



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

Wednesday 2 October 2019

Session 5



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RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

27th Meeting 2019, Session 5

CONVENER

*Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con)

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)

*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

*Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD)

*Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab)

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con) (Committee Substitute)

Hugh Gillies (Transport Scotland)

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Councillor Steven Heddle (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Keith Irving (Cycling Scotland)

Ian McCall (Paths for All)

Donald Morrison (Transport Scotland)

Robert Nicol (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Martin Reid (Road Haulage Association)

Keith Robertson (Mobility and Access Committee in Scotland)

Alistair Speedie (Timber Transport Forum)

David Sulman (Confor)

Stewart Turner (Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland)

Ewan Wallace (Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland)

Paul White (Confederation of Passenger Transport UK)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

Wednesday 2 October 2019

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Edward Mountain): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 27th meeting in 2019 of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. Please make sure that your mobile phones are on silent.

We have received apologies today from Jamie Greene and Stewart Stevenson. I welcome their substitutes, Finlay Carson and Christine Grahame.

Finlay Carson has not been to the committee before. Do you have any interests to declare?

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con) (Committee Substitute): I declare that I am a former partner in a farming business.

The Convener: Thank you. Agenda item 1 is consideration of a decision on whether to take in private item 4, which is a chance to review today's evidence session. Do members agree to do that?

Members indicated agreement.

Subordinate Legislation

Plant Health (Scotland) Amendment Order 2019 (SSI 2019/290)

09:31

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of a negative instrument, as detailed on the agenda. No motions to annul or representations have been received. As no member wants to comment, is the committee agreed that it does not want to make any recommendation in relation to the instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

Pre-budget and Financial Scrutiny (Road Maintenance)

09:32

The Convener: Item 3 is pre-budget and financial scrutiny on road maintenance in Scotland. Today, we will take evidence from two panels—the first witnesses are road users; the second witnesses are decision makers—on the efficacy of the approach to road maintenance and the adequacy of current associated expenditure levels. This activity will support the committee's scrutiny of the Scottish Government's draft budget 2021 later in the year.

I welcome the first panel: Keith Robertson, who is the lead member of the roads, infrastructure and active travel workstream, Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland; Martin Reid, who is the policy director for Scotland and Northern Ireland of the Road Haulage Association; David Sulman, who is the deputy chief executive of Confor; Alistair Speedie, who is the chair of the Timber Transport Forum; Paul White, who is the director for Scotland of the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK; Ian McCall, who is the senior development officer of Paths for All; and—he is just arriving—Keith Irving, who is the chief executive of Cycling Scotland. Appropriately, he is clutching his cycling helmet.

We will move straight to questions. It is quite a big panel today and my intention is always to get everyone in to ask questions. Those of you who have been before know that there is no need to push the red button on your microphone when you speak. Catch my eye if you want to come in and I will call you. If there is a difficult question, do not be the last one to look away because you will be the one who gets asked to answer it. When you are speaking, I ask that you keep looking in my general direction. That way, if I think that you are going off on a tangent, or stopping somebody else coming in, I can try to encourage you to wind up on that question.

John Finnie has the first question.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Good morning, panel, and thank you for your written submissions. The committee has heard that the current levels of investment in local road maintenance are unlikely to prevent further deterioration of the network. Do you agree with that assessment? If so, how much more should be invested? Where should the funds come from?

Alistair Speedie (Timber Transport Forum): Good morning. Yes, I agree that investment in the local road networks has diminished over the years. How much funding is needed is a very difficult

question to answer. I think that we have to start from the base and look forward from our existing position. There is no doubt that, if budgets continue to diminish, the roads will continue to deteriorate.

It needs to be understood that the local road network is the basic foundation for everything. We cannot get to shops, hospitals, education, work, or have successful industry without it. A good basic road network is essential for the economic wellbeing of the country.

The timber industry uses minor roads, because forests are by nature remote. It is key that that industry survives. For that to be the case, we need a road network that can support the wagons that have to take the timber from the forests to the market. At the moment, we do that by working together in a huge partnership that collaborates to sustain the network rather through expenditure on the network. By that, I mean that the regimes that are used to take timber to the market—

The Convener: I will stop you from going into too much detail about timber, because I know that a member wants to delve deeper into the issue of timber extraction.

Perhaps Martin Reid would like to come in, and then John Finnie can develop his question.

Martin Reid (Road Haulage Association): In general, we find that the trunk road network tends to be better maintained than the local authority road network. We understand that local authorities are under tremendous budgetary constraints, but we find that what we refer to as “the last mile” is where the deterioration is greatest, or is the hardest part of the journey.

For our industry—I guess that I can speak at this level for timber transport, too—the road deterioration leads to additional costs for the hauliers through wear and tear, additional strain on tyres and so on. I echo Alistair Speedie's opinion that we need at least the same amount of, if not more, investment, particularly in the rural roads than we currently have.

We have to remember that this is about accessing communities, too. The economic side of things is obviously incredibly important, but investment provides lifelines for communities that would otherwise be ignored, or are more vulnerable than some in the urban set up.

Paul White (Confederation of Passenger Transport UK): I echo what Martin Reid said. Road maintenance issues increase operating costs for bus companies, as they do for freight, and that can be the critical point when it comes to marginal services in rural areas. West Coast Motors said in its submission that, in the past five years, its operating costs have increased by 10

per cent, which it suggested was down to road maintenance issues and the standard of the road network.

How much should be invested and where should it come from? I understood from the previous evidence session that the backlog is about £2 billion. Dare I say that there should be an element of ring fencing for local authority budgets and a 10 to 20-year plan that addresses the backlog in the coming decades?

Ian McCall (Paths for All): Our submission focuses on the needs of walking and cycling and where that sits in the maintenance budgets. One issue is that it is fairly hard to find out how much is spent on footpaths and cyclepath maintenance. It is clear that, if we want to encourage people to walk and cycle, we need to maintain footpaths. At the moment, we do not really know what we are maintaining.

One measures what is important, so if we do not measure something, that suggests that we do not think that it is important. The national walking strategy has an action for local authorities to monitor footpath status and that could lead on to making decisions on budget. I flag up that, so far, that has not happened.

John Finnie: It is my experience that the public do not necessarily understand the finer points of who has responsibility for the trunk road network and the local road network. It is certainly the case that central Government, which has responsibility for the trunk road network, is expanding that network. Will you comment on whether the balance is appropriate? The situation has been compared with someone extending their house when they have not maintained the existing property.

Keith Irving (Cycling Scotland): Apologies for my late arrival, which was due to a rail maintenance problem, ironically enough.

The Convener: Not your bicycle then?

Keith Irving: No—it is perfectly maintained. Obviously, the committee and the Government have to take decisions about prioritisation, but I agree with the member's question that decisions on expanding trunk road capacity—when there is a £1.8 billion backlog according to the best figures available—have to be looked at together and not independently.

From the cycling point of view, it is very much an issue of spend to save. Cyclists depend on the local roads most of all, so the deteriorating condition is likely to lead to an increase in crashes that result in serious injuries, which has a cost to the individual and to the public purse through health costs.

Keith Robertson (Mobility and Access Committee in Scotland): The condition of the roads, and predominantly local roads, is fundamental to the wellbeing of people with disabilities and older people. If the trunk roads or local roads—that includes pavements, obviously—are not in good condition, that is a barrier, which leads to isolation. If people cannot get out of their homes they become isolated. There is plenty of research that, without exception, isolation leads to a quick and marked deterioration in mental health.

That being the case, it is a matter of spending to save, because spending on the roads authority will ultimately save on the health budget. We have to look at the door-to-door journey and not just ask, "Can we get on a bus? Can we get on a train?" We have to look at whether someone can get from their house—we also need to look at whether their house is suitable for them, which is nothing to do with this committee—to the point of destination and all parts in between, to reduce that isolation. That is a real problem.

With the best will in the world, we just cannot make everything accessible in one swoop, but it makes sense to make changes during a planned maintenance programme. That may cost a little extra, but that will be relatively small in comparison to making half a mile of pavement accessible. Why not do that during planned maintenance? Unfortunately, people do not listen.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): Of course, this is pre-budget scrutiny. Last week's panel could not tell us—other than anecdotally—how much was supposed to be spent on road maintenance and how much was being spent on road maintenance. Nobody would come up with a figure. The only person so far who has come up with a figure is Paul White, who has just told us that there is a backlog of £2 billion-worth of work. That sounds a very round figure.

Can you give us a bit more detail on that? What time period are we talking about? Can anybody on the panel give us an indication of the actual figures? We need to focus on what should be spent on road maintenance and whether all that money is being spent on road maintenance. We all say that not enough is being spent, but that applies everywhere. The Government has an idea of how much should be being spent on road maintenance. Is that amount being spent on it? Over what period is the backlog?

Paul White: I took that figure from Transform Scotland's submission. I believe that Transform Scotland will be represented on your second panel, so it might be able to provide you with more detail on that.

It is difficult to know exactly how much is spent, because the funding is part of the block grant and

the money that comes from the Scottish Government might not end up being spent on road maintenance. Therefore, I am afraid that I cannot give you that figure.

09:45

Ian McCall: I do not have an absolute figure but, in preparing our submission, I came across the statistic that councils have cut road maintenance budgets by 20 per cent over the past seven years. That figure was from the Improvement Service benchmarking report. The Improvement Service also said that spending on local roads had declined by 26 per cent in real terms over the past five years. I do not have an absolute figure, but that gives an indication of the way things are going.

John Finnie: I do not know whether Mr Reid or Mr Speedie would like to comment on the balance between spending on existing roads and spending on new roads, which there will always be demands for. Funnily enough, if we build new roads, people drive on them, but we are not maintaining the existing ones. Could either of you comment on the balance, please?

Alistair Speedie: It is absolutely appropriate that strategic decisions are taken to improve and add to the network. The strategic network, by which I mean the trunk road network, supports many highly populated areas, industry and so on, and I think that it is appropriate to build new roads for that reason. I imagine that that is very much on the capital expenditure side, but appropriate money also needs to be laid aside for maintenance. If you build a greenhouse, you have to have sufficient resources to clean the windows. In the past, maintenance budgets have been cut and maintenance programmes have been stretched.

I will give the example of cycleways. There is loads of money to build new cycleways, but despite all the grants that are available to do that, no money is provided to maintain them. Having to maintain those adds to the pressure on local authorities to stretch the road maintenance budgets.

Martin Reid: There is a point that is worth noting when we look at the rural context. There has been a great deal of investment in various sectors, such as timber transport and aquaculture, which tend to be in the remotest parts of Scotland. If we are spending money on building up businesses in those areas and developing products that we can take to market—not just in Britain but in Europe—but we do not invest in the roads that are needed to get those products to market, to my mind, that is a false economy. Greater economic brains than mine will have

thoughts on that. I do not know what the rest of the panel thinks about that, but those are my thoughts.

Keith Robertson: The issue is not only what is spent, but how it is spent and the quality of the reinstatements or the maintenance. The inspections have a lot to do with that. Local authorities are under huge pressures. I think that they get £36 per project for inspections. Even if it takes 20 inspections, they still get £36. That will not even pay for the inspector's fuel. We constantly see dropped kerbs that are far too high—they are a barrier—and a lack of access following road maintenance work that has not been done properly, because inspectors have not been able to get out to inspect it. That is a big part of the problem.

You might have read about this in the paper: I had an accident at Edinburgh airport, where a utility reinstatement had been carried out. I came flying out of my wheelchair and landed head first on the road because I did not happen to see the reinstatement. It had sunk, because no inspector had been along to check it. Quality is just as important as quantity.

The Convener: The points that you make are very valid. I hope that the Transport (Scotland) Bill, which we considered carefully, will make a difference, because it deals with such matters. That bill will go through the final stage of the parliamentary process very shortly. We will watch and see what happens. Thank you for making those points; similar ones have been made to us before, and we have listened.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Good morning. We have been talking about the need for figures, but we do know some figures. I have ascertained that there are 37.5 million vehicles in the United Kingdom, including 30.9 million cars, and that between £6 billion and £7 billion is raised in vehicle excise duty for the UK Government. It might be interesting to ask the UK Government how much of that £6 billion to £7 billion Scotland gets for road maintenance.

