

## The A83 at the Rest and Be Thankful – time to look at Norway

### Description

Catch-pit 3B construction progress in September 2022



The catch pits at the Rest and Be Thankful have had limited success despite their ever increasing size. Yesterday, the A83 was again closed due to forecast rain which could precipitate further landslips. Photo Credit Transport Scotland – from presentation to A83 taskforce

Generally, Scotland should not be investing in new roads. The world does not appear to have sufficient reserves of minerals to replace fossil fuel powered vehicles with electric ones and we need therefore to replace private car use with public transport. That means fewer vehicles on the roads and little need to expand the vehicle capacity of existing routes. The green thing for the Scottish Government to do, for example, would be to drop the project to dual the A9 and instead upgrade the railway whose capacity is extremely limited since most of it is single track.

Although road traffic has to reduce if we are to address the climate emergency, we still need an effective road network. That means we do still need some major investments in roads, with the A83 at the Rest and Be Thankful being the most pressing example in Scotland.

## Transport Scotland's "medium terms solution" at the Rest and Be Thankful

Just before Xmas, Transport Scotland announced ([see here](#)) a £30m package of improvements to the Old Military Rd. This is now used as an alternative route along the floor of Glen Croe when the main A83 above is shut due to the landslip risk.

An article in the Scotsman contains an excellent video ([see here](#)) showing how landslips on the slopes of Beinn Luibhean also threaten the Old Military Road. Hence why Transport Scotland's announced improvement programme includes "landslips debris catch fences, temporary bunds, drainage improvements and widening and discrete realignment to improve bends and avoid flooding".

What Transport Scotland did not make clear in their announcement is that this is their official "medium term solution" to the problems at the Rest and Be Thankful. There were several other options being considered, including an upgrade to the forest road on the other side of Glen Croe, which had been suggested by the A83 Taskforce. Under Transport Scotland's solution a section of the Old Military Road (OMR) will remain single track. As John Gurr, chair of the A83 Action Group put it in the Scotsman, this means "we would still not have a two-way road open when it rains for at least the next ten years."

The minutes of the most recent meeting of the A83 Taskforce in September ([see here](#)), show that ordinary members asked why Transport Scotland could not go ahead with "the green (forestry) route"? Transport Scotland avoided a direct answer but instead stated "that proposals for the medium term solution will be announced by the end of the year". They are now saying they will provide "more details of the improvements planned to the OMR at the next A83 Taskforce meeting in Argyll in January".

It appears that the views of the A83 Taskforce, chaired by the Minister for Transport Jenny Gilruth, are ignored by Transport Scotland who continue to dilly dally and at enormous cost. The outcome of this was well summarised at the last meeting of the taskforce by Iain MacInnes from Lochgoil Community Council who stated: "we're no further forward than we were 10 years ago".

Although packaged as good news, Transport Scotland's announcement provides confirmation that all their expenditure to date on trying to keep the A83 open has been ineffective and a waste of public money. Whether the £30m to "improve" a 2km section of what is currently single track road is any more effective or better value remains to be seen. The proposed work, however, will effectively destroy most of the historic value of the Old Military Road and further blight the landscape in Glen Croe, one of Scotland's most damaged glens.

## Where is the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) in this?

The LLTNPA, which is legally responsible for protecting both cultural and natural landscapes, has – as it has done over the last twenty years with the A83 at the Rest and Be Thankful – kept its silence. Gordon Watson, the Chief Executive of the LLTNPA, was at the September meeting of A83 Taskforce but is not recorded as having made a single contribution. Meanwhile, no-one from the LLTNPA was

recorded as having attended the March meeting.

Having taken no interest in how overgrazing has contributed the landslip problem and failure to push for sheep to be removed from the slopes above the A83 ([see here](#)), one might have hoped that the LLTNPA would have something to say about the planting programme that is now underway. But unfortunately they do not employ sufficient staff with either landscape or ecological expertise. To make matters worse, when it comes to Transport Scotland, the LLTNPA continues to abdicate their responsibilities as they have done with the disastrous proposals to widen the A82 along Loch Lomond ([see here](#)).

