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North transport needs must be addressed

The Scottish Government announced their future focused transport strategy last month with great flourish and loud acclamation.

On its launch, net zero, energy and transport minister Michael Matheson stated "the investment decisions we make now have never been more important", something I'm sure we can agree with.

Most of us in the north will, I suspect, take issue with his subsequent comments that the review "takes a balanced and fair approach to all modes of transport, and all areas of Scotland." We would more likely identify with residents on Mull, whose response to the

suggestion of a tunnel connecting them to the mainland was a sharp: "We need the ferry fixed now!"

Our city and region is thriving and we have an increasingly diverse and strong businesses base. In addition, we have a growing ambition, reflected in our aspirations for our region's key role in the development of offshore wind, renewable energy and green hydrogen production. However, I can't help but feel we achieve all that despite of, rather than because of, our region's transport infrastructure.

I agree with HIE's new chief executive, Stuart Black, when he recently argued for key stretches of the A96 road to be upgraded and stated: "Dualling the A9 Inverness – Perth route is vital to making the north an economic powerhouse."

And that future is upon us.

The A9 Dualling was announced in 2011 when Scottish Government ministers when they committed to dual 80 miles of road between Inverness and Perth by 2025. We are now around 80 per cent through that timeframe. Of the 11 sections planned, only two have been upgraded to dual carriageway. Only 10½ of the planned 80 miles of dual carriageway have been laid, just 13 per cent of the total. None of us need civil engineering degrees to conclude it is going to be "tight".



Despite promises to cut train journey times, they remain substantially the same.

You have to search the new document for any mention of the Inverness– Perth rail line, the Highland Main Line (HML). Three years before the A9 dualling commitment, First Minister Alex Salmond told a Highland audience that within four years HML journey times would drop to two hours 45 minutes. In the intervening 13 years, nothing substantive has changed and journey times remain similar to when the commitment was made.

However, half way down page one, is perhaps Transport Scotland's first statement of clear intent: "Mass transit in our city regions of Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen..."

While such reviews inevitably focus on our cities, I would argue

other factors such as a region's economic potential, the strength of its business community and variety of commercial activity must also feature strongly. If the review truly is to take account of "all modes of transport and all regions of Scotland", Inverness and the Highlands needs delivery on existing transport projects and recognition of past commitments, in addition to aspirations for a transport future we can all believe in, and commit to.

Fundamentally, we need a transport infrastructure which supports our region to deliver on everything those of us who do business here know it can achieve. Inverness Chamber of Commerce will continue to campaign for this.

I can't help but feel we achieve all that we do in the north despite of, rather than because of, our region's transport infrastructure.

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