

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM ROBERT COOPER

Introduction – historical

The severe winters of 2009 – 2010 and 2010 – 2011 impacted Scotland's roads unlike any other winter for several decades.

(see:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter_of_2009%E2%80%9310_in_Great_Britain_and_Ireland

And

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter_of_2010%E2%80%9311_in_Great_Britain_and_Ireland)

During 2009 – 2010 long periods of freezing conditions with deep snow and ice exposed innumerable flaws in road surfaces. During the months of 2010 between winters the defects were not dealt with in a rigorous and systematic manner. This was particularly obvious in the capital city.

The winter of 2010 – 2011 hugely exacerbated the road surface problems caused by the previous harsh winter. Although the damage was caused by these successive winters the weather uncovered multiple structural weaknesses which had gone unaddressed during previous years.

Since 2009 those responsible for road maintenance have struggled to repair the damage. To be fair however, some areas have managed better than others but the general point here is that the authorities have never managed to catch up.

It also ought to be recognised that the 2008 financial crisis probably lead decision makers to adjust spending priorities in subsequent years just as the harsh winters struck. However, I am unable to be specific in this observation but there is a suspicion that as austerity policies were implemented there was some impact of financing road repair and maintenance.

Introduction – Background Information

The background information provided with the Call for Views provides some information regarding Scotland's roads since 2004. However, the information is fragmented and confusing.

The road network is divided into two types – Trunk and Local. The details are taken from four investigations in 2004, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2016. The first of these estimates a maintenance backlog of £232m for trunk roads and £1.7bn for local roads

equating to 13% requiring repair now (2004) and 31% requiring further investigation (in 2004).

None of the other investigations cited follow this formula, those for 2011 and 2016 mention percentages but do not provide monetary equivalents. Those for 2012 and 2013 make only generalisations. Whilst links to the five investigations cited are provided, it would have been useful to have the same formula, percentages and money costs, used and tabulated as part of the background information.

This would have made the information much clearer and easier to follow, chronologically, especially to lay persons such as myself.

That said, the general problem of the maintenance of Scottish roads is one of increasing deterioration and increasing cost of remedial action.

The questions raised in the Call for Views

There are four direct questions asked in the Call for Views and I offer my comments to those questions in the order that they are raised.

1. Nearly everyone in Scotland uses roads and pavements. A year on year deterioration of surfaces, especially since 2009, has some impact on uses of that infrastructure.

Poor road surfaces have caused various groups to adopt inadvisable behaviours including, for example, cyclists using pavements rather than roads, drivers making dangerous manoeuvres and delivery drivers parking incorrectly in order to avoid road defects. Of course, much of this is based on anecdotal evidence but perhaps Police Scotland might have more concrete facts?

There is a hidden cost to the Scottish economy in that delays in the movement of freight and damage to vehicles must to be paid for by someone - usually the consumer.

Reputational damage. 'Edinburgh is officially the pothole capital of Britain ranking ahead of London.' See: ['Edinburgh is officially the pothole capital of Britain ranking ahead of London'](#), Edinburgh live, 8 January 2019.

For Edinburgh to be crowned the 'pothole capital of Britain' in 2019, is a major embarrassment.

All the above have a deleterious effect on those who live and work in Scotland and increases existing citizen alienation.

2. From the details contained within the background information it seems clear that keeping road maintenance expenditure at current levels will not resolve the problems being experienced daily by many users of Scottish roads.

The unwise behavioural outcomes mentioned, briefly, above are likely to become permanent as without significant remedial work there will be no incentive to do otherwise.

Additional costs (damage, delays and adverse health effects) to all road users will be in danger of becoming a permanent, normal and perhaps even acceptable part of moving around Scotland.

Keeping to the present levels of spending on Scottish roads will only cause increasing reputational damage for the nation (not just Edinburgh) because having understood and publicly acknowledged the scale of the problem the question being asked is:

'10 years after major road damage was caused by severe weather how many more years are required to remedy the problem?'

As a German tourist commented to me last week: 'If you cannot even keep the roads of your capital city in good condition what about your hospitals, schools etc.' – anecdotal evidence I agree but the committee members will take the point.

3. Countering the negative impact of road conditions in Scotland will be difficult, first and foremost because there is little visible is being done 'on the ground' and if the damaged stretch of road each individual is familiar with is not repaired permanently, but patched and re-patched, then the negative impression is continuously reinforced.

Negative impacts experienced by road users are as much as a problem are the roads themselves and this is because it is a negative experience. Only a positive experience can cancel a negative one – in this situation at least.

Blaming others for the problem is a negative reaction and is as diversionary.

Any explanation that 'the authorities are going the best they can' is now considered an excuse as it has been used so many times over the last 10 years since the problem first became obvious.

However, there are positive steps that could be taken and have previously been hinted at, in the Call for Views, and including the desire that members of COSLA to cooperate more closely.

But as this is national problem (albeit with many local variations) the question is why is there no national plan to solve that problem?

4. As funding, and therefore responsibility, is presently divided between Transport Scotland and 32 local authorities it is difficult to see any other way of retaining democratic accountability (as far that goes) for local roads. Perhaps the experiences of Transport Scotland, whose responsibilities cut across Local Authority boundaries, could be of benefit here?

Perhaps removing, temporarily, responsibility (and therefore funding) for Scotland's roads from Local Authorities and passing that to a national body until such time as the problem has been permanently corrected ought to be considered? Radical?, yes. Bold?, yes. Imaginative? yes.

Suggestion

The root cause of Scotland's roads being poorly maintained is because insufficient resources are directed at the problem. Of course, resources are finite and must be allocated according to specific priorities. Determining those priorities and allocating resources accordingly is a political decision.

There is one source of funding that the Call for Views never mentions and that is the collective contribution made by motorists of all types (private, business and public sector) in Scotland.

Depending on the method of calculation (as of 2009) between £28bn - £57bn is raised annually from motorists.

See:

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmtran/103/10304.htm> As 10 years have elapsed since these figures were calculated the totals are likely to now be considerably higher.

Scotland has approximately 10% of the total population and therefore about £2.8bn - £5.7bn is paid by Scottish motorists. This is admittedly a rather crude calculation.

If these sums (however calculated) were remitted to the Scottish government, the road maintenance problem in Scotland could be remedied very quickly.

As Scotland has 15% of all roads the burden of road maintenance falls more heavily on the Scottish population than that elsewhere. See:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/208692/road-lengths-in-great-britain-2012.pdf

Conclusion

At this time nearly all taxes (used in the widest sense) paid by Scottish motorists are not retained in Scotland. A small portion (I cannot be specific) of the total is returned by several mechanisms to Scotland.

The committee might wish to consider exploring ways of taking charge of monies (in full or part) paid by motorists in Scotland. This would mean that sums raised in Scotland would stay in Scotland and could be used to alleviate road problems that are particularly Scottish in nature – for example, more road miles per head of population and harsher weather conditions.

Without a larger allocation of funds from central government's tax paid by Scottish road users the Scottish government and Scottish Local Authorities would have to resolve the problem. Perhaps all bodies involved should be required to commit additional funds over a specific period to at least 'break the back' of the problem. How to achieve that is another matter.