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A96 Corridor Review

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Draft Environmental Report Non-Technical Summary

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of Summary

1.1.1 The purpose of this document is to provide a non-technical summary of the A96 Corridor Review Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Draft Environmental Report.

1.2 Background

1.2.1 In August 2021, it was agreed by the Scottish Government to take forward a transport enhancements programme on the A96 corridor that improves connectivity between surrounding towns, tackles congestion and addresses safety and environmental issues.

1.2.2 Whilst the current plan is to fully dual the A96 route, it was agreed as part of this process there would be a transparent, evidence-based review of the programme, to include a climate compatibility assessment to assess direct and indirect impacts on the climate and the environment. Other statutory assessments would also be undertaken which include a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Statutory Impact Assessments (SIAs).

1.2.3 As it has already received Ministerial consent following a Public Local Inquiry, dualling of the A96 from Inverness to Nairn as well as a bypass of Nairn is separate from the wider A96 review process.

1.2.4 The A96 Corridor Review is being carried out in accordance with the Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG). STAG is the best practice, objective-led approach to transport appraisal. The transport appraisal has considered all relevant transport modes within the A96 corridor, including active travel, public transport, rail and roads-based transport modes. Adopting STAG also brings the review in line with the same methodology as set out in the Second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2).

1.2.5 The A96 Corridor Review is being carried out by design consultants Jacobs AECOM acting on behalf of Transport Scotland. Jacobs AECOM supported Transport Scotland undertaking STPR2. The review considers transport problems and opportunities within the A96 corridor. It also looks at the changing policy context and other key considerations, such as development and growth aims for the corridor and surrounding area. Additionally, it considers the impact of the global climate emergency and the COVID-19 pandemic on how people work and travel within the corridor.

1.3 Background to the A96 Corridor Review SEA

1.3.1 In 2015, a Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB) Stage 1 Assessment for the initial development and assessment of broadly defined improvement strategies for the upgrade of the A96 to an all-purpose dual carriageway was published. A two-phased SEA was also carried out at this time, with reports published in 2014[1] and 2015[2], and the Post Adoption Statement published in 2016[3]. There was a need to undertake a new SEA Screening in 2022, to help determine whether a new SEA was required for the A96 Corridor Review. This SEA Screening Report concluded that a new SEA would be required, to establish the likely significant environmental effects of the A96 Corridor Review.

1.4 SEA Requirements

1.4.1 SEA is a means of systematically assessing Plans, Programmes or Strategies (PPS) that are likely to have significant environmental effects, if implemented. An SEA 'screening' exercise determined that the A96 Corridor Review could also potentially lead to significant environmental effects in the same way that PPS could (see A96 Corridor Review Strategic Environmental Assessment Screening Report[4]).

1.4.2 SEA aims to offer greater protection to the environment by ensuring public bodies (in this case, Transport Scotland) and those organisations preparing plans of a 'public character' consider and address the likely significant environmental effects. The approach to the A96 Corridor Review SEA is described in Section 3. The consultation process for this SEA is summarised in Section 6.

1.5 Related Assessments

1.5.1 Where not already covered by assessments for other Plans, Programmes and Strategies, the A96 Corridor Review is accompanied by other environmental-related impact assessments. These comprise the SEA, a strategic-level Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) and a non-statutory Climate Compatibility Assessment (CCA).

1.5.2 The Stage 1 (Screening) in the HRA process could not rule out significant effects on 11 European sites, designated for their biodiversity importance. The next stage in the HRA process, Stage 2 (Appropriate Assessment), is therefore required for these 11 European Sites. This Appropriate Assessment will be undertaken when a final set of interventions has been determined, to avoid unnecessary appraisal of interventions which may be removed from consideration at a later stage and not recommended to be progressed.

1.5.3 The CCA found that the existing transport appraisal and assessment processes applied to the A96 Corridor Review, including the associated Transport Planning Objectives (TPOs), shows a strong alignment with the CCA criteria developed. Where interventions are taken forward that have combined outcomes, such as where they affect the same settlement, they should be developed to optimise for lowest carbon and best climate resilience and adaptation outcome. Cumulative effects will also need to be assessed, including for relevant schemes that are already consented.

1.5.4 The need for various other assessments, including an Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA)[4], Fairer Scotland Duty Assessment (FSDA)[5] and Child Rights and Wellbeing Assessment (CRWIA)[6] was determined through consultation on a separate Social and Equalities Impact Assessment Scoping Report. A Partial Business and Regulatory Impact Assessment (BRIA)[7] has also been prepared. The Equality Impact Assessments and the Partial BRIA will be published for consultation at the same time as this Draft Environmental Report. An Island Communities Impact Assessment (ICIA) has not been undertaken due to the geographic location of the A96 corridor.

1.5.5 The various social-related Impact Assessments and the Partial BRIA will need to be updated when Full Dualling or any transport packages are taken forward to the next stages of design.

2. A96 Corridor Review Summary

2.1 Corridor Overview

2.1.1 The Inverness to Aberdeen transport corridor passes through the council areas of Highland, Moray, Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City. The corridor includes a number of settlements, including Inverness, Nairn, Forres, Elgin, Fochabers, Keith, Huntly, Inverurie, Kintore, and Aberdeen. These settlements are linked by the A96 Trunk Road, which provides strategic road connectivity between urban and rural areas. The surrounding environment is predominantly rural, with extensive areas of agricultural land, sensitive designated natural heritage areas and a significant number of cultural heritage features, including battlefields, scheduled monuments and listed buildings. The corridor is subject to flood risk from surface water and coastal flooding.

2.2 Appraisal

2.2.1 The appraisal process for the A96 Corridor Review is being carried out in three phases and has considered all relevant transport modes within the A96 corridor, including active travel, public transport, rail and roads-based transport. The Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG) stages to be completed for the review are:

- Preliminary Options Appraisal
- Detailed Options Appraisal
- Monitoring and Evaluation Plan.

