



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Structural Maintenance and Winter Service:
Department for Infrastructure

10 February 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Ms Liz Kimmins
Mr Andrew Muir

Witnesses:

Mr Joe Lawson	Department for Infrastructure
Mr Conor Loughrey	Department for Infrastructure

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): I welcome to the Committee meeting, via StarLeaf, Conor Loughrey, the director of network services for roads, and Joe Lawson from network maintenance and development. Conor, are you going to lead and make some opening remarks?

Mr Conor Loughrey (Department for Infrastructure): Yes. Can you hear me OK?

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We can, thanks.

Mr Loughrey: Thank you, Chair, for asking us along to discuss our winter service and structural maintenance. Hopefully, the briefing papers are self-explanatory, but it is worth taking a quick run through them. I am happy to take questions at the end.

You will be aware that we carry out precautionary salting of carriageways on main roads to prevent ice from forming. The current policy is that we salt routes that carry more than 1,500 vehicles a day and, in exceptional circumstances, roads that carry between 1,000 and 1,500 vehicles a day. That translates to covering 28% of the network, which picks up 80% of traffic journeys. There are 109 salting routes, which equates to covering 7,000 kilometres every time that we go out. We do that in just over three hours, and it costs about £80,000 every time that we do a run.

It is probably worth mentioning that that costs in the order of £5 million to £7 million annually. If we were to target 90% of trips, the cost would double, and if we were to move to 100% — the gritting of all routes — the cost would quadruple, taking us up to between £20 million and £28 million annually. Massive cost increases would therefore be associated with doing that. Outside of the existing policy, we salt small settlements in rural areas — settlements that contain 100 dwellings or more — and we

carry out priority secondary salting for rural schools that are most affected by winter weather conditions.

As well as what we do in the Department, our design, build, finance and operate (DBFO) contractors carry out a winter service on the motorways and the A-class road network, including the Westlink. They do about 185 kilometres. Moreover, when there is prolonged severe winter weather, we have arrangements in place with councils for the removal of ice and snow from town centre footways.

The full cost of the service is about £7 million a year, but it could go as high as £10 million, as happened in 2017-18. This year, given the competing demands, the Minister set an opening budget of £3 million for winter gritting, with the plan being to bid in subsequent monitoring rounds for further funding. In October, we got a further £5 million for winter gritting —.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Sorry, Conor, it is quite difficult to hear you. You are breaking up. Is there a clearer mic that you can use, or can you reposition yourself slightly better?

Mr Loughrey: I can move closer. Is that any better?

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): It is still breaking up, so we are not getting a clear run at hearing what you are saying. We will try again.

Mr Loughrey: I will continue and see how it goes.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. Thanks.

Mr Loughrey: I was saying that, originally, £3 million was held for winter gritting and that we then got £5 million in October. As things stand, we have an allocation of £8 million, which we think is appropriate to address our needs for this year. Are you hearing me better now?

Mr Hilditch: It is a bit tinny.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We are catching part of it, but the sound is still not great.

Mr Loughrey: OK. I will continue, because you will have heard a lot of this before. We can see how we get on once we move to questions.

Our briefing paper highlights what our funding was in recent years for winter service. It was £9.7 million in 2017-18 and £5.2 million in 2018-19. You can therefore see that there is quite a range. On average, there are 78 call-outs a year, and we use 62,000 tons of salt. This year, we have had 57 call-outs and used 53,000 tons of salt.

I will now talk about overall capacity. At the start of the year, our salt stocks were increased to 60,000 tons in the barns, and we have access to a further 20,000 tons held at Irish Salt Mining. I know that the Committee was meant to visit Irish Salt Mining at one stage. I do not think that that happened, but, if restrictions lift, it would be well worth the visit. We then top up our salt barns from October through to the end of the year, and then we take stock in January and start to run down the stocks between then and the end of the year. At this time, we have 35,000 tons of salt in stock. That will be sufficient to cover the rest of the year.

