

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 1 May 2024
7th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6)

PE1974: Adopt the A890 as a trunk road and PE1980: Adopt the A832 between Achnasheen and Gorstan as a trunk road

PE1974: Adopt the A890 as a trunk road

Petitioner Derek Noble

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to adopt the A890 as a trunk road, and to resolve the safety problems associated with the Stromeferry Bypass.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1974>

PE1980: Adopt the A832 between Achnasheen and Gorstan as a trunk road

Petitioner Derek Noble

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to adopt the A832 between Achnasheen and Gorstan as a trunk road, connecting this route into the existing trunk road network.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1980>

Introduction

1. [The Committee last considered petitions PE1974 and PE1980 at its meeting on 6 September 2023.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Transport.
2. The petition summaries are included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received a new written submissions from the Minister for Transport which is set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [The Committee received five written submissions on petition PE1974 prior to its last consideration of the petition.](#)
5. [The Committee also received three written submissions on petition PE1980 prior to the last consideration of the petition.](#)

6. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing for petition PE1974. Additional background information is also available in the SPICe briefing for petition PE1980.](#)
7. [Transport Scotland provided the Scottish Government's initial position on petition PE1974 on 28 October 2022.](#)
8. [Transport Scotland provided the Scottish Government's initial position on petition PE1980 on 24 October 2022.](#)
9. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 160 signatures have been received on petition PE1974, with 3 signatures having been received on petition PE1980.

Action

10. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
April 2024

Annexe A: Summary of petitions

PE1974: Adopt the A890 as a trunk road

Petitioner

Derek Noble

Date Lodged

19 October 2022

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to adopt the A890 as a trunk road, and to resolve the safety problems associated with the Strome ferry Bypass.

Previous action

I have contacted Rhoda Grant MSP for advice.

Background information

As highlighted in [the Annual Slope Inspection Report of 2021](#), "the A890 serves as the main link-road down the west coast of Scotland and is also a significant transit for east to west traffic travelling between the Isle of Skye and Inverness." The road is mainly single carriageway but frequently reduces to single track with passing places along the stretch between Attadale and Ardnarff. There has been a history of rock falls at the site since the road was opened, which continue to occur, posing a risk to the road and its users.

The Highland Council have undertaken feasibility studies into two alternatives to the Strome ferry Bypass. One is a bridge between North and South Strome and the other a new bypass route through Glen Udalain.

The existing road is the route taken daily by school buses, and there have been many days of education lost due to closures.

In 2012, the estimated cost of the Glen Udalain route was £23 million and that of the Bridge was £60 million. This level of funding can only come at a government level. The A890 has to be adopted by the Scottish Government for improvements to happen.

PE1980: Adopt the A832 between Achnasheen and Gorstan as a trunk road

Petitioner

Derek Noble

Date Lodged

6 October 2022

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to adopt the A832 between Achnasheen and Gorstan as a trunk road, connecting this route into the existing trunk road network.

Previous action

I have contacted Rhoda Grant MSP for advice on this matter, as well as in relation to petition PE1974, which calls for the adoption of the A890 as a trunk road.

Background information

The A832 links the A890 and the A835, completing the west to east road system.

If the A890 is trunked, as requested in petition PE1974, then the A832 between Achnasheen and Gorstan should also be adopted as a trunk road by the Scottish Government. Doing so would provide a trunk road connection between the A87 and the A835 trunk roads.

Adopting these routes as trunk roads could transform connectivity between the West and East coast, bringing social and economic benefits at both local community and national levels.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1974 and PE1980 on 6 September 2023

The Convener: Instead of considering PE1973, I will jump ahead on the agenda, because we now have Rhoda Grant with us, and I am happy to try to facilitate Rhoda's morning by bringing forward the petitions in which she has an interest.

Both petitions have been lodged by Derek Noble. PE1974 calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to adopt the A890 as a trunk road and to resolve the safety problems that are associated with the Strome ferry bypass. PE1980 calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to adopt the A832 between Achnasheen and Gorstan as a trunk road, connecting that route into the existing trunk road network. We considered the petitions on 18 January, when we agreed to write to a range of stakeholders to seek further information on the issues raised.

As I said a moment ago, we are joined by our colleague Rhoda Grant—good morning, and welcome, Rhoda. I am pleased to say that we have received responses from Lochcarron community council and the Plockton and district community council, which highlight the disruption that residents and others face when rock falls cause a closure of the A890, as well as their support for action to recognise the increased volume of traffic on the route and improve the quality of the road surface.