2.2.2 More detail on each of these stages is provided in the main Environmental Report.

2.3 Preliminary and Detailed Appraisal Process

2.3.1 Sixteen transport intervention options were assessed at the Preliminary Appraisal stage. As the current plan is to fully dual the A96 route between Inverness and Aberdeen, it was considered appropriate that the A96 Full Dualling option should be progressed to the Detailed Appraisal stage as it has already been the subject of a Preliminary Appraisal undertaken in 2014 that established the Inverness to Aberdeen Corridor Study A96 Dualling Inverness to Aberdeen Strategic Business Case. Early in the Preliminary Appraisal process, it was also identified that the Active Hubs option would clearly align with and sit within Transport Scotland's Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2) recommendation 22 (Framework for Delivery of Mobility Hubs), and therefore this was determined to be the most appropriate mechanism by which to progress this option at a national level.

2.3.2 At the Preliminary Appraisal stage, there was an 'option cleaning' process, which removed a significant number of duplicate options. Following on from this cleaning process, a total of 227 options were retained as part of the 'cleaned' long list of options that was used as an input into the option sifting process. The option sifting also removed many more options, for a variety of reasons, including options that were out of scope, did not address regional problems or opportunities or deliverability concerns.

2.3.3 Following the Preliminary Appraisal, options that remained in consideration progressed to Detailed Appraisal. At this stage, multimodal 'packages' were developed in line with STAG, with an 'area-based' approach to group options together in order to enhance characteristics in locations with a similar nature throughout the A96 corridor. Options were therefore assessed in the Detailed Appraisal as packages of interventions, and from hereon will be referred to simply as packages.

2.3.4 Although each package was appraised individually, where appropriate and relevant, a number of individual options are included in more than one package.

2.3.5 An assessment of the benefits and contribution of the individual options to the performance of the overall packages was undertaken as part of the STAG appraisal. This has included additional detailed assessment using the available transport models to examine the impact of those options that could be represented in the models on an individual basis and determine what proportion of the total benefits they would provide.

2.3.6 The additional assessments allowed the better performing options to be identified and these were combined to form an additional package, referred to as the Refined Package. This package was developed to maximise the level of potential benefits provided by combining the best performing options, whilst optimising investment within the corridor and delivering value for money.

2.3.7 A full description of the A96 Corridor Review appraisal process is provided in the A96 Corridor Review Strategic Business Case Transport Appraisal Report.[5]

2.3.8 The transport interventions included in each package are listed in Table 2.1. In addition to the packages listed in Table 2.1, full dualling was also assessed in the SEA. The results of the assessment are summarised in Section 7 of this Non-Technical Summary.

Table notes:

* Active Communities are only considered within the bypassed communities of Forres, Elgin, Keith and Inverurie, as well as Nairn, as this would be bypassed through the A96 Dualling Inverness to Nairn (including Nairn Bypass).

** Active Communities are only considered within the settlements and along the A96 Trunk Road sections related to Package 2, specifically Lhanbryde, Mosstodloch, Fochabers, Huntly, Kintore and Blackburn.

*** Active Communities are considered in the settlements of Nairn, Forres, Elgin, Lhanbryde, Mosstodloch, Fochabers, Keith, Huntly, Inverurie, Kintore and Blackburn.

Table 2.1: A96 Corridor Review Transport Packages and Interventions

	Package 1	Package 2	Package 3	Package 4	Package 5	Refined Package
Active Communities	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Active Connections			✓	✓	✓	
Bus Priority Measures and Park & Ride	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Improved Public Transport Passenger Interchange Facilities	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Investment in DRT and MaaS	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Introduce Rail Freight Terminals				✓	✓	
Linespeed, Passenger and Freight Capacity Improvements on the Aberdeen to Inverness Rail Line	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Targeted Road Safety Improvements		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Forres Bypass	✓				✓	
Elgin Bypass	✓				✓	✓
Keith Bypass	✓				✓	✓
Inverurie Bypass	✓				✓	
A96 Electric Corridor	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

3. SEA Approach

3.1 Assessment Overview

3.1.1 The SEA process has considerable overlap with the appraisal of the 'Environment' criterion within the wider STAG appraisal. The same topic specialists therefore worked on both appraisals and the results of the STAG environment criterion appraisal directly fed into the SEA for all environmental topics and their corresponding 'SEA Objectives', as listed in Section 3.3. The appraisal of the STAG 'Health, Safety and Wellbeing' criterion also fed into the SEA topic of Population and Human Health, specifically the SEA objective relating to safety.

3.2 Scope of Assessment and SEA Objectives

3.2.1 This SEA has developed a suite of 'SEA objectives' for each of the environmental topics listed in Scotland's SEA Regulations. SEA practitioners have used these objectives to assess all key components of the A96 Corridor Review, in particular, the transport packages and interventions. It has therefore aimed to have a positive environmental influence at each of the key stages of the A96 Corridor Review, as listed in Section 2.2.

3.2.2 The SEA objectives fall under the following topics:

- Climatic Factors – including two separate objectives, one for greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction and one for climate adaptation
- Air Quality
- Population and Human Health – including four separate objectives covering the topics of quality of life, noise and vibration, high-quality places and safety
- Material Assets - including two separate objectives, one relating to the sustainability of the transport network and one for reducing use of natural resources
- Water Environment
- Biodiversity
- Geology and Soils
- Cultural Heritage
- Landscape and Visual Amenity

3.3 Assessment Approach

3.3.1 As part of the STAG assessment process, the A96 corridor interventions require assessment under environmental and climate change criteria. These criteria and related sub-criteria are very similar to the SEA topics and objectives. The STAG appraisal and SEA appraisal are broadly consistent with each other, except where SEA objectives cover different topics to the STAG criteria.

3.3.2 The cumulative assessment has been summarised in a narrative for Full Dualling, each Package of transport interventions and for each SEA topic in Section 7.3 of this Non-Technical Summary. All assessments are limited to a high-level commentary due to the early stage and strategic nature of the design.

3.3.3 The SEA assessment process has used a similar rating system for the assessment of packages as the STAG appraisal. The SEA rating system was developed to align with the STAG rating system to ensure consistency of approach.

