

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PRE-BUDGET/FINANCIAL SCRUTINY ON ROADS MAINTENANCE IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM UNISON

Introduction

UNISON is Scotland's largest trade union with members across the public, private and voluntary sectors. Members are both users and providers of public services as well as taxpayers and are uniquely placed to support policy development. UNISON supports members working in roads teams across Scotland and therefore welcomes the opportunity to give evidence to the committee.

Evidence

The committee should ensure that their welcome work in this area includes pavements and footpaths which are also experiencing deterioration in their condition. Last year's report¹ by the AA highlighted the growth in claims related to pavement accidents leading to local authorities paying over £2million. It is also important to note that, as Caroline Criado Perez book shows², there is a substantial difference in the way men and women travel. Women are much more likely to be walking and driving on smaller roads as they are often combining unpaid care and paid work in part of their journeys. People with mobility problems including wheelchair users are also disproportionately impacted on by poor quality footpaths. The poor quality of footpaths also makes it more difficult for people to undertake exercise such as running and walking and therefore works against the Scottish government's efforts to keep people active to improve wellbeing.

Cuts

While there is a heated debate round the figures there is no doubt that local government has borne the brunt of cuts over the last 10 years. Reports from COSLA³, the Local Government Benchmarking report⁴, Accounts Commission⁵ and SPICe⁶, while using slightly different methodologies, confirm a decade of substantial cuts to local government budgets and the financial pressures they face. Demand for services has also risen further impacting on budgets. There is no doubt that the cuts to local government budgets have led to substantial cuts to roads budgets in Scotland. Reports by Audit Scotland⁷ and others referenced in the committee's call for evidence are supported our own survey of members working in roads teams and

¹ The AA <https://www.theaa.com/about-us/newsroom/the-shocking-state-of-pavements> August 2018

² Invisible Women Caroline Criado Perez 2019

³ COSLA: Fair Funding for Essential Services 2019/20

⁴ Local Government Benchmarking Framework report 2017-18

<http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/benchmarking/reports.html>

⁵ Accounts Commission Local Government in Scotland Challenges and performance 2019 March 2019

⁶ SPICe Local Government Facts and Figures 2013-14 to 2019-20 July 2019

⁷ Audit Scotland Maintaining Scotland's Roads follow up 2016 <https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/report/maintaining-scotlands-roads-a-follow-up-report-0>

show that there is a serious problem. Salami-slicing of services avoids headlines but the long years of austerity are having a severe impact on our roads and the staff trying to deliver them with limited resources.

UNISON Survey: Road to Nowhere ⁸

This survey was part of UNISON Scotland's Damage series: a programme of surveys looking at the impact of the age of austerity on services and those who deliver them.

Findings

Like all public services, roads teams have experienced budget cuts leading to job losses and at the same time they are also experiencing a range of increased demands. There is little sign of any increase in resources in the near future.

When we asked members about cuts in their workplaces the vast majority said that there had been budget cuts in the last year and over the last five years. More than a third (36%) of respondents stated that cuts in the last year had been severe with another 40% indicating that there had been cuts. When looking at the last five years over 40 per cent (41%) stated that cuts had been severe and 45% that there had been cuts.

These cuts have led to job losses meaning remaining staff are struggling with workloads. As it is experienced staff that tend to be in a position to volunteer to leave there is also a loss of experience which again leaves remaining workers under pressure.

Not all councils replied to our Freedom of Information request regarding job losses so we were unable to get a clear picture of job cuts across Scotland. For those that did reply to the question about job numbers, there were 74 less staff in their roads teams than in 2012. When we asked a different questions: *How many people have left and how many people have been made redundant?* The total was 458. It is worth noting that Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee did not respond to our request on time (and in some cases at all) so any job losses there were not included.

The Roads Collaboration Programme⁹ is already highlighting that there will be future problems because of the age profile of both road operatives and professional staff. Unless action is taken to recruit and retain new staff there will be a considerable skills gap in the near future as they will not have a chance to build up the experience needed to replace those retiring.

Responses from members indicate that the non-replacement of leavers is a significant issue. This means that there is no plan of what staff numbers or skills are

⁸ UNISON Scotland Road To Nowhere 2017 <https://unison-scotland.org/library/20171127-Road-to-nowhere-roads-staff.pdf>

⁹ Improvement Service: Roads Collaboration Programme <http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/roads-collaboration-programme.html>

required for teams – instead the skills mix is just who's left. The loss of staff, particularly experienced staff is becoming an increasing problem and has a serious impact on the ability of remaining staff to deliver a quality service. This would be a problem even with stable workloads but demands on roads teams are increasing. Road use continues to increase; more work is needed to meet our climate targets; increased awareness and concerns round air quality lead to greater demands for traffic and air quality monitoring and delivering change in response; and the problems with potholes/surfaces are leading to increases political pressure round road quality. Roads teams need more staff.

