavish Scott.

Now it is the turn of our antiquated rail links with the central belt to be identified for an upgrade. Hourly services to Edinburgh and 30 minutes knocked off the journey time are long overdue, as is the recognition by Network Rail's Scotland director Ron McAulay that Inverness is "a modern, successful Scottish city and increasingly requires a dynamic transport infrastructure".

Hopefully this will be just the start, because although welcome, the proposed improvements announced yesterday are not sufficient and hardly represent the dynamic infrastructure it is now admitted the city requires.

The three hours it will take to travel to Edinburgh still only matches the journey time by car, even when the tortuous A9 is taken into account. And it will still not be possible to arrive in Scotland's capital in time for a 9am business meeting.

Then there is the line to Aberdeen. Over the next decade Network Rail is proposing some minor improvements at each end to assist commuters, but anyone travelling between the two cities will still be quicker using their car.

If ministers are really serious about reducing vehicle use they simply have to do better. It should be one of the Scottish Executive's easier tasks to persuade motorists to forsake the A9 for the train, but an express service with fewer stops is required for business people, shoppers and tourists wishing to get to Edinburgh and back in a day. A journey time of 150 minutes is a realistic target.

Reliability is another factor. Although full details have not yet emerged, there is no indication that the £54 million being set aside for the route will include major works to address the problems around Kingussie where flooding is becoming a serious issue, curtailing services and forcing passengers onto buses.

So more needs to be done before politicians can begin to contemplate road pricing. To do so before a feasible alternative to the car is in place will not be acceptable, and while that position may be on the horizon in Glasgow and Edinburgh, it remains a long way off in Inverness.