

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE**PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND****SUBMISSION FROM ABERDEENSHIRE 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?**

The evidence from the Scottish Road Maintenance Condition Survey (SRMCS) shows that the quality of Scotland's roads as represented by the Road Condition Indicator (RCI) has been generally held at the same level despite recent reductions in expenditure. This has largely been achieved through the application of road asset management planning (RAMP), co-ordinated through the Society of Chief Officers for Transportation (SCOTS) partnership covering all 32 Scottish local authorities. The most significant change in Aberdeenshire has been a transfer of resources from resurfacing and reconstruction towards the greater use of surface dressing. Surface dressing is a low cost treatment that seals the surface of the road against the ingress of water thereby helping to reduce frost damage over the winter. However, it does not deal with the longer term damage to the lower layers of the road caused by repeated loading from heavy vehicles. It will not, therefore, prolong the life of a road indefinitely and more substantial treatment will eventually be required. The reduction in more substantial resurfacing treatment also appears to have been associated with an increased need for reactive patching in Aberdeenshire. There has also been an increase in the amount of preparatory work necessary prior to surface dressing, putting up the cost per square metre, and it is likely that this increase would continue in the absence of a resumption of more resurfacing.

Although the RCI is a useful indicator of the condition of carriageway surfaces and has the advantage of objectivity, being machine based, it by no means presents the whole picture of the condition of the road network and our teams will always seek to use as broad an evidence base as possible when looking at how our network is performing such as the number and type of road traffic collisions, public stakeholder comments and insurance claims. Reductions have impacted more heavily on other areas of the roads budget in order to maintain the expenditure on carriageway surface treatment. In particular, the budget for footway resurfacing has had to be reduced. Footway condition is important and this budget will need to be restored in the future if the council is to meet the national and local objectives for non-motorised transport.

Bridges are a critical element of the road network in Scotland. Due to the topography of Aberdeenshire there are approximately 1400 bridges that are intrinsic to the public road network. For bridges to remain in use it is important that they are well maintained. This is becoming increasingly difficult as spending has been significantly below what would be considered necessary to restore and maintain all the bridges on the network in good condition. As a result, we are now seeing bridges having to be either weight restricted or in some cases closed altogether, with a consequential disruptive impact on daily life.

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

In the short term, if spending continues at current levels then, even with an emphasis on surface dressing which can minimise the level of substantial deterioration in carriageway surface condition in the first few years, there will require to be greater prioritisation by roads authorities across the locations where the available funds are used for resurfacing/reconstruction. In the medium term it would be necessary to reinstate resurfacing and reconstruction programmes to address the longer term deterioration in the multiple layers of the road network. There is also a considerable concern that the reductions in other areas of the roads budget necessary to retain carriageway surface condition will impact on the full range of users of our network. In particular, if footway surfacing were to continue at present levels, there would be a substantial adverse impact on pedestrians in the short to medium term, which in turn would not support the place and active travel objectives which are at the heart of our current transport, planning and economic development strategies.

However, Aberdeenshire Council, along with other local authorities, are having to address a projected overall shortfall in their revenue budget in future years. Our teams have managed the available budgets very effectively whilst also working collaboratively to develop new approaches with other authorities. The Audit Scotland Reports of 2013 and 2016 highlight this work. For example we have used Asset management modelling to predict the impact on road condition of various levels of reduction in the roads budget. The results show that any further reduction from current levels would result in a sustained deterioration in the condition of the council's road network. This would clearly have an adverse impact on road users, businesses, public services and the economy. There would be more potholes, more insurance claims, more emergency road closures and more disruption. Good road connections are particularly important for an outlying rural area such as Aberdeenshire where remoteness from markets can be an issue for the economy. In the event of further reductions, priority would have to be given to A and B class roads, so C class and unclassified roads would be likely to be disproportionately affected.

Within our communities the role that the road network plays in delivering on the core policies around climate change, active travel, place and town centre first cannot be overstated. Creation of large scale new infrastructure that puts people first in how our streets operate is welcomed but the lack of funding to maintain and improve what we already have in place has the potential to undermine what should be a whole systems approach. This has already been flagged by the Active Travel Taskforce, is included within ongoing work by SCOTS on the Value of the Local Road Network and was flagged in the work to support the drafting of the National Transport Strategy.

Already the current budget provision for bridge maintenance, repair and renewal has necessitated prioritisation of works required to vital bridges to keep them operational in the medium term (10 years). This has meant that in some cases there has not been available budget to replace or repair less strategic bridges and hence those bridges have had to be weight restricted, closed or have collapsed. Each weight restriction or closure will have a very specific impact on communities that rely on a bridge for their transportation and access needs. In the case of bridge collapse this will have the effect of extinguishing conduits for vital utilities such as gas, electricity, telecoms (Including broadband) fresh water and sewers.

In addition to the above the retention of current levels of expenditure will also significantly constrain the ability of roads authorities to plan and develop the network for the future. This would initially limit how we bring forward projects that encourage active and healthy lifestyles but will also restrict what we can do to meet the demands of the connected, autonomous and low carbon vehicles that will populate our roads in the future. At the most basic level if in an autonomous vehicle requires to be able to “see” centre and edge lines to function properly, then this will determine how a road authority will maintain its network or restrict which parts of the network such vehicles can operate on.

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

Clearly, the best outcome would be achieved if there were no further reduction in road spending and instead the key strategic role that our road network plays in economic performance and social equity is reflected in how national, regional and local budgets are approved, distributed and allocated.

