

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

Regarding the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee request for views on the efficacy of the current approach to roads maintenance in Scotland and the adequacy of current associated expenditure levels. Below are the views of Aberdeen City Council.

1. How have recent spending decisions on roads maintenance affected the quality of Scotland's roads, road users, businesses, public services, and the economy?

Roads authorities across Scotland have been facing declining budgets for a number of years these budgets vary according to the competing demands and financial pressures facing each local authority. The road condition index tends to follow the trend in funds invested in both the local and trunk road networks.

The condition of a road network reflects on the community it serves, including the business community. Well maintained roads, footways and open spaces enhance the character of a community and can go some way to attracting businesses to an area.

Sustainable travel and leisure interactions such as cycling, and walking tend to be dependant of the condition of the network. As network condition improve these activities increase.

2. If spending on roads maintenance continues at current levels, what could be the likely effects on the above groups?

As budgets across Scotland are not enough to undertake all the aspects of road maintenance there will always be a focus on the condition of the road surface and how many potholes and obvious damage are on a particular road. There will always be pressure to repair potholes consequently short-term measures are more likely to be used to undertake repairs.

Potholes tend to be the manifestation of the reduced level of cyclical and routine maintenance such as reducing gully emptying, maintenance of drains or surface dressing. This cyclical and routine maintenance is critical to reducing the long-term whole life cost of a road but tends to be invisible to many road users.

If no long term investment is input into the road network it will tend to deteriorate at a reasonably predictable rate, cold and icy winter, reduced cyclical and routine maintenance tends to increase this rate of deterioration. If the lack of long term investment continues the road structure as well as the road surface will fail. At this stage repair costs grow exponentially.

To maintain a road network routine and cyclical maintenance is require to prevent damage resulting from in the main water getting into the structure of the road. In

addition to this, investment is required to rectify the ongoing slow deterioration in the condition of the network caused by the millions of vehicles using it each day.

3. How could any negative effects of reduced road spending best be addressed?

Much of the damage to the road network is as a result of the poor long-term quality of the multiple utility and service tracks installed into the road network. Utility companies are now reluctant to accept the cost of repairing very small areas of the road surface between their excavation and kerbs, chamber covers, other tracks, etc. This results in either the Local Authority paying for the reinstatement of these small areas or leaving a further weak point in the road that will pothole in due course.

These utility tracks are a significant cause of premature maintenance and at a time of reducing budgets across the country roads authorities are effectively subsidising utility companies.

If utility companies were required to maintain their works for a significantly longer period, they would place much more effort into ensuring the standard of their reinstatement works was sufficient to last longer and not become the cause of premature maintenance.

Spending on road maintenance tends to be subject to varying budgets this results in financial insecurity for suppliers, employees and contractors. Much would be achieved if the industry could have a reasonable degree of certainty on the finances available and the level of works likely to be procured in the coming years. Currently there is a feast or famine situation where the market is either oversupplied with work resulting in increased costs but not producing significantly more work, followed by a cut in budgets resulting in a contraction of the industry and loss of expertise resulting in a poorer standard of road maintenance works.

4. Is the current model of funding and delivering roads maintenance, which is split between Transport Scotland and local authorities, the most economic and efficient option?

The local road networks maintained by local authorities are in the main evolved roads many initially starting as tracks or drybound construction and have, as funds became available, been improved to reflect the local demands and needs of the communities they serve. Those communities that have, over the years, invested in the maintenance and improvement of their local roads network tend to have a reasonably good road condition. Communities that have not invested in the road network tend to a consequentially poorer road condition.

The national trunk road network, maintained by Transport Scotland, is in the main a planned network constructed post WW2 and has been constructed to the design standards prevalent at the time of construction. These roads tend to serve the needs of the nation are subject to much higher traffic volumes and receive significantly more investment per mile than the local road network.

The current model therefore reflects the need for a national road network and allows local accountability both to and not to invest in the local roads.

A national local road network could be based on funds being targeted towards the roads in the worst condition, this however would reward the communities who have historically chosen not to invest in the local roads and at the same time increase costs on essential elements of maintenance such as winter maintenance in areas that receive less investment in the future.