We also received a response in February from the then Minister for Transport, which suggests that, although there is linkage between the criteria set out in the strategic transport projects review and the A890, it is the Government's assessment that the A890 does not sufficiently meet the criteria to be incorporated into the motorway and trunk road network. The minister also suggests that transferring the route to the trunk road network would not solve the investment challenges that are associated with addressing road safety and maintenance issues on this stretch of road.

On a related point, the VisitScotland response states that it considers road infrastructure to be an important part of the visitor experience but that it would be for the Scottish Government to consider whether adopting the A832 as a trunk road would improve outcomes for residents and visitors to the area.

The response from Highland Council notes that it has done no further work on the Strome ferry options appraisal since December 2019, given that the project has no capital programme support and no preferred option has been identified. The council's response also states that, although parts of the A832 may not meet today's design standards, the issues of the A890 Strome ferry section outweigh those issues significantly.

There is a range of responses, and they are not altogether encouraging from the point of view of the petition, unfortunately. Before I ask the committee to reflect on what we have heard, I invite Rhoda Grant to make any comments that she feels would be appropriate.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Thank you for giving me the chance to speak to the petitions. I cannot stress enough how vital the links in question are to the west Highlands. They link the Highland Council area to the Western Isles. They are seen as links to Uig on Skye and to Uist, so they are incredibly important.

You referred to what the then Minister for Transport said about the STPR and how the A890 did not wholly meet the criteria for inclusion in the trunk road network. I do not understand that, because local communities use it to access healthcare and education, and it is also used for tourism, farming, aquaculture and renewables. It is a freight link to the Western Isles and it is on the north coast 500; as we all know, that has been incredibly successful in encouraging tourists into the area but it has put huge pressure on the road. I believe that the A890 is of national significance because of that.

You mentioned the submissions from Lochcarron community council and the Plockton and district community council, which highlight how important the A890 is to the area. If the road is closed, the detour involves going from the west coast to the east coast and back. That is a detour of 140 miles. A child from Lochcarron who goes to Plockton high school will have to double back, adding 280 miles to their daily commute to high school, which is totally unacceptable. That happens often, often for long periods of time. Therefore, I do not understand the then minister's reluctance to adopt the A890 as a trunk road. We should also think about the extra carbon that is emitted when the freight that uses that route has to travel an additional 280 miles, which is certainly not good for the planet.

Highland Council has made it clear that it is keen to do something about the situation, but it simply does not have the money. Last year, it spent more than £700,000 trying to deal with the rock falls. This year, it expects to spend £1.5 million on that. The council has not been able to make any progress on the options appraisal that it carried out.

I believe that the roads in question meet the criteria for a national strategic link and that the Government should therefore consider making them trunk roads. Given that we are two transport ministers on from when the most recent response was received, I suggest that the committee should write to the current transport minister to ask her to consider the petitions. I think that the A890 is of national significance and is significant in the context of the Scottish Government's duty to ensure that children are educated. The issue of children not being able to get to school because of rock falls was an issue when I was at school; it has been going on for some time. At some point, there will be a horrendous accident, because the road is dangerous—people who use it take their life in their hands. The current situation is simply not good enough.

The local people do not care who is responsible. It is clear that Highland Council does not have the money to do the work that is necessary because of the cuts in local government finance. People need to have safe roads. If the Scottish Government is not willing to adopt the A890 as a trunk road, it should seek to make capital available to make it safe or to reroute it along a safer route.

I know that the committee will be tempted to close the petition because it has had a response from the Scottish Government, but I ask it to write to the Scottish

Government again, given the national significance of the route and its importance to education, to ask it to change its mind, or to at least consider how it could assist.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Fergus Ewing engaged in the discussion when we last considered the petitions, and he is keen to comment.

Fergus Ewing: I endorse what Rhoda Grant said. If she does not mind my saying so, if rock falls on the A890 have been a problem since she was at school, the issue did not arise yesterday. I can put it no more candidly than that.

To be serious, this is a Highland problem, and it has been highlighted very well. The community councils have replied. Plockton community council has pointed out that, when the road is closed, there is a 130-mile diversion. Who in the central belt would put up with that? The community council also refers to the closures because of rock landslides, which Rhoda Grant has referred to today, and the fact that the road surface is “an embarrassment” with

“potholes that look like World War 1 shell craters”.

