

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM BRIAN GRIFFITHS

My background is that I have been driving for over 40 years and I would previously cover up to 20,000 miles per annum in a wide range of locations including Central Scotland and the Highlands and Islands.

More recently, I have moved to a locality with an excellent bus service which I frequently use in addition to walking several miles every day. I now only drive 4,000 miles per year and find this to be something of an ordeal due to the poor state of the roads which resemble an obstacle course and clearly have lacked sufficient investment for decades.

Turning to the questions raised:

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

The roads are presently in appalling condition with numerous potholes and craters requiring drivers of all vehicles to regularly take evasive action that avoids damage to their wheels and suspension. This obviously has a negative impact as, for the majority, there is no real alternative to using the roads given the sparse rail network that cannot be depended on. We all rely on the road network being well maintained in order to enable the free flow of goods and services as well as to facilitate social interaction. The lack of investment over an extended period of time is puzzling as there always seems to be provision made for ineffective traffic calming methods such as the expanding volume of speed bumps that only slow down smaller vehicles but can be straddled by commercials and larger SUVs. I can recall the point when road budget cuts began during the mid-1990s as I was acquainted with a resurfacing contractor at that time and the local authority abruptly terminated its contract with him, following which he very quickly went out of business. Previously, the roads were kept in very good order but since then successive authorities have reduced investment which has led to the current state of affairs.

To exemplify my point, I recently travelled on a coach from Edinburgh town centre to the outskirts of the city. The vehicle nearly shook itself apart for the entire length of Queensferry Road which I was aware of having been impacted upon by numerous utility company interventions and poorly attempted road repairs. The level of shuddering was so extreme that I presumed that there had to be a suspension fault but the same occurred a week later on the same route but with an almost new coach. The vibration was so bad that a young physically challenged person in a secured wheelchair yelled out in discomfort and was clearly in some distress. My experience is probably repeated around the country.

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

The poor state of the roads not only relates to levels of spending but how that money is applied. For example, repairs regularly fail after 12-18 months which suggest that the workmanship and materials are of poor quality and not fit for purpose. As such, there should be a bond required of all contractors, including utility companies, to cover the cost of the

inevitable future rework that is currently borne by the taxpayer. Furthermore, there should be independent investigation of how contracts are awarded to quarries and resurfacing companies whose work is clearly below standard.

As most car drivers are a captive audience, they will continue to travel by car to work through necessity, whilst bus operators and haulage contractors will similarly have no option but to transport passengers and goods on our crumbling road network. Apart from the unpleasantness of travelling in what resembles a third world country's travel infrastructure, there will be a cost in terms of road traffic incidents which have occurred as a direct result of potholes and craters or flooding caused by silted drains. I am sure that the committee could obtain data from the Association of British Insurers, Police Scotland and RoSPA to investigate further.

One further aspect that has never been discussed is how self-driving vehicles will avoid potholes and craters to avoid damaging their wheels and suspension systems. I understand that there will shortly be trials commencing on the Forth Road Bridge and it is likely that this will rapidly progress within the next few years to the point that a large percentage of journeys will be under autonomous control by around 2030. If the roads are not fully repaired by then there will be numerous incidents caused by autonomous vehicles blindly crashing through all the various road defects that humans currently steer around as a matter of course.

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

An area that is often overlooked is water damage caused by blocked ditches and roadside gullies, silted-up drains and soil that has been allowed to gradually expand to the very edge of the carriageway. Similarly, overhanging trees and tree branches create a tunnel effect which blocks out the sun and enables standing water, or ice during winter, to remain in-situ where evaporation would normally occur.

Were road spending to be focused on pre-emptive general maintenance rather than reactive repairs, this would help avoid some of the contributing factors to rapid surface deterioration caused by standing water and ice.

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?

I have serious concerns about whether all monies allocated to both national and local government for road maintenance is spent on repairing roads or whether much of it is redirected to competing priorities. There is also confusion about whether a particular stretch of road is the responsibility of the local authority or Transport Scotland. In fairness, I regularly engage with my local authority roads department as well as Bear and Amey and they have all proved receptive to my highlighting road defects before making repairs. However, it should not be necessary for a lay person to be continually having to report such faults and I would like to see more initiative being taken for repairs to be instigated on a rolling basis, particularly by local authorities.

There are also differing approaches taken by local authorities depending on their political affiliation, their relationship with the Scottish Government and whether they wish to actively discourage transport powered by internal combustion engines. As such, an alternative methodology of funding requires to be considered that focuses on improving the situation back to mid-1990s levels.