Table 3.1: Rating system for likely significant effects

Rating	Descriptions	Colour Rating
Major Positive Effect	The option has a major contribution to the achievement of the SEA objective	Major Positive
Moderate Positive Effect	The option has a moderate s contribution to the achievement of the SEA objective	Moderate Positive
Minor Positive Effect	The option has a minor to the achievement of the SEA objective but not significantly	Minor Positive
Neutral Effect	The option is related to but does not have any effect on the achievement of the SEA objective	Neutral
Uncertain Effect	The option could contribute or detract from the achievement of the SEA objective but this will depend on factors such as design and how the option is implemented. In addition, insufficient information may be available to enable an assessment to be made	Uncertain
Minor Negative Effect	The option detracts from the achievement of the SEA objective but not significantly	Minor Negative
Moderate Negative Effect	The option moderately detracts from the achievement of the objective. Mitigation is therefore required	Moderate Negative
Major Negative Effect	The option significantly detracts from the achievement of the objective. Mitigation is therefore required	Major Negative

3.4 Cumulative Effects Assessment

3.4.1 Cumulative effects have been considered at both intra-plan (the impact of a combination of transport intervention options) and the inter-plan (the impact of the plan alongside other plans and policies) levels. The cumulative effects are described in Section 7.

4. Policy Context

4.1 Overview

4.1.1 The A96 Corridor Review is undertaken within the context of national, regional and local Plans, Programmes and Strategies (PPS) in Scotland. A comprehensive review of PPS from national, regional and local levels is provided in the Draft Environmental Report Appendix B (Plans, Programmes and Strategies Review). These include, but are not limited to:

- National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4)
- National Transport Strategy 2 (NTS2)
- Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 (STPR2)
- Climate Change Plan Update
- Reducing Car Use for a Healthier, Fairer and Greener Scotland
- Regional Transport Strategies for the North East of Scotland 2040 (Nestrans) and Highlands and Islands (HITRANS)
- Local Transport Strategies and Local Development Plans.

5. Baseline Summary

5.1 Overview

5.1.1 The environmental study area considered is a 15km-wide corridor (7.5km either side of the existing A96).

5.2 Baseline Summaries by SEA Topic

Overview

5.2.1 Environmental designations are located throughout the study area. The number of environmental designations is notably higher at the western end, particularly between Inverness and Huntly where several designations cover a large area. The full extent of the Moray Firth coastline within the study area has national environmental protection. The study area crosses the River Spey at Fochabers; the river is designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Area (SPA), internationally designated Ramsar wetland site and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for much of its length.

5.2.2 There are no areas of national landscape protection, such as National Scenic Areas or National Parks, within the study area.

5.2.3 A summary of the key baseline findings for each SEA topic is provided in the following sections.

Climatic Factors

5.2.4 According to the Scottish Transport Statistics 2021, transport accounted for almost a third of Scotland's total GHG emissions in 2019. The largest source of transport emissions is cars, followed by HGVs, and aviation. The proportion of single occupancy car trips also shows an underlying increasing trend, with a rise of 6% recorded between 2008 and 2018.

5.2.5 Over the last few decades, Scotland has experienced a warming trend, shifting rainfall patterns, and rising sea levels. The Met Office historic 10-year averages from the stations in Kinloss, Keith and Aberdeen Airport identify gradual warming and increased rainfall between 1961 and 2020 in the study area.

Air Quality

5.2.6 There are no declared Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs) within the environmental study area and air quality is generally good. The Pollution Climate Mapping (PCM) model shows that roadside annual mean nitrogen dioxide (NO_2) concentrations are predicted to be compliant with Limit Values set by the European Air Quality Directive.

Noise

5.2.7 Scotland's noise map illustrates noise exposure from rail, road, air traffic and industrial sources in accordance with the Environmental Noise Directive. The main sources of noise within the environmental study area are sections of the A96 itself, A941 towards Rothes, A944 towards Kingsford, A940 towards Grantown on Spey and B9013 towards Burghead.

Population and Human Health

5.2.8 Aberdeen is Scotland's third largest city by population and its fourth most densely populated area. The largest settlement in Aberdeenshire is Peterhead; in Highland Council area it is Inverness, and in Moray it is Elgin. There are a number of areas of high deprivation within Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Moray and Highland Councils' administrative areas.

5.2.9 Access to services is an important consideration for rural communities and improved connectivity can reduce health inequalities. There are multiple core paths concentrated in and around the towns within the corridor and along the coast from Findhorn to Portgordon, as well as in forests and along lochs within the study area. Additionally, there are Rights of Way (ROWs) around the towns of Forres and Elgin, north-west of Keith and ROWs along the coast from Burghead to Lossiemouth.

Material Assets

5.2.10 The principal transport infrastructure within the environmental study area includes: the A96 Trunk Road (between Aberdeen and Inverness); other A-class roads; the rail network between Inverness and Aberdeen, which includes 12 rail stations; six airports including Inverness and Aberdeen international airports.

5.2.11 Natural assets within the study area include:

- Approximately 294 surface waterbodies, including several rivers
- Scottish Ancient Woodland Inventory and Native Woodland Survey of Scotland sites
- Various soil types, including some nationally important carbon-rich soils, deep peat and priority peatland
- land of varying degrees of agricultural value, including areas of Class 2 (land capable of producing a wide range of crops) and Class 3.1 (land capable of producing consistently high yields of a narrow range of crops and/or moderate yields of a wider range of crops) prime agricultural land.

Water Environment

5.2.12 There is a total of approximately 294 surface water features within the environmental study area, which includes rivers, lochs, water bodies and coastal waters. There are 11 surface water catchments within the corridor which are traversed by the A96.

5.2.13 Given the significant number of watercourses, the main risk of flooding within the A96 corridor is from river flooding. This includes the current route of the A96 itself.

Biodiversity

5.2.14 International designations in the environmental study area include four Ramsar wetland sites, eight SPAs and seven SACs. National designations include 43 biological SSSIs.

5.2.15 Scottish Ancient Woodland Inventory and Native Woodland Survey of Scotland sites are found throughout the study area, with significant concentrations around Forres and the River Spey.

Geology and Soils

5.2.16 There are 17 geological and five mixed (biological and geological) SSSIs scattered throughout the environmental study area.

Cultural Heritage

5.2.17 The environmental study area contains four historic battlefield sites. There are a large number of heritage designations throughout the study area, with the A96 itself passing close to a number of Scheduled Monuments, Gardens and Designed Landscapes and passing through Conservation Areas in Elgin, Fochabers and Keith.

Landscape and Visual Amenity

5.2.18 There are no areas of national landscape protection, such as National Scenic Areas or National Parks within the environmental study area. There are 13 Local Landscape Areas (LLAs) and 30 distinct Landscape Character Types (LCTs) within the study area.

