

REPORT TO: ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES COMMITTEE ON 6 AUGUST 2003

SUBJECT: ELGIN BYPASS AND TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT

BY: DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

1. **Reason for Report**

- 1.1 The committee is asked to note the outcome of the STAG 1 report on Elgin Bypass and to approve wider studies of traffic management options within the town.

2. **Background**

- 2.1 A report was presented to this Committee on 13 March 2002 (para 18 refers) when it was resolved that it be recommended to the Council's Policy and Resources Committee that an allocation of £50,000 should be made to commission work to develop and promote an Elgin Bypass when considering the next review of the Capital Plan. The funds were subsequently allocated to the Capital Plan as approved on 10 April 2002 (para 3 refers). It was agreed that the study was to be in accordance with the Scottish Executive's *Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance* (STAG). This is a document produced for the consistent assessment of transport policies and projects nationally, and it is regarded as an essential step to obtaining central government funding for any roads or transport investment.

- 2.2 The STAG process is objective-led ie. the objectives of any scheme or proposal should be set out, and a clear understanding of the issues to be addressed must be obtained before any solutions are sought. Alternative options for achieving the stated objectives must also be considered. The assessment process is in two distinct steps. Part 1 is an initial sift used to identify practical options that meet the objectives set for the scheme. This uses the best information already available and measures impact against the Government's five criteria for transport appraisal i.e. ***Environment, Safety, Economy, Integration and Accessibility***. If the proposed project is seen to meet the objectives, then the STAG 1 appraisal can be submitted to the Scottish Executive and a second more detailed stage (STAG 2) can be considered using updated information. It is important to note that a STAG 1 assessment is relatively limited and at this stage it is not intended to address detailed considerations of traffic solutions.

- 2.3 The Babbie Group were commissioned to undertake an independent STAG 1 assessment of the case for an A96 Elgin Bypass and also to report on how a bypass proposal would fit within a wider traffic strategy for the town. The consultants have delivered the STAG 1 assessment report. They undertook an outline review of the traffic situation within Elgin with a view to identifying the potential elements of a package of measures to manage traffic in the short, medium and long term. The impact of a potential A96 bypass, north or south of Elgin, has been assessed together with other options. It was intended that if this first stage report demonstrated that a bypass scheme could meet the objectives when measured against the national criteria, that it would be submitted to the Scottish Executive to support the Council's request for funding of an A96 bypass of Elgin.
- 2.4 In preparing their appraisal the consultants have carried out consultations, firstly with officers from a number of Council departments, and then with a broad spectrum of local representatives of organisations, not just related to Elgin, but to Moray as a whole. Invitations were sent to all Moray Councillors, and to representatives of Elgin Community Council, Elgin Business Action, Moray Chamber of Commerce, Moray Badenoch and Strathspey Enterprise Company, Moray College, the RAF and many others. In addition, because of the potential importance of traffic issues on the local economy, further consultation was carried out with a representative of the Moray Chamber of Commerce. The major purpose of the earlier consultation was to establish objectives, and the main objective of the study was agreed as :
- “To identify proposals to minimise congestion in Elgin by making most efficient use of the road network and to identify ways in which the network can be developed, including examination of a possible town bypass, to support the current trend for growth in the local economy.”*
- 2.5 North and south options for an A96 bypass were assessed on the basis of environmental impacts, traffic benefits and engineering issues. Outline construction and maintenance costs were used to provide indications of the likely economic efficiency of each of the bypass routes. The STAG process also requires that the bypass proposal is appraised against other options, including lower cost options, and not just a do-minimum scenario. Consequently, other options which would benefit the efficiency of the road network were identified in outline, either to provide additional road space where appropriate, or to make better use of the existing road network.
- 2.6 The existing road network is described as having a number of pinchpoints where movement around or through Elgin is restricted. Since the original traffic study was carried out in 1997 the number of pinchpoints has increased and the delays are noticeably longer. Elgin is developing on the periphery and in the town centre, and marginal traffic benefits achieved in the short term by small improvements are likely to be lost as new developments and changes in use of sites result in significant traffic generation in and around the town. Appropriate improvements to the road network to accommodate the development identified in the current Development Plan have been identified and will be continually re-assessed as development comes on stream or traffic patterns change.

