

**PE1540/AA**

Argyll and Bute submission of 15 August 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to submit evidence to the committee. The stability of the hillside adjacent to the Rest and Be Thankful on the A83 has been a long standing issue and the pursuit of a permanent solution is a key priority for the Council. Argyll and Bute Council's position on the Rest and Be Thankful has been and remains clear and unanimous. In November 2014 our Council agreed:

*That Transport Scotland and the Scottish Government be asked to provide a permanent solution for the Rest and Be Thankful. (A link to the minutes of that decision is provided within the body of this letter).*

The Council welcomes the commitment given by the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, Michael Matheson, at the A83 Task Force meeting in November 2018 to accelerate the STPR2 process for Argyll and Bute. This will explore, amongst other things, a permanent solution for the Rest and Be Thankful.

There is however no commitment from the Scottish Government to deliver that permanent solution or on timescales. Our understanding is that decisions on the funding of regional and national projects has not been accelerated. If a project is identified for the Rest and Be Thankful it will have to compete for inclusion in the project programme which will span 10 years. The funding decisions, we are led to believe, are at least 2 years away.

Years of landslip mitigation works have failed to keep the principal lifeline road route into Mid-Argyll, Kintyre, Islay, Jura, Gigha, Colonsay, and Cowal available, and to keep Argyll and Bute open for business.

The lack of accessibility during periods of severe weather, coupled with the associated effects of the ongoing works themselves – single file traffic and delays – continue to erode local and national confidence in the region.

There have been and continue to be robust criticisms of decision makers at Holyrood and their perceived inaction regarding the Rest and Be Thankful from those affected businesses and communities in our area.

The effects of years of national travel reports broadcasting across Scotland that the A83 is closed at the Rest and Be Thankful with a stated diversion of 60 miles has obvious consequences for our area, most notably with the families, businesses, students and investment which the Council, and its partners, are working hard to attract.

The Council continues to be concerned that the overwhelming national stigma around the accessibility of our area overshadows the wide and varied good work undertaken locally to create a place people choose to live, work, visit and invest. Argyll and Bute's population has declined by 5.1%, almost 5,000 people over the past 15 years. The population of the region is forecast to decrease steadily over the coming decades, with an overall decline of over 8,600 people expected between 2016 and 2041. Equating to a ten per cent decrease, this is in contrast to the national projected growth rate of five per cent over the same period. This remains the biggest single issue facing Argyll and Bute despite the significant local commitment to attracting people, connecting and growing the area.

We welcome the continued commitment of the Scottish Government to constructive engagement with the Council and other local stakeholders via the A83 Task Force meetings but the fact remains that a permanent solution does not appear to be any closer than when the Task Force was established in August 2012.

Being prepared to respond to and attempt to mitigate the effects of bad weather is one thing but taking action which will ensure permanent and uninterrupted access is clearly the best long-term goal for everyone, especially the Scottish Government.

The continuing uncertainty around the A83 Rest and Be Thankful needs urgent attention from the Scottish Government. Below is a chronology of events since landslip studies were undertaken in 2004. Fifteen years later the people of Argyll and Bute are still waiting on an unequivocal commitment from the Scottish Government to deliver a permanent solution.

The following is a short chronology of events:

- In 2004 Transport Scotland undertook the Scottish Road Network Landslides Study which identified the A83 Ardgartan to Rest and Be Thankful as amongst the most highly ranked debris flow hazard sites in Scotland.
- A significant landslide occurred in October 2007, closing the road for several days.
- Numerous subsequent landslides occurred between 2007 and 2012, leading to multiple road closures.
- Petition PE1428 was lodged in March 2012. This called on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to address, among other things, issues relating to the Rest and Be Thankful.
- By mid-2012 some preventative measures had been installed – the upgrade of culverts and the use of fences and debris flow barriers.
- In July 2012, Transport Scotland commissioned the A83 Trunk Road Route Study to examine the landslide problem at Rest and Be Thankful.
- To provide leadership and direction, the A83 Task Force was established in August 2012. (This is a consultative forum with decisions on improvements taken by the Cabinet Secretary and Transport Scotland).

