

## **RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE**

### **PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND**

#### **SUBMISSION FROM ANGUS COUNCIL**

At the meeting of the **Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee of the Scottish Parliament** on 26 June 2019, as part of their **Pre-Budget/Financial scrutiny on roads maintenance in Scotland**, the committee issued a **Call for Views**:

#### **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 Angus has been a reduction of resources from resurfacing, reconstruction and surface dressing albeit surface dressing has increased as a proportion. 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. It is a tool in the armoury in a rounded plan to manage roads assets in the short-term. 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, which is not the most cost-effective means of asset management. 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.

Angus' Road Condition Indices RCIs have reduced in recent years. Although the RCIs are useful indicators of the condition of carriageway surfaces and have the advantage of objectivity, being machine based, it by no means presents the whole picture of the condition of the road network. We 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 will ultimately have an impact on the safe and effective use of our networks, which will have societal, environmental and financial consequences.

Bridges are a critical element of the road network in Scotland. There are approximately 400 bridges in Angus, which 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 and in a short time some may be 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 continued additional local budgets for 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. Ultimately this will lead to a substantial adverse impact in the short to medium term on how maintaining our roads assets supports the place and active travel objectives, which are at the heart of our current transport, planning and economic development strategies.

We continue to manage the available budgets very effectively and we have seen some initial benefits on working collaboratively with other local authorities, who are also having to address a projected overall shortfall in their revenue budget in future years, sharing best practice in roads asset management planning. However, there is no indication that this will reach a balanced and sustained position at any time in the future. We have as have many other local road authorities adopted a roads inspection strategy that lowers the previous response times to deal with defects. This clearly has an adverse impact on road users, businesses, public services and the economy, where defects are present for less than optimal periods of time, whilst seeking to ensure that our networks remain safe and serviceable. There is an inherent risk of 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 Angus 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, which would lead to further deterioration of connectedness of our communities and increasing transport poverty. Such connectedness is demonstrated by our bridges, which as stated in our response is seeing increasing use of weight-restrictions and will inevitably lead to closures in the relatively near future to ensure risks from collapse are avoided.

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” (NTS).

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 and low carbon vehicles that will form our transport systems in the future. Such transport systems require base infrastructure, i.e. our roads, which to are well-maintained at proper investment levels.

### **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. Instead the key strategic role that our road network plays in economic performance and social equity should be 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 associated 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 and also rationalising our road network, which may see some roads no longer being maintained for vehicular use. 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. In Angus, heavy vehicles associated with agricultural operations need to access nearly all rural roads. Where enforcement is 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 be tens of miles. Such restrictions can also have a profoundly adverse effect on rural tourism. If we are forced to implement large numbers of such closures then the accessibility of our communities would then reduce significantly with inherent consequences on health and wellbeing.

#### **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 coordination at the interface between the trunk and local road networks for optimum efficiency of the road system as a whole, and a fuller realisation that trunk roads in isolation rarely provide a fully independent transport solution. That is, local roads are need to reach people, places and businesses. This realisation therefore needs to ensure that a consistent level of priority and funding to maintain trunk roads and local roads is in place.

The work ongoing by SCOTS though research funding from Scottish Road Research Board into "the Value of the Local Road Network" is considered will aid this realisation and identify a shared acceptance of the real needs of road users whether on local or trunk roads or both.

The issue of close coordination was highlighted in the National Road Maintenance Review (NRMR) as published in 2013, 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/s-ag-auditscotland.pdf](http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/documents/roads_collaboration_programme/s-ag-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 to encourage the formation of regional joint committees to enable joint working and procurement between groups of authorities. Angus Council is a member of the Northern Roads Joint Committee which was at the forefront in putting the necessary governance structures in place. Collaboration initiatives are also developing between Angus Council and the Tayside authorities. 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.