

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM SOUTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL

This response is on behalf of South Lanarkshire Council (SLC) and relates to our views as a local roads authority.

1.0 South Lanarkshire Overview

- 1.1 We recognise that a safe and well maintained road network is vital to that of both the local and national economy. A high quality and safe road network provides a basis for economic prosperity, attracting investment and providing our communities with safe and desirable places to live, work, visit and prosper. These networks should also support access to public transport and provide attractive opportunities to substantially increase levels of active travel.
- 1.2 The local transport network is also an increasingly important component of the move to a zero carbon economy, in terms of how we chose to use our existing infrastructure assets.
- 1.3 In terms of the road network itself, the Council is responsible for the maintenance of 2295km of carriageway network. The “roads” asset is recognised as the single biggest asset that the Council owns and has a gross replacement cost of £4.26 billion. The roads asset is made up of five major elements:-
 - Carriageways
 - Footways, Footpaths and Cycleways
 - Structures
 - Street Lighting
 - Traffic Signals
- 1.4 Since 2008 the Council has invested in excess of £126million as dedicated additional capital funding as part of our Roads Investment Plan. This investment was allocated primarily to improve the condition of carriageways and footways.
- 1.5 Significant benefit has accrued from this investment. We have treated 61.1% of our carriageway network which has improved our road condition as measured using the Road Condition Index (RCI) from 37.5% in 2008/09 to 31.2% in 2018/19. As a result the Council’s position in RCI rankings has improved from 22nd (of 32 councils) in 2008/09 to 9th in 2018/19. Road condition has obviously improved significantly and the carriageway maintenance backlog has decreased in real terms.

- 1.6 Looking forward, via our approved Capital Strategy, the Council is also committed to maintaining carriageway investment at “steady state” levels which will maintain road condition at current levels. However, while our progress has been good, and comparisons with other councils are broadly favourable, we remain in a position where almost a third of our roads require to be considered for maintenance treatment.
- 1.7 While good progress has been made in improving carriageway condition attention is also required to the other key asset groups. We would summarise our perspective on those as follows:-
- Footway, footpath and cycleways – We believe condition is broadly static and we are currently investing at a level sufficient to broadly maintain current condition. A challenge here is the changing demographics of our population with more elderly people who experience difficulty in using footpaths in only moderately poor condition.
 - Structures – We believe we are experiencing relatively slow regression in overall condition. Additional investment will be considered as part of future budget considerations.
 - Street Lighting – Excellent progress has been made in achieving a 100% switchover to LED lighting across some 60,000 units. Underground cabling systems are generally hidden from view and known to be aged. The reality is that a reactive approach to the development of faults in these systems will require to be continued. Our street lighting columns are among the oldest in Scotland and their age profile is expected to continue to regress. However, again these investment needs will be reviewed as part of forward financial planning.
 - Traffic Signals – the age profile of these assets is continuing to regress hence an increase in reliability issues is expected. Again, future investment needs will be considered in the context of future capital strategies.
- 1.8 It is clearly important that elected members are fully sighted on these issues in order to provide a sound basis for investment decisions. Consequently an annual report is presented to our Community and Enterprise Resources Committee to fully update elected members on current asset condition and anticipated condition trends going forward.
- 2.0 How have recent spending decisions on roads maintenance affected the quality of Scotland’s roads, road users, businesses, public services and economy?**
- 2.1 Considering the national picture firstly, it is obvious that the condition of Scotland’s roads is most fundamentally impacted by the level of maintenance

investment. It is therefore relevant to consider the evidence from successive Audit Scotland reports which looked at road maintenance in Scotland, including funding cuts. The key findings in terms of funding cuts were:-

2004 Report – 7% cut (from 1994/95)
 2011 Report – 13% cut, relative to previous report (2004)
 2013 Report – 21% cut, relative to previous report (2011)
 2016 Report – 14% cut, relative to previous report (2013)

- 2.2 In summary, this represents a 45% cut in investment in road maintenance nationally over 22 years.
- 2.3 Considering other similar information sources, the National Benchmarking Overview Report 2017-18, prepared by the Improvement Service, identifies a 16% reduction in roads investment from 2010/11 to 2017/18.
- 2.4 The picture from these statistics is one of deep and sustained budget cuts which will inevitably impact road condition across Scotland.
- 2.5 As Audit Scotland quite correctly pointed out there is clear evidence linking poor road condition with serious accidents. In addition, as we seek to achieve substantial progress on improving active travel levels, with the potential to deliver substantial health benefits and relieve pressures on the NHS budget, many of Scotland's roads represent a significant safety risk for cyclists and dissuade progress on this key priority.
- 2.6 Translating the national picture to a typical local level, it is noted that road maintenance is funded via local authority settlements from the Scottish Government. Increased pressure on the inevitably large expenditure areas of Social Care and Education then generally result in all other council services requiring to achieve disproportionate levels of savings. This generally leads to significant ongoing "efficiencies" being required on revenue budgets such as road maintenance.
- 2.7 Turning specifically to a South Lanarkshire perspective, the Council identified investment in road maintenance as a Council priority in 2008 and committed £126M of additional capital funding over an 11 year period with a focus on improving the condition of roads and pavements. As explained above, it is clear that this commitment, confirming as a council priority the need to improve road condition, was the catalyst to delivering what has been a year on year improvement in carriageway condition since 2010.
- 2.8 Despite the good progress this Council has clearly achieved in improving carriageway condition, public satisfaction with regard to the "maintenance of roads and pavements" was, by some margin, the lowest satisfaction level of any council service when most recently measured (Council Household Survey 2014). In addition we recognise that with almost a third of our roads still requiring to be considered for maintenance attention much work remains to be done. Hence, improving the condition of our roads remains a policy priority for the Council.