- The Jacobs Report was published in February 2013, and the Red Corridor Option was selected. This involved the installation of additional debris flow mitigation barriers; improved drainage; and the introduction of hillside planting. The Jacobs report itself describes this option as one which would: *“significantly reduce the frequency of occurrence of landslide debris reaching the A83 Trunk Road.”* This, obviously, does not constitute a permanent solution which guarantees the route remains open. The 2013 route study included a Transport appraisal in accordance with Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG) which requires five main areas of impact to be considered: Environment, Economy, Safety, Integration and Accessibility & Social Inclusion. The preferred option (red corridor) was also the lowest cost solution and the summary report stated “The Red Option is expected to significantly reduce the frequency of occurrence of landslide debris reaching the A83 Trunk Road at a much lower cost than the other options”. Suggesting that cost was a factor in choosing this option.
- Petition PE1428 was closed in September 2013 on the basis that the works recommended in the Jacobs Report would address the issues.
- Landslides and road closures continued. The Old Military Road (OMR) relief road was utilised as an alternative during daylight hours on some occasions. (Transport Scotland would be able to provide detail on the number of land slip events, the total number of days the road has been closed following landslips and the number of days that the Rest and be Thankful has been open but subject to traffic signal control). The study undertaken in 2013 by Jacobs on behalf of Transport Scotland advised that:-  
 “The section of the A83 between Ardgartan and the Rest and Be Thankful car park has a history of hillside instability, in particular the slopes above the Rest and Be Thankful. This has led to road closures on six separate occasions between 1 January 2007 and 31 October 2012, resulting in the road being closed for a total period of 34 days.”  
 Most recently the road was closed in 2018 due to landslides between the 9<sup>th</sup> October 2018 and 18<sup>th</sup> October 2018 with the Old Military Road diversion route also closed due to safety concerns during this period.  
 This also doesn’t take into account the period between 2012 and 2018 where the road was closed due to landslides.
- A further petition, PE1540, was lodged in November 2014, calling for a permanent solution.
- Further works continued over this period and still continue. The road has been restricted to single file traffic for months during this period and closed as a result of landslides for several days.
- Almost five years later this petition is still live and the A83 continues to be subject to road closures due to the failure of the current engineering solution, the most recent being in October 2018.

Argyll and Bute Council's position on the Rest and Be Thankful has been and remains clear and unanimous. In November 2014 our Council agreed:

*That Transport Scotland and the Scottish Government be asked to provide a permanent solution for the Rest and Be Thankful.*

The minutes of this meeting can be found at:

<https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/moderngov/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=257&MId=6412>

This position is supported by the Argyll and Bute Transport Connectivity and Economy Research Report commissioned by Highlands and Islands Enterprise, published in June 2016 which, among other things, identified the poor resilience of journeys between Lochgilphead, Campbeltown and Glasgow by Road due to impacts of landslides and accidents on the A83 as a key transport issue. The report is available at:

<http://www.hie.co.uk/regional-information/economic-reports-and-research/archive/argyll-and-bute-transport-connectivity-and-economy-research.html>

Following the most recent closure Councillors across the chamber re-confirmed our position. The full minute is available at the link below, but this extract in particular is pertinent:

*The Council agrees that the failure of the most recent works to keep the road open through severe weather demands an urgent review of existing and future plans at the Rest and Be Thankful.*

Minutes:

<https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/moderngov/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=257&MId=8015>

There are numerous examples of issues with the A83 at the Rest and Be thankful, both during closures and while it is open in its current single-file traffic management form.

### **Impact of Closures:**

- The Old Military Road's (OMR) availability is never guaranteed and requires a 3 hour mobilisation period before it can be brought into use. The convoy system cannot be considered to be an effective solution, significant disruption and delays are experienced and night time closures are often imposed. Flooding and the stability and visibility of boulders on higher ground have affected its availability.
- There is poor digital connectivity on the Rest (and indeed the wider network) causing communication problems which exacerbate road closures. Staff working on the site or responding to landslides do not have access to digital communication from the landslide locations impeding their response, restricting the dissemination of information and slowing staff mobilisation. Members of the public have no ability to raise the alarm in the event of an incident and no access to traffic updates.