I do like unvarnished prose, uncluttered by euphemism and Government jargon. However, the serious point is that, although Transport Scotland has said that the road does not meet the criteria, it has not said why it does not. It has listed the criteria, and, as Rhoda Grant said, some of the criteria appear absolutely to apply. The road links remote communities and key tourist areas—those two criteria are clearly met. Deploying said Government-style prose, Transport Scotland says:

“Although there is linkage in relation to the A890 with some of these criteria, it is our assessment that the A890 does not sufficiently meet the criteria to be incorporated into the strategic motorway and trunk road network”.

However, it does not say why. I think that our job is to tease out why it does not sufficiently meet those criteria.

As I said before, Highland Council covers an area larger than Belgium and 20 per cent larger than Wales and has a far larger road network than any other local authority—even Scottish Borders Council, which has a substantial one. The burden of maintenance of those local roads is massive. If the A890 is designated as a national trunk road, which I believe it should be, that would at least diminish the impossible burden that Highland Council’s roads department bears in relation to dealing with the pothole situation across the network.

I strongly endorse what Rhoda Grant has argued for today, and I think that we need to pursue this issue further. It might be difficult to do so but, at the end of the day, Transport Scotland has got to show that it understands and is sympathetic to the interests of the Highlands. At the moment, the strong feeling in the Highlands is that that is not the case on the part of that Glasgow-based quango.

The Convener: I am going to assume that there was no connection between your observations about Ms Grant being at school and world war 1 potholes. I take it that that was just an unintended—[Laughter.] Also, I wonder who is left to evidence that a

pothole looks like a world war 1 crater, but maybe there is someone who can do that in the Highlands, where, of course, everyone is long-lived.

Mr Ewing is right to say that we have simply been told that the Government does not consider that the road meets the criteria but that we have not been told why, in the light of the evidence that has been attested, it has come to that view. It has simply asserted its view, not justified it, and I agree that we should ask it to do so. I am happy with that proposal if other colleagues feel that it is appropriate. Are members content for us to proceed on that basis?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Rhoda, I think that your attendance contributed to a different outcome being achieved in our consideration of the petition, so I thank you for that.

Annexe C: Written submission

Minister for Transport submission of 26 September 2023

PE1974/F: Adopt the A890 as a trunk road

PE1980/D: Adopt the A832 between Achnasheen and Gorstan as a trunk road

Thank you for your letter dated 8 September 2023 regarding Petition PE1974 and PE1980.

To clarify the Scottish Government's position in the [letter dated 27 February 2023](#), as attached, the A890 and A832 do not sufficiently meet the criteria laid out in my previous letter to be incorporated into the strategic motorway and trunk road network.

In addition to the key functions of a strategic road network, laid out in our previous response, the Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2), published in December 2022, considered local roads to be "out of scope" unless they provided direct access to a major port or airport; linked to a nationally significant National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) development site; or where a local road intersected a trunk road where bus priority or active travel measures were proposed. While I note that the Highland Council did make representation for the A890 Stromeferry Bypass to be included within STPR2, due to the land slip issues that have affected this location, I would like to be clear that the evidence based transport appraisal that supported the review found that the A890 did not meet any of the criteria noted above and therefore was not considered further. Therefore, noting the criteria above neither the A890 or A832 met these criteria for consideration as part of the strategic transport network and were duly not included as part of the appraisal or STPR2 final recommendations.

As outlined in our previous letter, the routes are currently appropriately classified as principal "A" class roads. Principal A Class roads are best managed locally rather than centrally and function as main roads which distribute traffic to and from the strategic trunk road network.

The routes to the Hebrides and the Western Isles from the north, east and south are currently well served with several trunk routes linking to the main ferry ports including the A835, A82/A87, A830 and A85 to Ullapool, Uig, Mallaig and Oban respectively. Several principal A class distributor roads including the A890 link to these routes.

During the Committee meeting, the subject of funding was raised, and I am encouraged to hear that Highland Council is keen to find a solution to the issues on these routes. It may be helpful to note that in 2023/24, Highland Council received £561.5 million to fund local services, which equates to an extra £14.8 million to support vital day to day services or an additional 2.7 per cent compared to 2022/23.

I hope this is of assistance and clarifies the Government's position on this matter.

FIONA HYSLOP