

PE1657/AA

A77 Action Group submission of 5 February 2021

It is undoubtedly the case that both the Scottish and Northern Ireland economies are inter-dependent with the Ports of Cairnryan playing a pivotal role as the virtual bridge between our 2 countries. The North Chanel Partnership between Dumfries and Galloway Council and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council recognise this, as they do in recognising the important role the A77 and A75 play in linking our Counties to the various UK and European markets and are working together on a Socio and Economic Strategy. The A77 Action Group has recognised this since its inception in 2016 and has laid out the socio and economic case for the upgrading of the A77 and A75 to dual carriageway standards in its "Welcome" document. It is imperative that such Partnerships are maintained along with the links that have been established with other Local Authorities if our economies are ever to recover from this pandemic.

Brexit has clearly put a greater focus on the Cairnryan Ports which have so many advantages, the biggest being the shortest sea crossing between the UK mainland and the island of Ireland with 24 sailings each day and very little disruption because of adverse weather conditions. With the UK Government committed to the free flow of traffic between Northern and Southern Ireland, it is inevitable that Border Control points will be based on the UK mainland. Lorries are already being turned away at the Ports of Cairnryan for not having the proper documents to allow them to travel between the UK and Northern Ireland and this is likely to increase as Brexit takes more effect.

We believe we will see more and more lorries gravitating towards Cairnryan because of delays and the stacking of lorries at the other UK Ports of Holyhead, Liverpool and Heysham. This could be a real advantage for the Cairnryan ports were it not for the poor standard of the A75 which is not fit for purpose and requires to be brought up to dual carriageway standard, as does the A77 linking the ports to the central belt of Scotland.

Before COVID 19, and the lockdowns since March 2020, both P&O and Stena were already seeing a downturn of freight support on the Lochryan routes. With the introduction of larger vessels and improvements to infrastructure around the English and Welsh ports it is perhaps not surprising that hauliers are less inclined to make the journey North and face almost 100 miles of mostly single carriage way road from Carlisle to the Cairnryan ports. In particular the upgrade to full dual carriageway standard of the access road from the M6 to Heysham has been well received by Hauliers and makes that a more attractive option for their route planners.

During discussions with the ferry companies, hauliers regularly cite the poor quality of both the A77 and A75 as negative factors when they are quoting for work and planning journeys. This has been the case for many years and the future prospects for growth on the Lochryan corridor will undoubtedly be heavily dependent of the level of investment made to these roads. All the main ferry ports, on both sides of the Irish Sea, enjoy dual carriageway or motorway access apart from Cairnryan and this will continue to have a detrimental effect on the ports and the area in general until things change.

We then have Dumfries and Galloway Council and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council's making separate representations to the UK Government for 'Free Port' status for the Ports at Cairnryan and Larne. If successful, and we hope they will be, this will bring tremendous benefits to both our areas. We would see manufacturing companies wanting to locate to our areas and it would open doors for further investments creating very much needed employment. We are aware of the UK Government's Review of the 'Union's Connectivity' Strategy of which the A77 Action Group has put forward its document in support of the need for upgrading with evidence as to why it is imperative for the A77 and A75 to be upgraded to dual carriageway standards if we are ever to Restart, Renew and Recover from COVID 19. When we read the article in this week's Gazette we see it is imperative that these roads are improved as a matter of urgency or we will see more hauliers in Northern Ireland using the direct European sea crossings from Rosslare to Cherbourg and Dunkirk. You will note in the article the improved road links on the Island of Ireland, something that we cannot boast on this side of the water where the roads have been neglected going back decades by successive Governments.

The economic prospects for the residents of this corner of Scotland are dependent on A77 & A75 being upgraded to dual carriageway standard as a matter of urgency.