6. Consultation and Stakeholder Engagement

6.1 The SEA Scoping Report, Draft Environmental Report and SEA Post Adoption Statement will all be published on the Scottish Government's SEA Gateway website and also on the Transport Scotland website. The SEA Scoping Report was consulted on between January and February 2023. A workshop with the key environmental stakeholders also took place in February 2023. The Draft Environmental Report is being consulted on for12 weeks.

7. Assessment Findings

7.1 Preliminary Appraisal

7.1.1 To avoid duplication in the assessment between the Preliminary and Detailed Appraisal, the findings of the SEA assessment at the Preliminary Appraisal stage are not included here but can be found in full in the Main Draft Environmental Report[6].

7.2 Detailed Appraisal: Cumulative Effects by Package

7.2.1 This section summarises the appraisal of the six packages and the Full Dualling AST in line with the 14 overarching SEA objectives considered. As the interventions included in each package will not be constructed in isolation, the following includes a summary of the environmental effects predicted for each package, across all SEA topics. A more detailed assessment summary is provided in the Main Draft Environmental Report[6]

7.2.2 The Full Dualling of the A96 would be considered to have a **cumulative major negative effect**. There are opportunities to improve safety, for example through an increase in safe overtaking opportunities. There are also opportunities to improve placemaking, reduce traffic volumes in urban areas and improve accessibility. Minor positive effects were predicted for most of the Population and Human Health SEA objectives, for example due to improved placemaking and accessibility. Major positive effects were predicted for the safety SEA objective, mainly due to a prediction of lower traffic passing through urban areas. Many areas within the corridor could also benefit from improved climate adaptation. The infrastructure would be designed to be resilient to predicted impacts arising from current and future weather events and climatic conditions. However, as there is considerable uncertainty associated with the future impacts of climate change and any construction design is yet to be developed, an uncertain score was assigned for the climate adaptation SEA objective.

7.2.3 There are still likely to be major negative effects on many environmental receptors. This is mainly due to the construction footprint on habitats, cultural heritage, water quality, soils and landscape. Major negative effects were also predicted for GHG emissions and local air quality due to construction activity and traffic emissions during the operational phase.

7.2.4 Overall, Package 1 is likely to have some positive environmental effects, although the likely significant negative effects from some of the physical works would result in the overall package having a **cumulative moderate negative effect**. This is mainly due to the construction of a series of bypasses and public transport and rail freight infrastructure improvements and their potential impact on the natural environment.

7.2.5 Overall, Package 2 is likely to have some positive environmental effects, particularly on air quality and population and human health SEA objectives, as the package promotes interventions that will enable a modal shift to more sustainable and active travel modes. The likely significant negative effects from some of the physical works would result in the package overall having a **cumulative minor negative effect**. This is mainly due to the construction of public transport infrastructure, rail freight and road safety improvements and their potential impact on the natural environment.

7.2.6 Overall, Package 3 is likely to have some positive environmental effects, particularly on air quality and population and human health objectives, as the package promotes interventions that will enable a modal shift to more sustainable and active travel modes. The likely significant negative effects from a number of the physical works, particularly the public transport infrastructure, rail freight and road safety improvements, would result in the package having a **cumulative moderate negative effect.**

7.2.7 Overall, Package 4 is likely to have some positive environmental effects, particularly on air quality and population and human health objectives, as the package promotes interventions that will enable a modal shift to more sustainable and active travel modes. The likely significant negative effects from a number of the physical works, particularly any public transport improvements, rail freight and road safety improvements and the introduction of new rail freight terminals would result in the package having **a cumulative minor negative effect.**

7.2.8 Overall, Package 5 is likely to have some positive environmental effects, particularly in terms of safety and quality of life. The likely significant negative effects from some of the physical works would result in the overall package having a **cumulative moderate negative effect**, mainly due to the creation of a series of bypasses, public transport, rail freight and road safety improvements and the introduction of new rail freight terminals.

7.2.9 The Refined Package is likely to have a **cumulative minor negative effect**. Moderate negative effects are predicted for natural resources and biodiversity, whereas minor negative effects are predicted for air quality, water quality, cultural heritage, and landscape and visual amenity. Due to the predicted GHG increases associated with constructing and operating transport infrastructure, a minor negative cumulative effect is predicted for the GHG SEA objective. As there is considerable uncertainty associated with the future impacts of climate change and any construction design is yet to be developed, an uncertain score has been assigned for the climate adaptation SEA objective. There are also many minor positive environmental effects predicted, including quality of life and sustainable access, high quality places and sustainable transport networks. Moderate positive effects were predicted for the safety SEA objective. These positive effects mainly arise through targeted road safety improvements, the provision of high-quality active travel routes within and between settlements and various bus and rail improvements.

7.2.10 The likely minor and moderate negative effects are likely to arise from some of the physical works, mainly due to the creation of two bypasses and their potential impact on the natural environment.

7.2.11 The environmental impacts of any of the proposed packages would vary according to the degree of potential localised negative environmental effects from any new interventions implemented to achieve the package.

7.3 Detailed Appraisal: Cumulative Effects by SEA Topic

7.3.1 The Refined Package represents the better performing transport interventions from the STAG appraisal in comparison to Packages 1 to 5. This includes the appraisal of the 'environment' STAG criterion. Only one of the Packages, or Full Dualling, would actually be implemented. To avoid any duplication in the assessment of cumulative effects, this section therefore focuses on the potentially significant cumulative effects of implementing either the Refined Package or Full Dualling.

7.3.2 The sections below summarise the potential cumulative effects, on each SEA topic for the Refined Package or Full Dualling packages. The construction works associated with different transport interventions would also likely be spread over a number of years and the environmental effects may therefore not be concurrent or cumulative. The scale of the effects of these proposals on the various SEA topics will depend on the design and location of the works and further environmental assessment would need to be undertaken as the designs progress.

Refined Package Cumulative Effects on Climatic Factors

7.3.3 Traffic flows and emissions around the A96 increase as a result of this package, due to reduced congestion and an attraction of traffic onto this part of the network. There is therefore a net increase in GHG emissions. These will combine to increase overall vehicle kilometres, resulting in a net increase in GHG emissions.

