RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM SOCIETY OF CHIEF OFFICERS OF TRANSPORTATION IN SCOTLAND (SCOTS)

Whilst individual Road Authorities may respond to this call for views, the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland (SCOTS) wish to provide the following collective comments representing the position of 32 Roads Authorities and 7 Regional Transport Partnerships. A senior representative from SCOTS is available to address the Committee when considering this Call for Views.

This response relates to the road network managed by the 32 local Road Authorities (i.e. representing 93% of the country's road network) and focusses on looking forward rather looking back at the history of investment - individual authorities may provide more detail of that in their own responses.

It is widely understood that roads (and associated infrastructure) are vital for the social, economic and environmental wellbeing, not only of local communities, but Scotland as a whole. However, this is not currently well expressed in terms of the delivery of National Outcomes.

There is a strong case for adopting a new approach to valuing the roads network, and SCOTS are currently preparing a new framework, to clearly articulate the reliance of communities and commerce, on the local roads network, with clear links to the National Performance Framework. This will be crucial in the pursuit of a future inclusive growth strategy for Scotland, and it will offer a new way to consider infrastructure investment opportunities and priorities. SCOTS expect to have this available by the end of 2019.

The local roads network is particularly vital to accessibility and mobility for groups that face social and/or geographical disadvantage, more so than the trunk roads or even the rail network, because of cost and distance.

As the Call for Views has highlighted, there has been long-term scrutiny of road maintenance (and its funding) for many years. Missing from the SPICe research within the Call paper was the response to Audit Scotland's 2016 review (published in January 2018), prepared jointly by SCOTS, Transport Scotland, COSLA, SOLACE and the Office of the Roadworks Commissioner, on behalf of the Strategic Action Group (SAG).

This SAG response clearly articulated the context within which road maintenance must be considered. The economic and fiscal strategy of the UK Government, combined with the wider economic performance across the last five years, has resulted in an overall budgetary decline in public services. The prioritisation of Health, Care and Education in Scotland, interacting with demographic pressures, have created a very pressurised environment for all other services.

Spending on local roads has declined by 26% in real terms across the last five years, and this can be linked to the prioritisation of Education and Care, which account for around

60% of all local spending. Current maintenance expenditure on national roads is not sufficient to address the known current maintenance backlog of some £1.8billion.

The 2012 review of roads maintenance highlighted the view of senior roads professionals that enhanced voluntary collaboration between the 32 local roads authorities in Scotland, and with Transport Scotland, was the best way forward. This led to the formation of the Roads Collaboration Programme (RCP) in late 2013 and this has successfully delivered a range of collaborative activities, and work is ongoing including activities such as future workforce planning and joint contracts. Key to this has been a significant cultural change at both corporate and elected member levels towards positive and active collaboration and sharing across boundaries. Within the sector, this has been founded on the highly successful collaborative work of SCOTS for many years.

The ongoing severe budget reductions have eroded local authority management, professional and change capacity necessary to develop collaboration quickly, so voluntary progress has been less rapid than envisaged but is gathering momentum, especially in the north of Scotland.

The clear conclusion of the Strategic Action Group in 2018 was that – “given the projected pressures, a model for roads maintenance in Scotland based on 33 roads authorities is likely to be unsustainable”. The 2018 report was a direct response to the specific recommendations of the Audit Scotland 2016 report, and was not deemed to be the place to pursue the governance matters in detail nor to pre-judge the outcome of any future review – in particular the National Transport Strategy (NTS) Roles and Responsibilities work.

Q1. How have recent spending decisions on roads maintenance affected the quality of Scotland’s roads, road users, businesses, public services, and the economy?