We have other roles. We provide salt bins and salt piles to the public to be used on a self-help basis. Over 5,000 salt bins and over 50,000 salt piles are provided. Those are restocked as and when required but are subject to the availability of resources at a given time. That can be difficult, because, when we are experiencing a severe event, all our industrial staff are involved with the winter service operation.

On the staff whom we have involved, we get our forecasting service from the Met Office. It also provides us with an embedded adviser, who provides more detailed local information to help improve our decision-making. Over a season, on any particular night, we have 300 staff on duty. They include a range of personnel, such as drivers, loaders, fitters, duty controllers [*Inaudible.*] They are supplemented by 130 gritters and 12 snowblowers, should they be needed. There are different arrangements for snow. Dealing with it is a more resource-intensive exercise. In severe weather events, we have the capacity to bring in farmers or contractors to assist with efforts to clear snow.

There will always be issues with public information and communications, so it is important that we look at the comms side. We have a lead communicator in place who gathers the information. We then display that on TrafficWatch and provide guidance via social media.

To conclude on the winter service piece, the Department does all that it can to keep the roads open, but we cannot guarantee ice-free roads, and the onus is on drivers to drive in accordance with the conditions.

I will move on to structural maintenance, and hopefully you can hear me a bit better. "Structural maintenance" is the collective term for a range of activities, including resurfacing, reconstruction, surface dressing, patching and structural drainage. Structural maintenance includes both capital and resource funding. For the current year, the Minister allocated £75 million of capital towards structural maintenance and £13 million of resource. In-year, we received a further £6 million for bids, and that has now increased to £8.8 million, which has been added to the original figures. We got that through money received from in-year monitoring as well as from other readjustments in the Department. We also got some funding from the Department for Communities, because we are delivering schemes on its behalf.

You will be aware that the Barton report established that we needed £143 million to maintain our roads properly. The Barton report and the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report emphasised the need for certainty around longer-term funding of road maintenance budgets. They also recognised that the earlier that we get funding, the better that it is and that getting money late in-year can cause difficulties internally and externally. As it sits, the combined out-turn for capital and resource is in the order of £96 million or £97 million, leaving a shortfall, against the Barton figure, of about £47 million. This year's funding for structural maintenance has increased from £75 million to £83.8 million, which is an 11.7% increase. That has come from a mix of things. We bid in June, but the bid was unsuccessful. The Department got a £2 million allocation in October, of which £1.1 million went to structural maintenance. If we compare this year's output with that from previous years, we see that, at the minute, we are sitting at £96 million or £97 million — we will keep that under review between now and the end of the year, because there will be further minor adjustments — while we spent £54 million in 2015-16, and, in the past two years, 2018-19 and 2019-2020, we spent £109 million and £106 million respectively. When compared with those figures, I believe that this year's projected figure of £97 million is a good out-turn, given the COVID issues that we had at the start of the year, that we were slow to get started and that there were difficulties for our contractors in the earlier months.

Routine maintenance includes street lighting inspection and testing, street lighting maintenance, pothole repairs, grass cutting, gully emptying and weed spraying. Those are all important aspects of road maintenance. Of the £60 million budget that we got for roads maintenance, £13 million was earmarked for street lighting, *[Inaudible]* and IT. The rest went to the winter service and the other functions laid out in paragraph 11. All those services have been reduced in recent years owing to limited funding. We are now repairing potholes that are 50 millimetres deep on all roads, with 20 millimetres being the trigger on higher-traffic roads. For street lighting, we are providing a full service this year. Gullies are being cleaned once a year. Grass cutting is being done twice a year.

Effectively, that is this year's service. Those are all key areas that compete with winter service for the limited resource funding that is available. That really highlights the difficulties that the Department and the Minister face when decisions are being made about funding allocations.

Chair, hopefully you were able to pick up enough of that. I am not sure. I am now happy to take any questions.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): That was a bit clearer. Thank you for that. It is quite difficult to do this.

