

The State of Roads in Wales

To: The Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee

Here are my comments in response to your ongoing consultation. I hope you find them helpful. They are set out in the order and under the headings you have suggested and I have added a final paragraph relating to the opportunities associated with information technology.

The current condition of roads in Wales and whether the approach to funding and delivery of maintenance programmes for the local road, trunk road and motorway network in Wales is effective, managed so as to minimise disruption to road users, and provides value for money.

The condition of local roads in Wales gives cause for concern with resurfacing being postponed leading to the ingress of water and subsequent damage to the road pavement (i.e. the base and sub-grade). Potholes are causing damage to vehicles and posing a threat to the health and safety of road users.

Cyclists, who are vulnerable road users, are perhaps most at risk. The motorway and all-purpose trunk road networks appear to be in a much better condition than local roads but some heavily trafficked parts of the network are in urgent need of repair and/or resurfacing after this winter's snow and frost. The situation appears to be most acute on heavily trafficked routes in South Wales where access (for routine and major maintenance) is challenging.

Local highway authority budgets are under a great deal of pressure and highway maintenance appears to be low on their list of priorities. Disruption to road users may be limited by carrying out some routine and major maintenance tasks overnight (as is generally the case on the motorway and all-purpose trunk road networks).

Value for money can be improved by keeping road surfaces in good condition in order to avoid the need for pavement reconstruction which is disruptive and expensive to carry out. Given the 20 year life span of surfacing, we should be renewing 5% of the road network each year.

Whether major enhancement projects on the local road, trunk road and motorway network are prioritised, funded, planned and delivered effectively, and provide value for money. Relevant issues include the implementation of the Early Contractor Involvement approach and the opportunities offered by the Welsh Government's Mutual Investment Model.

Major enhancement/improvement works often require the satisfactory completion of statutory procedures as well as the availability of finance. Objections to draft orders can and often do lead to delay and additional costs. Central and local government clients should work with other stakeholders to avoid unnecessary cost and delay.

Contractors can provide hard-won advice on health and safety and on the construction process and this can lead to more efficient/better design. But client authorities remain responsible for policy/standards and may better understand what is and what is not politically deliverable. Consultants are best placed to provide technical advice as well as design and supervisory services.

The Welsh Government's Mutual Investment Model is essentially a modern form of private finance. PFI, PF2 and its derivatives are often used to finance mega projects, to transfer risk and to spread the cost of major infrastructure works. But these are complex and long-term contracts and they have long-term funding implications. They require ongoing technical, legal and financial expertise, which can be costly. Local authorities are perhaps not well-placed to adopt and use this highly specialised form of procurement.

Whether Wales is adopting a sustainable approach to the maintenance and enhancement of its road network in the context of key legislation such as the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013.

The WFGA and the ATA are likely to have a significant effect on transport policy and on road design, construction, operation and maintenance. The road network is frequently over-loaded and is increasingly perceived to be unsafe and inefficient. We will need to encourage more people to walk and cycle (particularly for short journeys) and to use public transport (buses, trams and trains). The shift from petrol and diesel engines to electrically powered vehicles will require major improvements in our electricity generation and distribution networks. Road space will need to be re-allocated and speed limits may need to be reduced and/or better enforced.

Motor vehicles, particularly the private car, are generally perceived to be comfortable and convenient and they are often used for short journeys when people could walk or cycle. This leads to congestion, delay and a raised likelihood of low-speed collisions (accidents) at junctions, shopping centres and outside schools. Perhaps the greatest challenge will be attitudinal change. The WFGA and the ATA can help in this respect.

The digital (road) network

We need to make best use of our valuable road networks. Flexible working hours, car-sharing and dynamic pricing may have a part to play. We should make best use of information technology to encourage people to make trips by the most appropriate means, route and time of day.

John Mather