

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM PHILIP SHIMMIN

About 20 years ago, as Director of Roads and Transport in Highland, I was instrumental in persuading my colleagues across Scotland to adopt a common approach to road condition survey. The survey was to be done every year and cover one third of the network each year thus after three years a robust picture would emerge. So far as I can tell, there has been a steady decline in the survey results and a steady decline in the amount of maintenance expenditure.

Alongside this decline in road maintenance expenditure there has been an overall decline in LG funding and inevitably councils have shed staff. The basis for reducing staff has been to avoid compulsory redundancies which means the best qualified and experienced Chartered Civil Engineers, Incorporated Engineers and Technicians have all left and even those filling the reduced number of posts in road maintenance are not the right people.

As to the roads themselves, there is much talk about potholes, but people do not seem to realise that potholes are a manifestation of the lack of intervention in the inevitable deterioration with age and use of the road as an engineering structure. The road structure is damaged by the passage of vehicle wheel loads, Lorries being many thousand times more damaging than cars. However the road structure is affected by exposure to rain, ice, snow and the progressive oxidation of bitumen. No bitumen macadam or asphalt is completely waterproof and yet local authorities seem incapable to put in place an adequate surface dressing programme to seal the surface and improve skid resistance.

Twenty years ago the adequate funding of road maintenance to enable appropriate intervention measures was becoming a major issue which has now become a crisis which will end up in more expensive total reconstruction being required.

The AA used to have an idea that instead of motorists being charged a Road Fund Tax they should be made to pay a sum made up of two parts. The one part would be a tax but the other part would be a road charge which would be used for road maintenance and improvement.

It might be worth looking at this idea again. The current level of funding makes the condition of the roads unsustainable.