

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM SPOKES

Spokes welcomes the opportunity to comment as part of this consultation on the future of Scotland's road maintenance expenditure.

We draw the Committee's attention to the Climate Emergency that the First Minister has declared, and also the Transport Secretary's recent and long-overdue acknowledgement that the Scottish Government's target/vision to achieve 10% of all journeys in Scotland being made by bicycle by 2020 will not be met - and indeed it will be missed by a very wide margin.

Road maintenance needs to contribute far more towards achieving the growth in cycling sought by Scottish Government targets, and which is required if everyday transport is to contribute to help tackle climate change. Furthermore road maintenance, in helping increase active travel rates, will contribute positively to the nation's good health, easing pressure on health expenditure.

The impact of poor road maintenance on cycling

Cyclists are particularly affected by poor road conditions. Uneven, rough and potholed roads and cyclist routes can cause or be a contributory factor in crashes / falls; they make bikes harder to control and less comfortable to use. Other road maintenance defects affect cyclists along with other road users: poor or missing signage, damaged railings, poles and bollards also cause and contribute to crashes and make bike travel harder than it need be. All these road maintenance deficiencies suppress the growth of cycling

As it is on local roads where the overwhelming potential for cycling growth exists, this is where standards of maintenance need to be absolutely first class. Better local roads will contribute to the appeal of everyday cycling – to school, work, visiting shops, etc

The contrast between Transport Scotland and local authority road maintenance

We are pleased that this issue was highlighted in the consultation's introduction. Several Audit Scotland reports show an entrenched pattern whereby local roads are maintained to a markedly poorer standard.

While local roads comprise over 93% of all roads by distance, in 2011 only 66% of local roads were in "acceptable condition," compared to 78% for trunk roads. By 2016, 87-90% of trunk roads were "acceptable condition", while local roads remained "broadly stable since the last assessment", i.e. just 66% in acceptable condition (*Call for Evidence, Background Information*).

This is contrary to what is needed to boost cycling take-up – local roads should be maintained to a very high standard rather than being a poor cousin to trunk roads and motorways.

Our views match those of the Scottish population. A survey for Transform Scotland found that **84%** of a random sample of the Scottish public felt investment in fixing our existing roads, cycle paths and pavements should come before the building of more roads, whilst only 7% disagreed (*Reference: transformscotland.org.uk/what-we-do/campaigns/fix-it-first*).

Improving Local Roads Maintenance

Whilst we generally support the devolution of decision-making and spending to local level, the disparity that has grown up in the condition of non-local and local roads is a very serious problem.

With road maintenance funding contained within a generalised local authority funding envelope it is easy to see how its value can be diminished alongside demands to do more for education or care for the elderly. This position, together with the general cutbacks to local authority spending, has led to severe local road maintenance underfunding.

New funding options

There are a range of options to establish additional funding streams for local road maintenance, of which we highlight three below, with (1) being the absolute top priority...

1. Funding to local authorities for road maintenance should be drastically increased and should be ring-fenced. In view of the climate emergency, expansion of the trunk road system should be halted (there may be a case for specific local improvements) and the money saved transferred to ring-fenced maintenance cash for local roads, cycle routes and footways.
2. Utility companies, whose road openings, patches and manhole covers are the cause of many repair issues on the roads, should be required to make a contribution to road maintenance on a per opening or per manhole cover basis.
3. Local Authorities and Transport Scotland should recover monies from insurance companies when infrastructure such as railings and signage is damaged in crashes. From FOI enquiries, we know that City of Edinburgh Council recovered only about £5,000 from insurance companies in 2018/19. We have little doubt that the full cost of such damage will be in the hundreds of thousands of pounds. We suspect that currently the taxpayer is subsidising the insurance industry through under-recovery of such funds. Accordingly, the Committee should investigate overcoming the barriers to achieving far better recovery of funds, to help public finances and achieve better road maintenance standards.

Conclusion

Local road maintenance standards are far poorer than those for national roads. This suppresses the take-up of cycling that the country needs.

Additional funding is needed to support better standards of local road maintenance. We have identified sources of additional money and efficiencies which could provide standards and conditions which are safe and welcoming for all forms of transport, but notably to increase cycling and walking..