

## **RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE**

### **PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND**

#### **SUBMISSION FROM SCOTTISH ROAD WORKS COMMISSIONER**

I refer to RECC Call for Views of 1 July 2019 in respect of roads maintenance in Scotland. In particular, in respect of the following four areas:

#### **1. How have recent spending decisions on roads maintenance affected the quality of Scotland's roads, road users, businesses, public services and the economy?**

I believe that a balanced approach has been taken by the Scottish Government in prioritising funding for both capital and revenue trunk road maintenance activities in recent years to the benefit of each of the groups. However, current financial pressures, conflicting political priorities and reducing technical capability in a majority of the 32 council local road authorities doesn't reflect the model of delivery achieved by the trunk road authority and, if maintained, will have an increasingly negative impact on each group.

#### **2. If spending on roads maintenance continues at current levels, what could be the likely effects on the above groups?**

If the level of trunk road maintenance funding is maintained, particularly in respect of capital schemes the likes of the A9 dualling, this will bring significant economic and social benefits to the country as a whole, and the four groups listed specifically. On the other hand, the challengingly low levels of funding available to local road authorities across the country, delivered on a politically inconsistent basis, will have an increasingly negative effect on road condition, road users, and the economic viability of organisations and the delivery of public services.

#### **3. How could any negative effects of reduced road spending best be addressed?**

Whilst there are many examples available, the following provide a snapshot:

- Ring fencing local road maintenance funding.
- Realigning local road maintenance away from the current 32 local council road authorities to fewer, more consistent, less politically driven local maintenance units. In places, perhaps not aligning with council boundaries if a more practical boundary exists.
- Allocating funding to projects on a strict Asset Management Plan basis rather than on a politically "nice to have" basis. Whilst political direction is clearly correct when allocating funding for the dualling of the A9 with its derived benefits, it should have no place when constituents lobby for a road to be resurfaced because there are utility company road works reinstatements with varying shades

of black bituminous materials, i.e. these are not aesthetically pleasing but do not compromise the structural integrity of the road.

- Standardising the use of significantly fewer, high performing, bituminous materials across the realigned local road maintenance units.
- Significantly increasing the amount of preventative surface dressing undertaken each year across the country, which has fallen out of favour for the wrong reasons. In parallel, a longer term programme of pre surface dressing patching will have to be considered.
- Reviewing the use of Stone Mastic Asphalt (SMA) material in lieu of Hot Rolled Asphalt (HRA) as a default surface course. Whilst there are clearly benefits both during the laying process and potentially structurally, the expected life of SMA is significantly less than the 25 years plus which can be achieved from HRA, making the whole life cost of SMA greater.
- Reviewing the extensive use of physical features in traffic calmed and 20 mph areas. Too often those managing their adoption have no thought for the longer term high cost maintenance implications.
- Introducing a more consistent and cost effective process for pot hole patching across the country, significantly increasing “first time permanent” repairs.
- Improved supervision of road maintenance activities.

#### **4. 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?**

Whilst there is currently a degree of consistency in the maintenance of trunk roads across Scotland, which is tendered by Transport Scotland and delivered by their contracted Operating Companies on a generally consistent basis, the current differential in the scale of local authorities and their respective political priorities, which determines funding levels, is a poor model to deliver high quality, cost effective local road maintenance.

The desire for local accountability is fully understandable in respect of many public services. However, roads and their associated infrastructure are strategic assets. They require to be maintained to a consistent standard across Scotland and achieve value for money. It is unreasonable to expect a local authority the size of Clackmannanshire Council with 288km of road network to carry the same level of technical and operational expertise as their immediate neighbours, Perth and Kinross Council with 2490km and Fife Council with 2417km, who themselves are challenged.

I would question whether or not it is reasonable that, in 2019, road users commuting across the central belt routinely use local roads which are maintained by several different local authorities to quite different standards.

It is my view that a structure of around 12 mainland road maintenance authorities should be established, with a minimum network length of 3500km. This compares with 9 Regional Councils undertaking both trunk and local road maintenance between 1975 and 1996 which should enable an optimum level of local accountability, whilst delivering a substantially more consistent and cost effective road maintenance service model. I also believe that local road maintenance areas do not need to strictly follow current political boundaries if a better geographic and logistically enabling solution exists.

Any move away from 3 island road maintenance authorities is more complex. However, change is required to drive a move away from politically driven road maintenance towards asset management led road maintenance, the use of a more common suite of materials and a general improvement in custom and practice.

Although it can be challenging delivering road maintenance in a large rural area the scale of Aberdeenshire Council with 5520km or Highland Council with 6745km, they each benefit from a degree of political consistency and common policy across their respective networks. It may therefore be logical to retain a number of the current larger rural maintenance areas, albeit, adjusting away from political boundaries if a more logical area exists.

Having worked in a County Council pre 15 May 1975, two Regional Councils (which maintained both trunk and local roads) until 1996 and subsequently a unitary authority prior to taking up my current post in 2015, I believe that there are clear benefits of scale in delivering road maintenance. However, I believe that the Strathclyde Regional Council model was simply too large, substantially removing any local accountability. On the other hand, whilst I support the principles of the Ayrshire Roads Alliance, I don't believe that it has sufficient scale to derive significant benefit. It should be extended to include North Ayrshire, Inverclyde, Renfrewshire and East Renfrewshire Councils, total network length of 5026km. Alternatively it could be extended to include South Lanarkshire Council bringing the total network length to 4461km.

It is also my view that there should continue to be a separate trunk road maintenance regime. Albeit, there should be some limited transfer of assets between the trunk and local road authorities. In particular, some additional A class roads, for example the Clyde Tunnel and associated A739 approaches should be transferred in, whilst a number of other roads should revert to realigned local roads authorities. Consideration should also be given to developing a more collaborative interface between trunk road and local road maintenance units, particularly in more rural areas.

Whilst trunk road and local road maintenance may appear similar, in practice the standards required, the significantly different volumes of traffic carried, the nature of the high speed network and complexity of delivery do not support a "one size fits all" scenario. It is wholly appropriate that the "per kilometre" level of funding allocated to trunk roads is significantly greater than allocated to local roads. Consideration should be given to a model which delivers a more consistent level of local road maintenance funding across Scotland which perhaps involves ring fencing of budgets to new, non-politically aligned local road maintenance units.

I trust the above information is useful at this stage and I look forward to the meeting on 25 September 2019. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any further information or wish to discuss this matter further.