A number of years ago, the idea was floated that we could remove vehicle excise duty and put the cost on fuel. That idea was dumped. It has now been suggested to the committee that the current vehicle taxation system should be replaced with a national road user charging scheme, so that the moneys that are raised better reflect the impact of vehicles on the road network. What is your view of that suggestion?

Keith Robertson: My immediate concern would be for disabled people, especially those who live in rural areas. Travel by car might be their only means of transport. As they are more likely to drive longer distances, they would be unfairly taxed on the distance that they drove because of

their need to be able to get out and about. I would be concerned about the proposal from that perspective.

The Convener: Martin, could you clarify something for me? Is it the case that an annual fee has to be paid for every lorry that goes on the road?

Martin Reid: Yes. In road tax alone, we are talking about a figure of about £1,200 a year. In looking at what we get, as a country, compared with what goes into the UK coffers, we need to remember that the amount of fuel duty that is paid in the UK is markedly higher than anywhere else in Europe.

The Convener: Do lorries that are not registered in the UK but which use UK roads pay any money at all?

Martin Reid: They do not pay any road tax. That goes to the country that they are registered in.

Keith Irving: I think that change is inevitable because of the number of low-emission and electric vehicles on our roads. They are increasing in number. The principle of road user charging is not new. It was first identified as a model that could work in the early 1960s. As a principle, it is extremely positive. Paying according to use is a common system for other forms of transport. There are many issues to resolve but, in tackling the road maintenance backlog, it seems a worthy idea for the committee to consider further.

I make the point that it is useful to talk about vehicle excise duty or vehicle emissions duty, because road tax has not existed as a concept since the 1930s.

The Convener: Paul White might want to come in on that. From what I am hearing, my concern is that such a system would be fine where there is alternative transport but, as Keith Robertson said, under a system that involves paying per mile, the poor people who live in remote areas will be stung very hard unless there is a bus, and there are not always buses in such areas.

Paul White: I defer to Keith Robertson on matters of equality and accessibility, but I have a lot of sympathy for the arguments for road user charging. From the point of view of the impact on the quality of the road, which we are here to discuss, and the emissions impacts, road user charging makes a lot of sense.

Such a system would have to be supported with alternative means of travel. That would mean supporting rural buses and having a network of alternatives available to people who might feel punished by a road user charging system. That is possible under the current regulatory framework, and it will also be possible under the regulatory

frameworks that are being considered as part of the Transport (Scotland) Bill. A local authority could support increasing the rural bus service or could work in partnership with bus operators to deliver a better service in a rural area while looking at improving the infrastructure and taking other steps that might help to deliver such a service.

The Convener: Richard, are you happy?

Richard Lyle: I am quite happy. The point that was made about electric cars was interesting. As they come into vogue, it will be interesting to see how the Government raises money from fuel duty.

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): Good morning, gentlemen. There is a general acceptance that the local authorities are suffering from cuts to road budgets and a lack of funds. Many people argue that the best way to deliver local road maintenance is not by each of the 32 authorities doing its own thing. Last week, we heard that the smaller authorities might lack the expertise and the staff compared with larger authorities that have a much bigger road infrastructure to maintain. Calls have been made for local road maintenance to be organised on a regional basis instead of each local authority doing its own thing. What do you think about that suggestion for getting better value for the money that we have to spend?

Martin Reid: I do not think that anything should be taken off the table. In my previous life, I worked in construction. When we dealt with local authorities, it was a real problem trying to get uniformity of approach across the whole gamut of the local authorities. I know that pilots have been done in the past—it has been a few years since I worked in that area—but joint procurement exercises could be the way ahead. That is definitely worth looking at.

Alistair Speedie: I certainly agree with that. Collaboration is extremely important, and I think that groups of councils should collaborate and work together; 32 councils all doing road maintenance is a very large number. In the past, there were seven regional councils and seven directors of roads. They were a very powerful body and did well with road maintenance expenditure. Collaboration is everything. As I said earlier, the Timber Transport Forum is a collaboration. We have had a lot of success through talking, working together and solving problems rather than flinging money at them. Collaboration is the way forward.

Keith Irving: I think that the members of the next panel will be in a far better position to go into that issue in detail, given the road maintenance strategic action group report that they commissioned. That focused on voluntary

collaboration and the fact that, in their view, having 33 roads authorities was unsustainable.

The important point is that reorganisation is not a silver bullet. There are still financial concerns there. Long-term planning is needed—it is not just a case of looking at one, three or five-year cycles for road maintenance; it is necessary to be able to plan management of the asset over a 10 to 20-year timeframe. That would be critical as part of any reorganisation. Other transport developments, such as major rail developments, are on a 10 to 20-year cycle, and it is important that road maintenance and other forms of transport activity have long-term planning, too.

Keith Robertson: I agree with my namesake on the length of the planning cycle. We have had a tried and trusted model of collaboration since the two-tier council days in Tayside. I believe that Tayside Contracts is so successful that it can feed money back to the three local authorities involved: Angus Council, Dundee City Council and Perth and Kinross Council. It was a collaboration between those three authorities that led to the formation of Tayside Contracts. We now have the Ayrshire roads alliance. As far as I know, that is working reasonably well.

We have been working on the road maintenance stakeholder group with the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland to push for that approach, because we see it as a more sensible way forward. Instead of the 32 local authorities working independently, it surely makes more sense for them to collaborate and to work right through, rather than stopping where one authority ends and another one begins. That makes eminent sense, but there is a problem with the three and five-year cycles. Those need to be extended.

10:00

The Convener: Mr McCall, do you want to come in on that? Are paths maintained to the same standard across all authority areas? Is there scope for collaboration?

Ian McCall: It is not my area of expertise, but I do not see any argument against collaboration. There is certainly evidence that local authorities take different approaches. A few years ago, Living Streets did some work on spend on footway maintenance—in fact, I think it was Keith Irving who was behind that research. It found quite a divergence between local authorities. It appeared that Edinburgh spent 31 per cent of its road maintenance budget on pavements, whereas Glasgow spent 9 per cent. It may well be that the councils were measuring different things or were spending the money differently. However, there is

a good reason to have some kind of common approach across the country.

Peter Chapman: I am pleased to hear you all say that collaboration is worth considering. However, I can see practical problems in the way that money is delivered. The block grant is delivered to 32 different local authorities, and they all want control over their own lump of money. The idea might be good, but how do we make it work in practice? Does anybody have any thoughts on how we can move it forward from a general idea to actually working in practice?

David Sulman (Confor): I absolutely agree on the comments made by colleagues about the value and benefit of collaboration and partnership. That is absolutely right. However, coupled with that, I would be wary of a move towards what we might call centralisation, because there is a risk of that being a blunt instrument with the inevitable unintended consequences.

One of the vital assets that we have in Scotland is the local knowledge of road engineers. Just because we have a number of very large local authorities, that does not necessarily mean that their roads departments are sufficiently resourced to do their job, so it should not automatically be assumed that smaller local authorities are disadvantaged. There are others more competent than I am to comment, but the expertise in Scottish local authority roads departments is overstretched, probably in every case.

On Mr Chapman's point, there clearly are concerns about the block grant and understandably there are competing concerns for that money. It is perhaps not surprising that education and a range of other issues have a higher priority than roads. I fear that roads are often viewed as something of a Cinderella and suffer as a consequence when it comes to dividing up the block grant.

When I entered the industry, I was fortunate enough to hear Alistair Speedie speaking on a number of occasions of his experience back in the times of what was called hypothecation, when sums of money were set aside for specific expenditure areas, including roads. That seemed to resolve a lot of issues and, to me at least, it seems that the backlog that we have heard about today has undoubtedly increased since the end of hypothecation. That is an area that we might usefully revisit.

Peter Chapman: Does anyone else have any ideas as to how we make collaboration work practically? As I say, each local authority wants to control its own budget, so how do they collaborate to spend some of the money in a more useful way?

Alistair Speedie: I do not have a solution, although I have thought about the issue carefully. There needs to be another funding model for roads maintenance alone. On the block grant for local authorities, it is absolutely appropriate that local authorities have their own priorities through their strategic plans for their areas. Those priorities are very much in the direction of education, care and social services, which is absolutely commendable. Previously, the priorities included fire and police, which was also commendable.

The roads maintenance budgets are always the bridesmaids. I suppose that savings can be hidden by longer cycles of maintenance, but those longer cycles of maintenance are now coming to the public's attention, given the number of potholes that we have and the fact that our infrastructure looks tired. In every city and town, it looks tired.

We should not take away power from local politicians. It is important that decisions are made where the populace lives. Local politicians know their area and what the priorities are. Therefore, another model for funding is needed. Whether it is road user charging, I am not sure. However, if the roads maintenance budget can be set aside in some form nationally, we would know that it was safe and we could plan for the long term. Local authorities have year-on-year budgets, so we cannot plan long term, which is difficult. Every local authority is working hard and doing its absolute damn best to get the best value for the money that it spends. That has been my experience in the past 33 years.

The Convener: Mr Robertson, what is your view on ring fencing the budget for road maintenance?

Keith Robertson: Going back a number of years, when I was a local authority councillor, ring-fenced budgets worked, to be perfectly frank. I do not see collaboration as removal of power from local authorities. A two-pronged approach could be taken. First, we need to show local authorities that there are tried and proven models out there that they could use and get the people who are running those models to demonstrate that. The other side of the coin is that Joe Public out there does not know what a road is. Roads are the very arteries of our society. If you ask most of the public what a road is, they will tell you, "It's a black surface that cars drive on," but, actually, that is only a small part of it. They do not understand that all the utilities are underneath the road.

The ring fencing worked. It protected our roads to an extent, although not as much as I would have liked. Something has to give somewhere and, just now, what is giving is the infrastructure. We have more potholes and barriers and reinstatements are not being done properly. Utility

companies have been left out of the discussion a little, but the majority of road works are done by utility companies. We need to get them on board a little more than they are now and have better quality reinstatements.

The Convener: That is an interesting point. Angus MacDonald wants to delve into that, so I will bring him in now on that particular point and open it up.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): Several witnesses that we have heard from have identified the root cause of many road maintenance problems as being roads authority and utility company procurement that is focused on minimising the cost of the work that is undertaken, rather than maximising the quality of the work, as Keith Robertson has identified. Do you agree with that assertion? If that is the case, how should it be addressed?

Martin Reid: The idea of the cheapest bid winning the contract applies not just to roads but to procurement in general. A full review of that is required, because the cheapest is rarely the best value when we consider the whole life of the contracts. I cannot say with absolute certainty, but I know that the civil engineers spoke to the committee last week, and I would be surprised if they did not say that preventative maintenance always beats reactive maintenance.

The panel's suggestion about ring fencing would allow the experts—the civil engineering contractors—to go about their business, planning ahead and knowing exactly what the workloads are. Basically, they would be able to put in sensible procurement practices. Unfortunately, right across the board with procurement in the UK, the lowest price tends to win. More and more contracts are awarded on the basis of 20 per cent value or expertise and 80 per cent cost.

A whole cottage industry has sprung up around road maintenance, with people putting on a sticking plaster; going away and then coming back and doing the same sticking plaster two or three years down the line. That has become part of business models, which is wrong—it should not be done.

The Convener: Interestingly, I notice that everyone is nodding. Who would like to add to that?

Alistair Speedie: Local roads authorities procure to the best of their ability. When a local roads authority is overseeing a job, we can be assured that it will be inspected and that the quality will be appropriate. The roads authorities have no control over the utility companies' procurement processes. I am not convinced that utilities actually supervise their contractors, and those contractors are roaming all over the

network. The New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 is very different from the old Public Utilities Street Works Act 1950. When I started off as an area roads engineer, I had complete control over who to put on the network and who to take off if the quality of work was not good. That is not the case now.