You have taken us through, to a certain extent, the budget side. I have some concerns. The Department made an £11 million bid, which was unsuccessful, in June. It received a limited £2 million allocation in October, £1.1 million of which was allocated to structural maintenance. As you highlighted, there is still a £47 million shortfall, based on the recommendations made by Barton. Yet, no bid was made in January, which we would have expected. Can you explain why that was the case?

Mr Loughrey: The bid was at departmental level, and structural maintenance funding did increase in January. We got £4.5 million in January monitoring, with a few adjustments, so the structural maintenance element of the Department's funding did increase. That might not have translated to a bid, but it recognised and picked up on easements in other parts of the Department.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): It was therefore an internal realignment of funding as opposed to a formal request.

Mr Loughrey: Yes, it was done within the Department, and that internal adjustment resulted in £4.5 million.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Would you have been able to cope with more than that, had it been made available to you, given the fact that you were bidding for it? I appreciate that the timing of all of this is critical, as you need the capacity to deliver on works, but could you have coped with more?

Mr Loughrey: No, and the question that we were asked was, "What could you take?". The earlier in the year we get funding, the better, but, at this stage of the year, we have to look at our spend. At the end of December, we still had over £30 million to spend. Even at this stage, we still have £20 million or slightly less to spend. We need to look at capacity internally and externally. Internally, our resources have been reduced considerably following the voluntary exit scheme (VES). As a result of VES, we lost a third of our design capacity and maybe 15% of our client staff. Our capacity to be ahead of the game and to be ready to take late money has therefore been reduced. We are where we are with staff resources, however, and we had a good look at that. To answer your question, no, the £4.5 million was what we could take, bearing in mind other minor internal adjustments that needed to be made.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): You mentioned the workforce challenges. Are those being addressed internally by the Department? Has a request been made, given the current situation?

Mr Loughrey: The Minister and others are aware that the voluntary exit scheme and its outworkings have made things more difficult. We are looking to do what we can by improving efficiencies. LED lighting, for example, saves resource funding, which, in turn, can be translated into other resource activities, be they staff or work on the ground. It is a balancing act. Although we are trying to be more efficient and generate more resource funding that could be used for staff, that has to be looked at alongside the other competing demands and functions that we are trying to deliver.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): What impact has COVID had on your ability to carry out your work, particularly as it relates to the workforce?

Mr Loughrey: The difficulties were felt early in the financial year as we adjusted to COVID, decided what services were essential and put in place safe working practices. Those are well established at this stage, so our delivery rate is fine now. Until we got those new working practices in place, however, we were slow in getting started.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Finally, Committee members in all constituencies are more than aware of issues with potholes and the need for resurfacing. I draw your attention to the quality of the work that is being done. In my area, workers are going out to complete the job, but, within a short time, the surface is disintegrating again. Has there been a change in practice or in the quality of material that is being used?

Mr Loughrey: There has not been a change in the quality. I do not know the detail of the examples that you are referring to, but I am happy to look at them. In some cases, depending on the defect that is reported, we may go out and do a temporary repair, with the intention of returning to do a more permanent repair. It could be that. There is no change in the material being used, but, as I said, I am happy to look at individual examples.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you, Conor and Joe. I have a couple of questions, and I will start off with ones about salting and gritting. What is the difference between a full salting action and a call-out? Is there any difference between the two terms?

Mr Loughrey: No. Call-out staff are on call. During the winter season, 300 staff are on at night. A full gritting action is when we do all roads. Depending on the weather and how localised it is, there could be partial actions taken, so we may have to do high ground or do the west or the east. We do not do everything all the time. Call-outs and full actions are broadly the same thing.

Mr K Buchanan: A full salting action costs £80,000 a night, effectively. Is that what we are saying, Conor? That would be for not all the roads but the road network that you grit.

Mr Loughrey: Yes. That is for the full 109 routes.

Mr K Buchanan: I have another point on gritting. When do you define the end of the winter service as being? I know that it is difficult to predict when that will be, but when do you draw a line to say that it is the end of the winter service? Is it whenever the last gritting action or gritting in any format has taken place?