When asked about changes in workload the vast majority replied that their workload had got heavier. Several issues emerged round changes in workload but the most significant one was that there just too much work to do with the staff available in local authorities. Members indicated that cuts in other teams meant that they were now expected to do a great deal more administrative work. Job losses and in particular the loss of more experienced or skilled staff meant that members were being asked to do work previously undertaken by those at a higher grade. Changes in culture and legislation like the Freedom of Information Act also mean that there is a lot more work involved in responding to those requests and a rise in work dealing with complaints from citizens.

There were also 296 vacancies across the councils who responded to the FOI request. Even where the decision is made to replace staff it takes time to recruit leaving teams short staffed for a considerable period of time. There is considerable pressure on those staff in roads teams to maintain service levels. Members indicated that it is sometimes hard to find staff to fill the more senior/qualified roles. Pay was continually mentioned as an issue in attracting suitable qualified staff to apply. Some state that qualifications requirements have been reduced in order to fill posts.

Workload

Roads teams report dealing with an increased administrative burden. Members also report both a widening of their job role and work that was previously undertaken by better paid staff moving on to them. Members also report increased work in responding to complaints about roads. The Audit Scotland report¹⁰ indicates that citizens are unhappy with the state of our roads and are raising these issues either direct to local authorities or via councillors. This may be linked to the final theme in members' comments: they are patching roads, doing cheaper minor repairs and short-term fixes rather than major works. This has also been highlighted as a concern by Audit Scotland. Temporary solutions only save money in the short-term. The surfaces need to be properly repaired and the temporary fixes just push costs into the future and mean raise the cost of the overall repair.

While forty-seven percent of respondents state that they rarely skip breaks or work late to get things done thirty-two percent are doing so frequently and a further twenty-one percent do so now and again. You cannot deliver a high quality service if workers are skipping breaks and working long hours. Not only does this affect the

¹⁰ <https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/report/maintaining-scotlands-roads-a-follow-up-report-0>

quality of their work it also impacts on people's time with their friends and family. A good work-life balance is not just a good thing for the individuals concerned: they are happier and healthier so this also means that when they are in work they are able to do their work to a higher standard than exhausted stressed-out workers.

Roads teams need to be able to recruit and retain skilled workers. There are many better paid jobs for people with their skills. If they are also working longer unpaid hours this adds to the attraction of the better paid private sector. Members' comments indicate that they are under enormous stress trying to keep on top of their workloads. The latest pay rise in still doesn't make up for the real terms pay cut members have experienced.

It's no surprise, given the responses earlier in our survey, that budget cuts, job cuts and overwork mean that morale in roads teams is very low. Forty percent of respondents felt that morale was low and a further forty-four percent that morale was very low. Only ten percent described morale as good and seven percent described it as fine. Members feel overworked and underappreciated. They report increased workloads and a lack of strategic planning or interested management as key causes of low morale. The long-term pay freeze is also frequently mentioned as a cause of low morale. The public sector will lose highly skilled staff if the budget cuts continue. Where respondents indicated that morale was good it was because of their co-workers.

Solutions

UNISON agrees with Audit Scotland and the Improvement Service current structures are unsustainable under current funding levels. Many of the discussion round councils challenging financial situation in general and roads in particular focus on technocratic solutions shared services, collaboration, joint working, increased centralisation and continued salami slicing. We do not believe that increased centralising or "collaboration" offer effective solutions. The financial situation is such that there is no magic structure that will enable us to build and maintain the transport infrastructure that Scotland needs with current funding levels. There needs to be more funding.

Citizens are also demanding that public services offer more choice and a wider voice for communities in the design and delivery of services. Shared services centralisation and regional collaboration will deliver one size fits all services. They will not meet the demand for citizen focused services. Scotland should be moving to more local control over roads not less.

There needs to be substantial extra funding for roads, pavements and pathways. This includes both for trunk roads and for local authorities. Councils also need more control over their budget levels. The government should act and other parties should work with them to agree a replacement property tax with rates set and collected by local authorities. A replacement for the council tax is not enough. To be sustainable local authorities need much wider powers over sources of funding. The increasing reliance of charges is regressive and many options for income generation through charges have generally been utilized already in response to cuts. The return of business rates to local authority control would be welcomed but there needs to be a

much wider basket of taxes and income raising routes for local authorities. The power to introduce taxes must lie with local authorities and offer the opportunity to give them meaningful control over their budgets to enable local priorities to be addressed.

Conclusion

UNISON is Scotland's largest trade union with members across the public, private and voluntary sectors. UNISON has a range of members working in roads teams across Scotland therefore welcomes the opportunity to give evidence to the committee. Roads budgets are under enormous pressure at a time when there is increased demand and growing public discontent about the state of our roads, paths and pavements. UNISON believes that there needs to be substantial investment in our infrastructure rather than a structural reorganisation. Increased collaboration or a new roads service will not overcome the financial challenges. They will also further weaken local democratic accountability and citizens' ability to influence public services.