

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

Pre-Budget/financial scrutiny on roads maintenance in Scotland

Key themes arising from written evidence

Introduction

The Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee [launched a call for views](#) on the effectiveness of the current arrangements for road maintenance in Scotland and whether current funding levels are enough, on 1 July 2019. Written submissions could be submitted until Friday 6 September 2019. This briefing highlights key themes emerging from an analysis of these submissions.

Understanding this Analysis

There are several issues that should be considered when reading this analysis:

- **Respondents were self-selecting:** Views on road maintenance were not collected from a representative sample of the Scottish population, as happens in public opinion polling. This means that the results reported in this analysis may not reflect the true distribution of opinions on roads maintenance held by individuals and organisations across Scotland and should not be read as such.
- **Complexity:** The funding and delivery of roads maintenance in Scotland is a complex subject, involving several funding mechanisms, regulatory systems and a variety of public and private sector organisations. This complexity may have acted as a barrier to responses from individuals and organisations that do not have access to technical expertise.
- **Stakeholders:** Road maintenance is of interest to a very wide range of stakeholders, with often competing priorities and views. Unanimity of views on the best way forward for the delivery and funding of road maintenance was always unlikely, which is reflected in the analysis.
- **Timescales:** The time available to SPICe to analyse a considerable number of responses was limited and may have restricted the scope of this analysis.

What are “key themes”?

This analysis highlights key issues and concerns about the organisation and funding of road maintenance in Scotland that were raised by multiple respondents to the call for views. It is not intended to be a comprehensive summary of every issue raised, but to outline recurring matters of concern to several survey respondents.

It is worth noting that this is only one strand of evidence gathering on road maintenance being undertaken by the Committee, with views also being gathered through oral evidence sessions.

Who responded?

A total of 65 responses were received, which can be broken down by category of respondent as follows.

Category of respondent	Number of responses
Individual	12
Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO)	16
Business	10
Public transport operator	3
Local authority	16
Other public sector	7
Anonymous	1

The NGO category includes a range of bodies, principally local and national campaign groups, membership organisations and professional bodies.

Given the limited number of responses within each category, and considerable crossover of opinions expressed between groups, no analysis of views broken down by group has been produced.

Background

The response from the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) includes a useful overview of key road maintenance principles, which is reproduced below:

“A road comprises of the pavement (a complex structure on which vehicles travel), bridges and culverts, footways (on which pedestrians travel), drainage, earthworks, street furniture, lighting and driver information systems. These all need maintained and replaced when life expired.

The road also acts (with the exception of motorways) as a utilities corridor with consequent problems of access and repair.

Some comments on roads:

- Road pavements are designed with a finite life and to fail (i.e. the design envisages time related maintenance)
- Road pavements do not self-heal
- Filling potholes sorts the symptom not the disease of a lack of maintenance

- You can expect a new road to need resurfacing (top layers) every 10 years or so
- You can expect a new road to need full depth reconstruction every 30 to 40 years or so
- If you do not maintain the surface courses deterioration happens faster due to water ingress and lack of strength
- Poor utility reinstatements cause more and faster deterioration
- Maintenance of subsurface drainage is an essential part of pavement maintenance
- Damage to roads are significantly higher from heavier vehicles such as HGVs and buses
- Bridges and earthworks also require maintenance (they have long design lives but do not last infinitely)
- Imposition of bridge weight limits can restrict access
- Maintenance of street furniture and driver information systems is a public safety issue.
- Poor maintenance has an effect on amenity.”

Key Themes

Key themes emerging from an analysis of the written responses to the Committee’s call for views on its Pre-Budget/financial scrutiny of roads maintenance in Scotland are set out below. The themes are not set out in any specific order.

Insufficient and declining budgets: Many respondents stated that, over many years, investment in road maintenance has been insufficient to deliver improvements or even maintain roads and associated infrastructure in its current state, e.g. Scottish Borders Council state that:

“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.”

One reason given for this lack of investment is that road maintenance funds are not ring fenced and must compete with other local authority priorities, e.g. Argyll and Bute Council highlight that:

“...there will continue to be competing demands from education and health and social care which means funding for roads and infrastructure is unlikely to see significant increases. This is likely to have a further detrimental impact on the condition and availability of the local road network.”

A situation that several respondents consider only to be getting worse, such as Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, which states:

“The annual revenue reductions for roads maintenance over the past 5 years compounded with savings targets of a further 25% within the next two years is painting a particularly concerning picture for the future”

Tackling these issues might involve considerable change to the funding and delivery of road maintenance, e.g. the Institution of Civil Engineers considers that:

“The key issue has to be the lack of funding and the need to find some way of ring-fencing funding for maintenance to ensure that the backlog is addressed and that there is a believable forward plan. This may require a completely new approach to funding.”

