

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM RICHARD WEST

Addressing your last question first, it is clear that in Scottish Borders Council (SBC) this local council is not a competent highway authority and should be stripped of its powers in this regard. Roads hereabouts are pot-holed, have broken edges and, perhaps most dangerously of all, road markings are in many locations allowed to become so worn that they are illegible. Whatever legal obligations local authorities have to maintain a safe and fit for purpose road network are simply ignored.

So the delivery mechanism does not work. The reason may in part be the sufficiency or otherwise of funding. But I consider that political choice comes into this equation far more significantly than is ever acknowledged. SBC spends freely on all matters related to education, trotting out a manta about legal obligations towards children and teachers. Wholly disproportionate sums are spent on meeting perceived requirements. And yet when road markings at, for example, a dangerous junction become illegible, drivers can wait in vain for their renewal. On dark country roads with dark Winter evenings once again just around the corner this poses a greater risk to more folk than many of the perceived dangers in the delivery of education. Education policymakers and teachers do indeed have a huge say in the dispensing of funds.

If local authorities are unable or, as I suggest, unwilling to devote a proper level of funding to road maintenance, then much of the case for a single national highway authority is already made, free as it would be from other distractions, real or imagined. Transport Scotland generally makes a better job of looking after its roads than local authorities, although their record is not perfect, witness for example the A77 from Ayr southwards.

The European comparison is stark. It is rare to find local roads in such an appalling state in other north-western European countries. In France and Germany they are almost unknown, in the Netherlands the heavily used network is immaculately maintained. Even in Belgium, which for long had the reputation for having the poorest roads in Continental Europe, enormous strides have been made.

The complementary strand of this is roadside litter, often an appalling blot on the beautiful Scottish landscape. Like maintenance, this appears to be done in a haphazard way, presumably when the level of complaints reaches such a level they can no longer be ignored. This really is the simplest and most basic highway service to deliver, but still seemingly beyond SBC.

As for the effects of different groups of users and the economy in general, this can be well guessed at and I suspect clever academics have researched it quite thoroughly. On tourism, how many overseas visitors never return after enduring Scottish roads as the backdrop to their holiday? For bus services, whose vehicles are plagued with much cruder suspension than the average private car, journeys are a sure recipe for spinal disorders. The 2 hour trip from Kelso to Edinburgh is an endurance test of noise and of being jarred up and down in your seat. Even short trips in Edinburgh with its awful main roads are unpleasant, and dangerous as the violent and unpredictable movement of the bus makes preparing to get off difficult. Other public services like ambulances must be affected too. How does a seriously ill patient cope with the rough ride to hospital? Surely many other examples have been brought to the attention of your Committee.

In short, the present situation is in dire need of reform, and the key to that must be to strip local authorities of road maintenance responsibilities, tasks that they seem to persistently, wilfully and arrogantly ignore.