

State of Roads in Wales

This is the response of Denbighshire County Council to the National Assembly for Wales' Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee consultation on the above subject. This response is submitted jointly by the Head of Highways & Environment and the Lead Member Highways, Planning and Sustainable Travel.

1. Firstly we are pleased that the discussion on road funding is taking place as it is clear that this is an important issue that affects both residents and visitors to Wales and indeed, here in Denbighshire, the feeling of our residents is such that the desire to improve the condition of our roads has been a Corporate Priority since 2012 and in the new plan for 2017–22 it again features as a defined objective. To this end we have perhaps had more elevated funding than neighbouring Authorities via our own Prudential Borrowing.
2. Despite this capital investment (and the boost the LGFI funding gave for the three years it was in place) our network has worsened and this winter's weather with its resultant potholes and rise in claims has tangibly reflected this. Clearly the approach of reactive maintenance and the need to agree liability is wasteful but unavoidable as things stand. On the face of it, in terms of benchmarked data, Denbighshire appears to be doing well as in A, B and C roads our Scanner results show that the percentage of roads in Poor Condition within these categories has fallen year on year but this masks an issue that cannot be ignored much longer. Using our own funding we have made a concerted effort to keep our good quality roads in good condition as this is both cheaper in the long run and less disruptive to road users as the processes required to do this i.e. surface dressing are easy to implement. However this approach has been to the detriment of other A, B and C roads which are in the Amber banding and of course the fifty percent of the remainder of the network.
3. On the subject of condition data we feel it is good to have Scanner as the nationally accepted tool for determining road condition in the way it does now, especially as it also allows trends to be noted, however it might also be beneficial to see how much investment has been put in by each council in order to achieve the outcomes they are reporting. This would give a truer reflection of effectiveness. When it comes to the Unclassified network, which generally comprises at least half of each Council's network, then the current All Wales Asset Management Project (being run under the auspices of CSS Wales) has developed a visual assessment tool which will allow for a uniform methodology of reporting and greater use of this assessment and reporting tool is to be encouraged.
4. Denbighshire has used a version of this assessment since just before road condition became a Corporate Priority and for us this clearly shows that the 620 kilometres of our unclassified network is certainly getting worse. Against this backdrop therefore we would find it inadvisable to accept any liability for unadopted roads – at least until we have addressed the acknowledged backlog in adopted road condition – and found a way to sustainably fund them.
5. Going forward, if road funding from the Assembly can be increased, then the Welsh Government will be keen to see that it is being focussed correctly so that the desired benefits can be confidently achieved. We believe that here again the All Wales Asset Management Project has a role to play. The new Code of Practice comes into place in October 2018 and under the project all twenty two Authorities will have agreed a uniform

approach to intervention criteria, inspections, hierarchy etc. and this in turn will ensure that reactive maintenance will take place more equally. Therefore this will ensure that any additional funding can be targeted more appropriately. Indeed it can be argued that the additional funding will free up some money from existing budgets to allow councils to do drainage / ditch improvement works which are certainly not being done at the moment due to budgetary pressures. This factor alone would ensure the longevity of any carriageway works as much as any other single consideration.

6. With regards to the current approach to prioritisation we would comment as follows:-
 - a) Using our own funding to address road condition the Asset Manager assesses the network and uses an element of the funding to ensure that surface treatments retain good road condition. The remaining funding is utilised in small scale surfacing and patching works on a risk based basis thus making any money provides as wide a benefit as possible. This works well and has allowed us to spread the benefits as far as possible across the network but this has had to be to the detriment of larger scale works that simply cannot be funded with current resources. It is recognised that any individual project that will cost over £250,000 just cannot be catered for with current budgetary levels and this leaves us having to do expensive but unavoidable reactive maintenance.
 - b) Using external funding, which invariably comes from Welsh Government grants, there is an internal prioritisation process which develops the schemes up to the stage where they can be proposed. These are almost exclusively 'Traffic' schemes which will provide junction enhancements and in recent times have been linked to the Active Travel agenda. Once these proposals have been submitted we feel that the scoring system that is in place to give an all Wales prioritisation works well.
 - c) The only real downside to b) above is that we struggle to be able to take a long term view and this creates problems. For example there have been a number of occasions where we have tried to get better value by linking a much needed highway resurfacing scheme to a grant funded scheme so as to get both a cost effective solution and minimal road user disruption but this has failed to come to fruition due to the either the failure of the grant bid or a last minute decision to provide the funding which makes a joined up scheme delivery option impossible.
- 7 It is accepted by all those involved in Highway Maintenance that reactive works are an expensive approach to take and the need to alter the ratio between planned and reactive is an important driver so that as much work as possible is programmed. This gives benefits in terms of contractor engagement, value for money, legislative adherence with respect to Streetworks notifications, communication with customers, liaison with utility companies etc., so to be able to extend this benefit beyond the usual 30th March financial year deadline would be a massive boon. Even within our own internal accounting it is very difficult for the Highways team to plan ahead due to the uncertainty of any medium term definitive funding and as a result a 'works programme' has to remain as a 'wish list' even into February until the funding for the new financial year has been agreed. Obviously this is not just a Denbighshire issue to but the way public funding has traditionally functioned but there is real merit in trying to extend this certainty of funding as far as possible and options to do this must be explored.
- 8 The LGBI initiative of a few years ago was a recognition by the Welsh Government that there was a backlog in terms of highway condition and indeed the funding that came as

