

Trunk roads and Scotland's National Parks (2) – dualling the A9 through the Cairngorms National Park

Description

A few days before Transport Scotland's latest plans for the Rest and Be Thankful were launched ([see here](#)), Fergus Ewing MSP was in the news calling for the dualling of the A9 to be speeded up. Just as with the proposals for the A83, there was no mention of the fact a significant part of the A9 lies within a National Park or the implications of that.

Fergus Ewing's arguments about dualling the A9

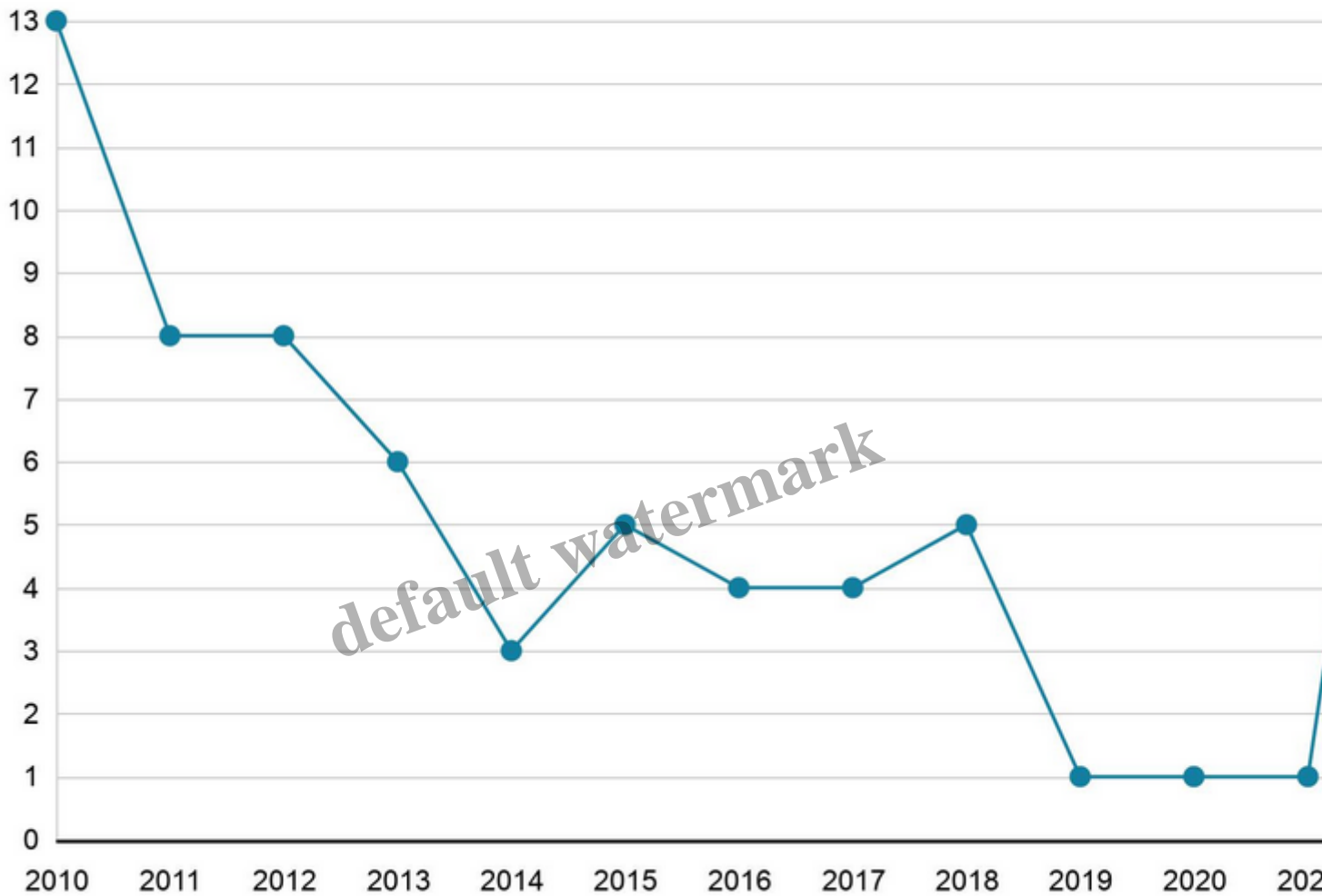
The Scottish Government committed to dualling the A9 in December 2011 and to complete the work by 2025 ([see here](#)). Mr Ewing blames the Bute House deal, signed between the SNP and Greens in August 2021, for the delays. That is not credible. The agreement stated "*work on other trunk roads projects and programmes under construction, design, development or procurement [part from the A96] will continue and be subject to the normal statutory assessment and business case processes*". It has also only been in existence two years, compared to the eleven and a half years for the A9 dualling project, during which time the Scottish Government has invested £430m out of a projected budget of £3bn (2008 prices). This shows the project was well behind schedule whatever influence the Greens may have had.