Mr Loughrey: Obviously, we react to the weather conditions. It is usually about the middle of April that we start to stand staff down, but we look at our forecasts and at what is coming over the horizon at us and react accordingly.

Mr K Buchanan: You mention farmers in your paper. Do farmers get any financial support for doing that when they are called on to help?

Mr Loughrey: Yes. In extreme weather events, farmers are called on to help with snow clearance. Yes, they do get paid for what they do.

Mr K Buchanan: They get a financial contribution. OK.

I will move on to roads maintenance briefly. The Chair mentioned temporary repair or, as I call it, stub patching; I am sure that you are aware of the term. Is stub patching — doing a temporary repair and then having to come back to do it again — cost-effective? I appreciate that you can do more stub patching or temporary repairs in a day than you can do permanent repairs, but is it cost-effective to do so when set against the amount of money that you pay out every year because of damage to vehicles?

Mr Loughrey: No, it certainly is not the preferred option, but temporary repairs are done to address an immediate safety defect, something that could damage a vehicle or any road user. It is something that we do not as standard but to address an immediate safety issue.

Mr K Buchanan: Conor, I know that this is a broad question, but what is the difference between the timeline for temporarily repairing a pothole of a certain size and permanently repairing the same pothole? Does it take half the time or a quarter of the time? Has a cost analysis been done, considering that you have to come back to that pothole?

Mr Loughrey: There are no set times. A lot of what we do is dictated by the workload at a given time. Frost and ice are very sore on the roads, as you will know, and can generate a lot of potholes. It really depends on what the workload is at a given time. We will get back to the pothole as soon as we can, but it depends on what needs to be done at a given time.

Mr K Buchanan: This summer — this growing season — will grass cutting be done twice?

Mr Loughrey: A decision on grass cutting will be one for next year's budget. It is early days for that. We will have to see what the budgets are, and the Minister will need to make decisions about what we do with the range of routine maintenance functions, including grass cutting and winter service. At this time, we are not sure what the budget for grass cutting will be.

Mr Hilditch: Gentlemen, you are welcome this morning. Where are we with the winter service in general at present? Are we looking at an average winter, or have recent times increased slightly expectations of what is expected?

Mr Loughrey: We have had 57 actions this year, and, from looking at my notes, I see that, on average, there are 78-odd actions. We are looking at something similar to last year, with a spend of £7 million to £8 million.

Mr Hilditch: You were not too concerned when the £2 million bid was turned down in the October monitoring round.

Mr Loughrey: No, but that was on the back of having received the £5 million COVID allocation, which brought us up to £8 million. We have since reviewed that, and we think that the £8 million will cover us for this year.

Mr Hilditch: OK. Thanks. I will now touch on something that is probably more on the capital side. What is the process for replacing the fleet of vehicles? Is there a need for many of them to be replaced at the minute?

Mr Loughrey: We have schedules of the type of machinery and its age profile. In a given year, there will be an allocation to upgrade the parts of the fleet in greatest need. The fleet competes for finance with everything else, so there is an ongoing programme of replacement.

Mr Hilditch: On the maintenance side of things, an issue about which I am getting quite a few things thrown at me is drainage in rural areas disappearing over a number of years. There have been two examples recently of drains having been located 5 feet down, covered over. They then had to be dug out. Long gone are the days — I am probably one of the older ones here — when, in rural areas, you saw a wee man with a spade and a wheelbarrow trotting about and clearing all the drains. It is all very well having the big suction machines to clear the gratings in urban areas, but there will be a problem going forward with rural drainage, with rivers coming out on to the roads, resulting in aquaplaning and things like that. Recent experiences have shown that there has been a real lack of maintenance in rural areas, and, because of that, drains are virtually hidden now.

Mr Loughrey: That is something that we would certainly expect our inspectors to pick up on. If there is a blocked outlet or one that is not functioning, water will pond at the location, so we would expect that to be picked up on and for the opening to be cleared.