## **The likely long-term solution for the Rest and Be Thankful and lessons from Norway**

Transport Scotland are due to announce their preferred long term solution to the problems at the Rest and Be Thankful in the Spring, having awarded a £25m design and oversee contract to Atkins WSP Joint Venture in August ([see here](#)). Transport Scotland and their consultants are supposed to be looking at five options, including tunnels. Interestingly, they chose to float one of these to the Scotsman:

*“a new 2.7-mile road that would cross the glen and Croe Water over a 200m viaduct, along with landslip debris flow shelters”.*

Why? The most likely reason is this is that building a 200m viaduct along the middle of Glen Croe and landslip shelters is now their preferred option and the reason for that is probably because it is believed to be a cheaper option than a tunnel which they have estimated to cost c£900m.

Norway now has a massive road tunnelling programme, intended to connect up the whole country. You can read a summary [here](#) which includes a number of investment projects, for example:

- “The Norwegian Public Roads Administration and Bane NOR are preparing to start up the E16 and Vossebanen Arna-Stanghelle in 2024. The project involves the construction of a 36 km road tunnel and a 26 km railway tunnel, divided into three tunnel sections with tunnel lengths between 8 and 10 km. In this project, the road and railway tunnels will provide common solutions for evacuation in the event of fire and accidents. The existing road has a high risk of landslides, in addition to many traffic accidents. The cost estimate for the road development is NOK 1,4 billion Euro.

Eighteen months ago 36km of road tunnel in Norway was due to cost 1,400,000,000 euros. That is 38,888,888 euros a kilometre, let's call it 40m euros per km. By my reckoning a tunnel under Beinn Luibhean would be about 4km in length but let's play safe and allow for 5km. In Norway, a tunnel of that length could apparently be constructed for under 200m euros (£180m) despite the much higher labour costs there. There are reasons for this ([see here](#)), including the “Norwegian tunnelling method” which is apparently far more advanced than anything used in other countries.

It might be thought positive therefore that the minutes of the March A83 Taskforce meeting show that Transport Scotland had been in talks with Norway:

*“DR summarised the recent meetings Transport Scotland have had with the Norwegian Public Roads Administration (NPRA) and confirmed that Norway use a very similar process to the UK in terms of options assessment, statutory process, procurement and construction. A Representative of the NPRA also confirmed that a timescale of 7 to 10 years for a long term solution was reasonable for a project of this scale.”*

Note the emphasis on process, there is nothing about why costs are far lower in Norway than the £900m Transport Scotland has been bandying about. Why is it that what is possible in Norway appears so impossible in Scotland? Transport Scotland need to explain themselves, preferably in front of the Scottish Parliament.

Many people are unaware that Scotland once assumed the position that Norway now has. The hydro tunnel connecting Loch Treig to the Fort William aluminium smelter constructed in the 1920s was at the time the longest in the world. In the 1950s we constructed hydro tunnels under mountains with scarcely a thought. Unfortunately, we are now way behind and Transport Scotland need to ask the Norwegian tunnellers to teach us them they do things. They are doing this in other countries such as Chile and it would be far easier for them to bring their machinery and expertise across to Scotland.

## **A tunnel at the Rest and Be Thankful should be the only option on the table**

A tunnel under Beinn Luibhean is the obvious solution to the problems at the Rest and Be Thankful and as Norway shows eminently affordable. Had it been chosen 10 years ago, the problems at the Rest and Be Thankful would now have been addressed. It would only require a fraction of the budget was set aside to dual the A9 and, despite calls to upgrade that route for safety reasons ([see here](#)) is a far more pressing priority with Transport Scotland openly stating their medium term solution cannot guarantee that a road through Glen Croe will remain open at all times.

What's more, a tunnel would minimise the destruction of the landscape in Glen Croe. What price our National Parks? It's time that the LLTNPA spoke out.

### **Category**

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

### **Tags**

1. landscape
2. LLTNPA
3. public transport
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