Focus on short-term repairs rather than routine and cyclical maintenance leads to an increasing rate of deterioration: A number of respondents have outlined concerns that, due to the limited budgets available, some local authorities have focused on delivering cheaper short-term maintenance, which can cover a larger proportion of roads, at the expense of more costly structural maintenance, e.g. the Chartered Institute of Highways and Transportation (CIHT) considers that:

“...reductions in spend have resulted in a greater amount of surface treatments being purchased...this approach can be to the detriment of the quality of roads and structures and their expected lifespan; as more expensive interventions are not being invested in to the level that is required to maintain a steady state of condition in the foreseeable future, let alone address the backlog.”

Further to this, Audit Scotland highlight that prioritising maintenance activity using asset management techniques, with a view to getting best value for available budgets, can have negative consequences as:

“...prioritising roads which are of greatest strategic importance may mean that the condition of less important roads will deteriorate over time. While surface dressing can be effective at halting deterioration, it can be more expensive in the long term than reconstruction due it having a much shorter expected lifespan. Surface dressing could also be hiding the true condition of roads.”

However, this view on surface dressing treatments is not universally shared. The Scottish Road Works Commissioner calls for:

“Significantly increasing the amount of preventative surface dressing undertaken each year across the country, which has fallen out of favour for the wrong reasons. In parallel, a longer term programme of pre surface dressing patching will have to be considered.”

A need for long-term budget certainty: A key concern raised by many respondents is a lack of certainty in road maintenance budgets, which works against developing long term plans to maintain the network, e.g. the Asphalt Industry Alliance ask that Government:

“Introduce an invest to save programme for local roads, with a 10-year commitment to funding. This additional funding support would need to combine both a needs element and an investment element – to allow highway authorities to bring roads up to a condition from which they can be managed in a cost-effective way going forward.”

While the Ayrshire Roads Alliance consider:

“It is important that any additional investment must be long term. If Councils are provided with significant long term funding then this will create a robust, cost-efficient asset planning approach which will allow a managed implementation programme.”

The importance of long-term budget certainty in achieving best value is outlined by the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland (SCOTS), which considers that:

“...any additional investment cannot be short term – the supply chains are not prepared for that and road users will not tolerate the resulting sudden increase in roadworks countrywide. Authorities need a 10 to 20-year investment programme, to allow robust, cost-efficient asset planning, and a managed implementation programme – ideally with a pipeline of work to share with supply chains to maximise value for money.”

Disparity between the levels of investment in maintaining/developing the trunk road network and maintaining local roads: There was a general acknowledgement from many respondents that, due to the nature of the traffic using trunk roads, a higher level of investment was appropriate. However, many respondents called for a levelling up of investment in local roads to nearer the level invested in the trunk road network, e.g. the Asphalt Industry Alliance state that change is needed to:

“Address the disparity which exists in Scotland between funding for trunk roads and the rest of the network.”

A view echoed by Glasgow City Council, which thinks that:

“The imbalance between trunk road funding and local road funding needs to be urgently addressed.”

Cycling UK in Scotland go further, calling for a rethink on the split between investment in major new trunk roads schemes and investment in local road maintenance and active travel schemes, recommending:

“...a substantial shift in the balance of transport funding: from national to local roads, and from building new road capacity to maintaining the existing network. These allocations should be informed by a wider review of the optimal balance of transport spending”

This is a view shared by Dumfries and Galloway Council, which considers that:

“There is a need to balance the nation’s investment in new transport infrastructure with the need to ensure adequate funding of existing transport infrastructure, particularly with respect to the trunk and local road networks”.

Transform Scotland starkly illustrate the choice taken by the Scottish Government to invest in new roads versus investing in maintaining current infrastructure, stating:

“The key question we would like the Committee to consider is as follows: The Scottish Government was able to find £6 billion for two road schemes (the A9 & A96 dualling schemes) — so why can’t £2 billion be found to clear all of Scotland’s road maintenance backlog?”

Concerns about the current organisational arrangements for the delivery of local roads maintenance: Many respondents have stated that the current arrangement of 32 local authorities delivering local roads maintenance within their boundaries does not deliver best value. Audit Scotland consider that:

“...it is clear that there is now a growing consensus that the current model of 33 roads authorities responsible for roads maintenance delivery in Scotland is likely to be unsustainable.”

A view shared by some of the individuals who responded to the consultation e.g. Andrew Fraser argues that:

“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.”

