

National Audit Office

The condition and maintenance of local roads in England:

To: English Councils
For info: Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Background

On 23 July 2024, The National Audit Office released its report examining whether the Department for Transport (DfT) is ensuring value for money through its funding provision for local road maintenance, and whether it is effectively fulfilling its role in supporting local authorities to deliver local road maintenance. They assessed whether:

- DfT understands the condition of local roads in England
- DfT is using its data and information to inform its funding decisions
- DfT is supporting local authorities effectively through providing guidance on asset maintenance

The report findings make difficult reading for the DfT and are damning in parts.

Despite their importance, the condition of local roads is declining and the backlog to return them to a good state of repair is increasing. Although DfT has provided between £1.1 and £1.6 billion of capital funding each year to local authorities, it does not have a good enough understanding of the condition of local roads and does not use the limited data it does have to allocate its funding as effectively as possible.

It does not know whether the funds it allocates are delivering improvements in road condition, and has not updated its guidance to local authorities to share good practice and help them make the most of their limited funds, for some years.

The briefing provides a synopsis of the key points. The full report can be accessed here [link](#)

Key findings

DfT's understanding of the condition of local roads:

1. There are currently significant gaps in DfT's information on the condition of local roads, limiting its understanding of condition of the network.
2. The limited data that DfT collects show the surface condition of local roads as stable over time, but information from industry bodies and people using roads suggests that road condition is getting worse.
3. DfT's data do not allow it to understand how the funding that it provides for local road maintenance improves the condition of local roads.
4. Unlike its longer-term funding for the strategic road network, DfT's funding for local roads has generally been short term and provided through multiple funds.
5. DfT does not consider the condition of roads or the factors that contribute to their deterioration when allocating funding to local authorities
6. DfT's use of funding incentives to improve local authorities' approach to asset management no longer works as intended.
7. The increasing backlog in road maintenance work hinders local authorities in undertaking preventative work that could deliver better value.
8. DfT has announced £8.3 billion in additional long-term funding for local roads maintenance, but it is not yet clear how this will be allocated
9. DfT has not updated its road maintenance guidance or tools that can help local authorities deliver maintenance more effectively for several years.
10. DfT needs to plan now for how it will support local authorities to meet challenges on the road network, such as climate change and the introduction of autonomous vehicles

Recommendations

To improve the accuracy and completeness of its understanding of the condition of the local road network in England, DfT should:

- Review its coverage requirements for local authorities on surface condition reporting, making use of the advances in data collection and technology since these were first set to ensure it has the information it needs.
- Request information on the condition of other key road network assets, such as bridges, where local authorities are already collecting this data and consider the frequency at which it should collect this information from all local authorities. Should DfT decide that regularly receiving this information would be useful, it should work with DLUHC to ensure effective and proportionate data-reporting requirements for local authorities.

Summary

To improve its approach to funding local road maintenance, DfT should:

- Review its approach to allocating capital funding to local authorities for local road maintenance to ensure its allocative effectiveness. DfT should review how it can make better use of data to target allocations of funding where it is most needed.

- Work with HM Treasury to set out how it will provide longer-term funding certainty to local authorities that will help better support preventative road maintenance approaches.
- Consolidate the number of shorter-term funds through which local authorities receive funding for road maintenance. This should include consolidating funding pots that use similar mechanisms to allocate funds.
- Update its use of incentivised funding and consider how it could use this to improve outcomes. DfT should ensure that it develops a rigorous approach to assuring itself that its incentive mechanism is delivering real improvements.
- Develop an evaluative framework and use it to assess the impact of its investment in local road maintenance at the national level and to inform its future policy and investment approaches. 21 To improve its support for local authorities and guidance on how to deliver effective and efficient highways maintenance, DfT should:
 - Review the tools and guidance that it has provided to local authorities and set out how and when it will refresh them.
 - Identify and fill gaps in guidance it provides to local authorities. This should include developing its understanding of where local authorities have expressed a need for greater direction and where new guidance is needed.

APSE Comment

APSE collects data on the state of local roads through the APSE Performance Networks Benchmarking club. This confirms that the state of A,B & C roads has remained stable over the past 5 years, whilst unclassified roads are seeing a significant deterioration.

The Asset based system for determining which roads should be maintained has been a helpful tool in determining the order of priority for road replacement but has now reached a juncture. Without significant additional investment, the road system will deteriorate further. The Asset based approach has effectively just contained the level of deterioration, postponing the point at which many roads fail at the same time.

APSE agree with the report's findings. Funding must provide certainty over an extended timescale and be based on need rather than prowess at bid writing. To be fair, DfT have commenced on a programme of collating a national register of utilities, but progress is slow.

All APSE members can sign up to APSE's Highways, Street-Lighting and Winter Maintenance Advisory Group network, which is an online network providing four learning events across the year, with expert speakers from across local government and the wider highways sector. You can sign up to the network using [this link](#).

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