

Response to the NESTRANS 2040
Draft Regional Transport Strategy for
The North East of Scotland

by

Newtonhill, Muchalls & Cammachmore
Community Council

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on behalf of

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This document outlines the response of the Newtonhill, Muchalls & Cammachmore Community Council to the NESTRANS 2040 Draft Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) for The North East of Scotland.

The draft Strategy

A strategy needs to be clear and concise; the draft RTS is neither. There needs to be a set of clear goals with target dates, success criteria, and methods for measuring the success criteria. Once the goals have been defined, the strategy should inform how NESTRANS proposes that these goals will be achieved. If there are no goals, then a strategy is not required. The draft RTS appears to be targeted somewhere between a policy document and a wish list.

When considering regional transport infrastructure, NESTRANS needs to take a strategic view and ensure that potential routes, for example for the Rapid Transit system, are reserved and protected from housing or business development. There are examples in Newtonhill, where better forward planning would have enabled better infrastructure and transport links.

The Community Council applauds your vision statement:

To provide a safer, cleaner, more inclusive and accessible transport system in the North East, which contributes to healthier, more prosperous and fairer communities.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The draft RTS recognises the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on regional transport and on individual behaviour. This pandemic has been with us since the start of 2020 and is unlikely to go away any time before the summer of 2021, possibly much later. The economic impacts will be with us for several generations to come.

All policy needs to be reviewed in the light of the impact of COVID-19. Many of the larger employers are doing this with some already deciding that home working benefits both the employee and employer. More people are shopping online and fewer are driving into towns to shop. The subsequent drop in demand for transport comes with an increase in demand for improved digital networks and faster, more-reliable broadband connectivity.

Active Travel

An unexpected benefit of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the increased demand for safe cycling and walking routes. During lockdown, many family groups were out walking or cycling every day, and this has continued now that lockdown is easing. This is a beautiful part of the country and more people need to use it safely. This increase in activity must be further encouraged to improve the physical health and mental wellbeing of the community.

RTS paragraph 10.15 says:

Like the local authorities and other partners, Nestrans is committed to putting the words of the national and local strategy documents into practice and ensuring delivery of a comprehensive, high quality and safe active travel network across the north east. Since Nestrans was first established as a statutory body in 2006, around a quarter of our budget has been spent on measures, such as shared paths and traffic free routes as well as the Getabout cycle roadshow, to encourage more to consider active travel as an option. It is anticipated that this share will increase with greater focus on active and sustainable travel.

Recently, Newtonhill and Muchalls have lost an important part of their open space and use of the Core Path following a decision by planning authorities, against the expressed wishes of the community, to allocate land for building. This follows on from a progressive loss of green space and

walking routes to relentless housing development within Newtonhill and Muchalls, despite the new town of Chapelton being developed just the other side of the A92.

The Community Council looks to NESTRANS to ensure delivery of a comprehensive, high quality and safe active travel network from Portlethen to Stonehaven and connecting Newtonhill to Chapelton via the underpass under the A92. We need to regain and maintain access to the countryside, foreshore, and more safe pathways.

Newtonhill Railway Station

Newtonhill Railway Station is not mentioned explicitly, but paragraph 10.26 says:

Consideration of new stations will need options brought forward and business cases developed to ascertain the viability for new stations both between Aberdeen and Dyce and between Aberdeen and Laurencekirk. A balance would have to be struck to determine an optimum number of stations to enable access to the railway whilst maintaining its primary function as a fast form of travel, and not jeopardising overall network capacity and performance. Consideration of possible station locations will require to link to Local Development Plan allocations, with a view to proposed developments being well served by rail as well as existing residential and industrial areas. There are also other feasibility Nestrans Regional Transport Strategy 2040 29 considerations, including the technical suitability of alternative sites to accommodate new railway stations and associated facilities, and the impact on existing bus networks.

Some residents have called for Newtonhill Station to be re-opened, especially as the line runs right through Newtonhill. At the same time, other residents have expressed concern that parking for users will create severe problems for local residents and businesses. Newtonhill does not have sufficient space to accommodate the inevitable volume of parking that will be generated by commuters and other rail users from outwith Newtonhill, especially Chapelton.