a result was a real boost but it was too short term and it is now becoming a little dubious as to how sustainable those benefits have been. Highways need a longer term, sustained, forward thinking approach and with local authority budgets becoming highly constrained then it is only with additional support from external sources that any improvements to carriageway condition will be brought about. Of course there are massive wider benefits in providing this boost in terms of; economic benefit to business; employment opportunities; career development for officers before many of the construction skills are lost; reduced liability costs; aesthetics; road user satisfaction; reduced disruption due to better planning of schemes and a better tie in to contractors who will have a greater long term certainty. But to get all of this will come at a cost and we feel it is important that options to increase funding, on a ring-fenced basis, are looked at.

- 9 It is our understanding that two of the potential options that have been mooted are an increase in fuel levy and the introduction of a Permit Scheme for road works, so we will consider both now:
 - a) A fuel levy should be relatively easy to collect and will more than likely give a year on year sustained level of income that will therefore give certainty for longer term planning. Obviously any such levy will have a negative economic effect too so it will need to be a political judgement as to whether this option is viable. It is our view that this proposal would be difficult to support politically, and it would clearly be generally unpopular.
 - b) We are aware that Permit Schemes are in place in some Authorities such as Cheshire West and they have the potential to bring in a significant income. However, we would have concerns that if this was to be the only additional source of revenue to pay for highway maintenance then this could be very variable across the country and also year by year, thus introducing uncertainty and inequality. Not only that but it would also require greater resources being needed to monitor it and for fairness any works done on the network by the Council's themselves may also need to be Permitted thus complicating matters further.
- 10 Although we ourselves have used it in the past, and the LGBI was also paid for in the same way, we do not feel that Prudential Borrowing is the best way to pay for any improvements if the intention is to find a medium to long term strategy for improving our roads. Ultimately there is a cost here that has to be borne somewhere so upfront funding must be the preferred option in our opinion.
- 11 However any new money can be raised, it is important that it is used to give positive outcomes from the very start so that residents and visitors see tangible benefits right from the beginning. This is particularly important if they feel they are incurring direct greater costs themselves through a possible fuel levy. Notwithstanding this desire for some early impact there is also the need to look closely at larger scale works as referred to in 6a above and to this end we feel there is justification for the Welsh Government to create a fund which can be the subject of bids from councils so that significant schemes which are currently unattainable can be assessed on a case by case basis. Here in Denbighshire we have a number of similar works and it is likely that all councils are the same so the chance to submit applications to get such desirable schemes constructed is important. In other words we would suggest a two strand approach whereby there is an increased allocation of base funding to each Authority and the opportunity to access additional monies on a scheme prioritisation basis.

- 12 Finally, we come to the section of the consultation which relates to the Well Being Impact Assessment and Active Travel (Wales) aspects and within this context we feel our own current Corporate Plan captures these aspirations appropriately; after all they underpin our current delivery. There are two relevant parts to the plan so we will quote them directly as we feel they are also fully supportive of the aims of the Welsh government.

Connected Communities

Denbighshire understands that access to goods and services is key to maintaining people's independence. However, depending on where you live, this is not always easy. During the course of this new Corporate Plan Denbighshire will make it a priority to ensure that communities throughout the county are connected and have access to the goods and services they need.

To achieve this we will:

- Better enable people to travel to work, education and services.
- Invest in roads and bridges to maintain a viable, sustainable infrastructure.

If we are successful we expect to see:

- Improved travel connectivity across the county

Resilient Communities

In Denbighshire we aim to promote people's health & well-being and encourage them to remain as independent as possible.

To achieve this we will:

- Support people to plan and shape their communities.

If we are successful we expect to see:

- People will be more resilient and independent.
- Everyone feeling safe in their communities.

- 13 In conclusion we would state that the condition of the road network both in Denbighshire and across the country is a concern to us and is obviously an important issue to our residents given the regular feedback and interaction we have with them. We are trying our utmost to deliver on our promise to improve road conditions but the scale of the problem is growing due to ongoing deterioration and any delay will simply add to the costs of putting it right. The new Code of Practice gives us an opportunity to review our collective approach and to make changes that might mean existing budgets can be re-allocated but there will remain an obvious shortfall that just cannot be filled. We welcome this chance to contribute to the debate about future road funding and the various other aspects of life in Wales that it feeds into and we are keen to engage further should the opportunity arise. The historical underfunding of this vital infrastructure is beginning to tell with poor quality surfaces and road user exasperation so the faster a solution to these matters can be found the better.