However, island authorities have highlighted that their unique status should be appreciated in any new structure, e.g. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar argue that:

“The removal of the economy of scale offered by a single roads authority in the islands would be significant. Therefore the Comhairle would not be in favour of any changes from the current delivery model within our islands.”

While, COSLA urge caution in the expectations from any redesign of road maintenance delivery mechanisms, stating:

“It should, however, be emphasised that regional working or changes to the current governance model ought not to be seen as alternatives to adequate investment, as they cannot and will not on their own solve the issues stemming from insufficient funding.”

The Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland (SCOTS) highlight what they see as the success of current collaborative arrangements between local authorities, stating:

“The 2012 review of roads maintenance highlighted the view of senior roads professionals that enhanced voluntary collaboration between the 32 local roads authorities in Scotland, and with Transport Scotland, was the best way forward. This led to the formation of the Roads Collaboration Programme (RCP) in late 2013 and this has successfully delivered a range of collaborative activities, and work is ongoing including activities such as future workforce planning and joint contracts. Key to this has been a significant cultural change at both corporate and elected member levels towards positive and active collaboration and sharing across boundaries. Within the sector, this has been founded on the highly successful collaborative work of SCOTS for many years.”

In addition, there is no firm agreement on what form any changes should take, with Fife Council stating:

“None of the alternative delivery arrangements suggested so far would appear to be beneficial to Fife and therefore would not be supported by Fife Council.”

While trade union UNISON, which represents many road workers, argues that:

“UNISON believes that there needs to be substantial investment in our infrastructure rather than a structural reorganisation. Increased collaboration or a new roads service will not overcome the financial challenges. They will also further weaken local democratic accountability and citizens’ ability to influence public services.”

Issues around the recruitment, training and retention of the full road

maintenance workforce: In part linked to the issue of declining budgets, several respondents highlighted concerns about the recruitment and retention of suitable staff to manage and deliver road maintenance, e.g. East Lothian Council state that:

“Recruitment is challenging and the skill set has diminished over 25 years to unacceptable levels. Costs associated with using external consultants impacts on the overall cost of projects but also impairs the ability of the organisation to

increase the capability and capacity of the authority as Authorities are too small to fund the level of expertise needed.”

A view shared by COSLA, which highlight that reducing budgets have resulted in a

“Reduction in staff, loss of expertise and lack of workforce planning”.

As also echoed by the Chartered Institute of Highways and Transportation, a professional body for staff working in the field, that:

“Our final and crucial view is that the overall Scottish skills base for roads asset management is talented but reducing.”

Trade union UNISON also sets out concerns about the age profile of the road maintenance workforce and the possible impact this could have in future, stating that:

“The Roads Collaboration Programme is already highlighting that there will be future problems because of the age profile of both road operatives and professional staff. Unless action is taken to recruit and retain new staff there will be a considerable skills gap in the near future as they will not have a chance to build up the experience needed to replace those retiring.”

Damage to vehicles caused by road defects: An issue of particular concern to those respondents representing road users is damage to vehicles, and increased general maintenance costs, associated with potholes and poor road surfaces, e.g. IAM RoadSmart, commenting on the results of an online survey of their members conducted in July and August of 2018, state that:

“Some 47% - over 3,400 respondents – say they have experienced damage to their car, commercial vehicle, motorbike or bicycle or personal injury as a result of hitting a pothole.”

A concern shared by the bus industry representative body, the Confederation of Passenger Transport, which considers that:

“The general condition of Scotland’s roads is causing significant damage to the buses and coaches operating along the length and breadth of the country, with vehicles frequently meeting potholes, road erosion, and loose surfaces.”

Negative impact of deteriorating road infrastructure on pedestrians, cyclists and bus users: Road maintenance is an important issue for pedestrians and cyclists, as outlined in a joint response for Paths for All and Living Streets Scotland, which states that:

“Road maintenance is a major concern to pedestrians and cyclists and research indicates levels of funding are falling and will have serious negative consequences.”

Cycling UK in Scotland provide some figures which emphasise the importance of this aspect of road maintenance, stating:

“For cyclists, road maintenance is a major issue - ‘poor or defective maintenance’ was recorded by the police as a ‘contributory factor’ to 368 incidents in which cyclists were seriously injured and 22 were killed on Britain’s roads between 2007 and 2016 . Many of the complaints Cycling UK in Scotland receives from members are about road maintenance. Around 12% of the legal claims handled by Cycling UK’s solicitors on behalf of our members are due to poor maintenance.”

The impact that poor maintenance of dedicated cycling facilities has on the attractiveness of these modes (and their potential for modal shift) is raised by David Moss, who notes that:

“...many dedicated cycle paths rendered unusable due to lack of maintenance. often covered in debris. cycle paths require regular sweeping since loose stones etc. do not get removed by passing motor traffic, which does happen on the open roads.”