7.3.4 The existing A96 Trunk Road is considered vulnerable to the effects of climate change, particularly in areas with a high risk of flooding or locations where current or future ground stability issues are known or anticipated.

7.3.5 The infrastructure would be designed to be resilient to predicted impacts arising from current and future weather events and climatic conditions, and designed in accordance with current planning, design, engineering practice, and codes. A number of mitigation and adaptation measures would be considered at later design development stages to address potential risks.

7.3.6 Traffic flows and emissions around the A96 are likely to increase due to a combination of reduced congestion, which potentially attracts traffic to the route, and an increase in route length. These will combine to increase overall vehicle kilometres, resulting in a net increase in GHG emissions. GHG emissions are predicted to decrease between the opening and design year due to an increase in low emission vehicle kilometres travelled across the whole modelled traffic network.

7.3.7 The existing A96 Trunk Road network is considered vulnerable to the effects of climate change, particularly in areas with a high risk of flooding or locations where current or future ground stability issues are known or anticipated.

7.3.8 The infrastructure would be designed to be resilient to predicted impacts arising from current and future weather events and climatic conditions, and designed in accordance with current planning, design, engineering practice, and codes. A number of mitigation and adaptation measures would be considered at later design development stages to address potential risks.

7.3.9 Due to the predicted GHG increases associated with constructing and operating transport infrastructure, a **minor negative cumulative effect** is predicted for the GHG SEA objective and an **uncertain cumulative effect** is predicted for the climate adaptation SEA objective.

Refined Package Cumulative Effects on Air Quality

7.3.10 The Refined Package has the potential to have negative effects in terms of air quality. The bypasses may result in an increase in the use of private vehicles due to the reduction in congestion, which may lead to a reduction in air quality in the vicinity of the bypass alignments and the wider A96 corridor.

7.3.11 The promotion of vehicles with lower or zero emissions through the inclusion of alternative refueling infrastructure and facilities should help to reduce vehicle emissions and thereby reduce overall air pollution. The inclusion of bypasses has the potential to reduce existing air quality concerns within the settlements of Elgin and Keith by reducing the traffic passing through them.

7.3.12 Total emissions of nitrogen oxides (NOx) and particulate matter (PM) were predicted to increase in the future. This is due to an increase in vehicle kilometres and associated emissions, in particular through the construction and operation of bypasses. The increase in PM is predominantly due to non-exhaust emissions from road, tyre and brake-wear.

7.3.13 Traffic is predicted to divert away from areas of Elgin and Keith due to the potential interventions. By reducing the traffic through Elgin and Keith, there is also an opportunity to increase the active travel opportunities within these settlements. This could further reduce the use of private vehicles, with a positive effect on air quality.

7.3.14 A **minor negative cumulative effect** is predicted for the air quality SEA objective.

Refined Package Cumulative Effects on Population and Human Health

Quality of life and sustainable access

7.3.15 The packages could directly improve access to local infrastructure that would improve health and wellbeing. This is a result of improved active travel provision, improved public transport interchanges and improving the journey time and frequency of rail services.

7.3.16 The proposals within this package are also likely to have positive effects in terms of communities and physical fitness. The interventions could see a modal shift to sustainable transport methods including bus, rail, walking and cycling. The increased opportunities to travel by these methods would be beneficial and create opportunities for communities to access key services, employment opportunities and health care.

7.3.17 A **moderate positive cumulative effect** is predicted for the quality of life and sustainable access SEA objective under the topic of Population and Human Health.

Noise and vibration

7.3.18 This package has the potential to have negative effects on noise and vibration through the increase of freight on the railway and any associated rail freight facilities. The significance of the effect would depend on the location of such facilities.

7.3.19 An **uncertain cumulative effect** is predicted for the noise and vibration SEA objective for Population and Human Health. This is due to a combination of positive and negative impacts predicted, depending on location and the ways in which the transport interventions might be implemented.

High quality places

7.3.20 Enhanced placemaking, along with reducing demand for unsustainable travel for shorter everyday trips, would also offer improvements to visual amenity in some communities. An improved public realm with less through-traffic allows people to gather and socialise.

7.3.21 A **minor positive cumulative effect** is predicted for the placemaking (high quality places) SEA objective under the topic of Population and Human Health.

Safety

7.3.22 Personal security is likely to improve through an increase in people walking, wheeling and cycling in and around key communities along the A96 corridor as there would be an increase in natural surveillance. Furthermore, public realm improvements, such as the provision of street lighting, can help reduce road traffic collisions and increase pedestrian activity due to a reduced fear of crime.

7.3.23 Public transport interchange improvements and DRT/MaaS may improve personal security and make a safer network for travellers. It may also help those with mobility issues travel, thereby reducing social isolation by allowing trips to be made more easily.

7.3.24 A **moderate positive cumulative effect** is predicted for the safety SEA objective under the topic of Population and Human Health.

Material Assets

Sustainable transport

7.3.25 There is potential for minor positive effects on the sustainable use of the transport network through planning for future travel arrangements where journeys are made by a number of different modes (including active travel modes). There is also potential opportunity for road schemes to improve surface conditions and improve safety. Reducing overall maintenance needs in the longer-term, could also lead to fewer disruptions to the transport network, as road closures and maintenance activities would be reduced.

7.3.26 A **minor positive cumulative effect** is predicted for the Material Assets (sustainable transport network) SEA objective.

Natural resources

7.3.27 There is a potential opportunity for road schemes to improve surface conditions, and, alongside advancement in the types of materials used, reduce overall maintenance needs in the longer-term. More durable and sustainable materials therefore have the potential to reduce natural resources requirements.

7.3.28 Depending on the source and type of materials/natural resources used to construct some of the new infrastructure, there is potential for negative effects on material assets in terms of natural resources usage.

7.3.29 A **moderate negative cumulative effect** is predicted for the Material Assets (natural resources) SEA objective.

Water Environment

7.3.30 The construction works have the potential for significant negative effects on the water environment. The physical works, including improving public transport interchanges, linespeed improvements and increasing passenger and freight capacity have the potential to have negative effects on water quality (risk of surface water drainage pollution) and flooding during the construction phase.