With decline in travel to work, increased unemployment and more working from home, there is likely to be a reduced demand for a station in Newtonhill. If the proposed Aberdeen Rapid Transit system were to be extended to Stonehaven and to include the Newtonhill Park & Choose, then it could provide a far superior alternative to catching a train from Newtonhill Station. At the same time, journey times to the central belt would not be compromised.

Aberdeen Bus Station

The Community Council, Transport Action Kincardine (TrAK) and others have long campaigned that Aberdeen Bus Station is not fit for purpose, especially when compared with other major cities in Scotland. The fact that the bus station is smaller than the Union Square car park speaks volumes about the lack of planning and investment. RTS Action AA 1.b says NESTRANS will:

Work with Aberdeen City Council and the owners of Aberdeen Bus station to upgrade facilities to include enhanced waiting facilities, seating, information and support staff where appropriate.

This action illustrates that NESTRANS recognises most of the deficiencies of the current bus station, but this policy does not go anywhere near far enough. The bus station needs to be fit for use, by bus operators and passengers alike. Traffic light phasing must also be changed to reduce bus waiting times and consequently, bus journey times. NESTRANS needs to make “the considerable improvement of Aberdeen Bus Station by the end of 2022” as one of its primary goals.

Buses

Buses have long been recognised as a breeding ground for communicable diseases and COVID-19 has reinforced that perception. A lot of work will need to be done to encourage people to use the

buses again. Aberdeen City has a frequent and reliable bus service. If a bus is taken out of service, then the wait for the next one is not too long. The same cannot be said of the service to and from the Newtonhill, Muchalls & Cammachmore Community Council area. Too often it is seen as more convenient and faster to use a private car rather than take a bus or, in many cases, more than one bus.

Park & Ride and Park & Choose

RTS Action PR 2 says:

Although there is currently a small Park & Ride facility at Newtonhill (provided by the developer of the town of Chapelton), a high-quality Park & Ride facility to the south of Aberdeen at Portlethen is still a priority. A site to the south of Aberdeen was identified in the previous RTS and the Scottish Government's Strategic Transport Projects Review. We will work with Transport Scotland and Aberdeenshire Council to ensure delivery of this facility alongside significant bus priority measures on the corridor into Aberdeen and a Bus Service Improvement Partnership agreement to ensure attractive journey times and service provision are integral to the design and development of this facility.

The Park & Ride facility at Newtonhill, known locally as a Park & Choose, is a well-used and valuable facility for local residents. One of the main reasons for its success is that it is close enough to residential areas to walk to. For safety reasons, mains lighting must be provided inside the bus shelter.

A Park & Ride facility at Portlethen would be of very little value to residents of Newtonhill, Muchalls, Cammachmore and Chapelton. If it is necessary to drive any further than one could comfortably walk, then there is no point in stopping to wait for a bus. With decline in travel to work, increased unemployment and more working from home, there is little chance of success for Portlethen Park and Ride. It is highly likely that it would turn into a white elephant, like the one at Craibstone. It has been suggested that a route to the Aberdeen Airport could also be incorporated into the Park & Ride, but it has already been shown that there is little demand for such a route.

It is the view of this Community Council that a Park & Ride from Portlethen area to the City Centre is a waste of resources. Too short a distance for the benefit-cost ratio to make a meaningful difference.

Conclusion

The Community Council looks to NESTRANS to ensure delivery of a comprehensive, high quality and safe active travel network from Portlethen to Stonehaven and connecting Newtonhill to Chapelton via the underpass under the A92.

The increased demand for local walks, cycle routes etc. should be recognised and investment directed towards that end.

Extending the proposed Aberdeen Rapid Transit system to include Newtonhill and Stonehaven could provide a far superior alternative to catching a train from Newtonhill Station.

NESTRANS needs to make "the considerable improvement of Aberdeen Bus Station by the end of 2022" as one of its primary goals.

For safety reasons, mains lighting must be provided inside the Newtonhill Park & Choose bus shelter.

Before scarce financial resources are spent on a Park & Ride at Portlethen or a new station at Newtonhill, future demand should be reassessed.