Mr Ewing also used the recent spate of deaths on the A9 to claim that the dualling delays was costing lives. There were 13 deaths on the Perth to Inverness section last year, 12 of which were on the single carriage sections. The long-term statistics, however, show ([see here](#)) that whatever the safety benefits of dual carriageways, this cannot be more than part of the explanation:

Deaths on the A9

Inverness to Perth

● Fatalities



Source: Scottish government

2014 was the year average speed cameras were introduced and for a time it appears they had a significant impact. So, what has caused the death rates – every one is a tragedy – to go up again?

In calling on the Scottish Government to speed up the dualling of the A9 both Mr Ewing and Kate Forbes MSP, who supported him, failed to say anything about the Highland Mainline Railway, much of which is still SINGLE TRACK. This affect both the frequency of the service (hourly after after upgrades in 2019 and the length of time the train journey takes ([see here](#))).



The single track line at Newtonmore . Many of the dualled sections of the Highland Line were removed in the 1960s. The single track without any passing place helps explain why so few trains stop at Newtonmore and prevents the development of any local train service linking the various Speyside villages which help local residents and visitors.

Unlike the A9, the proposals for electrifying the Highland Main Line which is in many respects in a worse state than it was in the 19th century do not even have a date ([see here](#)). A fully dualled and electrified line would enable a far better train service and help to reduce the number of vehicles on the A9, something that Mr Ewing never mentions.

The A9 and the Cairngorms National Park

The Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA)'s National Park Partnership Plan (NPPP) 2022-27 was underpinned by a series of fact sheets (a welcome contrast to the Loch Lomond and Trossachs

National Park Authority's draft NPPP which is currently out for consultation and is mostly based on thin air ([see here](#)). The CNPA's fact sheets included one on transport which started as follows:



Transport Infrastructure

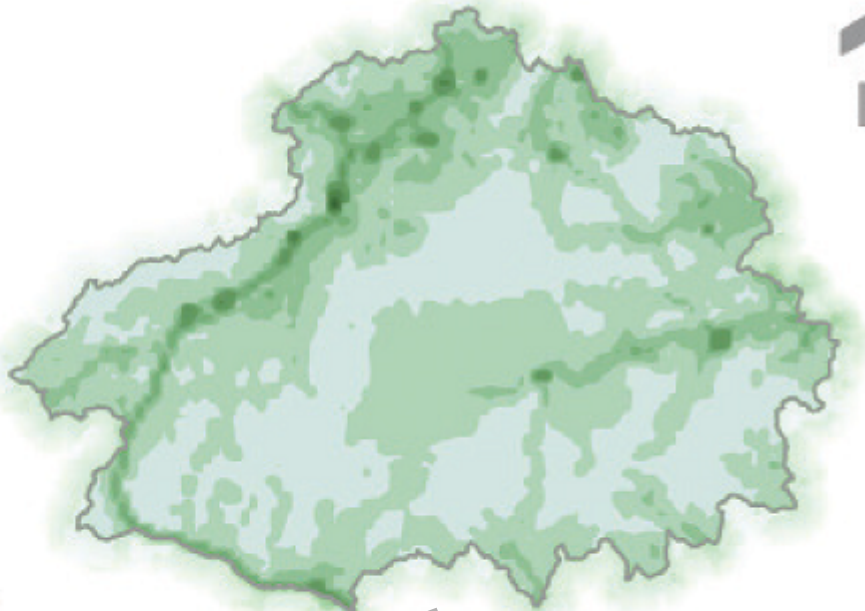
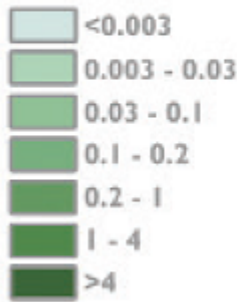
The National Park benefits from relatively good major transport infrastructure links compared to many other rural areas in Scotland. A mainline railway between Perth and Inverness and four A Class roads (A9, A93, A95 and A86) connect the area with Highland, Moray, Aberdeenshire, Perth and Kinross and the west of Scotland (see map below). Of the A roads, one is subject to a current improvement project. The A9 Dualling Strategy aims to link existing sections of dual carriageway to create a continuous dual carriageway between Inverness and Perth:

<https://www.transport.gov.scot/projects/a9-dualling-perth-to-inverness/>

This point raises the important question of what should be given greater priority, fixing the problems of the A83 through the Rest and Be Thankful and the A82 along Loch Lomond, for example, or dualling the A9? Perhaps Kate Forbes, who represents Lochaber as well as Speyside, could say which she believes is more important?

The fact sheet also included interesting information about particulate emissions from vehicles:

Emissions of PM10 in tonnes in the Park in 2016



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The dark green line round the western boundary of the National Park marks the A9.