7.3.31 Construction works have the potential to cause moderate negative environmental effects, given the scale of these works are likely to be more significant and may affect the water environment. For the continuous active travel route, following the current A96 route may help to reduce negative effects on the water environment.

7.3.32 The magnitude of environmental effects will depend on the design and location of the works and further environmental assessment would need to be undertaken as the designs progress. There are potentially adverse environmental effects on drainage and flooding, which could be significant if environmental designations are affected.

7.3.33 A **minor negative cumulative effect** is predicted for the water environment SEA objective.

Biodiversity

7.3.34 The construction of the interventions has the potential to have negative effects on biodiversity, landscape and forestry. This includes potential effects on local, national and internationally designated habitats. These effects could be moderate negative (depending on alignment), given the scale of development associated with the construction of the interventions.

7.3.35 The magnitude of environmental effects will depend on the design and location of the works and further environmental assessment would need to be undertaken as the designs progress. There is potential for negative environmental effects on biodiversity, particularly if designated biodiversity sites are affected – for example through surface water drainage or dust deposition during construction.

7.3.36 A **moderate negative cumulative effect** is predicted for the biodiversity SEA objective.

Geology and Soils

7.3.37 The physical works associated with the construction of the interventions have the potential to have negative effects on soils within and around the construction footprint, including high grade agricultural land, Geological Conservation Review sites, carbon-rich soils and peat.

7.3.38 Potential construction impacts include pollution, erosion, removal, degradation, compaction and sealing.

7.3.39 A **minor negative cumulative effect** is predicted for the geology and soils SEA objective.

Cultural Heritage

7.3.40 The construction of the bypasses and other construction works within this package have the potential to have negative effects on cultural heritage. These effects could be minor negative (depending on alignment), given the scale of development associated with the interventions.

7.3.41 The physical works, including improving public transport interchanges, linespeed improvements and increasing passenger and freight capacity has the potential to have negative effects during the construction phase. The impacts would be of varying degrees depending on scale, design and location. The rail improvements at Keith and Huntly are likely to result in some negative effects on cultural heritage. However, these effects may be limited considering there are no cultural heritage designations in the areas of the transport interventions. The physical works also have potential for negative effects on undesignated cultural heritage features and/or archaeology which may be discovered during construction.

7.3.42 A **minor negative cumulative effect** is predicted for the cultural heritage SEA objective.

Landscape and Visual Amenity

7.3.43 The interventions, including bypasses and improvements to public transport interchanges, have the potential to have negative effects on landscape and visual amenity. These effects could be minor negative (depending on alignment), given the scale of development associated with these interventions.

7.3.44 The physical works associated with the other interventions are likely to have negative environmental effects of varying degrees depending on scale, design and location. Some of these impacts may be short term during the construction phase only and could be mitigated. Construction activities associated with rail improvements have the potential to result in some negative effects. However, these effects may be limited, considering there are no landscape or other environmental designations in the areas of the rail-based interventions.

7.3.45 Whilst the study area does not contain any nationally recognised scenic viewpoints, or nationally designated landscapes, there are visual sensitivities to some development types within or visible from the Local Landscape Areas. There are also numerous towns, villages and rural properties, along with several paths, recreational trails and areas used for outdoor recreation where visual effects could occur.

7.3.46 A **minor negative cumulative effect** is predicted for the landscape and visual amenity SEA objective.

Full Dualling Package Cumulative Effects on Climatic Factors

7.3.47 Traffic flows and emissions around the A96 are likely to increase due to a combination of reduced congestion, which potentially attracts traffic to the route, and an increase in route length. These will combine to increase overall vehicle kilometres, resulting in a net increase in GHG emissions. GHG emissions are predicted to decrease between the opening and design year due to an increase in low emission vehicle kilometres travelled across the whole modelled traffic network.

7.3.48 The existing A96 Trunk Road network is considered vulnerable to the effects of climate change, particularly in areas with a high risk of flooding or locations where current or future ground stability issues are known or anticipated.

7.3.49 The infrastructure would be designed to be resilient to predicted impacts arising from current and future weather events and climatic conditions, and designed in accordance with current planning, design, engineering practice, and codes. A number of mitigation and adaptation measures would be considered at later design development stages to address potential risks.

7.3.50 Due to the predicted GHG increases associated with constructing and operating transport infrastructure, a **major negative cumulative effect** is predicted for the GHG SEA objective and an **uncertain cumulative effect** is predicted for the climate adaptation SEA objective.

Full Dualling Cumulative Effects on Air Quality

7.3.51 Full Dualling has the potential to have positive effects on air quality. The inclusion of bypasses has the potential to improve the existing air quality within the settlements of Forres, Elgin, Keith and Inverurie by reducing the traffic passing through them. However, it may result in an increase in private vehicle usage due to the reduction in congestion, which may lead to a reduction in air quality in the vicinity of the bypass alignments and indeed the wider A96 corridor itself.

7.3.52 Total emissions of nitrogen oxides (NOx) and particulate matter (PM) were predicted to increase in the future. This is due to an increase in vehicle kilometres and associated emissions, in particular through the construction and operation of bypasses. The increase in PM is predominantly due to non-exhaust emissions from road, tyre and brake-wear.

7.3.53 It should be noted that the assessment assumes no change in pollutant emissions, per vehicle, beyond 2030 and therefore represents a worst-case approach.

7.3.54 A **minor negative cumulative effect** is predicted for the air quality SEA objective.

Full Dualling Cumulative Effects on Population and Human Health

Quality of life and sustainable access

7.3.55 Full Dualling is likely to have positive effects in terms of communities and physical fitness. The network improvements could reduce disruption and congestion and increase accessibility, including access to services. The inclusion of the bypasses could lead to improvements in quality of life and accessibility for Elgin, Keith and Inverurie through removing some of the through traffic from the network.

7.3.56 The packages are also likely to have positive effects for communities and physical fitness. The interventions could see a modal shift to sustainable transport methods including bus, rail, walking and cycling. The increased opportunities to travel by these methods would be beneficial and create opportunities for communities to access key services, employment opportunities and health care.

7.3.57 A **minor positive cumulative effect** is predicted for the quality of life and sustainable access SEA objective under the topic of Population and Human Health.

