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# Getting the balance right

Simon Burrows reflects on how cash-strapped local authorities can keep to road budgets ... and remain publicly accountable

Despite the Government's recent commitment to spend more than £5bn on roads maintenance during this Parliament, the reality is that the money available to local authorities for highway maintenance remains tight – and the pressure councils face will be further escalated by the planned future increases in government capital funding of new roads infrastructure.

All of this puts public sector decision-makers under greater pressure to balance their need to spend cautiously against the requirement to be fully accountable and proactively address public complaints. This pressure is likely to escalate as winter draws in and the 'pothole season' approaches, bringing the state of roads under yet further scrutiny.

## Urgent concern

Local road networks are an especially urgent concern. Back in March 2015, The Asphalt Industry Alliance (AIA) claimed that £12.16 billion was required to get the local road network back into

'reasonable' condition. And a recently released report by PTEG (Passenger Transport Executive Group) found that in the six English metropolitan areas alone (with a combined population of 11 million), there were 5,500 kilometres of local roads in urgent need of repair in 2014. And it is this local road network, of course, that is most likely to attract public complaints.

When it comes down to it, most people are only interested in that section of the network that impacts on them personally; that affects their journey to work, or trip to the shops. Often, they don't ever see the state of the rest of the network, nor truly understand the pressure on the authorities to juggle priorities or balance the books. In other words, the very process of complaining is necessarily subjective. This makes it especially hard for the authorities to prioritise.

At the same time, it is also a complex and unwieldy process. Complaints are typically managed in call centres, and confusion can creep into the process, leading to misunderstandings. Sometimes, for example, it can be difficult to ascertain whether one pothole has been reported

five times, or whether there are five separate potholes in a given road. For some councils, processing complaints is made more difficult by the need to manage and coordinate multiple communications channels used by the public, from traditional handwritten letters to emails, mobile phone calls and social media forums.

All of this adds to the pressure on local authorities who are trying to balance long term planned works with calls for reactive repairs. Growing demands to take account of stakeholder concerns can divert resources to complaint investigation. The challenge they face, therefore, is increasing, while their funding continues to come under scrutiny. So how can they manage the process more effectively?

**Getting a handle on the problem**

The key to success is the ability to switch from a reactive to a proactive approach and to successfully prioritise the most urgent maintenance requirements. Maintenance planning, delivered as part of a broader asset management approach, can help achieve both objectives. By integrating the relevant data to which authorities have access, visualising it, and then using it to drive a holistic analytical approach, councils can get a 360° view of their road network, enabling them to see its present condition and project how it is going to behave in the future. This, in turn, allows them to reach informed decisions about what action to take.

The key is early intervention. If maintenance planning can pinpoint resurfacing work that can be done today, that will help eliminate the need for more costly reconstruction tomorrow. The real condition of the asset, as determined by the overarching asset management solution, is vital here of course. If the road is in a very bad state then resurfacing is unlikely to be the appropriate course of action.

Another benefit of this approach is the scope of data that can potentially be brought to bear on the decision-making process. Soft data about schools in the area, how busy a road is, the quality of the lighting, etc. all need to be evaluated and taken into account as part of the final judgment call. After all, in making any maintenance decision, the fact that there are potholes in the carriageway needs



In last November's Spending Review, Chancellor George Osborne announced a £5bn spend on roads maintenance during the current Parliament. But will it be enough? Photo: HM Treasury

to be balanced against the location of the road – is it a busy street passing a large school, for example, or a quiet country lane serving a single farm? With a best practice asset management approach, all this data can be clearly visualised and presented to help educate the public about the rationale behind road maintenance decisions and the challenges councils face in making them.

**From reactive to proactive**

In general, councils would expect to see a fall both in complaints and the need for reactive maintenance from using asset management solutions to deliver a more proactive highways maintenance approach. So ideally, the approach will shift the existing balance between reactive maintenance and emergency repairs on the one hand over to planned maintenance on the other, with extensive benefits accruing as a result, both to the councils and the wider public.

Adopting an asset management approach will not, of itself, solve the problems. However, it can provide the crucial evidence with which to make a sound case for investment in the highways infrastructure. Elected Members can then make informed decisions on local budgets and the industry, as whole, can make a clear case to government.

Ultimately we need adequately-funded asset management so that the life cycle cost of maintaining our highways can be optimised. Without the right level of funding we are simply storing up work, and costs for future generations of highway users.

One thing is clear - with growing public complaints about the roads and the level of long-term highways funding uncertain, the need for high-quality highways asset management has never been more urgent.



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