These concerns also apply to footways and footpaths, as expressed by Aberdeenshire Council:

“...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.”

Bus operator Stagecoach highlights the impact that delays caused by road works can have on bus punctuality, a major concern of bus passengers, and asks that:

“When work is being scheduled, it is critical that the impact on bus and coach passengers is taken into account. If disruption is likely, bus and coach services must receive priority to minimise or mitigate delays. This could involve dedicated alternative routings or being allowed to maintain access to the area the works are taking place whilst other traffic is diverted away.”

The importance of maintaining bridges and other structures: Several respondents were keen to emphasise that road maintenance does not just involve maintaining a high-quality road surface, e.g. Aberdeenshire Council raise concerns about the ability of local authorities to adequately maintain bridges stating:

“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.”

This concern is shared, and expanded upon by Scottish Borders Council, which states that:

“...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.”

A view emphasised by Glasgow City Council, which states that:

“Decades of under investment in roads infrastructure has resulted in deterioration of all roads asset groups. In particular, there has been significant deterioration of street lighting assets, drainage systems, traffic signals and critical infrastructure such as bridges. “

The Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland (SCOTS) also highlight that:

“It should be noted that the use of carriageway condition as a proxy for the condition of the whole roads-related infrastructure disguises the reducing condition of other assets – where reduction in investment has been more acute, for example bridges, footways, signs, road markings etc. It is the view of roads professionals that the overall road network infrastructure is deteriorating and that increasing service failure (or restriction in use) will be inevitable starting the short-term”

The fragility of rural road network: Several rural local authorities were keen to outline the particular challenge of maintaining large, rural road networks serving distributed population centres, which may also carry a considerable number Heavy Goods Vehicles that transport timber and agricultural products, e.g. Argyll and Bute Council highlight that:

“...the road network is fragile both in terms of its construction and availability. Unplanned closures following landslips and serious/fatal collisions often result in diversions that can be up to 100 miles in length. Such closures have a massive impact on individuals, business including the food and drink industry, tourism and the general economy of Argyll and Bute.”

While Dumfries and Galloway Council state that:

“There is a need to consider the benefits in maintaining local roads infrastructure in rural Scotland to address rural effects like resilience, geographic scale, deficiencies in transport infrastructure, low populations, migration of young people, weak economic growth and low wage economies. There is a need to ensure that an equitable share of infrastructure investment is realised in rural areas.”

The possible economic impact of failing to invest in minor, rural road maintenance is highlighted by the Timber Transport Forum, which states:

“A solution is required to address the long-term maintenance of the 30,000km of low volume minor rural roads otherwise Scotland’s economy will be much diminished. Such a solution will require recognising rural Scotland as inherently productive and worthy of investment in social and economic activity.

Unless funding models can address the rural challenge, it is likely that large areas of Scotland will be left behind and will not realise their social and economic potential. ‘Landlocked’ forests, isolated by poor road condition, may become wastelands.”

Alan Rehfisch
SPICE Research
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List of respondents

A77 Action Group
Aberdeen City Council
Aberdeenshire Council
Alistair Potter
Andrew Fraser
Angus Council
Anonymous
Argyll and Bute Council
Arthur Robinson
Asphalt Industry Alliance
Audit Scotland
Ayrshire Roads Alliance
Brian Griffiths
Brian J Young SBC
Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
Confor
COSLA
CPTUK
Cycling Scotland
Cycling UK Scotland
David Hamilton
David Moss
Dumfries and Galloway Council
East Lothian Council
Federation of Small Businesses
Fife Council
Friends of the Earth Scotland
Glasgow City Council
IAMRoadsmart
Institution of Civil Engineers – Scotland
Keep Scotland Beautiful
Lothian Buses
Matthew C Aitken Haulage Contractors
McGills Bus Service
Mineral Products Association Scotland
Mobility and Access Committee Scotland
Moray Council
Nigel Baylis
North Ayrshire Council
Orkney Islands Council
Paths for All and Living Streets Scotland
Patricia Khatib

Peter Hawkins
Philip Shimmin
RAC Foundation
Rail Freight Group
Raymond Monaghan
Richard West
Road Haulage Association
Road Surface Treatments Association
Robert Cooper
SCOTS
Scottish Road Works Commissioner
SEStran
Shetland Islands Council Roads Service
South Lanarkshire Council
Spokes
Stagecoach
Sustrans Scotland
Timber Transport Forum
Transform Scotland
Transport Scotland
Unison
Virgin Media