Roads authorities are allowed only a random selection of inspections of utilities works. Roads authorities do not dig up their own roads; it is utilities that dig up the roads. If a road is not put back together again, it is like going for an operation and being cut open and not sewn up correctly. The road begins to allow in water, which then freezes and the road deteriorates. Most potholes start from utility works. Again, there are processes through various committees, such as the roads authorities and utilities committee (Scotland) and through the Scottish road works commissioner, that are supposed to control all of that. It needs hard work and collaboration to ensure that those processes are successful.

Martin Reid: The question touches on one of my bugbears, so forgive me if I am overtly vocal on the issue. First, I would like to congratulate Alistair Speedie on his analogies—they are brilliant.

There is an awful lot wrong with procurement in general. Particularly with the low-cost option, we find that an unreasonable amount of strain and risk is placed on those at the bottom of the supply chain. The hauliers bear an unreasonable amount of risk within any supply chain, because 40 per cent of the costs of any job that they do go on fuel. The credit lines for fuel are a maximum of seven days, whereas a haulier could wait anything up to 90 days to get paid. They could have three or four contracts running concurrently, where they have no chance of being paid, so they are bankrolling the process. That is not just for our industry. It happens right across construction and roads.

The whole procurement model is a problem. It was a real problem with the collapse of Carillion, where the main contractors were holding on to the moneys. They used cash retention and did not pay the subcontractors all the way down, and that took out businesses. Because the larger contractors had made suicide bids just to get the contract in the first place, at zero margins and with no profit, they used the retention and money for the subcontractors as their cash flow. That happens right across the board and not just in our industry.

Mr MacDonald has asked a great question that is the nub of any maintenance issues that we have.

Keith Irving: The Mobility and Access Committee has highlighted the sheer importance of the inspection of reinstatements by utilities. That

is a key priority, but unfortunately it requires local authority capacity to inspect closely and ensure that the work meets an acceptable standard. There is a particular issue with utilities and manhole covers. From the point of view of people cycling, the quality of the work around manhole covers has to be particularly high. Those can create specific hazards, particularly at junctions, when people are required to swerve around them. That creates a more hazardous environment, and it comes all the way back to the work of the utilities. As panel colleagues have said, utility works have to be focused on extremely tightly to ensure that they achieve minimum standards.

10:15

Keith Robertson: The issue is not only with utility companies. Especially with large developments, when developers have section 50 or section 90 requirements put on them, they build the roads, roundabouts or whatever to support their development. The developer will put down the cheapest possible road. The dropped kerbs will be much higher than 0mm to 6mm, so they will be an absolute barrier to anybody trying to get up them. Developers will use the cheapest materials that they can find, because they want to make as much money as possible. We need more enforcement of not just utility companies but developers that build roads and other infrastructure to support their developments. The quality of what they produce must also be inspected by local authorities, but that means that the local authorities must have the capacity to carry out inspections.

About two and a half years ago, I did a street walk with the City of Edinburgh Council and Edinburgh Napier University's transport research institute. The roads engineers from the council told me that, at the time, the council had four inspectors for the whole of Edinburgh. That may have changed since, but that is ridiculous. With the best will in the world, four people cannot inspect all the road works that are going on. As I say, that might have changed, but that was two and a half or three years ago.

Finlay Carson: Good morning. I am going to jump back to other infrastructure that is not necessarily connected with car or bus travel. We keep on hearing about how important getting out and walking and cycling are, and their impact on health and the social impact on communities. We also hear how important it is for older people to get out. However, a recent poll suggested that 60 per cent of older people are concerned about uneven and cracked pavements, and 48 per cent said they would consider not going out because of the condition of the pavements. That ties in with a 20

per cent decrease in the amount of money that is being spent on footway maintenance.

While roads—we touched on this earlier—are being upgraded or built, can the associated infrastructure for other users, including cyclists, pedestrians and people with limited mobility on mobility scooters, perhaps, be upgraded as a matter of course?

Keith Robertson: The short answer is that it absolutely can. When I talk about a road, I mean from build line to build line, including pavements—shoreline to shoreline, and not just the bit in the middle.

I go back to what I said earlier. It is difficult enough to live as a disabled person; the impact it has on one's life is profound. You have to plan everything down to the tiniest detail. If people's confidence is shaken, especially if they are getting a bit older—I know that I am getting older, but I do not include myself—they do not go out. The impact that that has on the person is devastating.

The impact in respect of funding is equally devastating: maintenance has a huge impact on local health budgets. Getting the procurement process right, the quality of the road maintenance right and the quality of reinstatements right can cause savings in other budgets, such as in health and social care.

Please remember—there has been a little bit of talk about buses, and I know that this is slightly off the question—that in rural areas if there is not a little trundle bus that has no place for a wheelchair on it, there is a coach. In many rural areas we do not have buses, so we have to use cars. That is a big problem to note. We have to get the quality right.

Ian McCall: In answer to the question, I say yes and no. There is an opportunity when general road projects are going ahead to improve things for pedestrians and cyclists. In a way, Finlay Carson's question points to the problem: roads projects and roads maintenance should be about every user, including walkers, cyclists, buses, trucks and whatever. We should have a much more co-ordinated approach to maintaining footpaths. My submission points out that there is a problem in respect of knowing what the actual situation is: it is pretty hard to know because the matter is not really looked at.

There is also an equity issue, because older people and more vulnerable people are more likely to suffer if our footpaths are not in good condition. I think that that has been said already.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Good morning, everybody. I am interested in cycling aspects—in particular, in safe segregated cycle paths. Keith Irving's submission says that about 6

per cent of crashes in which someone is killed or seriously injured while cycling are because—I assume—of potholes, manholes that are not covered or other issues with the road, and no other vehicle is involved. As a former operating room nurse, I completely appreciate Alistair Speedie's analogy about the roads. I have put bones back together myself, so I would be interested to hear the evidence about the road conditions and how they contribute through cyclists falling foul of potholes and so on.

Keith Irving: To continue Alistair Speedie's analogy, it is easier to fix a vehicle than it is to fix a human, which is why we are so concerned about local road maintenance. To pick up on Finlay Carson's question, I note that people walking or cycling often do not have a way through when a road is closed for maintenance, although there might be opportunities to maintain a temporary route, which is important while work is on-going.

On the impact on people cycling more generally, there are particular problem areas where road maintenance issues can be more serious—for example, immediately around junctions where, as well as paying attention to vehicles, the cyclist has to pay attention to the road surface ahead. Having to swerve suddenly to avoid a pothole creates a more hazardous situation. When a cyclist is travelling downhill at greater speed, surface defects and the problems that they create can be magnified. It is about vehicles and surface defects coming together. As I have said, local road maintenance is really important.

It is also important to reflect that we know that the figures are underestimates. We are not quite sure about the precise figures, but twice as many people are admitted to hospital having crashed on their bikes than are recorded in the Police Scotland figures. The figure of 6 per cent would suggest that perhaps 10 or 20 people are seriously injured every year, potentially due to surface defects. According to hospital figures, the actual numbers are likely to be far higher—in summer through surface defects and in winter through lack of gritting, as well as just through general surface issues. The surface is clearly a priority for safety of cyclists.

Martin Reid: In our written submission—to be fair, I point out that this is about England—we cite a freedom of information request from the Federation of Small Businesses, which was covered in *The Daily Telegraph*. It shows that in England in 2018-19 there were complaints about 700,000 potholes, which was an increase of 13 per cent over the previous year. Almost £2 million was paid out in compensation in 7,706 successful claims. That was in England, but if you do the scale calculation and drop the number by whatever factor, you can see that there is a

massive problem right across the UK. The roads are for everybody, and we want to encourage as much active travel as possible. The points that Keith Irving made were very well observed.

Emma Harper: Has the cost of repairing the potholes in order to protect cyclists and other road users been estimated?

We go on about safe segregated cycle routes in this country, but in other countries bicycles manage to share roads quite easily with cars. Is it about changing attitudes and getting people to slow down in towns and cities, and things like that? I am interested in the cost of what we need to do.

Keith Irving: Cost estimates are not broken down for cycling. The problem with patching individual potholes is that doing so creates a more hazardous route than repairing the whole surface of the carriageway would. As a slight aside, I say that that shows the importance of the Transport (Scotland) Bill parking provisions that the committee has been considering. Poor parking across footways and segregated cycleways damages their surface, which is why it is important that the parking provisions be enforced when they are enacted.

The advantage of a segregated cycle route is that the cyclist is not mixing with traffic and is not swerving around minor defects and colliding with a vehicle. The side of the road, where people have to cycle, is often where the worst conditions are—potholes, rutting or just gathering of debris.

Again, I am sorry that there are no precise figures for the committee, but there are strong reasons for segregated cycling routes to keep everyone safer.

Paul White: I will add to Keith Irving's point and answer Ms Harper's question.

Of course we need to improve the quality of the road surface to encourage active travel. We also have to look at prioritisation, whether through segregated cycleways or bus lanes. If you are looking to encourage sustainable and active travel, the journey must be made quick and safe so that there is an increase in bus travel and in cycling. It is about the standard of roads, but it is also about reallocating road space to allow prioritisation.

The Convener: Emma Harper has another line of questioning.

Emma Harper: I am going to move on to heavy goods vehicles and Road Haulage Association issues. I see from our information that it is intended that the road user levy for heavy goods vehicles contributes to repairing wear and tear of the roads. The road user levy is collected by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and redistributed back to Scotland through the Barnett

formula. Do Scottish lorries that never go out of Scotland pay for road maintenance elsewhere, even though they do not use the roads?

10:30

Martin Reid: You could not track that outside the country.

Emma Harper: Do lorries that originate in Ireland and Northern Ireland using our roads to go to the central belt from the Port of Cairnryan not contribute to road maintenance in the current way that—

Martin Reid: The levy would go to the central pot.

Emma Harper: Is it then redistributed?

Martin Reid: Yes.

Emma Harper: Our papers say that the road user levy is reduced for vehicles that emit less nitrous oxide. Do vehicles that emit less cause less damage to the roads?

Martin Reid: I do not think that the engine is related to damaging the roads. I guess that it is about the overall picture. Lorries, unlike many other types of vehicle, are designed so that the weight is distributed per axle. The weight limits are based on how much weight can go on an axle. For example, on a 44-tonne vehicle, really the only weight that will be put down on the road without air suspension would be about 11.5 tonnes.

Lorries take a lot of the flak about road maintenance. It is fair to say that the heavier the vehicle, the more damage it will cause to the road, but we must remember that just about everything that is moved in the United Kingdom is moved on the roads. They are an absolutely integral part of how everybody exists day to day. Depending on whom you ask, you might hear that 90 per cent or 95 per cent of all that you are wearing, eating or sitting on has at some point been on the back of a lorry. In a sense that is inevitable, and it is a cost that is helping the economy.

I reiterate that the industry is doing a fair bit to mitigate the problem. The low-emissions Euro 6 engines will not make any difference to wear and tear on the roads. They are more about wear and tear on the environment.

The Convener: I will bring in David Sulman, provided that you do not focus on timber, which one of the committee members wants to ask about.

David Sulman: I want to build on the point that Martin Reid made on the question of engineering. Much of our discussion this morning has focused on urban roads. The significance is that the vast majority of urban roads are engineered structures.

Our rural roads cannot, by and large, be regarded as having been engineered. Many have been there for many hundreds of years, and although they have a tarmac and stone dressing, they long predate the advent of the internal combustion engine. Local authorities that are responsible for maintaining rural roads have a far greater challenge than those that deal with engineered structures.

Emma Harper: Specifically, what can be done, or what is being done, to minimise the damage that is caused by HGVs to the roads? You are obviously addressing the issue, so this is a good opportunity to say what the Road Haulage Association or others are doing to mitigate damage to the roads.

Martin Reid: Much of what we can do relates to guidance on loads—for example, securing loads so that wear and tear is not uneven—and to maintenance of trucks. Everybody who operates a truck has to have an operator's licence: they make a number of promises on that licence when they are granted it. If they do not do the upkeep of vehicles, they answer to the Office of the Traffic Commissioner for Scotland, who has the power to curtail and even take away an operator's licence. Maintenance schedules are clear and must be obeyed, including walk-around checks by drivers before they start work and when they take a break. They have to do the walk-around checks to make sure that the maintenance side of things is up-to-date.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP) (Committee Substitute): I am interested in the levy that is put on lorries and freight. Does the money from that just go into a big pot or is it reallocated to road maintenance? If it goes to road maintenance, what is the formula for allocating that funding?