The professionals who manage, maintain and develop the transport network across Scotland continue to maximise the value of every pound provided to them to invest in road infrastructure, despite erosion of resources and loss of skilled staff. In terms of the local roads network, the ongoing spending reductions within local authorities have directly resulted in:

- the loss of experienced managers and staff, leading to general resource resilience challenges across most authorities and ‘single points of failure’;
- an aging workforce and lack of adequate succession planning;
- a focus on reactive rather than planned maintenance, and loss of whole-life decision-making – e.g. a concentration on potholes rather than the underlying causes of surface failure;
- use of short term ‘quick fixes’ rather than long term interventions, e.g. thin surfacing’s widely used rather than replacement of worn-out carriageway layers;
- core roads maintenance funding increasingly used to respond to increasing frequencies of severe weather and its effects on road assets;
- maintenance ‘holidays’ being taken on assets such as bridges and lighting (in part masked by the ongoing LED lantern replacement programmes);
- loss of ability to be innovative, to embrace new technologies and to react to changing needs and opportunities necessary for the future road network.

An ongoing national focus on building new infrastructure continues to miss the essential need for maintenance of existing assets. It is good to see this aspect included in the draft National Transport Strategy.

In 2018, the Improvement Service reported that overall revenue expenditure on roads had reduced significantly, by 32.8%, since 2010/11, while capital expenditure had increased by 12.3% across the same period. They also reported that, in terms of the underlying condition of carriageways, over 8 years there had been very little change in the A, B and C class road network overall, with around 30% to 35% of classified carriageways continuing to require maintenance (representing around 40% of the local network). During 2017 to 2018 it was noted that there was a small deterioration in A, B and C class roads, with only unclassified roads improving, and this remains the emerging situation in 2019.

It should be noted that the use of carriageway condition as a proxy for the condition of the whole roads-related infrastructure disguises the reducing condition of other assets - where reduction in investment has been more acute, for example bridges, footways, signs, road markings etc. It is the view of roads professionals that the overall road network infrastructure is deteriorating and that increasing service failure (or restriction in use) will be inevitable starting the short-term.

A road user survey was carried out by the Improvement Service in 2018. This indicated that 79% of people were dissatisfied with the state of local roads, with 72% believing that the condition had deteriorated in the previous two years. 71% of people believed that there are more potholes than in previous years.

The whisky, quarrying, agriculture and timber transport industries continue to add considerable pressure of increasing HGV traffic on many roads not built to carry such loads and vehicle sizes. The increase in tourism-related traffic, for example the North Coast 500 illustrates other pressures growing on the network with no additional funding being provided on a planned long term and strategic basis.

Q2. If spending on roads maintenance continues at current levels, what could be the likely effects on the above groups?

Projections by each local authority participating in the SCOTS national asset management project, confirm that at present levels of investment (in particular revenue), all roads assets will continue to deteriorate. Capital injections by many Councils are welcome but tend to allow a small amount of selected assets to be improved on a one-off basis, and do not help with long term whole-life asset planning.

Winter services have been under constant scrutiny and funding reduction in recent years to turn the previous objective of “plan for the worst and hope for the best” to now accepting what happens each year and just finding the money to pay for it, either from cancelling end of year roads projects or sometimes from other corporate sources.

Investment has focused in recent years on carriageway repairs, maximising the use of available funding by disinvesting in bridge maintenance, drainage, safety barriers, road markings, signs, trees/verges etc. There is increased risk to the safety of road users, not least as the effects of climate change become increasingly evident.

It is expected that there will soon be an increase in load restrictions on many structures, limiting their use to certain vehicles. In 2019, a survey by the RAC foundation highlighted that some 412 bridges in Scotland were substandard, with only 53 of these expected to be strengthened by 2023. The same survey also stated that the bridges maintenance backlog has increased by some 25% since 2018. Restriction on the use of or in some cases the removal of this infrastructure will have a major impact on freight business, and emergency vehicles. This will directly affect local economies and communities.

There will be an increase in carriageway surface failures, resulting in more potholes, until there is investment in fixing the underlying causes of surface failure.

All authorities are committed to increasing active travel, but road condition is a major barrier to those interested in walking and cycling - road condition is directly related to pedestrian and cycle safety. A survey by Living Streets in May 2019 highlighted that 31% of people over 65 years of age are unwilling to leave home on foot due to the condition of footway surfaces.

