

Scottish Parliament Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee
Call for Views
Pre-Budget/Financial scrutiny on roads maintenance in Scotland

Evidence paper from Transform Scotland, 06/09/19

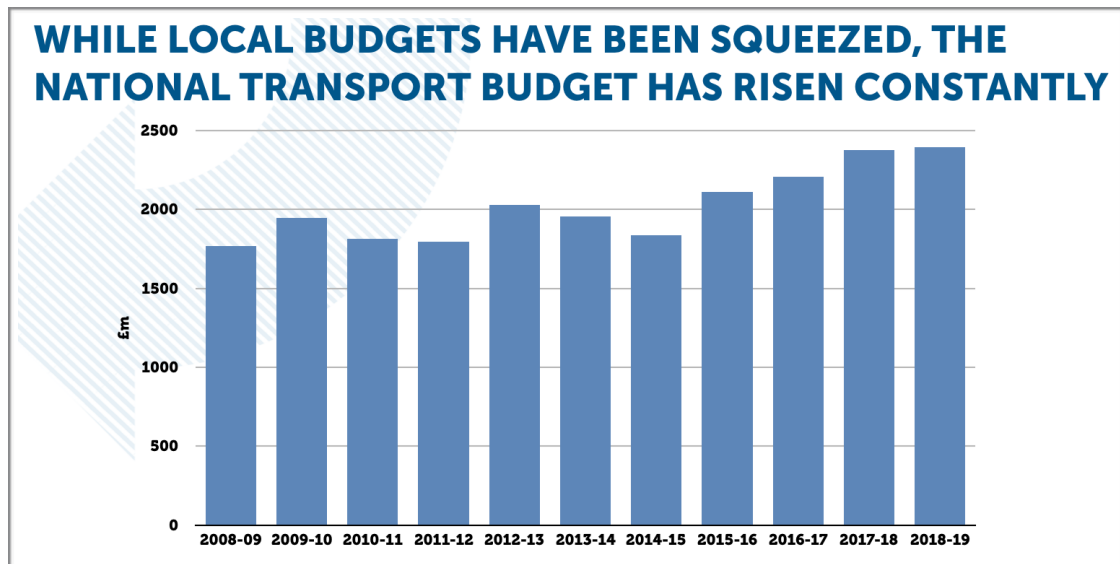
1. Key Points

- Scotland is estimated to have a road maintenance backlog of over £2 billion.¹ Fixing this should be the first focus for national and local roads policy — not adding additional road capacity. Fixing local roads would help not only car users, but also pedestrians, cyclists and bus users.
- Sound asset management practices would dictate the maintenance of the existing asset base prior to further expansion of the asset base. The Scottish Government has over the past decade flagrantly abandoned this principle by committing many billions of pounds to new road construction while failing to improve (in some cases worsening) the condition of the existing road asset base. The effect has been most acute for local roads: these are most important for the sustainable transport modes of walking, cycling and bus users. As such, these groups will have been adversely affected disproportionately.
- Investment in local road maintenance would provide greater local economic activity as contracts are more likely to be of a scale that can be carried out by local Scottish firms and Scottish Local Authorities. In contrast, contracts for new trunk road construction are typically awarded to international construction companies.²
- Investment in local roads would benefit more people than investment focussed on the trunk road network. Everyone uses the local road network; the trunk road network has a smaller set of users and is used disproportionately by the more mobile and affluent.
- Independent polling we commissioned indicated that 84% of the public agreed that priority should be given to repairing existing roads ahead of building new roads.
- The key question we would like the Committee to consider is as follows: The Scottish Government was able to find £6 billion for two road schemes (the A9 & A96 dualling schemes) — so why can't £2 billion be found to clear all of Scotland's road maintenance backlog?

2. Investment in local roads has declined whilst Scottish Government spending on new trunk roads has increased

Local Authority investment in roads declined by 20% in real terms between 2010/11 and 2016/17 in the face of increasingly constrained budgets at a local level.³ Reduced spending, combined with severe damage to roads through poor winter weather, has left many local roads in unacceptable conditions. Meanwhile, the Scottish Government's transport budget has increased by around a third over the past decade (see chart below).⁴ The Scottish Government's budget for new trunk roads increased by 66% over the same period.

The Scottish Government's decision to let local roads deteriorate and instead build new roads is economically, socially and environmentally unsustainable and is putting an unnecessary strain on both Local Authorities and road users.



3. Poorly maintained local roads pose a threat to all road users: pedestrians, cyclists and bus users, not just car users

The effects of poorly maintained roads – such as potholes – pose a threat to the safety of all road users. Car drivers, bus passengers and bus operators all suffer the ill-effects of poorly maintained local roads through damage to vehicles and uncomfortable journeys. For people travelling by foot or bike the impacts can be even more severe, as potholes and poorly maintained pavements can cause serious injuries. Poor quality roads also make travelling by foot or bike unappealing options and restrict these modes being an option for all ages and abilities.

4. The Scottish Government should prioritise investment in fixing the local road network ahead of construction of new trunk roads

Scottish roads policy should focus on clearing the £2.25 billion roads repair backlog – a small share of the £6+ billion currently planned for new trunk roads. This would benefit all road users – car drivers, bus passengers, cyclists, and pedestrians. This ‘Fix It First’ approach is favoured by the vast majority of Scots, with independent polling finding that 84% of the public agreed that priority should be given to repairing current roads instead of building new roads.⁵

Given the Government’s commitment to tackling the Climate Emergency, roads funding should be prioritised for investment in local, sustainable transport (walking, cycling and buses) rather than the longer-distance journeys serviced by the trunk road network.

Investment in repairing existing local road infrastructure over new trunk road construction would also present a huge economic opportunity to Scotland, as Scottish firms would be able to carry out the work, as would Scottish Local Authorities.

Notes:

¹ A figure of £2.25bn for the road maintenance backlog figure was reported by Audit Scotland in its 2011 report ‘Maintaining Scotland’s Roads: a follow-up report’: https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/uploads/docs/report/2011/nr_110216_road_maintenance.pdf

- 2 For example, none of the companies that bid for the construction of the Aberdeen western peripheral route were headquartered in Scotland, and the contract was awarded to a consortium made up of three companies headquartered in England. Meanwhile the Queensferry Crossing was built by a consortium of companies headquartered in Spain, Germany, the USA and England. We accept that such contracts will lead to a 'trickle down' of investment to Scottish sub-contractors, but consider this an inefficient and indirect method to concentrate investment in the Scottish economy.
- 3 Improvement Service (2018) National Benchmarking Overview Report 2016/17. Page 10.
- 4 Based upon 'Motorways and Trunk Roads' spending line in Scottish Government Draft Budgets published over the past decade.
- 5 ScotPulse poll for Transform Scotland, May 2014. ScotPulse online survey sent to a representative sample across Scotland. 1086 respondents were asked "Do you think the Scottish Government should give priority to fixing the existing road network before building new roads?" The key finding from ScotPulse was that "84% of respondents agreed that the Scottish Government should give priority to fixing the existing road network before building new roads." Full opinion poll findings available on request.