Martin Reid: I do not know the answer to that, I am afraid.

Christine Grahame: Can you find out?

Martin Reid: Yes.

Christine Grahame: Secondly, will Brexit make any difference? Will there be a difference for European Union lorries that use UK roads if we are no longer in the EU?

Martin Reid: That is an interesting question and one that we are still waiting to get an answer to—along with most questions about Brexit, it has to be said. We have bits and pieces of legislation, but nothing that is end to end. The cabotage rules will definitely change, which means that the number of internal journeys that people can do in a second country will change, but we are still not 100 per cent sure about the access that European trucks will have in the UK.

The Convener: Christine Grahame might get an answer to her question on the allocation of funding from the next panel. It might be in a better position to answer that.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I feel that my questions have been trailed twice, but the guys who want to talk about timber transport have been held back. Their chance is now here, as I have a couple of questions on the subject.

In its submission, the Timber Transport Forum highlights the timber transport fund, which helps to co-finance improvements on some non-priority roads that are affected by timber transport. However, councils have to match fund those improvements on what are, as you say, non-priority roads. The money has to come from overall council budgets and it is taken away from other roads that are council priorities. Is that a fair way to allocate funding? Should the improvements not be entirely funded centrally by a combination of central Government and the industry?

Alistair Speedie: We know where timber transport accesses the local road network, which is at about 3,000 points across Scotland. We collect that information to try to help local authorities to plan for the future and see whether there are areas where they should bid for support from the timber transport fund. Given the way that things are set up at present, that is the only way. I think that the roads authorities in Scotland have been very fair in working and collaborating with the timber industry to co-fund the applications.

The average intervention is about 50 per cent. In the past 10 years, the strategic timber transport fund has spent some £80 million. The fund has provided £40 million and local authorities, mainly, have provided another £40 million. Some interventions can be increased to 70 per cent, which obviously creates a bigger advantage for the local authorities.

We have mentioned in earlier discussions what happened in previous decades. In the 1990s, there was the roads accord between the Forestry Commission and local authorities. Ring-fenced money went to areas with a lot of forestry such as Dumfries and Galloway, where 30 per cent of the land mass is covered in commercial forests, and that money was purely to be spent on the improvement of forestry roads. The roads accord lasted through the 1990s, but when it came to the millennium it disappeared into the general grant—to be honest, it disappeared like snow off a dyke.

Local members considered the possibility of weight restrictions on all forestry roads, which would have been a disaster. During the dark nights of foot-and-mouth disease in Dumfries and Galloway, when I was in the council bunker as part of the response, I came up with the idea of

everybody working in a partnership—a collaboration—to try to sustain the network where there was no money to be spent on it, and we did that through the agreed routes maps. There is now a network across the whole of Scotland and into the north of England so that the hauliers that drive the large timber wagons know exactly what the rules are.

The only issue that we still have in all of this is that the wagon and the public are still the weakest link, but it is also the supply chain that suffers because, as David Sulman said, the roads that timber transport uses are the rural and remote roads that have just a skin of surface dressing year after year. They do not have any structural integrity. In order to sustain them and keep them in a form such that everybody can use them, we can allow only one lorry an hour to carry its timber out, because we need to let the road recover. If it is a stronger road, we can allow two or three lorries. That does not help the supply chain.

We are a long way from solving the problems for the supply chain in this very important industry. The Scottish Government very much wants to plant more trees, which is commendable given the climate emergency. However, it is the remote areas that will take that additional planting, and the remote roads will have to cope with the harvesting and thinning. There is a long way to go, but please be assured there are those right across Scotland who are working hard to try to come up with solutions.

The Convener: I will bring in David Sulman now. He had to wait for us to get on to the subject of timber transport, but I am sure that we will get full value from him as well.

David Sulman: Thank you, convener. I will add to Alistair Speedie's comments and, I hope, answer some of Ms Harper's questions as well.

Continuing with Alistair Speedie's medical analogies, I note that we continue to apply a series of sticking plasters to the problem, which is a necessity. Ms Harper asked what industry is doing to mitigate the problems of large goods vehicles on roads. It is a challenge for the entire rural road network, but the forestry and timber sector, in addition to valuable partnerships and the development of things such as the agreed routes maps that Alistair Speedie mentioned, is also making good use of technology.

There are systems and technologies that I suspect most people will be unfamiliar with, but which are well established in the haulage sector. For example, central tyre inflation enables people to reduce the tyre pressure on a vehicle dynamically according to its load, which has a rolling, smoothing or calming effect on the road. When the lorry driver is conveying his load of

timber on weak sections of road, he can set the system to deflate the tyres, which flattens the profile of the tyre and reduces the point loading—the axle loading that Martin Reid mentioned. The use of CTI, as it is called, is increasingly widespread and a number of fleets now have many, if not all, of their vehicles equipped with the technology. Indeed, some areas and some buyers will require the use of such vehicles.

We have seen a move away from old-fashioned types of tyre, such as what were called super singles. They had benefits in some areas, but they did not necessarily help roads. There has been a move away from twin axles to different tyre shapes and sizes in order to help roads to withstand repeated traffic. We also see increasing use of different configurations of lorries. Rather than the larger traditional articulated trailers, we are seeing vehicles that are colloquially known as wagon and drags, which are smaller articulated arrangements. All those things are targeted at reducing axle loading and being kinder to roads.

Colin Smyth: I have a couple of brief follow-up questions. I presume that the successful initiatives that David Sulman mentioned—the agreed routes maps and the targeted funds through the timber transport fund—could be rolled out to other sectors that have hauliers. They are not just about timber transport. I presume that they should be rolled out elsewhere in areas—particularly rural areas—that face pressures as a result of having lots of HGVs.

David Sulman: I absolutely agree. The strategic timber transport fund and its scheme provide a tremendous model that other sectors could look at in conjunction with the Scottish Government.

Colin Smyth: Alistair, on your point about the pressures on councils given that they have to provide match funding, you said that money was previously ring fenced for authorities that had pressures as a result of timber transport. Given that, as you rightly say, the Government is driving increases in timber production, does any part of the current allocation of funding to councils still take account of the timber pressures within their overall budgets, or has that completely gone?

Alistair Speedie: My experience is that it has completely gone.

Peter Chapman: I was aware that some lorries that haul timber have the tyre pressure technology that Mr Sulman mentioned. My question is in three parts. Do you have any idea what percentage of lorries that haul timber have that system on board? What does it cost per lorry to fit it? Do you have a measure for the difference that it makes to wear and tear on rural roads?

10:45

David Sulman: I start with an apology. I do not know off the top of my head the percentage of the fleet that has the technology, but it is increasing. I can come back to you with that and with information on the cost. There are a number of different systems and the cost is not inconsiderable. The figure that many hauliers will use is typically £12,000 per vehicle, so it is not inexpensive, but it provides real benefits. Not only does it benefit weak rural roads, but it improves quality for the lorry driver as well. We are all aware of whole-body vibration from machinery and equipment in the workplace, and it is an important health matter for all of us who regularly drive on rural roads—and indeed some urban roads where potholing and rutting are issues. We are helping to protect the roads and to improve the lot of lorry drivers, who suffer a great deal of other pressures as well.

I will come back to you in writing with the percentage of the fleet, but it is significant and it is increasing, particularly in Scotland and parts of northern England. Once we cross the border into southern England, there is less pressure and the use of CTI is reduced, but it is a significant feature of the timber transport fleet in Scotland.

On the costs, if we work with the figure of about £12,000 per vehicle, that is realistic. The technology makes a real and quantifiable difference.

The Convener: Do you happen to know whether all of Scottish Forestry's vehicles use that system?

David Sulman: Scottish Forestry does not have a particularly—

The Convener: I am asking about the contractors that it uses. Is the system part of the contract?

David Sulman: It can be—it is a contract condition that is increasingly being used.

The Convener: Are you saying that it can be or that it is?

David Sulman: It is.

The Convener: Vehicles are all required to have the system.

David Sulman: I am not sure that that is the case for every project, because it will depend on the location and the quality of the roads, but I am sure that the consideration is uppermost in the minds of Scottish Forestry and Forestry and Land Scotland when they award contracts.

Emma Harper: I am looking at the agreed routes and consultation routes, particularly in the south-west of Scotland. As Alistair Speedie

mentioned, almost 30 per cent of Dumfries and Galloway has timber. The proposed routes are the yellow ones. How long does the consultation take? How do you pay for it and what are the associated costs? You are obviously managing to speak to local authorities and others in the timber transport business.

Alistair Speedie: Basically, the timber industry can use agreed routes without question. They are mainly A-class roads; the trunk roads certainly come under that classification.

At the level of consultation roads and below, there is not a public consultation per se, but the industry must consult the roads authority and agree a regime to pull out the timber while sustaining the road. That is done through a network of regional timber transport groups, which are themselves, at the local level, collaborations and partnerships of the industry and all the required agencies.

The Convener: I will bring in the deputy convener, Maureen Watt.

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I have a practical question. Is there any evidence that, where white lines are painted down the side of roads, there is less breakage of the road? Sometimes, the lines are not visible, or grass has covered over them.

Alistair Speedie: I will impart my experience. White lining at the edge of the road helps, but that assumes that the road is wide enough for two-way traffic. Rural roads are very narrow. If they do not have any constraint at their edge, the grass verge acts as that constraint, and once that grass verge is damaged, the edge of the road starts to fray and there is damage to it.

Maureen Watt: As someone who lives near Durris forest, I understand that, but do your drivers get training about how to behave on rural roads?

Alistair Speedie: They very much do. We are very aware that, no matter how much we try as leaders and managers to organise the transport, the weakest link is the wagon and the public.

We have loads of training sessions, and we work very hard with the hauliers to make them understand that the road is there for all users, including cyclists, horse riders and the disabled. We must train people. Is this a problem that needs money to be flung at it? We must also change attitudes. Everybody has to respect other road users. We try to get that message through to the drivers of the huge wagons.

Christine Grahame: My question is to do with the submission from the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK, so, Mr White, you are my target.

The Convener: That is worrying, Mr White—I can vouch for that.

Christine Grahame: You are my gentle target. To get back to the budget and costs, you highlight in your submission two particular costs to bus and coach operators. One cost is due to service delays as a result of not being informed about roadworks and so on. The second cost is increased costs for repairs to wear and tear directly attributable to the state of the roads.

I do not see any figures for those costs in your submission. When we are holding Governments and local authorities to account, I think that it is important that we have some figures. Do you have any figures for costs and fines to operators because of changes in their timetable, delays and even cancelled services? Do you have costs for repairs through wear and tear directly attributable to road surfaces? What about claims that you have had to put to insurers, again directly as a result of the condition of the roads, which is more cost to the operator?

If you have those figures, are they broken down by council area? As we know, some roads are wholly the responsibility of councils. The figures would give us a picture of what the cost is to our very precious bus companies and coach operators.

Paul White: The short answer is that I do not have those figures with me today. I can talk about the delays to services. As you know, the traffic commissioner for Scotland expects 95 per cent punctuality, and we have a window—

Christine Grahame: I want figures. We are talking about money, so we need those figures if we are to lay this matter at the door of councils and the Government. If you do not have the them, that is fine. Perhaps you could write to the convener with the figures, but it is the costs that I want.

Paul White: Yes, we can provide the costs. Earlier, I cited the West Coast Motors submission and its suggestion that its operating costs have increased by 10 per cent. I can provide a monetary figure for that.

As for my point about the traffic commissioner for Scotland, if an organisation is called to a public inquiry for failing to adhere to the punctuality targets, it can reference road maintenance issues as being the cause of that. I would hope that there would be no fine, if an organisation can prove that its failure to meet the punctuality targets was because of things outwith its control. On the number of organisations being fined, I am hopeful that I would not be able to ascribe a large number to that, but that does not mean that the process does not occur.

