

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM SESTRAN

About SEStran

SEStran is the Regional Transport Partnership (RTP) for the south east of Scotland, covering eight local authorities. The area covered is diverse in both geographical and socio-economic terms, and includes City of Edinburgh, Falkirk, Fife, Midlothian, East Lothian, West Lothian, Scottish Borders and Clackmannanshire. SEStran's main function is the publication of a statutory Regional Transport Strategy.

General Points

Policy 13 of the Regional Transport Strategy 2015 – 2025 Refresh published in July 2015 identifies that “*The RTS will give a high priority to the maintenance of public transport networks and infrastructure*”. Whilst this is specifically aimed at public transport networks the principle of investing in maintaining the road network so it can be safely used by all road users especially where it supports active travel is fully supported.

The format of the specific SEStran comments below reflect the table produced in the consultation document and specifically relate to the numbered sections.

Issues and Key Questions within the Call for Views

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

There has been a general reduction in the quality of maintenance of the road network throughout Scotland.

SCOTS monitor closely the condition of the road network based on the SRMCS survey data. SCOTS has undertaken work to establish the cost of the headline backlog, which is the cost of producing a network free from any 10m subsections in an amber or red condition. The 2019 headline backlog figure of £1.888 billion is £31.8 million less than the £1.919 billion backlog for 2017 (adjusted for inflation).

SCOTS also estimate the average annual budget for each authority to maintain steady state Road Condition Index scores. The previously published steady state figure for 2017 was £254.8 million (at 2019 prices). The 2019 steady state was calculated to be £254.8 million calculation therefore represents a decrease of £0.8 million or 0.3% in percentage terms over the two-year period.

Colleagues in SCOTS will be better qualified to speak to these figures but they provide evidence that there is a substantial backlog of investment needed to improve the condition of the road network and that there is a minimum budget level needed to maintain the existing status quo.

There is considerable variation across local authority areas in terms of budget provision and the nature and type of network defects. Therefore, some authorities show slight improvements in RCI whilst other show deterioration.

However, continuing underinvestment in road maintenance funding will lead to an ongoing deterioration in the network, and an increase in the headline backlog investment figure.

- b) If spending on roads maintenance continues at current levels, what could be the likely effects on the above groups?

The impacts of will be manifested in a potential increase in accidents and damage to vehicles and potential injury to road users. This could affect the ability to facilitate public transport improvements and increased demand from services provided next to the carriageway.

As the transport network would be less efficient for freight and goods movements there would be an increase in cost to business:

- time - due to delays on poor roads and vehicles off the road and
- financial – cost of repairs and replacement due to reduced vehicle life span,

Both would have an impact on margins, investment and business confidence with flow on effects to overall economic growth.

- c) How could any negative effects of reduced road spending best be addressed?

There is evidence of roads authorities better prioritising and targeting maintenance activity which has led to improved output from reducing resources and this should continue.

However, the funding needed to create a defect free network is not a realistic aspiration. Therefore, a decision needs to be made on what is considered to be a sustainable level of investment for road maintenance. The minimum level of investment should ensure that at the very least conditions on the network do not deteriorate over time.

Innovative approaches to other funding mechanisms should be explored; workplace parking levy's, tolls on high volume routes, charging for HGV & LGV movements for example. The latter could also help work towards environmental targets if the freight industry develops models that employ greater efficiencies with capacity – same volume of goods moved by less vehicles.

Use 'smarter' approaches to road maintenance and new road builds; getting better value from innovative new technology, materials and techniques to reduce costs and improve the lifespan of work undertaken.

- d) 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?

The Audit Scotland report: Maintaining Scotland's, Roads: a follow-up report ¹ outlines that there is now a consensus between Strategic Action Group members for roads maintenance that the current model of roads maintenance delivery in Scotland is likely to be unsustainable. However, there is not yet a clear plan in place to address these structural challenges. In particular, progress towards sharing services and greater collaboration at a strategic level remains slow. Councils were at the early stages of establishing regional arrangements but there was a lack of clear plans and timetables for determining the potential extent of shared services at an operational level.

Consideration of overall network resilience is important in this context. Incidents on a well-maintained core network lead to an impact on the surrounding peripheral network and therefore a lack of investment in the peripheral network can lead to the network being less able overall to cope with major incidents.

Although there are examples of shared services e.g. Ayrshire Alliance and Tayside Contracts there is clearly insufficient evidence to convince other authorities to enter into shared services agreement. The whole issue of Regional Governance for Transport functions is identified as an issue within the NTS2 consultation and has relevance in this context. The review of integration of Planning, Economics and Transportation on a Regional basis may be a catalyst since the delivery of maintenance functions is a transportation function.

Summary

The recent announcement in the 2019-20 Programme for Government to invest over £500 million in improved bus priority infrastructure to tackle the impacts of congestion on bus services and raise bus usage is welcomed. However, ongoing capital investment in new infrastructure must be matched with a commitment to provide adequate resources to maintain the existing infrastructure so that the maximum benefits accrue from the investment for all road users.

Therefore, investment to maintain existing infrastructure is crucial to ensuring that the quality of Scotland's roads continue to provide access and connectivity for existing road users, businesses, public services, and the help maintain economic activity.

6 September 2019

¹ https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/uploads/docs/report/2018/ir_180626_maintaining_roads.pdf