3.0 If spending on roads maintenance continues at current levels, what could be the likely effects on road users, businesses, public services and economy?

3.1 Considering this in terms of a South Lanarkshire perspective, and considering the individual asset groups referenced above, we would comment as follows:-

- Carriageways – given Council commitments to continue funding at steady state levels we would expect carriageway condition to remain static at current levels. Given some 31% remain to be considered for maintenance attention the key risk is that roads in poor condition will deteriorate rapidly in extended severe winter conditions representing a short term risk to public safety, prior to repairs being completed.
- Footways, footpaths and cycleways – we expect the scenario to mirror that of carriageways.
- Structures – If relatively slow regression continues to be experienced this would ultimately reach a position where bridges may require to be closed for reasons of public safety. However, we would expect funding to be prioritised to avoid such scenarios.
- Street lighting – We consider the key risks here to be continuing deterioration of underground cabling systems, with subsequent reliability issues (blackouts) and the risk of street lighting columns ultimately deteriorating to a stage where they become structurally unsound and require to be removed. Again, if deterioration were to approach a point where public safety was expected to be compromised we would anticipate appropriate funding being identified to address the situation.
- Traffic Signals – with a regressing age profile will come increasing reliability issues as signals fail. We would expect the main consequence of this to be relatively short term congestion and delay rather than specific risks to public safety.

3.2 The impact of this in terms of the user groups identified is considered to be manageable.

4.0 How can negative effects of reduced spending be addressed?

4.1 The principles of asset management have developed at both a national and local level over recent decades to ensure that a sound understanding is available of investment needs and to provide a basis for associated investment decisions.

4.2 The preparation of clear and concise roads asset management plans provides the information for elected members and politicians to be fully aware of road maintenance funding requirements and the likely consequences as a result of their budget decisions. The availability of information in relation to the financial

requirements for steady state funding needs to be detailed and provided for all asset groups.

- 4.3 It should be acknowledged that technological developments will continue to provide new solutions for the industry to mitigate against the impact of reduced spending in some areas. It should also be highlighted that future investment will be required in roads infrastructure to ensure existing roads are ready to accommodate future technologies.
- 4.4 The development and use of preventative maintenance strategies and techniques provides road authorities with tools and techniques to deliver effective and timely road maintenance to protect the condition of assets. However, it should be noted that this does not replace the need for conventional maintenance processes and their associated costs.
- 4.5 The high replacement costs for transport infrastructure cannot be avoided once assets are beyond their serviceable life. However, by providing a suitable budget for the provision of good maintenance we will ensure the asset remains in a serviceable condition for as long as possible and thus minimise the risk of premature failure.
- 5.0 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**
- 5.1 The funding models are very different. Transport Scotland budget is allocated as part of the Scottish Government's considerations of their funding priorities. This includes consideration as to what the Scottish Government consider an appropriate settlement for local government, and individual councils.
- 5.2 There is then a further challenge for Roads Services within local government as they require to compete with other priority and high cost areas such as Social Care and Education for the limited funding available. Given that Social Care and Education budgets are generally relatively protected within councils the impact of any budget pressures are then applied disproportionately to other council services including road maintenance. We consider this pattern to be fairly typical of the direction in which councils are driven as a consequence of demographic change, national priorities and funding pressures.
- 5.3 Models for delivering road maintenance emerge from the different statutory responsibilities for this function. With responsibilities for Scotland's roads split across 32 councils, 4 Operating Companies employed by Transport Scotland and a further 5 DBFO operators there is obviously a question as to whether 41 individual operators represents the optimum solution for a country of Scotland's size. We note the ongoing National Transport Strategy Review is considering issues of Transport Governance.
- 5.4 In terms of delivery models, we note Transport Scotland wholly outsource road maintenance. Alternatively, larger councils generally operate a mixed

economy having an in-house capability with the ability to supplement this as necessary via engaging external resources.

- 5.5 This is the model used by South Lanarkshire Council. We consider it appropriate for our geography and the nature and scale of our road maintenance workload.
- 5.6 Our experience is that the public perception of road maintenance in Scotland is such that road users generally do not appreciate the different maintenance responsibilities and as a result do not see, for example, the difference between various road categories such as all purpose (non motorway) trunk roads and strategic council roads. Hence, there is frequently public confusion as to who is responsible for what.
- 5.7 We believe infrastructure investment should be recognised as a national priority and should be funded appropriately, particularly with regard to the maintenance of existing infrastructure.