One facet of the process with the traffic commissioner is that she cannot call local authorities to account, for example, if a service is held up and severely delayed because of a roads maintenance issue about which they have not been informed. In those circumstances, a local authority does not have to answer to the traffic commissioner and give evidence about why it has not consulted with the bus operator and informed it of that ahead of time.

Christine Grahame: That is a fair point, but that is separate from costs. Can you give, or are you able to get a breakdown for council areas?

Paul White: I can speak to our operator members in different council areas and ascertain costs relating to those operators. I hope that that would give you a rough breakdown by local authority area, if not regionally.

Christine Grahame: That is very kind—thank you.

The Convener: It would be helpful if Paul White writes to the clerks with those figures, so that the committee can have them for its consideration.

Maureen Watt: Keith Robertson mentioned having an accident at Edinburgh airport. What is the best way of ensuring that work sites are set up in such a way as to minimise any impact on people with mobility problems? You have already hinted that there are not enough road inspectors.

Someone else—I think that it was Martin Reid—talked about a race to the bottom in terms of costs being the only consideration when awarding contracts. Is there a way of making sure that contracts are awarded to somebody who consistently does a good job?

Martin Reid also said that, because of the race to the bottom, margins are narrow, but we have seen directors getting huge sums of money, so that does not wash all the time. Are there any other ways of making sure that roadworks and roadworks' sites are better policed by the contractors themselves or whomever?

The Convener: Does Keith Robertson want to start on that? Martin Reid was nodding vigorously, so he will get a chance, too.

Keith Robertson: The answer to the first part is training. Every person working on a road should receive disability awareness training and access training, and not just the ticketholder or the person who is in charge of that site. That ticketholder may be in charge of 20 or 30 sites. They may not even visit some of them, but they are still supposed to comply with the rules.

We welcome that not following the procedures laid down in "Safety at Street Works and Road Works: A Code of Practice"—known as the red

book—is, we hope, to become a criminal offence, as it is in England and Wales.

Getting that done is a different matter; getting people to listen is a different matter. I am finding that it is easier to get the road authorities, especially the national ones, to listen. I am doing a presentation on access and roadworks to BEAR on Monday and I recently gave presentations to RAUC(S). I hope that we can do more for the regional bodies.

No one from a utility company has come forward and mentioned training. I suspect that that is simply because they do not want to do it. However, somewhere down the line, we need to get more professional and become more aware. A public education process needs to be undertaken not only on what roads and pavements are, but on how disability affects people across Scotland. I think that that would go a long way towards helping the situation.

It would help if more people—I am talking about people without a disability, not those whose lives are so severely affected that making a complaint is a huge issue for them—who have a bit of an idea of what it is like not to be able to get out of their home or be able to get down the street to do their shopping and buy a pint of milk, a paper or whatever were willing to approach local authorities.

Training is a big factor, but inspections are important. Those need to be increased, and something needs to be done about the costs.

Martin Reid: On the procurement side of things, there is precedent in solving a lot of the problems through the adoption of project bank accounts.

With project bank accounts, rather than the tier 1 contractor holding all the aces, at various pre-agreed stages, the money goes to tier 2, tier 3, tier 4 contractors at the same time as tier 1. That means that the subcontractors are getting paid at the same time and the main contractors cannot use their money as cash flow, which reduces the amount of risk.

The Convener: I think that that is a good place to leave it. I thank all of you for coming this morning and giving evidence to the committee. I hope that you consider that you have had a fair chance to put across your views. The session has been helpful to us.

I will suspend the meeting briefly, to allow you to depart and to allow the next panellists to take their seats.

11:00

Meeting suspended.

11:05

On resuming—

The Convener: We will now take evidence from our second panel. I welcome you all. From the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland, we have Stewart Turner, chair, and Ewan Wallace, vice-chair; from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, we have Councillor Steven Heddle, environment and economy spokesperson, and Robert Nicol, environment and economy chief officer; and, from Transport Scotland, we have Hugh Gillies, director of roads, and Donald Morrison, head of asset management and procurement.

We have a series of questions. I think that you have all been here before, but I remind you that you do not need to push any buttons to operate the microphones. As I said to the previous panel, if you catch my eye, I will endeavour to bring you in, but if you all look away at the same time, the last one to do so will be the first person I bring in. The first question will be asked by Mike Rumbles.

Mike Rumbles: Good morning. We are focusing on pre-budget scrutiny, so I want to get some information on the money. In 2011, Audit Scotland said that 66 per cent of local roads were in acceptable condition, which meant that a third were not. In the next Audit Scotland report on the subject, in 2016, the situation had not changed. In its response in January 2018, Transport Scotland said that £1.2 billion was needed to deal with the backlog with local roads.

Our job is to focus on what the Scottish Government is allocating to local authorities for spending on local roads and road maintenance. I am trying to get to the figures, because we do not seem to have them. Before we can say whether more needs to be spent or less needs to be spent, we need to get some figures. In the Scottish Government's budget, there is a notional allocation to local authorities for road maintenance. Is that figure being spent by COSLA members on road maintenance? Is the money that you notionally receive being spent in that way?

Councillor Steven Heddle (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I am happy to start. Thank you for the question. As was noted in the previous session, spending on local roads has fallen by 26 per cent over a five-year period. As you say, the funding that is allocated to local authorities for roads is a notional amount. In determining whether local government is spending the money that it is allocated on roads, it is difficult to put an exact figure on it, because we are talking about a notional allocation. It is one of many indicators that aggregates to the funding position for local government, and in some areas it will be more accurate than in others.

In referring to the 26 per cent drop in spending over the past five years, I note that local government funding has reduced by 7.5 per cent over the same period. If we consider that the effect of protected funding on unprotected funding is to act as a multiplier of the cuts to the unprotected areas, in which roads falls, we can see that we need to multiply that 7.5 per cent by two and a half. That is what we estimate the multiplier effect to be, taking into account inflation, which local government is absorbing, in many cases alongside the cuts and the increase in duties on local government. Taking that into account, the answer to the question, "Is local government spending all the money that it gets on roads?", is "Probably", although it is difficult to be more exact than that.

The 2016 Audit Scotland report also showed that approximately half the local authorities at the time were overinvesting in roads. That shows that local authorities are willing to spend on roads if the funding is there. I would say that the decline in the standard of roads is due not to local government underinvesting in the area but to the Scottish Government underinvesting in local government to allow us to apply funding to the totality of the services that we provide.

Mike Rumbles: I am not presuming anything, but if this committee decides to say in its report that not enough Scottish Government money is allocated through COSLA to the local authorities for road maintenance, we would have to be on firm ground, if I can put it that way—in other words, we need the figures. We all know that it is up to local authorities to decide what to do with their un-ring-fenced money, but it would be very easy for the Scottish Government to turn round and say, "We give them a nominal sum. If it is not being spent on the roads and we give them more, it will still not be spent on the roads." If you cannot answer the question today, I would like it if you could write to the committee, because I am trying to find the figures. Rather than saying, "It is probably spent"—we get lots of anecdotes saying that the money is not being spent or that the money has been spent—we need to know what the nominal amount of money that the Scottish Government allocates to local authorities through COSLA is and whether local authorities are spending that money. We need to know whether there is a gap or whether we are just talking about anecdotes. We need to get the information to help us on this issue.

The Convener: I know that Steven Heddle wants to answer, but I presume that Donald Morrison and Hugh Gillies have the figures. Is that the case? Do you have the figures?

Donald Morrison (Transport Scotland): We do not have the figures for what is allocated to local government specifically for roads. Transport

Scotland is in the same boat in that we are aware of the overall local government settlement and changes in that, but we are not aware of what is allocated specifically for roads. That comes from the centre, whereas Transport Scotland is responsible for the trunk roads. We have our own figures for what is invested in the trunk road network year on year and what the profile of that is, but we do not hold the council-by-council figures for local roads.

The Convener: Hugh, do you want to add anything?

Hugh Gillies (Transport Scotland): No—my position is the same as Donald Morrison's.

Councillor Heddle: To respond to Mr Rumbles's request, as he has asked for that information, we will try to provide it.

We are trying to convey the wider picture of local government funding. We would suggest that there are three things that would be game changers for our ability to provide services in general and to maintain roads in the way that the committee is interested in in this session. The first of those would be increased funding. It is undeniable that local government funding has decreased. The second of those would be to have the flexibility to allocate it, because that flexibility would allow us to do the early intervention, to be innovative and to prioritise. The third of those would be the ability to operate on a multiannual basis, which would allow us to prioritise roads when roads are an issue and to prioritise planning when planning is an issue. There are three aspects: the funding, the flexibility and a multiannual approach to things.

We are very guarded about the idea that roads would become another ring-fenced area in the local government settlement, because that would just transfer more pressure on to the unprotected areas in successive funding rounds. Roads are experiencing pressure because it is an unprotected area, but if we were to ring fence roads spending, that would transfer the pressure on to planning, community assets and local economic development. I noticed that the first question in the committee's call for evidence was:

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

Public services and the economy are affected, too. The effect is not felt only in the roads strand; it is felt in all the other areas that are competing for funding with roads. We need to have the flexibility to enable us to address those things.

Mike Rumbles: I am puzzled, because we are getting figures from all over the place that do not seem to resonate correctly. As long ago as 2004, Audit Scotland said that, on our local roads—our

local authority roads—there was a backlog of spending of £1.7 billion to get them back to a proper, acceptable level. More recently, Audit Scotland produced reports in 2011 and 2016 in which it said that only two thirds of our roads were at an acceptable level. It also said that, with declining road maintenance targets, the situation was stable—it had not changed in that period.

However, in its response to Audit Scotland's report in January 2018, Transport Scotland, along with other organisations, mentioned that a figure of £1.2 billion was needed to deal with the backlog. On one hand, we have a figure of £1.7 billion and, on another, we have a figure of £1.2 billion. I do not know from reading all the information that I have in front of me what the actual situation is. If we are to produce a report that has some depth to it and that will be able to exert some influence on the Scottish Government, we have got to get to grips with the figures. Can Transport Scotland explain the difference?

11:15

The Convener: I would like to bring in Stewart Turner or Ewan Wallace, who have not contributed yet. Stewart, would you like to respond to that?

Stewart Turner (Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland): The current figure for the backlog on Scottish roads is £1.8 billion, but there is a problem with that. Year on year, we evaluate what the backlog is and, year on year, we compare the figures, but we need to recognise that we are talking about a large number and that, over the past five or six years, funding for the roads has decreased.

The techniques that we have used over the past five to six years make it easier for us to manage the road network. We have a fantastic roads asset management system, and we know that Transport Scotland uses something similar. In addition, we have used different techniques to surface the roads. We are papering over cracks on our road network at the moment. Whatever the backlog figure is, it is huge in all 32 council areas. The same is true of the roads that Transport Scotland is responsible for. The figure is very large. We are just trying to get to a place where we have more money to spend overall on our roads maintenance.

Mike Rumbles: I am just trying to get the actual figures.

Donald Morrison: There might be confusion because the backlog for local roads and the backlog for trunk roads are calculated separately. There are two different numbers. Those might be the two numbers that Mike Rumbles was referring to.

The Convener: The figure is £1.8 billion for local roads.

Donald Morrison: At the time of the report, it was £1.2 billion for trunk roads.

Richard Lyle: I have a question for Councillor Heddle.

I was the Scottish National Party group leader in COSLA from 2007 to 2009. In the concordat days, ring fencing was substantially removed from quite a number of areas. Are you suggesting that we should go back to ring fencing for roads issues? It would be easy for COSLA to contact the 32 councils and say, "How much do you get in your budget for roads? Can you give us those figures, please, and we will send them up to the Scottish Parliament?" In fact, you guys should have those figures. It would be quite easy for COSLA to get that information. It might be hard for us and for Transport Scotland to do that, but it would not be hard for COSLA to do.

Councillor Heddle: I have already given an undertaking that we will try to provide the figures, but it must be borne in mind that what we are talking about is a kind of proxy figure that is not based on need.

