

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM PETER HAWKINS

Executive Summary

Badly-maintained roads are a major issue for cyclists because they are dangerous. The present maintenance regime favours trunk roads, with around 87-90% “acceptable” in 2016, over local roads, with an 'acceptable' rating of only 66%, and no improvement in 10 years. The system is thus not working.

While most local services genuinely serve local residents, the local roads, especially in cities, serve a wider community, and this is especially the case for the heavier vehicles that cause the most damage - HGVs and buses.

Local roads, in cities at least, should be put into 2 categories: *thoroughfares*, which carry traffic from many origins, and *residential* streets, which serve mostly local, lightweight vehicles.

Thoroughfares should be included in the national maintenance regime along with trunk roads. They could be identified via the national roads classification, eg A and B roads; and any *bus route* should be so designated. *Streets* would remain the responsibility of the local authority.

I welcome the opportunity to comment on road maintenance to the Scottish Government's REC Committee.

For cyclists, road maintenance is a major issue; most cycling takes place on local roads; many of the complaints Cycling UK Scotland receives from members are about road maintenance; many cycle crashes are caused, directly or indirectly, by poor road maintenance; and on many local roads, cyclists are unable to keep to the sides, where they should be and want to be, because the sides are full of potholes; to avoid this danger cyclists are forced into the middle, exposing them (and other road users) to a different source of danger.

Similarly, because many local roads are so poorly maintained, some cyclists, especially commuters, choose to ride on a trunk road if a choice is available, despite the fact that this exposes them to a greater danger from fast-moving motor traffic.

Trunk Roads better maintained than Local Roads

The 'Background Information' summarised in the 'Call for Evidence' clearly shows the unfavourable comparison between trunk roads and local roads. Thus, while the latter comprise over 93% of all roads, in 2011 only 66% of local roads were 'in acceptable condition', compared with 78% for trunk roads, and in 2017-18 “some 37% of the local road network may require some kind of maintenance, compared with 8.6%/11% of trunk roads being “life-expired” - ie local roads are around 4 times worse.

In 2016, 87-90% of trunk roads were “in acceptable condition”, while local roads remained “broadly stable since the last assessment”, ie just 66% in acceptable condition.

The likely reason for this discrepancy is that Local Authorities (LAs) are generally under-funded and have to meet a very wide range of obligations; given the choice between spending on roads vs, say, a leaking school roof, local councillors will invariably choose the latter.

Whatever the reasons, the fact is that the “current model of funding and delivering road maintenance, split between Transport Scotland and local authorities”, is *not working*.

Possible Solution

If the problems could be looked at in a slightly different way, a solution might be found. The relevant questions are: Who uses the local roads? and Who causes the most damage to them?

Who uses the roads?

Local roads are different from other categories of local public spending, in that for the latter, the 'consumers' are truly 'local' - schools, care homes, social work etc cater for a local catchment; but many local roads, especially in cities, are used by everyone - potentially from all over Scotland and beyond; this applies particularly to businesses and commercial traffic.

Who causes the most damage?

Of all the different categories of road user, the most damage is caused by buses and HGVs, then LGVs, then cars, then - a long way down - bicycles; basically, damage occurs in direct proportion to axle weight. Local roads are subjected to almost no restrictions on the type of traffic that uses them. Hence, these roads not only serve long-distance traffic, but that traffic is often of the heaviest and most damaging type - HGVs, and in many cases buses, since Scotland's cities serve not just local buses but also those from surrounding LAs - for example, Edinburgh's roads take buses from the Lothians, from Glasgow, indeed from all over Scotland, and then there are the tourist coaches; and the same is most probably true of the other Scottish cities.

Streets vs Thoroughfares

There is a good case, therefore, that many local roads serve a *national* purpose rather than a purely local one. I propose a distinction, for cities, between *thoroughfares* ('wider purpose') and *streets* ('residential'). Thoroughfares should be managed nationally, along with the trunk roads. Streets would remain in local authority control.

How could streets be distinguished from thoroughfares? One possibility is the road network classification. 'A' roads are an obvious category of the latter; many 'B' roads could also be included; a bus route would be an obvious candidate - and so on.

Making better use of this long-standing classification scheme might bring other advantages too. For example, LAs could then apply access restrictions to the lowest classes of road, thereby ensuring less maintenance, long-term.

In sum, roads should be treated differently from other local services, in recognition of the fact that a) some largely serve a wider community in addition to the purely local one, and b) the vehicles that cause the most damage are often those which belong to that wider community - HGVs, buses.

