

## **PE1657/Y**

North Channel Partnership (Dumfries and Galloway Council and Mid and East Antrim Council) submission of 3 February 2021

The North Channel Partnership was re-established in January 2020 by Mid & East Antrim Borough Council and Dumfries & Galloway Council. The two Councils signed a terms of agreement document with seven objectives:

- adopt strategic policy and lobbying positions on projects of mutual interest to both Councils
- work jointly on shared economic, tourism, heritage and cultural projects which provide defined and measured benefits for the respective areas.
- identify and attract funding for joint projects which positively impact on the economy of both regions
- strengthen the historic links and strong relationships between the respective Council regions
- share best practice on the development of policy, the economy, tourism culture and heritage
- identify and prioritise those activities which can create an immediate positive impact on the economy
- raise the economic profile of both regions

The ports and north channel crossing are important areas for the Partnership. The Partnership is working with a range of key stakeholders, including ferry companies, to progress a number of common interests, including those of ports and the associated infrastructure. The significance of the need to upgrade the A75 and A77 routes was highlighted by both Councils in their submissions to the recent UK Union Connectivity Review.

The A75 and A77 roads on the Scottish side of the North Channel, to and from Cairnryan Port, are amongst Scotland's busiest trunk roads. The roads have a number of difficulties, including safety concerns, a lack of facilities, and longer journey times compared to competitor ports. There are also road infrastructure issues such as classification and carriageway quality; the roads suffer from HGV platoons and limited overtaking opportunities; and there are long diversionary routes in the event of road closures. The Partnership is concerned that lack of investment in the roads will encourage the growth of alternative travel routes to and from Northern Ireland, and impact on business and tourism in both areas.

The Port of Larne in Northern Ireland is a major gateway for commercial and domestic travel. It is a key strategic port, with the shortest, fastest and most frequent crossing to Scotland. The principal road link (A8) between Larne and Belfast has recently benefitted from a £120 million upgrade. The benefits of the A8 upgrade included access to a complete high-speed dual carriageway between the Port of Larne and Belfast, reducing journey times by up to 25 per cent. This has created the potential for better access and connectivity with commercial markets across the UK.

The A75 is the major link road for circa 97 miles between Stranraer and the town of Gretna Green and the junction of the M74/M6 north/south axis motorway network. Only around 4 miles of the route is dualled; hence, typical journey times exceed 2 hours. Despite the strategic significance of the infrastructure as the road forms part of the European Route E18; this route and the A77 route require investment for the Larne/Cairnryan transport axis to grow and to maintain present volumes of commercial and tourism and vehicle car traffic, Traffic volumes may also potentially increase following Brexit as hauliers find new routes into Europe.

It is acknowledged that improvements to the routes should be future proofed ensuring a lasting benefit for both the local economies and to support green transport and connectivity. This supports both local authorities' commitment towards tackling the climate emergency and ambitious targets for carbon reduction. The opportunity to develop digital roads which improve air quality and providing sufficient access to green energy or charging points can enable a greater use of the routes by low or zero emission vehicles for both tourism and trade. This would contribute to Scotland's net zero ambition and support the Partnership's ambitions to bid for a Greenport to be established.

The strategic importance of the ports at Cairnryan is clear. The ports provide:

- the only surface trade route between Scotland and Northern Ireland / Ireland;
- the only ferry routes to enable personal travel directly between Scotland and Northern Ireland, two nations with historic and cultural ties;
- a short sea crossing route to Northern Ireland for traffic from across the UK;
- local employment on the ferries themselves and at the ports.

There is evidence of freight traffic travelling from across the UK to access the ports at Cairnryan owing to the relatively shorter sailing time compared to competitor ports. The ports at Cairnryan are geographically closer to Northern Ireland than the southern 'competitor' ports at Holyhead, Liverpool and Heysham. The large majority of traffic on the route from Cairnryan, and indeed more than 90% of freight movements, are associated with Northern Ireland.

The nature of the road links to these competing ports is one of the factors in the decision-making process and stakeholder consultation highlights concerns that poor connectivity to the ports at Cairnryan could see the region lose business if roads are not improved.

In summary, the North Channel Partnership is supportive of the need for infrastructure investment on the A75 and A77 routes.