To go back to your question about ring fencing, I am absolutely not advocating ring fencing. I would advocate a return to the state of affairs under the concordat, which I thought represented a very good state of affairs between local and national Government. We are trying to return to that in the joint work on the national performance framework. We have shared goals in respect of achieving those outcomes for the country. If local government is allowed to do things in its own way while meeting the national targets, I think that that would afford us the kind of flexibility that would benefit us.

The Convener: It seems that we are saying that we have £3 billion of road works that need to be undertaken across the network, if we add the £1.8 billion to the £1.2 billion. The Government allocates money to councils in a grant, a proportion of which, it is thought, will go towards road repairs. What people will not understand—I am struggling to understand this—is whether that money is actually going to road repairs or whether it is going to other projects.

The committee will have to go back to the Government to ask how much money is outstanding, how much money is needed and what the shortfall is, if there is a shortfall; the councils could be oversubscribing money to roads, in which case all the roads should be perfect. I am not sure that I am hearing that from the panel. Perhaps you could help me—perhaps I am not understanding the situation. Is money set aside for road repairs and is it all being spent by all the

councils on road repairs? Steven Heddle might be able to help me with that.

Councillor Heddle: Councils all across the country will be starting their budget-setting process now. They will have a set amount of money—which they do not know yet; they will be told that at some time in December—that they can spend on all their unprotected services. Roads will be competing alongside economic development, planning, community services, elements of housing and a whole range of things that local people unquestionably put demands on their council to provide—I am thinking of services such as grass cutting, grounds maintenance and so on. The councils will look at the totality of the money and they will carve it up according to the local priorities. I would say that that is entirely appropriate—that is local democracy in action. The amount of money that is spent on roads is based on affordability and local priorities.

In responding to Mr Rumbles, I have tried to give an indicative figure that suggests that we probably are spending the money that we get on roads already, because the decline in funding for roads basically mirrors the decline in the funding for local government.

John Finnie: Councillor Heddle, I want to draw an analogy with the Scottish Government's school building programme—forgive me for forgetting its name, which has just changed—which provides assistance to local authorities on top of the capital allocation for school building. Some local authorities—although not in the area that I represent—are quite aggrieved about that, because they have already brought their schools up to standard, so they will not benefit from the new scheme.

I am absolutely with you on local decision making, but is there not a danger that, if this committee came up with a formula or a suggestion for road funding, we will reward failure and will reward the people who have not maintained the roads rather than those who have? I zealously guard local autonomy and decision making, but you can imagine all the organisations and local authority departments from which other committees could be hearing exactly the same thing. How do we square that circle?

Councillor Heddle: That is a very good point: other committees will indeed be hearing exactly the same thing in respect of other issues. The situation varies by local area, but the way to deal with that is to have a general increase in local authority funding so that people can fill in the gaps that have accumulated in their respective areas, whether those gaps are in spending on roads maintenance or economic development and so on. You identify a very real risk that such programmes could reward failure, but that is what happens

when you have targeted initiatives and ring fencing.

John Finnie: For the avoidance of doubt, I was not commending ring fencing, but I do not see how a general increase would address the issue. Mr Rumbles is quite rightly trying to identify and home in on the scale of the issue and how we should address it. Councils could receive a significant increase for road maintenance but still make a local democratic decision to direct those additional moneys to housing.

Councillor Heddle: Yes, but they have to answer to their electorate, who would be undeniably upset if they had terrible roads that were not being repaired. You would hope that the aspiration to have a decent road standard would be reasonably uniform across the country so that the system would be self-correcting.

Angus MacDonald: We have entered into an interesting debate on ring fencing. I take on board Councillor Heddle's view on the matter. However, we heard a call for ring fencing from someone on the previous panel—from Paul White, I think. A great deal of ring fencing was done away with in 2007 amidst a fanfare; if I recall correctly, it was referred to as the "historic concordat" at the time. Surely there has to be ring fencing if we are to catch up on the local road maintenance backlog of £1.8 billion.

Stewart Turner: In addition to the backlog is the standstill budget that we require to maintain the roads in the condition they are in at the moment. Generally, that is set at around the right amount of money—the two authorities that I work with get £5 million per year.

The budget that Mr Rumbles talked about is for all for road maintenance, whereas the numbers that we are talking about relate to the condition of the carriageway; they are not to do with the pavements, the safety fencing, the streetlights, the verges or the signs. From an asset management point of view, we can see that the condition of those parts of the network is getting worse and worse. Although we are addressing today the very important issue of good, smooth running surfaces without potholes, the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland and local government want to make sure that the pavements and all the rest of our infrastructure are also in good condition. We should not lose focus on that.

The Convener: Does Ewan Wallace want to come in on that?

Ewan Wallace (Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland): Yes. Thank you for bringing me in, convener. Via COSLA, we will be able to give information on how much has been spent, based on experience across the 32 local authorities. How much was spent in the previous

year is a matter of public record—the information is usually available in June each year.

Stewart Turner is correct when he says that we allocate funds against the full range of activities. At the moment, there is one area that is still ring fenced in transport-related budgets—the safer streets funding for cycling and walking. The roads authority side would echo COSLA's position that local decision making is absolutely critical. However, things are becoming increasingly difficult with the allocation of funds swinging towards such a large proportion already being prescribed. That makes it very difficult to set budgets.

All 32 authorities will be doing work now to put in front of the elected members information about the amounts that should be allocated for road maintenance in the coming financial year. We have agreed across 32 local authorities to undertake what we call status and options reports for the road network through the road asset management planning process. A status and options report looks at what has been spent in the past, the condition of the network and the amount of money that we consider, as professionals, should be spent going forward to address the backlog, to keep a steady-state situation or to improve the condition of our roads. You will start to see that information being presented to the local politicians in councils over the coming months as part of their own consideration, before the budgets are set in February.

Robert Nicol (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): On ring fencing, which we have talked about, I refer the committee to our submission and what we say about our pre-budget scrutiny of the whole local government budget. We draw a slight distinction between pots of ring-fenced money—and COSLA does not support ring fencing—and protection of budgets more generally within education and health and social care, which are the areas that account for the big budget spend in local government. When those big budgets are protected and difficult to modify, there is an impact on other, unprotected services, of which road maintenance is one. There is a distinction between ring fencing, which might take the form of a grant, and the protection of big services, which has an impact. I draw the committee's attention to our submission, which goes into that in a little more detail.

Richard Lyle: I have just pulled up something very interesting on my phone. Councils last year got an extra £186.54 million—Orkney Islands Council got an extra £1.02 million—and there are moves towards a three-year budget. My own council, North Lanarkshire, got more than £11 million extra, which was quite pleasing. The point I am making is that we can easily get figures—I got

figures off my phone—so I am sure that COSLA can get figures for roads.

11:30

Now I will ask the question that I am supposed to ask. SCOTS highlights in its written evidence that the roads collaboration programme

“has successfully delivered a range of collaborative activities”.

Can you outline those successes, indicate how they could be replicated and explain what impact they could have on road conditions?

The Convener: I will go to Stewart Turner and Ewan Wallace, but I will give Steven Heddle a chance to answer the point that there was all that extra money and it was all fine, because that was posed as part of the question.

Councillor Heddle: Thank you very much, convener. The answer to that would be “we wish”.

Richard Lyle: It is true.

Councillor Heddle: We would point out that local government budgets have decreased over a number of years and that, in 2019-20, the core revenue budget fell by £147 million, while the core capital budget fell by £17 million. The figures that Richard Lyle quoted are modified by the additional responsibilities placed on local government and the ring-fenced funds that are used to fund them. We find that a lot of those additional responsibilities are cast as being fully funded, but it seems that “fully funded” means taking money from the core local government budget, which is compounding the very issues that we are discussing today.

Stewart Turner: Mr Lyle, thank you for your question and for the opportunity to speak about the roads collaboration programme, which has been running for a number of years and provides a great number of benefits, which I hope are seen by the people out there on the streets who use the roads.

Probably one of the biggest pieces of collaboration that we do in SCOTS is the Scottish road maintenance condition survey, which measures the condition of our roads. All 32 authorities contribute to that. That is really why we are here today. We have a red, amber and green system, and around 37 per cent of our road network is red or amber and requires repair. We also work out the value of the backlog and the standstill budget. Ewan Wallace touched on the status and option reports that are taken to every council at different times throughout the year to advise councils of where we are.

We also collectively have a roads asset management plan working group, to which all 32

councils contribute, in order to get the best possible review of our assets in Scotland. That covers not just the roads but, as I mentioned, the pavements, the street lighting and all the other parts of our infrastructure.

We are moving forward on road worker training. In the previous evidence session, there was some discussion about the quality of reinstatements, which we will address in SCOTS with a training programme that will commence on 1 April next year. All 32 authorities will be collectively managed to make sure that the training that is undertaken with road workers is consistent. All road workers will be trained to the same standard, no matter whether they are in Orkney, with me in Ayrshire or with Ewan Wallace in Aberdeenshire. If we train everybody to the same standard, we expect the quality of road works to improve.

The roads collaboration programme also has a number of collaborations throughout the country that relate to management. I am head of roads for the Ayrshire roads alliance—that is my day job, and we may touch on how that is governed. Things have moved forward over the past five or six years there. There is a northern collaboration board, which Ewan Wallace is in charge of, or the lead officer for. It is a joint committee and runs from Argyll and Bute, around the north of Scotland and through to Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen. It is moving forward well.

Work is on-going with other collaboration programmes throughout Scotland. We should not forget about Tayside Contracts, which is really the direct labour organisation in the Tayside area and involves Angus, Perth and Kinross and Dundee. The most recent formal collaboration is between Inverclyde Council and West Dunbartonshire Council, which have now moved to a joint committee as well. A lot is going on. A lot of improvements are being undertaken and I hope that we will see the benefits as we move forward.

Richard Lyle: When I was a councillor, I was never a supporter of regional councils, but I am supportive of the likes of Tayside Contracts and Amey in North Lanarkshire. It may be that some councils can work collaboratively across an area.

When I come off a bypass and go up the slip road to the roundabout at the top, I am coming off a road that is maintained by Transport Scotland and going into the council's domain. Do councils and Transport Scotland work closely enough with each other in maintaining our roads?

Stewart Turner: Yes, we work well together. We have lots of meetings through the year, with some directly involving me, Ewan Wallace and Transport Scotland colleagues. At a local authority level, we also meet with the trunk road operators. It should not really matter to the public: whether

they are on a trunk road or a local road, they should expect a satisfactory level of service. I think that our working relationship with Transport Scotland cannot be improved. It is very good.

Maureen Watt: I have a specific question for Ewan Wallace. Can you tell us more about how the collaboration in the north works and what it delivers? Does it mean that you do not compete for jobs at the same time, so there is more of a pipeline of work? How is does the collaboration benefit, first, the taxpayer and, secondly, the provision of good roads and bridges?

Ewan Wallace: Stewart Turner said I was in charge of that group but I am absolutely not in charge of it. It has a political chair; I am the lead officer on behalf of the officer representation on the northern collaboration. The group is a formal joint committee and comprises seven local authorities from across the north—Angus, Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Moray, Highland, Western Isles, and Argyll and Bute. The current chair of the committee is from Argyll and Bute; she is a very good chair, so it has been a very positive group.

We have sought to deal with the governance issues around working across boundaries. Some authorities have aided other authorities by doing work for them that they did not have the skills base to do for themselves and for which they would have had to go to the private sector. The product was better and cheaper—it was a saving for one authority and an income for another. We have established the principle of that arrangement.

At the group's most recent meeting, the political representatives agreed the business case for a range of professional services, such as design schemes for additional, upgraded or replacement bridges, including expert elements such as geotechnical engineering. Moray Council has a dredger that is utilised by other members of the joint committee through a framework agreement. We have produced briefings for members on key issues, such as the use of alternative materials in road construction. We will not get to the point of pooling budgets—that is not the purpose of the joint committee; the purpose is to build in resilience.

The value to the taxpayer comes from our being able to carry out work across boundaries as efficiently as we can. If Highland Council has a resource available to do design work that Aberdeen City Council requires to be undertaken, we now have a formal governance framework to allow that to happen.