- There are countless stories of the human impact of closures:
  - People who already face long journeys to access vital medical treatment – consultations, scans, procedures – who then face additional delays at already difficult times;
  - Children's services affected, with already distressing situations exacerbated by travel delays, physical separation and missed contact visits;
  - Medical staff travelling with patients are prevented from returning to the area, such as the recent case of a midwife who was unable to return leaving the remaining team short staffed;
  - People who miss those vital medical appointments because the logistics of getting from Argyll to Central Scotland are too difficult or too costly;
  - Disruption to food supplies to communities in Mid Argyll, Kintyre and the Islands
  - Employees who are unable to get to their place of work or critical meetings outwith Argyll and Bute, risking the patience of their employers or the loss of new business;
  - Customers in the rest of Scotland frustrated because they cannot receive their goods from Argyll and Bute, so they take their business elsewhere;
  - Local companies unable to receive the supplies they need to do their business;
  - Visitors who never come, and local businesses that close their doors as a result,

#### **Impact of Traffic management:**

- The first weekend in July saw an hour long delay at the Rest when a cyclist making their way through the temporary traffic lights failed to make it through before the opposite lights changed, leading to a chaotic gridlock situation. Traffic from both directions became trapped in the single file section of roads. Members of the public had to manage the situation which required drivers to reverse through stretches of the road works with steep drops on either side.
- Continuing single-file access into Argyll and Bute via its main route is completely unsuitable. During busier periods there are significant delays. The temporary removal of the traffic lights for the summer period is welcome but this removal of an obstacle will only be short lived. Temporary traffic lights and road works are anticipated to be required for the foreseeable future.
- Concerns have been raised by multiple stakeholders at the Task Force meetings that the current works to construct deep catch pits will actually destabilise the road itself and lead to further disruption.

There are also a number of issues on the **wider Argyll and Bute trunk road network:**

- An RTC on the A82 Loch Lomond on the afternoon of Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> July 2019 closed the road for over seven hours, creating chaos on diversion routes such

as the A814 from Arrochar to Helensburgh, which is unsuitable for large vehicles. Larger vehicles using the A814 blocked that road meaning that the A83 was inaccessible.

- In the most recent closure of the A83 (October 2018) the OMR was unavailable and the travel disruption quickly escalated to travel chaos with the closure of the A85 due to an RTC. This effectively sealed off Argyll and Bute, with the only road access available via the A82 through Glen Coe then the A828. A diversion of up to 120 miles (the distance from Edinburgh to Aberdeen).
- The second weekend of July 2019 saw five mile tailbacks at Inveraray due to a fault with the traffic lights at Inveraray Bridge – the network is over-reliant on these frail critical/single failure points.
- Notwithstanding its suitability or otherwise as a diversion route, the A82 north of Tarbet is completely unsuitable as the main route north from the West of Scotland, with narrow and meandering sections along the Lochside which fall well below modern standards (7.3m carriageway width).
- Heavy vehicles can often run off the trunk roads, and the soft roadside verges mean they become stuck fast, and road closures can be needed to recover the vehicles. One such example occurred in on the A83 at Furnace in February last year when the road had to be closed to allow a crane to pull the vehicle out; this after several days of traffic signals/single lane traffic while the vehicle was stuck.

It is the view of communities in Argyll and Bute that these vulnerabilities would not be tolerated in any other area of Scotland and should not be accepted in Argyll and Bute.

These and a number of other issues on the wider trunk road network – alignment, pinch points, congestion, frailty of key infrastructure like traffic signals, soft roadside verges – which affect the overall performance and resilience of the trunk road network, require to be addressed through STPR2. The Council's view is that a solution for the unique and recurring issues at the Rest and Be Thankful should be progressed in advance of STPR2, allowing that exercise to have a more holistic focus on the wider trunk road network in Argyll and Bute.

Uninhibited year-round access over the Rest and Be Thankful would be truly transformative, restoring local confidence and de-stigmatising the area nationally, attracting people and investment as well as strengthening the main route to market for globally sought after goods which are produced in Argyll and Bute. With initial support from the Scottish Government allowing Argyll and Bute the opportunity to thrive, the more the area can contribute to the national economy.

During 2017, Argyll and Bute contributed 5% of Scotland's total international visitor volume and 2% of its value. While domestic visitor volume in Argyll and Bute accounted for 7% of Scotland's volume and over 7% of its domestic tourism value. Argyll and Bute also is estimated to contribute 7% of Scotland's pure alcohol capacity, used in whisky production, which is set to grow further with recent investments made in new distilleries and in continued expansion of existing producers. Argyll and Bute's food and drink sector contributes approximately £124 million of Gross Value Added

and our region also contributes significantly with its aquaculture sector, contributing approximately £31 million Gross Value Added.

Representatives from the Council would be happy to attend a future meeting of the Petitions Committee to give further evidence on the issues at the Rest and Be Thankful, and to discuss why Argyll and Bute needs a permanent solution.