

Call for Evidence – Local Roads in England

The Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT) represents the majority of senior local government officers who are responsible for the delivery of local highway management and maintenance across England. We are grateful for this opportunity to present evidence to the committee on this challenging subject, one where we have raised concerns with the Department for Transport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, especially about capital and revenue funding levels and predictability, for a number of years.

Local roads are the veins and arteries of our country and vital to the delivery of an economically prosperous and healthy community. Delays caused by local authority roadworks, congestion and third-party activity (such as utilities work and development) have a significant impact on the national and local economies - well-funded and maintained roads minimising these delays have a positive impact on those economies and on the wellbeing of our communities.

The financial challenges have been there for many years and are not the result of the approach on one particular political party. Since the banking crisis in 2008/9, the revenue available to local authorities to deliver essential services has reduced. With a growing population and increasing demands on education and adult social care, the pressure has been felt most in the place services that local authorities deliver. This has resulted in a real terms reduction in revenue funding that ADEPT has previously advised to be between 30% and 40% for many highway services across the country and, in some instances, even higher – worsened in recent years by inflation, increased energy prices and war.

Some of this reduction has been mitigated through varying interpretations on the optimum use of capital funding, but this is not possible for all activities. Representatives of ADEPT aided the National Audit Office in the recent study (as referenced by the committee) regarding how the interplay between revenue and capital funding has changed over time, first illustrated to the DfT and MHCLG in 2019. The use of modern systems which are used to assess and monitor condition, support development of maintenance programmes and control how the network is used and repaired is one example where additional pressure has been placed on revenue budgets. Many local authorities have been forced to reduce the amount of monitoring they are doing in order to achieve an acceptable level of repairs on the ground. This, in turn, means that some local authorities do not have the information that DfT requests in the format that it is being requested. The recent publication by the BSI *PAS 2161 – Road Condition Monitoring* has the potential to help local authorities collect and share relevant data using different technologies and in a form that will enable DfT to better understand the ongoing deterioration in local road condition that the previous system did not adequately reveal. However, the stark reality is that local road maintenance is significantly underfunded, and more consistent monitoring will only re-affirm that fact.

Of course, the road itself is one of a number of assets that local authorities are looking after in order to ensure that the public can complete their journeys in a safe and timely manner. The conditions of bridges, drainage, safety fencing, lighting and traffic control systems are also being monitored. Drainage, in particular, can be a challenge as, for the majority of local roads any highway drainage discharges into a system that is managed by a third party (often with insufficient capacity to cope with normal let alone extreme rainfall events) and so finding an appropriate measure that reflects this complexity is difficult.

The DfT has sought to give longer term visibility of funding but is unable to provide it in a form that enables local authorities to properly plan maintenance regimes over a number of years. This uncertainty is not reflected in the funding for National Highways where the proposition that greater visibility of longer-term funding will help deliver efficiencies has been accepted for the last 10 years. ADEPT accepts that such visibility would need to be accompanied by evidence that efficiencies were being delivered as a result of the commitment from Government, but we believe that the sheer scale of the backlog coupled with the well-advertised financial constraints on Government mean that this has to be the right way forward. ADEPT continues to inform the DfT of its opinion that current capital allocations are less than half of what is needed to keep highway infrastructure from deteriorating and around one-third of what is needed to clear the current maintenance backlog over the course of a decade or so. Local authorities do not have the capacity or mechanisms to close this financial gap themselves.

Added to the lack of visibility of longer-term funding, short-term injections of cash which have to be spent in the same financial year present a significant challenge to local authorities. Whilst additional money is always welcome, the tight timescales and late notification of the allocations (relative to the timing of optimal impact on the ground) inevitably lead to less efficient maintenance solutions being chosen and reduce the ability to look holistically at the potential schemes enabling a “one and done” approach to individual sections of road which would make efficient use of resource and enhance the reputation of the highway maintenance service. It should also be noted that the condition of the local highway network is impacted by a wide range of factors that make comparison between local authorities unhelpful. The size of the network, the rural/urban split, the geographical location (in terms of encountered weather patterns), the traffic volumes and the ground conditions are all specific to each local highway authority and they impact on any performance measures that are used. Any push to enhance the monitoring regime needs to take this into account and should be focusing on continuous improvement within a local authority rather than making comparisons between authorities who are managing different challenges.

There is also a skills and retention challenge for local authorities with the pool of resources with highway maintenance expertise reducing year on year. ADEPT, the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation (CIHT) and the Highways Sector Council all have projects aimed at addressing this issue but, to date, this challenge remains a significant factor in slowing down the delivery of good asset management in many local authorities.

Local authorities have worked hard to become more efficient, taking a more risk-based approach to maintenance which has resulted in changes in gully emptying regimes, grass cutting frequencies etc. to ensure they are making best use of the resources available. In addition, responding to the climate emergency, changes in lighting technology and in the use of streetlights has helped reduce the overall cost of this area of service. However, as local authorities continue to encourage active travel and micro mobility, the maintenance requirements need to be considered for those modes of travel and there is increasing pressure from the public for enhanced lighting of footways and for higher levels of maintenance on footways and cycleways. Many local authorities do not have good levels of condition data for their footways because they have had to reduce costs and, whilst the light traffic levels on footways mean that they generally deteriorate more slowly, they are impacted from vehicle overrun and continued footway parking, impeding pedestrians and thus holding back the healthiest form of active travel.

Local authorities are also needing to consider the impacts of new technology. Autonomous and connected vehicles potentially need a higher level of highway maintenance (particularly for road marking provision and maintenance) so that they can safely interpret what is ahead of them. This

additional burden on local highway authorities needs to be properly funded – a point flagged with the DfT when it consulted ADEPT on how best to progress connected autonomous vehicles nationally.

Finally, there is a clear need to review the standards and guidance for local roads to ensure that they are fit for the 21st century. The recent issue of PAS2161 shows that new technology can offer efficiencies and the ability to collect focused data to enable better maintenance decision making.

Submitted by:

Hannah Bartram, Chief Executive Officer, ADEPT

Hannah.bartram@eastsussex.gov.uk

www.adeptnet.org.uk