Those are probably the main points about the northern collaboration. It is quite different from Ayrshire roads alliance and Tayside Contracts. Its scale could mean that there is the potential for us

to share plant across boundaries, but only when the geography allows. However, we can certainly share skills, knowledge and experience across all boundaries.

Christine Grahame: Mr Turner, you mentioned that 37 per cent of roads are rated red or amber. Is that an overall figure? What is the split between trunk roads and council roads?

Stewart Turner: I do not know the split between trunk roads and council roads, but we have a split for each local authority area and the different types of road that they have—A, B, C and unclassified roads.

Christine Grahame: Have we been given that information?

Stewart Turner: If you do not have it, we can provide it.

The Convener: I will bring in Hugh Gillies, because his title is director for roads; to me, that sounds like all roads but I would like clarification. Is that just trunk roads, or do you get involved in local roads, too? First, we will hear from Donald Morrison.

Donald Morrison: On the question about the percentages of roads that are rated red and amber, the 37 per cent is for all council roads. The contribution to that total varies from council to council. There is a separate figure for trunk roads, which is 13 per cent; that figure was published in the Audit Scotland report.

The Convener: Do you want to explain that, Hugh? Perhaps you can explain at the same time how you will manage the £1.2 billion deficit on trunk roads that we talked about.

Hugh Gillies: As director for roads, I have a policy interest in local roads as well as my direct responsibility for about 3,500km of trunk roads. Donald Morrison is my finance and numbers man, so I am glad that he is with me today. He helps me with finance.

On how we will tackle the backlog in our budgets, we present to the Scottish ministers, through spending reviews, a scenario of a standstill budget and then a budget that would allow us to eat into the £1.2 billion. That is very similar to the description that Stewart Turner offered you.

I have responsibilities in the policy sense elsewhere within local roads, primarily in two areas. I lead on low-emission zones in the Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow council areas, which is proving to be an interesting challenge. That means working with the four cities. It is about their city streets, within their council areas, but I work with them from a policy delivery point of view.

Road safety is the other area of significance in which I have responsibility. Those of us within the profession tend to split road safety into what we call the four Es: education, engineering, encouragement and enforcement. I have direct responsibility for road safety on the trunk road network and also for the policy area in education and encouragement.

The Convener: We will move on. Peter Chapman has some questions.

Peter Chapman: What is the Scottish road network management forum? How is that organisation made up, and what practical difference does it make to the management of Scotland's roads?

Donald Morrison: The Scottish road network management forum is a sub-group of the road collaboration board. Representatives of Transport Scotland and SCOTS both sit on the forum. Mr Lyle asked earlier how SCOTS and Transport Scotland collaborate and co-ordinate—in essence, that happens through that forum.

The forum's work concerns the interface between the maintenance of trunk roads and the maintenance of local roads, to see how we can share knowledge and services across those boundaries. For example, we are looking at our new trunk road maintenance contracts to see where improvements can be made in collaboration with local authorities. We are considering the potential for efficiencies through trunk road and local road services sharing depots. We can channel the feedback from the forum into our trunk road maintenance contracts as we draft them, and set out requirements for collaboration and shared services.

Ewan Wallace: For completeness, I add that Hugh Gillies, Donald Morrison and their teams are fully embedded in the collaborative work that we have undertaken across the north, and across all the discussions. Donald Morrison has addressed the joint committee on a couple of occasions and has produced papers. That gives the complete picture for the whole network.

Peter Chapman: That is good—the feeling is that the organisation is working well and is beginning to deliver savings. The collaboration is working out.

Donald Morrison: Yes. There is plenty of activity on the collaboration front.

Peter Chapman: SCOTS mentioned in its written submission the on-going development of a “new infrastructure evaluation model/framework”.

How will that improve the current arrangements and what practical difference is it likely to make?

There seem to be lots of bodies out there. I am trying to find out how they interact and what they can deliver.

Stewart Turner: That is a piece of work that we are undertaking through the Scottish road research board, of which Donald Morrison and I are members. We are trying to evaluate the road network; I do not necessarily mean in monetary terms, although that will be a number at the end. We know that every journey that is made by road may be made by rail, road or active travel and we are trying to understand what impact that journey has on the economy.

We have not yet finished that piece of work. Once it is complete, we could present it to the committee, if you wish. Through that work, we are trying to establish whether we can assign some sort of value to the local road network and the trunk road network.

11:45

Hugh Gillies: Mr Chapman mentioned there being an array of organisations. A few years back, the roads collaboration programme was set up and its constituent parts—Transport Scotland, COSLA, SCOTS, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and the Improvement Service—realise that it is time for a reboot. The programme is a place where officers from those various organisations can come together, share a common cause and give a common message. It is also a place where, as officers—because we have our political masters—we can debate the issues of the day and reach a common view, or disagree. It is the one place where officers from a range of organisations will come together and look at the future of Scotland's roads within the overall transport portfolio.

Finlay Carson: My question is about the road asset management plans, particularly in relation to trunk roads. We have some issues—I am going to be a bit parochial here. Mr Gillies will be aware that we have an on-going issue—

The Convener: If it is a constituency issue, I will challenge you.

Finlay Carson: You can challenge me and I will stop, convener.

The Convener: Be careful, Mr Carson. We do not like to go into constituency issues in this committee. We want to look at the national picture.

Finlay Carson: It absolutely is a national picture, but I will put it into perspective by—

Mike Rumbles: By giving an example?

Finlay Carson: Exactly—by giving you an example. It will be helpful.

As Mr Gillies knows, a petition has been running regarding the maintenance of the A77 and the A75. We have something like 4,500 signatures to say that people are not happy with the way in which the roads have been maintained, not just the road surface but also the wider asset—the verges and the roadside vegetation.

How do the RAMPs play into the relationship between Transport Scotland and the delivery companies, whether that is Amey or Scotland TranServ? Do you look at the asset management approach that applies to the contract you have with those companies? Which way round does that work?

Donald Morrison: In effect, the road asset management plan sets out the strategic approach and gives an overall view of how we plan our maintenance, the lifecycle plans that we have and our approach going forward.

The detail is included in the trunk road maintenance contracts, which contain the specific requirements for the maintenance that the operators have to undertake. Inspection is a key part of that, and inspections to identify defects are obviously important. Programmes of work are implemented, based on the defects that are identified. The detail of the requirements is in the contract, while the RAMP is the overall strategic approach.

Finlay Carson: There is an argument that roads are sometimes repaired on a reactive basis, rather than according to any long-term plans. We have seen an example in the south-west in which there appears to have been an acceleration of projects before the end of a contract by the likes of Scotland TranServ. Do the RAMPs not suggest that that should not be the case?

Donald Morrison: The lifecycle plans set out a long-term approach; that is a continuous approach on an annual basis. It is a mix of reactive work that deals with defects that occur on a day-to-day basis, such as potholes—those are the reactive treatments—and we have an annual programme of planned work that is prioritised based on need. The planned work is what you might call preventive maintenance, an example of which would be the longer stretches of resurfacing or reconstruction.

Christine Grahame: A bit like Mr Chapman, I am aware that there are various organisations that deal with collaboration and the sharing of assets such as repair lorries and so on.

Following my colleague Mr Carson's example, I will give you an example from my part of Scotland. There is a bad bit of road called the Leadburn junction. It is within the provenance of Midlothian Council, although most people who use it are Borders people. Responsibility for repairs lands on

one council, and the councils fight about it. I want to ask Councillor Heddle of COSLA whether there is a way in which councils could come together and agree to fund roads when it is obvious that there is a shared concern. When someone drives on a road, they do not know that they are suddenly going into another council's area and it can be a matter of going just a few inches—I am talking old money; I am not into metres yet—into another council's area. It is the same road, but it might be maintained in a different way.

I appreciate that that situation is difficult and I appreciate the autonomy of the councils, but could COSLA work on the sharing of resources on certain routes where it would be relevant to both of their constituency areas?

Councillor Heddle: Well, the—

Christine Grahame: I appreciate that it would not affect Orkney so much.

Councillor Heddle: We are in a unique situation, in that we have no trunk roads.

Christine Grahame: My sister is an Orcadian, so I know that.

Councillor Heddle: Yes, we would find it difficult to find a road junction that was shared with Highland. *[Laughter.]*

The final decision for such things rests with councils, but we certainly try to foster collaboration. Our colleagues from SCOTS may be able to identify some excellent examples from the northern collaboration, the Ayrshire example, and the wider regional collaboration around economic partnerships. We feel that the examples that have developed so far have been largely in accord with what Audit Scotland recommended in its 2016 report and that good progress has been made. We would be happy to encourage councils to collaborate on issues such as those that you described.

Christine Grahame: How is that going? The money is a big issue, is it not? Is progress being made? The public would expect that to happen.

Councillor Heddle: I defer to colleagues for specifics.

Stewart Turner: I could give you some examples from my area, one of which is historic and one from our current practice.

We have just finished a scheme in the east part of East Ayrshire Council that butts into South Lanarkshire Council where there was a sharing of costs. There was some benefit to South Lanarkshire Council. That was agreed seven or eight years ago, and that job is now finished; the agreement was met. I now head the roads for East Ayrshire Council and South Ayrshire Council and because of that we can look across boundaries.

We have done several schemes that have gone from East Ayrshire into South Ayrshire, with a sharing of costs. If the surfacing was undertaken in South Ayrshire, it was paid for by South Ayrshire, and the works in East Ayrshire were undertaken or paid for by East Ayrshire. We did not want to arrive at a boundary and just finish one piece of road and leave a bit. That was true collaboration, which is the benefit of having the alliance in Ayrshire.

Emma Harper: This is a national issue. I have a question that I would like to ask as we are talking about collaboration in a pre-budget context. Recently, the Infrastructure Commission for Scotland was formed as an independent body to consider the 30-year strategy for the future. Is work being done on how we develop the infrastructure that will be needed?

The Convener: Who would like to start on that?

Donald Morrison: I can partly answer that question, certainly with regard to trunk roads and trunk road maintenance. It goes back to what Hugh Gillies was saying about long-term financial plans. What we have done in Transport Scotland to feed into the infrastructure work is develop a long-term financial plan for trunk road maintenance using financial models. The model looks at where we are now with regard to road condition and provides options over five, 10 or 15 years, or whatever horizon we want to look at. We can set road condition targets within the model that will produce a financial plan and give ministers options for funding decisions.

The Convener: Who wants to come in briefly, Ewan Wallace or Stewart Turner? One of you, not both.

Ewan Wallace: My red microphone light has gone on first so I think it must be me to answer.

On the work of the Infrastructure Commission for Scotland, I can give an example from the north-east. Information about all the work we have been doing around collaboration on transport and road maintenance is in our submission. I understand that many colleagues from around Scotland will have been doing the same pieces of work and will have worked closely with their regional transport partnership colleagues and their economic development partners to create an overall, holistic picture of the role of infrastructure and how we maintain it and develop it to deliver inclusive growth and a low-carbon future, which the commission is very much focused on.

The commission has run a number of round-table discussion sessions. I cannot speak for the rest of SCOTS, but I know a number of colleagues have been heavily involved in those discussions and I believe that the commission has appreciated that we have brought evidence about road

maintenance and the role of the road network into those discussions.

Colin Smyth: The committee has heard calls for the Scottish Government to focus on the maintenance of the existing road network before investing in the expansion of the trunk road network. That is hinted at quite strongly in the consultation on the national transport strategy. What are your views on that suggestion? How should the Government balance network development with on-going maintenance?

Hugh Gillies: As you have said, Mr Smyth, Transport Scotland's position on the national transport strategy will be that we would invest in what we have, maintain what we have, add to what we have and then build new infrastructure. That has been our historical position. The NTS is out for consultation now and views will be heard and taken on board with regard to expansion.

Colin Smyth: There seems to be a suggestion that the balance will change and that there will be more focus on maintenance than on expansion of the network. Is that a fair reflection of the current direction of travel?

Hugh Gillies: The NTS is out for consultation now, but that is a clear indication of an option to go forward.

The Convener: Do you have a view on that, Councillor Heddle?

