

## **RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE**

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

#### **SUBMISSION FROM BRIAN J YOUNG OF SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL**

**This is the Scottish Borders Council officer response to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee call for views on the efficacy of the current approach to roads maintenance in Scotland and the adequacy of current associated expenditure levels.**

The response has been set out so as to respond to the specific questions highlighted by the Committee:

#### **Introduction**

In area terms the Scottish Borders is the fourth largest authority in Scotland, with the Council looking after a network of almost 3000km of road as well as over 1200 bridges and culverts, and approaching 19,000 street lighting columns.

The condition of the Council road network continues to deteriorate, and recent road condition indicator results suggest that almost half of the Scottish Borders road network is in a condition that requires attention; with the condition of many bridges requiring attention too.

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

##### Background

The continued long-term under investment in Scotland's road network has led to a declining network. This is not something that is confined to recent years but is the culmination of a much longer period of under investment across all areas of roads maintenance. As much of the deterioration is beneath the visible surface of the road the true extent of structural deterioration is still not apparent to everyday users.

Reductions in available revenue budget have impacted on the delivery of planned works as well as reactive, routine and cyclic works. All of this is detrimental to the condition of the network. Reductions in cyclic gully emptying, cleaning ditches and cutting drainage offlets for example has reduced the ability of the road networks to deal with surface water. This in turn leads to accelerated deterioration of the road network and, in some cases localised surface water flooding. Surface dressing programmes have also reduced significantly over the years leading to a rapidly deteriorating network that subsequently needs more substantial funding to rectify the level of defects.

It should be noted that the under investment has impacted, and continues to impact on all aspects of the road network including bridges, retaining walls, safety barriers, street lighting, road markings and signage.

##### Impact on road users

For road users, and particularly businesses, poor road condition increases journey times, reduces fuel efficiency, increases maintenance cost and potentially impacts on driver health through whole body vibration and fatigue. In addition to increased costs through network delays and vehicle repairs the road condition increases the vulnerability for drivers. Much more research is required in this regard but as well as the obvious dangers from potholes and poor road surface quality there are more hidden dangers such as diminished skid

resistance qualities on many of our roads with current funding levels leading to carriageway renewal and resurfacing schedules many times in excess of what is recommended.

Inevitably these issues also have a detrimental effect on the economy as a whole; albeit this is difficult to quantify.

Resource issues are equally impacting on the renewal schedules of ancillary aspects such as road markings, signage and safety barriers. The long-term road safety implications of these aspects are unlikely to be evident until much further into the future.

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

If spending continues at current levels (N.B. current indications are that further dilution is a more likely scenario), then the condition of the road network will deteriorate further as there is insufficient funding to achieve steady state position. As such roads authorities will, at best, effectively be looking at a managed decline of their asset. All of the groups above will therefore be impacted by the continuing decline of the road network.

In addition to the increased costs discussed in answer to the previous question there is significant potential for a diminished road network with more roads taken off the public road list as they become unsuitable for everyday transport. This can be particularly the case for routes that are impacted by niche activities such as timber extraction; not least as the remote minor roads on which the majority of timber originates were never constructed to carry anything like the size or weight of vehicles associated with that industry. The Strategic Timber Transport Fund has helped to an extent in this regard but despite it there are currently roads in the area that are disintegrating under the loadings they are facing.

Deteriorating road conditions also carry with them a significant litigation risk and this is another area that is likely to negatively impact on road authorities going forward.

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

The current underlying state of the road network can only be truly addressed by immediate, significant and sustained investment in roads infrastructure. Even with such investment it is likely to take a number of decades to repair the damage that continued under investment has brought and, without change, will continue to bring.

One method of limiting the impact of reduced road funding is to carry out works that have a lower cost rate of application. Unfortunately this is not an effective long-term plan as it leaves the worst areas of the network to deteriorate further and faster.

Alternative methods of working and/or materials can also be beneficial. For example TS2010 in preference to more traditional HRA can lead to savings through a reduced need for road closures and smaller squad sizes. In the bigger picture however this is only likely to be of marginal long-term benefit.

### **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?**

### Efficiency

In efficiency terms, at least, the current model of funding and delivering road maintenance is sound and logical with a strategic management split between the longer distance traffic routes that transcends multiple authority areas and more local routing where localised input is a prerequisite.

The current model brings advantages at both these levels. Transport Scotland in looking after the strategic trunk road is able to apply a consistent approach across the national network as well as developing the areas of specialism required for aspects such as motorway maintenance that smaller authorities in particular may not possess.

Meanwhile local authorities are able to develop a more locally informed decision process that both meets the needs of, and is accountable to, the local populace while still reflecting national policy.

### Economy

In economic terms it may be possible to make a case for a more centralised service or multiple authority area groupings but this would bring a number of dis-benefits; not least the loss of locally informed decision making and accountability.

It would also be likely that more geographically isolated areas may receive less priority and funding than more central areas.