Noise and vibration

7.3.58 Full Dualling has the potential to alleviate noise and vibration within the settlements, depending on the alignment of the dual carriageway, as it is assumed that dualling is likely to bypass settlements. Full dualling is likely to result in greater noise impacts in proximity to its alignment. The significance of these effects would depend on the preferred alignment and its proximity to sensitive receptors, although noise mitigation could be incorporated. The construction of interventions included in this package and associated traffic are also likely to lead to minor negative effects on noise and vibration during the construction phase.

7.3.59 An **uncertain cumulative effect** is predicted for the noise and vibration SEA objective for Population and Human Health. This is due to a combination of positive and negative impacts predicted, depending on location and the ways in which the transport interventions might be implemented.

High quality places

7.3.60 Where the alignment of the dual carriageway results in the provision of bypasses, Full Dualling provides the opportunity to deliver interventions within towns to enhance placemaking and reduce real and perceived severance, reducing demand for unsustainable travel, particularly for shorter everyday trips. Enhanced placemaking, along with reducing demand for unsustainable travel for shorter everyday trips, would also offer improvements to visual amenity in some communities. An improved public realm with less through-traffic allows people to gather and socialise.

7.3.61 A **minor positive cumulative effect** is predicted for the development of high quality places SEA objective.

Safety

7.3.62 The provision of a dual carriageway and an increase in safe overtaking opportunities between Hardmuir and Craibstone would result in the safer operation of the network and reduced accident rates and severity. This is particularly relevant at locations where there is a safety problem or a potential safety risk. Personal security is likely to improve through an increase in people walking, wheeling and cycling in and around key communities along the A96 corridor as there would be an increase in natural surveillance. Furthermore, public realm improvements, such as the provision of street lighting, can help reduce road traffic collisions and increase pedestrian activity due to a reduced fear of crime.

7.3.63 The improvement in safety would likely result in reduced accident rates and severity as well as a reduction in driver stress, through the provision of safe overtaking opportunities.

7.3.64 A **major positive cumulative effect** is predicted for the safety SEA objective under the topic of Population and Human Health.

Material Assets

Sustainable transport

7.3.65 Full Dualling has the potential for major negative impacts on the sustainable transport SEA objective as dualling could potentially lead to increased vehicle traffic and associated negative impacts on several SEA topics such as climate (GHG emissions), air quality, noise and vibration, water quality and flood risk, biodiversity, cultural heritage and landscape.

7.3.66 However, there is a potential opportunity for road schemes to improve surface conditions, and, alongside advancement in the types of materials used, reduce overall maintenance needs in the longer-term, with associated positive effects. The full dualling option also has potential for minor positive effects on the sustainable use of the transport network by promoting or improving the sustainable use of the transport network through planning for future travel arrangements where journeys are made by a number of different modes (including active travel modes).

7.3.67 Bearing the potential negative and positive effects in mind, Full Dualling was assessed to have a **moderate negative cumulative effect** on the sustainable transport SEA Objective.

Natural resources

7.3.68 Depending on the source and type of materials/natural resources used to construct some of the new infrastructure associated with several of the proposed interventions, there is potential for major negative effects on material assets in terms of natural resources usage.

7.3.69 A **major negative cumulative effect** is predicted for the natural resources SEA Material Assets objective.

Water Environment

7.3.70 Full Dualling has the potential for significant negative effects on water, drainage and flooding. There are large areas of floodplain around Elgin associated with the River Lossie, some of which have flood mitigation. There are areas of flood risk around Keith associated with the River Isla to the north of the town and some flood risk to the west and south-west to a lesser extent. There are also areas of flood risk around Inverurie associated with the River Urie and River Don. The construction of the new dual carriageway also has the potential to have a negative impact on water quality of these watercourses and consideration would be needed as to the alignment in terms of water crossings and bridge design.

7.3.71 The scale of the effects of these proposals would depend on the design and location of the works. These have the potential to have adverse environmental effects on water drainage and flooding which could be significant particularly if environmental designations are affected.

7.3.72 Full Dualling was assessed to have a **major negative cumulative effect** on the water quality and flood risk SEA Objective.

Biodiversity

7.3.73 Due to the overall scale of the required infrastructure, Full Dualling has the potential to have major negative effects on biodiversity and habitats, and forestry. Such impacts could either be direct such as demolition/land loss/habitat loss, or indirect such as impacts on setting or views and would depend on the alignment of the dualling. The A96 corridor and its surroundings, contain various local, regional, national, and international designated sites, the impacts on which would need to be considered. Depending on the alignment of the Full Dualling option, there could be significant effects on the environment given the scale of works which would likely be irreversible particularly given the sensitive locations along the existing route.

7.3.74 The scale of the effects will depend on the design and alignment of the dualling and further detailed environmental assessment would need to be undertaken as part of any further option development.

7.3.75 Full Dualling was assessed to have a **major negative cumulative effect** on the biodiversity SEA Objective.

Geology and Soils

7.3.76 Soils are important for biodiversity and carbon sequestration. They also provide important ecosystem services such as crop production, pollutant filtration, water retention and protection of archaeological resources.

7.3.77 Due to the overall scale of the full dual carriageway option, this package has the potential to have major negative effects on soils within and around the construction footprint, including high grade agricultural land, Geological Conservation Review sites, carbon rich soils and peat.

7.3.78 Potential construction impacts include pollution, erosion, removal, degradation, compaction and sealing.

7.3.79 Full Dualling was assessed to have a **major negative cumulative effect** on the soils SEA Objective.

Cultural Heritage

7.3.80 Due to the overall scale of the required infrastructure, Full Dualling has the potential to have major negative effects on the historic environment. Such impacts could either be direct such as demolition/land loss or indirect such as impacts on setting or views and would depend on the alignment of the dualling. The A96 corridor and its surroundings, contain various local, regional, national, and international designated sites, the impact on which would need to be considered. Depending on the alignment of the Full Dualling option, there could be significant effects on designated and undesignated cultural heritage assets given the scale of works, which would likely be irreversible particularly given the sensitive locations along the existing route. This includes, but is not exclusive to, potential impacts on Gardens and Designed Landscapes, Conservation Areas, Historic Battlefields Sites and Scheduled Monuments.

7.3.81 The scale of the effects will depend on the design and alignment of the dualling and further detailed environmental assessment would need to be undertaken as part of any further option development.