Councillor Heddle: I do not have an answer to that question but it is a very good question. The expansion of infrastructure is completely tied to economic development. We find that time and time again and, certainly, infrastructure for transport and digital connectivity has been identified as a key objective for the enterprise agency for the south of Scotland. Upgrading the existing infrastructure is also a key objective. It is difficult to make a distinction between the need to prioritise new infrastructure, when we do not know what it is, and the need to prioritise existing infrastructure, when we do not know where it has been focused. The question that you ask is a good one, and is one that we need to wrestle with.

Stewart Turner: I want to confirm the view of SCOTS with regard to the draft national transport strategy. We agree in principle that the way forward is as Hugh Gillies described it to be a moment ago. We have to recognise the sustainable travel hierarchy and place walking, cycling and public transport ahead of the car—I think that we all agree that that is the way forward to a healthier and better Scotland—but we still have to maintain what we have. If we can maintain what we have in a better condition, I am sure that we can move forward. An analogy that is sometimes used is that, in a house, you would fix the roof before you put in new carpets.

Colin Smyth: To take a local example in your area, Mr Turner, there is bound to be an element of resentment if, having seen the Government spend billions, and proposing to spend billions more, on upgrading the A9, we suddenly move to a position of no longer expanding the road network. People who live near or travel on the A75 and the A77 to the ferry ports through Ayrshire might feel particularly angry that they have not benefited from that investment if we suddenly move away from supporting expansion of the network to a policy of just maintaining what we have.

12:00

The Convener: We need to be very careful about setting one part of Scotland against another. We need to look at the national strategy. Stewart Turner, do you want to respond briefly to that?

Stewart Turner: All that I would say to Mr Smyth in response is that the national transport strategy will develop into the strategic transport projects review and that will give local authorities opportunities to contribute.

The Convener: The question of which projects should be done rather than others is the sort of matter that is best put to the minister, so we will move to Emma Harper's question.

Emma Harper: With regard to active travel and promoting walking and cycling, it has been suggested that while roads are undergoing maintenance, facilities for specific road users, including cyclists, pedestrians and people with limited mobility, should be upgraded as a matter of course. What are your views about that?

Donald Morrison: One thing that we are looking to take forward, and we have started to spend money on it on the trunk roads, is addressing barriers to accessibility and movement. It is a programme that came out of our roads for all forum, which is chaired by Transport Scotland and attended by SCOTS, local authorities, MACS, Cycling Scotland, and so on. There are a number of stakeholders in the forum.

In the early stages of the forum, an audit of the 3,500km trunk road network found several thousand barriers to accessibility. Last year, we invested £2 million to address those barriers—creating dropped kerbs, pedestrian and cycling facilities and so on. This year, we have invested a further £2 million to address those barriers. That is a programme that we have recently implemented. There is still a lot of work to be done on it, but we hope, with budgets, to be able to continue the programme and address all the defects that we identified.

The Convener: Do Stewart Turner or Ewan Wallace want to come in on that?

Stewart Turner: We echo the concerns that were raised by Donald Morrison. Roads are not just for people who drive cars or lorries; they are for everybody. It is all about active travel. We have to make sure that our pavements, roads and footpaths are as safe as they can be. I know through one of our working groups that the 32 authorities collectively take an active role in making travel as safe as possible for all road users.

The Convener: I assume, Councillor Heddle, that you would echo those comments and that I can move on.

Councillor Heddle: I defer to my colleague, Robert Nicol.

Robert Nicol: I have nothing much more to add. I completely agree with colleagues. COSLA strongly supports the draft national transport strategy and the accessible transport strategy. From COSLA's point of view, much of this has to be left at the local level because it comes down to very localised decisions about junctions and so on, but I completely agree with the comments that have been made by my colleagues.

The Convener: Angus MacDonald, your question is next. It would be helpful if you would address it to a particular person.

Angus MacDonald: The panel might have heard me ask the previous panel this question but it is just as relevant to you. Several witnesses have identified the root cause of many road maintenance problems as involving the fact that road authority or utility company procurement is focused on minimising the cost of work undertaken rather than on maximising its quality. Would you agree that that is an issue? How might it be addressed? Perhaps Councillor Heddle might respond first.

Councillor Heddle: I defer to SCOTS colleagues on this matter. There is certainly an issue there and you can see that as you drive on the roads. What was your question again?

Angus MacDonald: There is an issue, and I think that we all see it, with regard to the quality of the work that is undertaken by utility companies and road authorities. It seems that minimising the cost is very important. Do you agree that maximising the quality of the work should be more important? How do you make sure that that happens?

Councillor Heddle: I will defer to colleagues on this, but I agree with the point that you make.

Stewart Turner: I do not think that there is any doubt that the public considers that the quality of

reinstatements, whether they be done by utility companies or roads authorities, could be better. There are good examples out there but we have to get to a situation that is much better than it is now, or there is a perception that it is much better.

We know that, through the Transport (Scotland) Bill, there will be increased powers for the Scottish road works commissioner, Angus Carmichael, and we fully support that.

I mentioned earlier the training programme for road workers that we will have throughout Scotland, so that the 32 authorities will have a consistent way of dealing with reinstatements. If you get your reinstatement correct, it makes it easier in the long run because it lasts much longer.

I suppose that this also touches on our budgets, which are generally reactive. We would like to be able to resurface a road once utilities work or road works have been undertaken. If we were enabled to do that through bigger budgets, a degree of poor condition would be taken away.

There was some talk about the procurement method. I can assure you that local authorities include an element relating to quality in all contracts, large or small. The bid with the lowest price does not necessarily win a contract. It might well be that the lowest price wins, but there has to be a degree of quality as well. We have to make sure that the contractor that is undertaking the work for our road works or road authority is good at doing the work.

I cannot speak for the utility companies. They have their own procurement process, but they have the same rules for reinstatement and I hope that the road works commissioner will get increased powers to take appropriate action.

The Convener: Trunk roads? Cost or quality?

Hugh Gillies: We are in the process of procuring our next operating company contracts for the south-east and the south-west. They are known now as network maintenance contracts. Previously they were known as 4G. The current incumbents are Scotland TranServ and Amey. As we are going through the procurement exercise, we have placed a higher emphasis on quality. For 4G contracts, the cost:quality ratio was 80:20—80 per cent in costs and 20 per cent in quality. We have changed that to 60 per cent on price and 40 per cent on quality for the procurement that is going through now.

One of the big things that we have promoted within this procurement round is consideration of the customer. On customer care, I accept that we could do it better and that we need to do it better. The customer is one of the things that we have put right at the heart of these new contracts. The

customer might be an old lady in a village—we talk about active travel and trunk roads in villages, or local roads—but consideration goes right through to big business as well. We have put in a requirement that incoming contractors must make the customer the focus for what they do.

John Finnie: I have a brief question, but I will ask it in two parts.

The Convener: Maybe one person from each group could answer.

John Finnie: Yes, indeed. The first part is for COSLA. Mr Nicol, a number of local authorities have declared climate emergencies. Will you outline the steps that will be taken to minimise the climate impact of road repairs?

Robert Nicol: I suspect that my learned colleagues to my left and right could talk at a technical level about how they deal with the impact of road maintenance in a warmer and wetter world. However, recognising utterly what you have said, COSLA has taken steps to think deeply about how we respond to an emergency situation in climate change. We have debated the subject a few times at the level of our board, which Councillor Heddle chairs. We are trying to think about the implications of climate change for all local government policies and services, including transport and road maintenance.

I cannot give you a concrete response on what we will do, but I assure you that we are thinking about that, and it will be something that we will want to consider carefully in the months and years ahead. Most of our papers in this regard are public—they are on our website to be looked at. If there is a specific follow-up, I am more than happy to try to answer it.

John Finnie: I will direct the same question to Transport Scotland, but I will add a supplementary question. Your very helpful written evidence states:

“We have undertaken a collaborative review of our National Transport Strategy to set out a compelling vision for the kind of transport system we want for Scotland over the next 20 years, one that protects our climate and improves lives.”

Will you outline how maintaining the same road building programme, with £6 billion being spent on two roads, will protect our climate? Will you also answer the question about the impact of road maintenance?

Donald Morrison: I can certainly answer from the road maintenance perspective, that being my area. It comes back to what Hugh Gillies said about the network maintenance contracts, how we intend to go forward and the requirements that we have built into that.

We are acutely aware of the climate emergency. On how we might address it or mitigate the impacts, we have set various requirements in the contracts. For example, our operating companies have large fleets of vehicles, as you might imagine, and we have set targets on ultra-low-emission vehicles. We have mandated that at least 10 per cent of the vehicles must be ULEVs on day 1 of the contract, which will be next August, and that at least 50 per cent of the fleet must be ULEVs by 2025. We have set those specific requirements in the contracts, and they are minimums. We have set key performance indicators in the contracts, which will be monitored continuously. We will track the progress that the companies make in meeting those requirements.

We have also set key requirements for carbon reduction. Our operating companies are required to set on day 1 of the contract a baseline for the carbon footprint for all the operations that they undertake, so we will have a year 1 carbon footprint. They will then be required to reduce that carbon footprint over the life of the contract. Performance indicators will be set within the contract to measure the reduction in the carbon footprint, and performance against that will be linked to payment. If they do well in that respect, their payments will not be affected, but if they fall behind, there will be reductions in the money that is paid to them, so carbon reduction is incentivised.

Those are specific examples of how we might mitigate impacts for the whole 3,500km of the trunk road network. They are the key examples in relation to the fleet. We have also set performance indicators for the recycling of materials, which are also linked to payment, along with requirements to reuse waste materials within the companies' operations. Those specific requirements have been set out and they will be monitored through the KPIs.

John Finnie: Thank you. I appreciate that we are here to discuss road maintenance, but how will you offset that against the conflicting evidence that we get about the road-building programme? Is the road-building programme under review or not?

Hugh Gillies: The road-building programme, as you describe it, is under review. We have talked about the national transport strategy and colleagues from SCOTS have mentioned the strategic transport projects review, which will be the follow-on. That will determine how the Scottish Government will take forward its transport infrastructure planning and delivery. The road-building programme, as you describe it, will be taken into consideration as part of that.

I realise that we are here to talk about maintenance, but the First Minister gave a clear indication in the programme for government on the

promotion of active travel and a move to seriously change mode take-up through the promotion of bus travel. At Transport Scotland, we will need to play our part in the delivery of that.

12:15

John Finnie: For the avoidance of doubt, I acknowledge that. That is a very bold statement from the people who are responsible for the Government's transport programme. All these things will have to be offset. Mr Gillies, you are the head of roads. Is there a review of whether we are going to continue with the dualling of the A9 and the A96?

Hugh Gillies: What I will say is that all of this is up for debate as part of the strategic transport projects review.

The Convener: That was a very good probing question.

John Finnie: With respect, I thought that it was a simple question that could be answered with a yes or a no. Is it up for review or not, Mr Gillies?

The Convener: In fairness, I think that that is a question for ministers to answer when they come in.

We have had examples from other people regarding the climate emergency and what is being done. Ewan, will you give an example of what you are doing and how you are responding?

Ewan Wallace: SCOTS is sharing knowledge across the 32 authorities about what individuals are doing. It reflects a lot of what Donald Morrison described, with the move to different types of vehicle. We tend to own and operate our vehicle fleets for undertaking road maintenance activities within the local authority areas, so we have a direct ability to move to different types of vehicle.

A number of authorities are looking at different materials when they specify the types of material that they are going to buy in. I think that colleagues have already given the committee evidence on the use of a warmer mix, as opposed to a hotter mix, in what goes on to the back of the vehicles that go out to undertake road resurfacing. There is also increasing use of technology in workforce planning and the ways that the workforce is deployed to different locations.

All of those elements are built in. They are shared in our working groups in the SCOTS network, which look at these things regularly, and they reflect the similar approaches that Transport Scotland is building into its revised contracts.

The Convener: We have come to the end of our evidence session. I thank you all for the evidence that you have given, which has been very interesting. I thank committee members for

getting their constituency questions off their chests during this session, because—

Mike Rumbles: Except me. [*Laughter.*]

The Convener: I thank Mike Rumbles for not doing that.

I close the public part of the meeting.

12:17

Meeting continued in private until 12:30.

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