The emissions in the National, while well below levels in Scottish cities, are highest along the A9. Dualling it so average vehicle speed and fuel consumption rises can only make the problem worse. Those who believe that electric vehicles will address this problem need to be able to explain how many electric vehicles will be using the A9 in fifteen years time? As a result of the cost of electric cars and the shortage of rare metals required for battery use, it is likely that traffic will drop significantly in the next two decades. That means investment in dualling yet more roads is likely to be a waste of money long-term.

The CNPA recognised in its NPPP that private car use would reduce in future:

C7. Transport to and around the Park

How people get to and move around the Cairngorms is going to be one of the biggest changes in the National Park over the coming years.

There is a need to improve public transport to cater for residents, commuters and visitors, and to move to a hub and spokes model (where one central 'hub' location caters for lots of smaller 'spokes') for key visitor destinations.

There will be less use of private cars in future and a need to look at site-specific solutions for key areas of the National Park, such as Glenmore. And we need to make it easier for people to get to work in the National Park more sustainably.

This is a key issue for the Cairngorms and one which we need to focus on to achieve our net zero and visitor management objectives. There is a need to ensure that work in the National Park follows the hierarchy of transport needs as set out in the National Transport Strategy.

And that the priority was to improve public transport:



Unfortunately, it mainly focused on behaviour change rather than investment as a means of enabling this shift:

2

Transport is more sustainable

People increasingly choose to leave their car at home, with residents and visitors being more active and making regular use of low and zero carbon transport.

And it copped out on the dualling of the A9, no doubt to avoid falling into a political hornet's nest, despite what was recommended in the Environmental Impact Assessment that preceded the NPPP:

A9 Dualling Strategy (Transport Scotland)	The project involves the upgrade of 80 miles of single carriageway along the A9 between Perth and Inverness by 2025.	- All Topics	The plan will need to consider the effects of the dualling on the aims of the National Park and how this will influence the proposals in the NPPP.
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Instead of stating that any further dualling of the A9 through the Cairngorms National Park should consider all of its statutory aims, policy C1 of the NPPP lends support to improvements in both the roads and the rail network:

“Supporting sensitively-designed improvements to the A9 and other trunk roads and the main railway line as an integral part of enhancing the connectivity of the Highlands.

This policy avoids saying which is the more important:

Policy C3 re-iterates the landscape point, “Ensuring road upgrades and improvements respond to local landscape character”, but says nothing about the likely impact on the CNPA’s other objectives. . For example, if the A9 dualling goes ahead it will blow the CNPA’s targets for reaching net zero out of the water.

The targets for transport in the NPPP are not fit for purpose:



- 20% of current journeys by visitors, commuters and residents within the National Park do not take place by car by 2030.
- Increase active travel and public transport usage within the National Park.
- 25% of visitors get to the National Park by public transport by 2045.
- E-bike and adapted bike hire and charging facilities will be available in all main settlements and major visitor hubs by 2030.
- Key public transport options will have capacity for people to bring bikes to the National Park by 2030.

What climate emergency if in 22 years time just a quarter of visitors to the Cairngorms National Park are expected to arrive by public transport? There is a yawning gap between the objectives set out in the plan and the spin:

“Meeting the objectives within this Partnership Plan will mean hard choices need to be made. There are ambitious targets to increase the number of affordable houses, improve active travel and public transport, reduce deer numbers This is not tinkering around the edges, this is fundamental change that we need to see and support.”

What needs to happen with the A9 dualling project?

Given the climate emergency and that private car use will have to reduce in future, ditching the A9 dualling project shouldn't be a hard choice but instead, under pressure from Mr Ewing, the Scottish Government has committed to announce an update on how it is progressing its current plans in the Autumn. As long as the Scottish Government, including the Greens, remain on the defensive and fails either to make the arguments about where the priorities for road improvements should lie Scotland-wide or promote an alternative vision for public transport along the A9 corridor, they are likely to remain on a hiding to nothing.

It is clear some road improvements are needed across Scotland, including sections of the A9 north of Inverness and at some of the road junctions between Inverness and Perth. However, because of the climate emergency, we need a modal shift to public transport and to find alternative solutions to dual carriageways as a means of reducing the carnage caused by cars. A National Park worth its name should be able to say simply and openly that the A9 dualling project needs to be dropped and counteract the misinformation being put out by the likes of Mr Ewing.

A positive vision would put upgrading the Highland Mainline, from single to dual track and from diesel to electric, at the heart of future investment. The Scottish Government should be aiming for a minimum train service of once every half hour between Perth and Inverness supplemented by a 15 minute local shuttle service through Speyside, from Dalwhinnie to Carrbridge, with connecting electric buses to Cairn Gorm and places like Laggan. Such a service would enable the majority of visitors to Speyside to arrive and enjoy the area by public transport by 2045 and help many local residents of the National

Park to leave their cars at home. Why do those in power appear to incapable of developing such a vision?

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. public transport
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