7.3.82 Full Dualling was assessed to have a **major negative cumulative effect** on the cultural heritage SEA Objective.

Landscape and Visual Amenity

7.3.83 Due to the overall scale of the required infrastructure, Full Dualling has the potential to have adverse effects on landscape. Such impacts could either be direct such as demolition/land loss/loss of vegetation or indirect such as impacts on setting or views and would depend on the alignment of the dualling. The A96 corridor and its surroundings, contain various local, regional, national, and international designated sites, the impacts on which would need to be considered. Depending on the alignment of the full dualling option, there could be significant effects on the environment given the scale of works which would likely be irreversible particularly given the sensitive locations along the existing route.

7.3.84 Whilst the study area does not contain any nationally recognised scenic viewpoints, or nationally designated landscapes, there are visual sensitivities to some types of development within or visible from the Local Landscape Areas. There are also numerous towns, villages and rural properties, along with numerous paths, recreational trails and areas used for outdoor recreation where there is the potential for visual effects to occur.

7.3.85 The scale of the effects associated with the full dualling of the A96 will be dependent on the design and alignment of the dualling and further detailed environmental assessment would need to be undertaken as part of any further option development.

7.3.86 Full Dualling was assessed to have a **major negative cumulative effect** on the landscape SEA Objective.

7.4 Summary of Cumulative Effects Assessment

7.4.1 In general the Refined Package has fewer negative effects and lower magnitude negative effects than Full Dualling in terms of potentially significant cumulative effects. This reflects the fact that the Refined Package was developed specifically to maximise the level of potential benefits provided by combining the best performing options from Packages 1 to 5. Both the Refined Package and Full Dualling have positive effects predicted for the Population and Human Health topics, for example due to targeted road safety improvements. However, the considerable amount of land-take, raw materials requirements and GHG emissions associated with constructing a fully dualled road for the entire corridor length has led to Full Dualling being assessed as having major or moderate negative effects for most of the SEA Objectives. In contrast, the Refined Package was assessed to be likely to lead to minor negative effects for most SEA Objectives, albeit with moderate negative effects predicted for natural resources and biodiversity due to the raw material demand and land-take associated with constructing the Refined Package bypasses.

7.5 In-Combination Assessment

7.5.1 As stated in the UK Government SEA Guidance, “Cumulative effects arise, for instance, where several developments each have insignificant effects but together have a significant effect; or where several individual effects of the plan (for example noise, dust and visual) have a combined effect”.

7.5.2 Cumulative effects on an SEA topic can arise from the combined effects of plans. For example, proposals along a linear route, such as a transport corridor, may cumulatively affect the landscape qualities experienced along that route.

7.5.3 The Local Development Plans (LDPs) relevant to the Nairn, Forres, Elgin, Keith and Inverurie settlements have been reviewed to establish site allocations of proposed development on the periphery of the settlements, in order to identify land covered by housing policy and possible future planned large-area housing developments that need highlighting when assessing potential cumulative impacts. To focus on the development applications that are most likely to lead to significant in-combination effects, only plans to build 100 homes or more are referred to in the main Draft Environmental Report[6].

7.5.4 The in-combination effects between the A96 Corridor Review and these other plans and projects are likely to affect all of the SEA topics but will vary considerably depending on the timing of construction of each. Some effects, such as construction stage noise and vibration and air pollution are likely to be negative, but there may also be positive in-combination outcomes, for example related to improved safety or improved active travel connections. More in-depth, in-combination assessments for all environmental topics will be required at the project level, when transport interventions included in the A96 Corridor Review are being taken forward to the design stage. Screening for the Environmental Impact Assessment will be required at that stage.

7.6 Assessment Summary

7.6.1 The results of the SEA matrix-based assessment showed that the Refined Package and Packages 2 and 4 are likely to have the lowest impact on the environment overall, with cumulative minor negative effects predicted. By comparison, Packages 1, 3 and 5 were assessed to lead to cumulative moderate negative effects and Full Dualling was assessed to potentially lead to major negative effects.

8. Mitigation and Enhancement Measures

8.1 Overview

8.1.1 The SEA aims to prevent, reduce or offset any significant adverse effects as far as possible before mitigation measures are proposed. In addition to preventing or minimising adverse effects, mitigation measures have also been provided for SEA topics where many uncertain effects were predicted in the assessment.

8.1.2 The mitigation measures and enhancement opportunities consider:

- the environmental baseline data
- the environmental requirements emerging from the plans and policies review,
- the SEA objectives
- feedback received from the consultation on the SEA Scoping Report, including local context and feasibility
- key issues and opportunities identified during the development of the A96 Corridor Review and during the production of the draft EqIA and other Impact Assessments
- feedback from the SEA Consultation Authorities and other key stakeholders.

8.2 Further Environmental Assessment

8.2.1 As discussed in the sections above, further environmental assessment will be required at the project level. For any transport intervention options that arise from the A96 Corridor Review should be subject to the usual consideration through the relevant consenting process, supplemented where appropriate by the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), HRA, and via site controls and Environmental Management Plans. This environmental assessment will therefore enable the clear identification of constraints, opportunities and ecosystem services at the site/project level, which in turn will allow the development of targeted and detailed mitigation, enhancement and monitoring measures.

9. Monitoring

9.1 Overview

9.1.1 It is a requirement for Transport Scotland to monitor significant environmental effects arising as a result of the implementation of the A96 Corridor Review. The purpose of the monitoring is to identify any unforeseen adverse effects at this early planning stage and to enable appropriate remedial action to be taken.

9.1.2 There is a wide range of existing monitoring programmes in place at the national and local level to monitor environmental status and assess performance against established environmental indicators, many of which are relevant to the A96 Corridor Review. The final environmental monitoring framework for the A96 Corridor Review will be included in the SEA Post Adoption Statement. This will refer to existing monitoring regimes wherever possible, to avoid any duplication of monitoring.

10. Next Steps

10.1 Overview

10.1.1 The feedback received in relation to the Draft Environmental Report consultation will be reviewed and used to inform the finalised version of the Environmental Report and will also inform the SEA Post Adoption Statement.

10.1.2 The key SEA milestones are as follows:

- Consultation on the Draft (public consultation version) Environmental Report for 12 weeks
- Finalise Environmental Report
- SEA Post Adoption Statement.

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