

## **RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE**

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

#### **SUBMISSION FROM RALPH ROBERTS OF MCGILL'S BUS SERVICE**

**Q1:** How have recent spending decisions on roads maintenance affected the quality of Scotland's roads, road users, businesses, public services, and the economy?

**A1:** Our view is that there has been an insufficient level of maintenance spending on roads to keep them in a satisfactory state to allow predictable upkeep of the infrastructure. Too many repairs have to be done at short notice and in the cheapest possible way – which is generally during peak road use periods.

Short notice repairs are the enemy of the bus user. The bus company cannot plan properly and many systems such as real-time information, which is available at every bus stop in most areas nowadays via mobile apps, cannot be updated in time so the public facing information is all wrong.

Where bus users can see the roadworks, they understand that there is an impact, however, many bus users only use part of the route so they only get to see the result of the disruption and they blame the bus company. The sad fact is that the majority of complainants simply don't believe what they are being told and they expect the bus company to somehow mitigate the disruption or somehow enable an information update so that they know what is going on.

For small disruption, this is perfectly reasonable using mobile alerts and social media feeds but roadworks disruption affecting dozens, if not hundred buses or more are simply impossible to inform on other than in general terms. The result of this is that bus users cannot then rely upon the bus as a mode and make alternative arrangements if they can. It is rare to see more than 50% of this attrition come back once the disruption is over.

When a bus company is delivering a TfL style network of services like we do, there are many areas of roadworks disruption on the network every day. Most take place at short notice and it is still far too common to receive no notice at all. There is little to no consultation around planned works and almost always, for high impact works, local authorities simply will not give any ground in terms of how roadworks are arranged. We are now, and have been for some time, in a position where roadworks are actually causing the withdrawal or curtailment of bus routes. This is not necessarily on the route that the works take place.

Blinkered thinking, an unwillingness to engage, insufficient manpower at local authority level, a lack of appreciation of what they do and limited budgets are the causes of the problem. Additionally, local authorities are guilty of a hands-off approach to managing utility company works. On too many occasions, works go on for too long or closures remain in place simply for the contractor's convenience. My belief is that the local economy is being adversely affected for the benefit of the utility company's shareholders.

Utility companies are also using declaration of 'emergency' works to get around the need for notice. Local authorities admit to knowing this but are reluctant to do anything about it because of the workload involved. This is a difficult thing to manage but it has to improve. Also, contractors are very guilty of submitting a range of dates for works and not committing to updates until sometimes actually on the day of the works but most often, the day before. This does not leave time for bus route diversions, manpower and asset planning or bus user information. Simple things such as planning rest breaks for drivers take time to plan in, even on the simplest of diversions so notice is crucial.

I would like to see longer periods of notification of works on a bus route. Where works are due to happen on a bus route, a full six-week notification needs to be given with a hard start date that can only be moved with the full agreement of the bus company. Bus users are put at a significant disadvantage with roadworks and better procedures are needed to avoid even harsher social exclusion than already exists. In the hierarchy of impact, it is the bus user that is unduly punished by roadworks.

**Q2:** If spending on roads maintenance continues at current levels, what could be the likely effects on the above groups?

**A2:** Further bus service cuts will continue due to rising costs of circumventing the ever increasing and erratic roadworks and the falling bus use that takes place as a result.

**Q3:** How could any negative effects of reduced road spending best be addressed?

**A3:** Better management. This will cost little more than at present. Better notice periods as mentioned above will at least give the ability to plan. More powers for local authorities to control utilities would also help as the local authority would be more efficient and actually spend less.

**Q4:** 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?

**A4:** No, not in every case. There is generally a logical split between trunk routes and local routes, but, occasionally, like in Inverclyde, a trunk route can form part of a local network and there is a disconnect between the local authority and Transport Scotland in terms of local planning. This kind of situation is best turned over to the local authority. I would accept that this is probably the exception.

More joined up working between Transport Scotland and local authorities should be achieved and there would be overall savings. Additionally, poor work by contractors are not addressed quickly enough as Transport Scotland seem excessively reluctant to revisit a section after work is done.