- 2.7 The Consultant's findings regarding the bypass conclude that whilst both bypass lines appear to be feasible in engineering terms, there are environmental issues caused by both, but more importantly the traffic analysis indicates that a bypass would not provide a significant benefit to strategic road users nor to the inhabitants of the town. The average time savings for drivers using a bypass route, which is longer than the existing A96 route, would be very small. Given the proportion of traffic on the A96 in Elgin that is local in nature, a bypass would result in only modest reductions in traffic flow. Even considering the small additional economic benefits which could be attributed to air quality improvement and potential accident reductions, the relatively high construction costs of either bypass option results in a high, negative net present value (NPV). The conclusion is that whilst it is acknowledged that there are indeed delays and congestion at peak times on the A96 within Elgin, a bypass is not the correct solution at this stage. The report recommends that a bypass could be pursued as a long term objective within a strategy to provide network improvements to support the development of Elgin. This approach would also tie in with the lead-in time involved in promoting a major road scheme that can take a number of years from feasibility to construction. Consequently the report recommends that a STAG 2 assessment for an Elgin Bypass is not pursued at this time.
- 2.8 The report makes recommendations for the establishment of a road network strategy for Elgin, whether or not it is accepted that a bypass should be pursued as a long term objective. This strategy would take account of committed and proposed road improvements, committed and proposed land use changes and the Scottish Executive's strategy for the management of the A96 route. The strategy should identify short, medium and long-term objectives linked to proposals and options that can realistically be taken forward and implemented to achieve these objectives. The strategy which should be developed as an integral part of the review of the Local Transport Strategy would also feed into the Development Plan Review and show the logical and objective development of the Elgin road network in the context of future development patterns. This should enable a co-ordinated approach to road and land use development, and could expand the case for promoting a bypass at an appropriate time in the future.
- 2.9 Options for future improvement of the network start with the list of specific junction and road link improvements already identified as TSP 3 to TSP 15 in the Local Plan. In addition, work is on-going to determine improvements to South Street/Hay Street junction, the Laichmoray Roundabout, New Elgin Road/Edgar Road and the Reiket Lane link required to support the Elgin South Masterplan proposals. In addition, more radical and larger projects should be considered for the medium to long term.
- 2.10 The report also recommends the formalisation, enforcement and support of a hierarchy of roads. This would require a review of the road network and the identification of, for example, formal strategic distributor and access roads. The function of each road type could be supported by appropriate regulation, traffic management and signing. Examples of this are to formalise the function of Morriston Road and Lesmurdie Road as distributor roads for traffic from east and west to Lossiemouth and north Elgin, and, the up-grading of the Reiket Lane-Thornhill Road to provide this facility for the Elgin South area. The final quadrant in the south-west

of the town would involve the development of a Wittet Drive-Edgar Road-Birnie Road link (or equivalent). Establishing a hierarchy would help manage traffic demand and control flows, particularly at key junctions where turning movements are a significant factor in causing congestion.

- 2.11 It is important to note that the hierarchy concept could include recognition of the dual function of the A96 as both a strategic and local road. Improvements would require the cooperation of the Scottish Executive and it is perhaps this which should be the subject of representations to them in the short to medium term rather than the immediate pursuit of a bypass. This would not diminish the long term objective of a bypass of Elgin, but it would aim to provide some relief from traffic congestion along the A96 in the foreseeable future.
- 2.12 The report also recommends detailed investigation of possible one-way systems around Elgin town centre, involving trunk road and local traffic. If implemented, such a scheme would require appropriate one-way provisions and control of all roads within the proposed gyratory. This would have a major impact on traffic circulation in the town as a whole.
- 2.13 The Elgin Traffic Model, which was developed in 1997 and has been continually updated since, is nearing the end of its useful life. To allow robust analysis of the measures proposed in the report, and to enable a holistic view of alternative packages of improvements to be taken, the data in the SATURN model would have to be completely up-dated. The existing model is adequate for the work needed to conclude the road infrastructure requirements for the Elgin South development proposals. It will be necessary to analyse future road requirements related to planning applications and also as input to the review of the Local Transport Strategy and the Development Plan.
- 2.14 Whilst the assessment of the Babbie Group has been carried out independently, and aspects within it could be questioned, officials are in broad agreement with the general findings, conclusions and recommendations for the way forward.
- 2.15 A further remit of the previous Minute referred to in para 2.1 was that Officers should meet with representatives of the Scottish Executive to discuss a way forward. This meeting took place in May 2003 and was constructive but little support was found for promoting a bypass of Elgin on technical grounds at this time. In response to a request from officers for a joint study between the Council and the Scottish Executive to assess traffic problems and determine solutions along the trunk route through Elgin, a “willingness to engage in working together” was offered but it was stated that neither funding, nor even staff resources, could be committed at this stage. It was agreed that, subject to the agreement of this Committee, the Council should submit justification to the Scottish Executive for funding a joint study of A96 problems. (This might include a contribution to traffic modelling for Elgin, or alternatively additional work to be carried out on an earlier A96 study commissioned by the Scottish Executive some 4 or 5 years ago). If this request for further investigation is successful, then a STAG 2 appraisal may be required at a later stage to obtain support from the Scottish Executive, particularly if funding is sought for improvements on, or impacting on the

