

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM ANDREW FRASER

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

It is difficult to know exactly what is meant by "recent" in this context, let alone "recent spending decisions". However, there seems little doubt that during the past several decades, there has been a gradual decline in the quality of roads maintenance generally, and hence the quality of Scotland's roads. As to how that decline affects road users etc. is difficult to say. The costs may be measured in terms of inconvenience, accidents, delay and damage, perhaps, as traffic signs are left damaged or missing for years, their sizes are reduced to save money, potholes are left to connect up into long ruts, gullies are left choked, surface water is left uncontrolled, visibility splays are obstructed and public complaints are ignored. Some accidents contributed to by poor maintenance may be identifiable from STATS 19 records, but these will be an underestimate, because the factors involved in accidents are not always obvious, even to a specialist in accident investigation. It is a concern that the Accounts Commission's 2016 report page 11 paragraph 13 relies entirely on STATS 19 records in its estimate of the numbers of casualties in road traffic accidents involving poor and (sic) defective road conditions. It is not clear whether the Commission has simply relied upon the notoriously unreliable STATS 19 Contributory Factors (101 – Poor or defective road surface, being one of them), but police officers are not trained in roads matters and the calculation that the Commission has made is almost certainly wrong. In fact, Contributory Factors should never have been published, but the fact that they have speaks volumes for the calibre of those who allowed it.

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

Many years ago, Professor Coleman O'Flaherty was looking forward to the formation of larger local authorities, able to generate the funds and to attract and retain staff of sufficiently high calibre to cope with roads and their problems properly. In Scotland the formation of the Regions was a great step forward. The larger authorities enjoyed economies of scale, employed the specialists required and provided wide experience for road engineers and technicians in roads and bridges design and construction, traffic management and engineering and development control. Interestingly, the rate of reduction of fatalities on Scottish roads – partly because of the larger authorities' ability to support accident investigation units, fell at around 22/year before the "re-organisation" of 1996. After that, the gradual loss of the aforementioned staff sufficient calibre, and of specialist units is associated with a quite abrupt change in the rate of reduction, to about 11/year. This is an association, of course, but if this aspect of roads maintenance (accidents and casualty reduction) has suffered to that extent (over 1,000 excess fatalities valued at £2m each) it would be surprising if more general maintenance has not suffered similarly.

The final nails in the coffin of the co-operative approach engendered by them, was the (inevitable) cancellation of the Agency Agreements with the Secretary of State and the very contrived attempts to introduce “competition”. The appearance of this “consultation”, however, seems to suggest that “Competing for better roads” has failed.

To return to the question, the answer may depend on upon what can be done with the monies available. If nothing changes, the likely effects will simply be a continuation of the costs currently being borne by the “above groups”. If ways are found to do more with less, then things may improve. However, there seems little chance of that without a reformation that may allow a return to roads authorities large enough to do the job properly.

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

It is time that the political nature of local authorities was recognised. Those who have created the current situation cannot simply demand that they “work together” when, politically, adjacent authorities may be bitterly opposed. It should also be realised that the smaller authorities are much more prone to servicing the emotional appeals of the “social” sector, rather than the more or less taken for granted “roads” sector. Strategic roads authorities were created on the past. They are urgently needed again. The politicians' contempt for the Royal Commission which gave us the Regions has cost us dearly.

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?

One just has to look at the situation around junctions to see how silly is this arrangement. It becomes ridiculous where accidents are concerned, despite the STATS 19 guidance, and it is pitiable when a local authority cannot improve a fatal accident site, because it is a point where a so-called “local” road meets a trunk road, and the authority responsible for the latter contrives to make the improvement unaffordable through using an inappropriate costing technique.

Presumably, similar things occur in the more general maintenance arena, so it is impossible to argue that the current model is the most economic and efficient option.

Is there any hope?

It has been a frustrating time for those involved with roads – and it says a lot for those who remain and are doing the best they can within the limitations imposed upon them by those to whom political power was more important than providing a good road system for those who elected them. But the Audit Commission, while clearly not expert in roads matters, seems to be pointing towards sensible solutions, although it seems rather naïve in its expectation that Councils will be happy “work together”, at least in the short term. In 2009, for example, Stirling Council suddenly reneged on its agreement in the road safety arena with Falkirk & Clackmannanshire Councils to maintain a joint accident investigation unit, despite the economies of scale involved and the consistently positive reports the unit received from its Stirling Council supervisor. That this should have happened may be a further indication of the loss of staff of an appropriate calibre to which many have already referred.

It is, therefore, encouraging to read the Road Maintenance Strategic Action Group's response to the Audit Scotland's 2016 Report. The response is reassuring, in that there definitely seems to be a determination to revert to a position similar, as far as roads maintenance is concerned, to the one which existed between 1975 and 1996.

So there is hope, although one can foresee continuing political problems.

This "consultation" has referred to roads maintenance in a manner which suggests that the authors see roads maintenance as an entity quite separate from those other functions of a roads department, and mainly based on keeping the formation dry. This is a mistake, but it is more or less to what the maintenance arms of roads departments have been reduced. Roads maintenance, however, should be more than that. Much closer liaison is required between those involved in maintenance and those involved in the other road-related disciplines. Too often, elements of the road are "maintained", without any thought given as to whether the element being maintained is appropriate, or up to current standards. Too often, the maintenance of important elements (traffic signs, for example) are simply ignored, or in appropriate replacements are made without reference to (for example) traffic management specialists.

Roads maintenance organisations, therefore, should not be allowed autonomy. If joint organisations are to be set up, then they should include ALL elements of the roads function, and be led by one capable of ensuring a proper balance between the sections, with information flowing freely between them. Given this, repetition of historical mistakes might be avoided (over-use of warning line, for example).

Finally, a warning about over-reliance on targets:

"Goals may cause systematic problems in organisations due to narrowed focus, increased risk-taking, unethical behaviour, inhibited learning, decreased co-operation, and decreased intrinsic motivation."¹

An environment capable of attracting and retaining people of an appropriate calibre remains a most important factor, the most important factor, perhaps, being the quality and integrity of the politicians we elect.

1 Ordóñez, Lisa & Schweitzer, Maurice & D. Galinsky, Adam & Bazerman, Max. (2009). Goals Gone Wild: The Systematic Side Effects of Over-Prescribing Goal Setting. *Academy of Management Perspectives*. 23. 10.2139/ssrn.1332071.