

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM COSLA

Introduction

1. COSLA welcomes the opportunity to contribute evidence to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee on roads maintenance in Scotland. Pre-budget scrutiny is an essential element of the Scottish budget process, but no topic can be considered in isolation from the system it is part of. This submission therefore attempts to place road maintenance within a wider Local Government context.
2. In pre-budget scrutiny evidence, COSLA has written to all Committees across the Scottish Parliament on the specific questions posed but alongside specific evidence we urge Committees to consider the context of overall Local Government budgets. This is set out in COSLA's submission to the Local Government and Communities Committee.

Local Government's Vision

3. To ensure sustainable communities across Scotland, Local Government's unique role in designing and delivering the vital services which underpin and provide the lifeblood to communities must be recognised and invested in accordingly. The interrelated and collective impact of the everyday services delivered by Local Government directly affects all individuals and communities in Scotland.
4. Aligned to the National Performance Framework (NPF) and the core priorities set out in the Scottish Government's Medium-Term Financial Strategy, COSLA has agreed four priorities for its Spending Review campaign this year. The four priorities cannot however be considered or viewed in isolation and throughout this evidence we will stress these critical interdependencies. The four priorities are:
 - **Inclusive economic growth**
 - **Improving Wellbeing**
 - **Tackling child poverty**
 - **Addressing climate change**
5. Councils spend, plan, regulate, connect, educate, enforce, support, train and employ. Local Government is the only body operating across all the agendas that can impact on the lives of all our citizens and communities by coordinating the multi-faceted services they provide, tailored to the needs of individual communities and local authority areas.
6. To deliver on the NPF and the four priorities set out above, Scottish Government must choose to invest in Councils. Investment means no more cuts to the Local Government core settlement and putting fiscal measures in place to ensure

individual Councils are empowered and autonomous to make decisions at the local level. In contrast, recent settlements have seen reductions to core local authority budgets and increased central control of how budgets can be spent. This is putting not only Local Government's vision at risk, but the whole of the NPF and most importantly is impacting on the lives of vulnerable individuals and communities in Scotland.

The Role of Local Government in roads maintenance

7. In the context of roads maintenance, the benefits of having safe and reliable roads go beyond allowing vehicles to go from A to B. Not only does a safe and reliable local transport network provide a visible symbol about the vitality of our economy and public sector infrastructure, it can also help employment, through attracting investment in vital industries which are reliant on good road networks. As SCOTS make clear in their evidence to the Committee, "The core function and purpose of a road is to be a physical connector for people, businesses and communities. Local roads are therefore strategically significant for the social, economic and environmental wellbeing, not only of local communities, but Scotland as a whole. This should be reflected in policy and planning for the sector". We agree with this statement. This is especially true for some of Scotland most remote and rural communities, where roads are essential in ensuring equality of opportunity for access to services, employment, markets and transport hubs such as railway stations, ports and airports.
8. As the largest greenhouse gas emitting sector, transport is also at the centre of the national climate change agenda and substantial changes to how we move people and things will be needed if we are to achieve the 2045 net zero target approved by the Scottish Parliament as part of the stage 2 debate of the Climate Change Bill. The transition to a carbon neutral economy will be extremely challenging and will require both new investment decisions and substantial behaviour change within society. Throughout this transition and even after we reach the net zero target, there will be a need for Scotland to maintain a comprehensive road network. As a result, continued investment will be needed in roads, even if we are taking active steps to encourage public transport and, in certain circumstances, discourage car usage. How we do this as a country will require debate and a likely reprioritisation of our current investment decisions. The recently published Programme for Government and Clean Air for Scotland Independent Review are relevant to this discussion. Local Government has an active and substantial contribution to make to this transport revolution, but it will only be able to rise to the challenge if its empowered with the right policy, support and resources.
9. Roads maintenance is one of Councils' statutory services that has suffered the most from continuing cuts to Local Government budgets, as resources previously invested on our transport network are directed to protected services such as education, health and social care – often as a result of Scottish Government priorities and ring-fencing of resources. However, Local Authorities work hard to maintain road quality as best possible. To evidence this, the 2016 Audit Scotland

report “Maintaining Scotland’s Roads” said that independent survey results indicated that the condition of Council maintained roads had remained stable at around 63 per cent in acceptable condition over the period 2011/12 to 2014/15. While this report is now three years old, it is clear that Councils take their responsibilities to road maintenance seriously, despite budget constraints.

10. Mitigating the impact of budget reductions whilst ensuring adequate maintenance of the local road network is therefore a common challenge across Local Authorities, one that is dealt with differently depending on the area, length and type of local transport network. Councils continue to look for different solutions to best address their local needs and make the best use of their limited resources without compromising the safety and accessibility of our roads.

11. However, this approach is not without consequences. The ongoing cuts to Council budgets have led to:

- Reduction in staff, loss of expertise and lack of workforce planning
- Short term reactive maintenance as opposed to long-term investments and strategic planning
- Increasing customer dissatisfaction with the state of local roads and increased expectations
- Steady deterioration of road quality

12. Regardless of their current level of spending, the continued lack of funding is eroding the capacity of Councils to cope with current pressures on their local transport network and prepare appropriately for the ones ahead. Given that funding levels are not set to improve in the foreseeable future, Local Government will continue to have to make increasingly difficult choices. At the same time, local authorities will have to face a number of other challenges, including but not limited to:

- Rising service demand
- Tension between investing in existing assets vs new infrastructure
- Increasingly harsher weather conditions
- Supporting the transition to a low-carbon transport system and economy

13. Whilst each Council will determine how to best respond to these challenges in their area, the consensus is that robust budget arrangements must be in place for local government to be able to respond effectively.

Conclusion

14. With regards to the current model of funding, we recognise that improvements can be made to better respond to existing financial and delivery challenges as long as change is gradual, voluntary and allows different solutions for different localities. These considerations inform our contribution to the discussions on the future governance of transportation services as part of the National Transport Strategy review, which will also look at the management of roads maintenance.

15. 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. Not only does reform need to be driven by strategic and collective leadership from the wider Local Government family, it will also need to be supported by adequate budgets and incremental resource transfer to Councils if we want it to be valuable, effective and sustainable.

16. In the course of pre-budget scrutiny, COSLA would urge the Committee to consider the overall Local Government Settlement as fundamental to specific consideration about roads maintenance in Scotland.