The Scottish Government could improve local-road maintenance standards by accepting the role of *thoroughfares* and making provision for them - either by increasing LA grants in proportion to the need, or by having Transport Scotland take over their maintenance - or by some other means.

Other European countries

In other European countries the local units for road maintenance purposes are generally much larger; the German 'Land', for example, or the French 'departement' are much bigger than Scotland's LAs; in fact some German 'Lander' are bigger than Scotland as a whole.

This puts Scotland at a disadvantage; small populations responsible for a large road network. Based on the European analogy, most of Scotland's roads should be maintained by a single organisation.

Wider issues in the need for better standards

1 Replace HGVs in cities with cargo bikes

There are also wider transport issues which should be included in the discussion. For example, electrically-propelled cargo bikes are becoming much more common, and could ease maintenance problems by being employed for local deliveries in towns and cities, replacing the hugely-damaging HGVs which should be confined to the trunk roads and motorways. Cargo bikes can carry up to 60kg.

2 Cycling and the Climate Emergency

Second, Scotland has declared a climate emergency; transport is a major contributor to carbon emissions (over 25%), (and note, this will not be eliminated by a switch to electric propulsion, since over half the emissions are created in the manufacture of the vehicle itself); the bicycle has potentially a major role to play here but its role has never been taken seriously by successive Scottish governments. Poorly-maintained roads are discouraging cycling, hence worsening carbon emissions.

3 Cycling and the Health Crisis

Third, Scotland might well declare a health emergency, since an alarming percentage of its population is now over-weight or, indeed, obese, putting great pressure on the health services. This is largely due to reduced levels of physical activity, which in turn is linked to rising levels of car use. Bad roads are just an inconvenience for cars, but for bicycles they are much more, they are *dangerous* - and hence discourage cycling. (I might also mention the impact on pedestrians, who suffer from being splashed as passing traffic encounters the potholes). Well-maintained roads thus play an essential role in encouraging active travel, which in turn benefits public health and the climate emergency.

4 Improve cycling conditions in routine road repairs

Fourth, in this connection, City of Edinburgh has recently been including, where possible, improvements for cycling in its road maintenance schemes - thus bringing extra benefits, at little extra cost. This policy could be adopted Scotland-wide.

In sum, the case for better maintenance of all Scottish roads, but especially local roads, is overwhelming, and should be addressed without delay.

I also wish to endorse, as relevant also for Scotland, Cycling UK's *recommendations* in response to the (UK) Transport Cttee Local Roads Funding Inquiry, 2018, as below:

1. Our recommendations are as follows:
 - *Recommendation 1:* The Government's forthcoming Spending Review should result in 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.
 - *Recommendation 2:* The Code of Practice on 'Well Managed Highway Infrastructure' should be revised to include references to the following site-specific factors that should be taken into account in assessing the risks posed to cyclists by potholes: (i) their position relative to the edge (or the effective edge) of the road; (ii) their alignment (i.e. whether they run parallel to or across a cyclists' line

of travel, and thus the likelihood that cyclists' wheels will get trapped in them); (iii) whether they are at or near junctions, particularly major or complex junctions; and (iv) whether they are on gradients. Awareness of these issues should be incorporated into professional training for highway inspectors.

- *Recommendation 3:* The business case for highway maintenance investment should reflect the environmental and health benefits of reduced fuel consumption, and the deterrent effect of poor surfaces on cycling and walking (due to the greater risks and effort involved), as well as the reduced costs of highway repairs, delays, and damages to both people and vehicles.
- *Recommendation 4:* Councils should adopt processes to ensure that opportunities are routinely taken to improve cycling conditions when carrying out planned highway maintenance works, thereby achieving 'best value' from the synergies between their cycling and planned highway maintenance programmes.
- *Recommendation 5:* Highway authorities should be encouraged to use bicycles with sensors to monitor road and cycle track surface quality, and to use specialised narrower vehicles to keep cycle tracks free of debris and vegetation, or from snow and ice in winter.
- *Recommendation 6:* The providers of defect management systems for highway authorities should integrate their products with Fill that Hole and similar public defect-reporting websites, to facilitate two-way communication between users of these sites and the highway authorities themselves.
- *Recommendation 7:* Cycle safety should be taken into account in managing road works, street works and construction sites, in accordance with Transport for London's guidance on 'Cyclists at Roadworks' (as set out in TfL's 'Temporary traffic management handbook').

(Cycling UK: recommendations to Transport Cttee Local Roads Funding Inquiry, 2018; reproduced with permission)

Peter Hawkins has been campaigning for more and better cycling in Edinburgh and Scotland for 39 years.