Inward investment will be affected as businesses respond to their perception of local/national government's commitment to maintenance of the country's road infrastructure.

The road construction and maintenance supply chain will continue to be under pressure with reducing demand for materials and services, alongside increasing bureaucracy around the system (for example in procurement and taxation), alongside a lack of forward confidence in orders.

Q3. How could any negative effects of reduced road spending be best addressed?

Roads professionals have been working hard for many years to address the negative effects of reduced funding, through improved practices, collaborations, engagement with communities, increased transparency of decision-making, and driving efficiencies throughout their processes and supply chains.

The SCOTS Asset Management project is an internationally recognised industry-leading initiative, engaging all Councils to develop and use robust asset management and technical processes to pursue best value for money. This demonstrates the ability and willingness of officers to take a professional approach to managing Scotland's most valuable asset, if given the resources to do so.

Through the Roads Collaboration Programme (RCP), all 33 road authorities are seeking to mitigate some of the operational effects of the ongoing financial austerity, focussed most recently on improving the resilience of service provision across each authority. The RCP is actively developing a range of measures to improve the planning of the future road sector workforce, in conjunction with all relevant Government agencies and academia. The impact of this will not be seen immediately, but this is a very practical and vital initiative, and will continue to develop.

Authorities are actively sharing best practice and expertise all across the country, including sharing of resources and procurement activity. Collaboration across local and trunk networks is also being actively progressed and encouraged through the Scottish Road Network Management Forum, recognising the need for a whole-network approach.

Q4. 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?

It is the view of SCOTS that the current funding model is not sustainable. There is no doubt that additional funding for roads would make a significant improvement to network condition and road users' experience of the road network. Each local authority has data and tools to demonstrate at a local level, the benefits of varying amounts of increased investment.

However, any additional investment cannot be short term – the supply chains are not prepared for that and road users will not tolerate the resulting sudden increase in roadworks countrywide. Authorities need a 10 to 20-year investment programme, to allow robust, cost-efficient asset planning, and a managed implementation programme – ideally with a pipeline of work to share with supply chains to maximise value for money.

The continued use by many authorities of the historic national roads classification (I.e. A,B,C,U) is not appropriate for maintenance prioritisation decisions. Some authorities have developed a new hierarchy for their road assets to ensure investment is made first on the most necessary and important local assets.

Key national industries, such as agriculture, tourism, whisky, quarrying and timber are causing increasing damage to the country's local road network by heavy (or inappropriately sized) vehicles, and opportunities for re-investing existing taxation revenue relating to these industries should be considered to directly address the asset damage being caused. The timber transport fund is a good example of this in practice. The overall consideration of funding for transport should also consider how the current income through Vehicle Excise Duty and Fuel Duty are redistributed and whether alternative models, linking use and impact to taxes and charges, needs to be developed.

The 2018 Improvement Service road user survey asked respondents about their personal priorities for government spending, with the top 5 (in order) being: Healthcare/NHS, Care for the elderly, Primary and secondary schools, Criminal justice (incl. Police and prisons), then Upkeep of local roads. When asked about future spend on roads and transportation, 55% prioritised road maintenance, 30% public transport, 10% low emission transport and then 5% prioritised active travel. 29% of respondents supported the payment of more personal tax to be spent on road maintenance, with 44% strongly against this.

A new infrastructure evaluation model/framework is currently being developed by SCOTS, which has the potential to help policy-makers and practitioners to embed the wider social, economic and environmental impacts of local roads in their decision-making and therefore make more informed investment (or disinvestment) decisions going forward.

This model will benefit both local and central government through the inclusion of economic and social value as core investment considerations, supplementing the traditional focus on safety, road network performance and asset condition. There will be the ability to base this model on the approaches and data sources already in use across the public sector, to inform service delivery within a wide range of public services. This approach aligns the road service with the National Performance Framework and the overarching Government strategy on inclusive growth. It will fit varying local authority geographies, whilst evaluating community impacts, and improve the clarity of the implications of future budget decisions.