A96. The Scottish Executive Officials made it clear that they would be considering Elgin's problems in a Scotland-wide context.

- 2.16 In the March 2002 report to this Committee it was also agreed that tenders should be invited to renew the term contract for traffic consultancy work. It was agreed that the current negotiated contract with the Babbie Group could be extended to cover existing or urgent consultations and this has been used to provide on-going development control advice with Elgin South and other major development proposals. It would be an appropriate time to re-tender in the near future when Elgin South road requirements, and some other Transport Assessments relating to current planning applications, have been agreed.
- 2.17 The Babbie Group STAG 1 report is attached as an **Appendix** to this report.

3. Proposals

- 3.1 It is proposed that the Committee notes the contents of the STAG 1 report from the Babbie Group relating to an Elgin Bypass and other traffic management options in Elgin which concludes that a bypass would not provide a significant benefit to strategic road users nor to inhabitants of Elgin, such that a bypass should be pursued as a long term objective within a strategy to provide network improvements to support the development of Elgin.
- 3.2 It is proposed that proposals be prepared and presented to the Scottish Executive Officials to engage their support and contribution towards studies, assessments and short or medium term solutions along the trunk road route through Elgin. This would include the development of an updated or replacement traffic modelling for analysis of congestion and new developments.
- 3.3 It is proposed that tenders be invited covering a suitable period from experienced Consultants to assist the Council with traffic consultancy work.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 The cost of carrying out study works to date, and the further developments proposed can be funded through several items in the Capital Plan for 2003/04, namely
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| - Transportation studies (part) | (unallocated £20,166) |
| - Wards Road link | £ 50,000 |
| - Elgin Traffic Management & car parking (part) | £300,000 |
| - Elgin Bypass – carry/forward from 2002/03 | £ 24,000 |

5. Staffing Implications

- 5.1 There are significant staffing implications in developing traffic solutions for the congestion and development led infrastructural projects which will be addressed in a subsequent report to this Committee.

6. Corporate Plan

- 6.1 The report supports a strategic objective of the environmental programme to maintain and improve the existing roads network.

7. Consultations

- 7.1 The Principal Planning Officer has been consulted and his comments are contained within the report.
- 7.2 Head of Financial Services has been consulted and concurs with the contents of the report.

9. Recommendations

- 9.1 It is recommended that the Committee notes the contents of the STAG 1 report from the Babbie Group relating to an Elgin Bypass and other traffic management options in Elgin which concludes that a bypass would not provide a significant benefit to strategic road users nor to inhabitants of Elgin, such that a bypass should be pursued as a long term objective within a strategy to provide network improvements to support the development of Elgin.**
- 9.2 It is recommended that proposals be prepared and presented to the Scottish Executive Officials to engage their support and contribution towards studies, assessments and short or medium term solutions along the trunk road route through Elgin. This would include the development of an updated or replacement traffic modelling for analysis of congestion and new developments.**
- 9.3 It is recommended that tenders be invited covering a suitable period from experienced Consultants to assist the Council with traffic consultancy work.**

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Background Papers:

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