Work through the National Road Maintenance Review, Roads Collaboration and the input to the draft NTS have considered how other nations allocate and prioritise funding for the development and maintenance of their transport networks. The Committee should include this as part of its considerations.

Greater certainty on funding levels and periods would then allow all Roads/Planning/Transport authorities and bodies to start addressing the backlog of planned maintenance that has been building up across many elements of the road infrastructure as well as joining that work up with projects that create better places within our towns. As this may take some time to feed through any formal processes and given the ongoing fiscal uncertainty, it is likely that we would be continuing the strategy of concentrating the available funds on preventative treatments such as surface dressing. If the shortfall were to continue for a sustained period, it would become necessary to consider more drastic measures such as the imposition of weight limits on certain roads to prevent further damage or catastrophic failure to road surfaces. It should be noted that so long as frost damage is avoided, the service life of roads depends primarily on the cumulative loading from heavy goods vehicles and that light vehicles such as cars have relatively little impact. For this reason, weight limits, if properly enforced, could in theory offer some potential for prolonging the life of the road network with a reduced budget. However, weight limits have proved very difficult to enforce in the past and the necessary exemptions to allow access mean that there would still be significant numbers of HGVs using the roads. For example, in farming areas such as Aberdeenshire, heavy vehicles associated with agricultural operations need to access nearly all rural roads. Where enforcement were practicable, the resulting diversions for goods vehicles would impose additional costs on businesses and adversely impact on the economy. In rural areas these diversions can typically exceed 50 miles and one location in Aberdeenshire there is the potential for a 180 mile diversion that would impact on large numbers of tourist and agricultural traffic. If we are forced to implement large numbers of such closures then the accessibility of our communities would then reduce significantly.

Additional budget for the maintenance, repair and renewal of bridges is the best way to maximise the number of bridges that will be able to remain in service with an acceptable degree of robustness and resilience. The current bridgeworks

backlog in Aberdeenshire is estimated at £84M with current spend levels at £2.4M. Recent experience has shown that it is extremely difficult to enforce weight restrictions at bridges when imposed and consequently it is now more likely that all vehicular traffic would need to be prohibited if the bridge is on either a A or B Class road. Effective prioritisation of spend from available medium-term budget is now essential if the cumulative Aberdeenshire wide effects of current and subsequent bridge closures are to be mitigated as far as is reasonably practicable.

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 current division of Scotland's roads into a national trunk road network funded and managed by national government and a local road network funded and managed by local government is a very long standing convention deeply embedded into Scottish roads law and practice and ties in well with the principles of devolved government.

However, operationally there needs to be close co-ordination at the interface between the trunk and local road networks for optimum efficiency of the road system as a whole. This is not really a problem for motorways and special roads which have no frontage development and limited access points to the local road network. In this case, the current model whereby they are managed as free standing trunk road operational units is probably more efficient and economic than the agency agreement system operating before 1996 whereby each Council managed the sections within their own boundaries on behalf of the trunk road authority.

All-purpose trunk roads have far more interaction with the local road network. In the case of single carriageway all-purpose trunk roads, this interaction is very strong with frequent junctions and frontage development and the agency agreement system was probably operationally and economically more efficient with each Council able to integrate the management of these with adjoining local roads.

Dual carriageway all-purpose trunk roads share some characteristics with each of the above groups. However, as they have been improved over the years they have taken on more of the characteristics of motorways and special roads. Improvement schemes will normally aim to minimise access points and increase grade separation. Operationally they also share more characteristics with motorways and special roads than with single carriageway trunk roads and local roads. Specialised signing and vehicles are required to undertake lane closures on high speed dual carriageways. It would, therefore, probably be most efficient to manage these in conjunction with adjacent motorways and special roads.

The last re-organisation of local government in 1996 resulted in unitary councils with a wide range of sizes. Some, like Aberdeenshire with some 5,500 km of roads, are large enough to function efficiently as a free standing roads authority. However, some of the smaller councils are rather small for efficient operation of their roads functions.

This issue was highlighted in the National Road Maintenance Review (NRMR) as published in 2013 and which led to specific work on encouraging greater

collaboration. A Roads Collaboration Board was formed with representatives from Transport Scotland, COSLA, SCOTS, SOLACE and the Improvement Service. This reported to a Strategic Action Group that was jointly chaired by the Transport Minister and COSLA Spokesperson. The following link shows the position on this work following an Audit Scotland report of 2016.

http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/documents/roads_collaboration_programme/sag-auditscotland.pdf

The joint position of the partners on the Strategic Action Group was that a regional approach would be optimal but with no view on the details of the make up of such regional groupings or the functions that they would deliver. This is now also covered in the National Transport Strategy Consultation as launched on 31 July in which it is proposed that further work is required on what the optimal models may be.

One of the approaches taken forward on the back of the NRMR was encourage the formation of regional joint committees to enable joint working and procurement between groups of authorities. Aberdeenshire is a member of the Northern Roads Joint Committee which was at the forefront in putting the necessary governance structures in place. Although this is still in its early stages, there are already a number of successful collaborations and it is anticipated that this structure will make a useful contribution to future efficiency in the management of local roads. However whilst the Northern Roads Joint Committee does allow engagement with Transport Scotland and may allow some specialist work to be done jointly, it is not constituted to allow it to take decisions on the funding or delivery of road maintenance. That still sits with the relevant roads authorities.