Mr Hilditch: On that, I pay tribute to the local section engineers in the Mid and East Antrim Council area and thank them for their attendance and their diligence in getting those things fixed.

In closing, I acknowledge and thank your staff who go out in the lateness of night and the early hours of the morning, with all the dangers that they face, to do the roads during the winter season. I thank them for that.

Mr Loughrey: Thank you.

Ms Kimmins: It is probably difficult with that feedback, Conor, so I appreciate your powering on through.

You said that the Department was able to move money around internally rather than bid for structural maintenance funding. Can we get a comparison for this year with last year's January monitoring round? Were you able to move money around then? I ask because around £11 million was allocated for structural maintenance in January monitoring last year. Can you comment on how that compares with this year?

Mr Loughrey: I do not have the figures to hand. From memory — I may be wrong on this — we got our money earlier last year, and that helps us [*Inaudible.*] Joe, do you have any knowledge of how that panned out last year?

Mr Joe Lawson (Department for Infrastructure): The allocation from last year's January monitoring round was fairly low for structural maintenance. It may have been less than £1 million. The reason for that, Conor, was because we had exceptionally high bids that were successful in September and October.

Mr Loughrey: That aligns with my sense of it. If we get the money earlier, we are better placed to do something with it. It is a lot more difficult to do so come January.

Ms Kimmins: Yes, OK. What about the funds for this year that have been moved around internally? Are you able to say where the additional funds from other areas came from in the Department?

Mr Loughrey: No, I do not hold that information. Our central finance team will look at the situation across the Department, which includes DVA and all of our functions, and tell us whether our needs can be accommodated from the additional £4.5 million. However, I am not aware of exactly where that came from.

Ms Kimmins: When you talked about capacity, you said that you were not able to take on additional work. You outlined to the Chairperson that it is an internal matter relating to departmental staff rather than a matter for the construction industry. Am I right in saying that?

Mr Loughrey: It is a bit of both. In order to get schemes out the door, you do not move straight from getting money. A scheme needs a level of design and you need to contact utilities to see whether anyone has any other plans. There is a bit of work on that for every scheme, and some are more complex than others, but it takes a bit of time. Our capacity to design and get ahead of the game early in the year has been reduced because of the reduction in staff numbers over the years. However, I am reasonably confident that the industry will have enough to keep it going between now and the end of the year.

Ms Kimmins: On that note, Conor, if structural maintenance spend was less than that in previous years because of capacity issues, should the Department not have had schemes ready that were initially identified for this year before COVID hit?

Mr Loughrey: I will just look for the figures here. The structural maintenance spend was £109 million and £106 million for the last two years respectively. At the moment, we are looking at £97 million for this year, and there may be more minor shuffles. Given the difficulties that we had earlier in the year, it is a good outturn and it reflects well on the staff who were involved. We would like to have schemes sitting on the shelf and ready to go, but we lost a third of our design team at VES, which has limited our capacity.

Ms Kimmins: I want to ask about winter gritting. Have any additional bids been made in order to increase grit stock or the resources for the winter service? I am sure that other members are in the same boat; I have had loads of requests for additional gritting bins and for extending the gritting schedules. Could we not have put in a bid to better prepare Roads for the future, where there is potential underspend in other areas?

Mr Loughrey: The fundamental issue is that winter service is resource funding, whereas the £75 million, which is now £83.8 million, is all capital, so it comes from a different pot. In general, however, we would look to do more in winter service but there are, clearly, financial implications around that. This year, the Department was reliant on in-year funding to allow us to get the winter service up to the level that we provide at the moment. While we are mindful of that, a lot of requests are coming in across a range of areas, and we understand why people would like us to do more. It comes down to resources, because winter service is competing with all the other functions that we carry out, all of which have been reduced over the last five years, such as grass cutting and gully emptying. They are all competing for the same limited resource.

Ms Kimmins: The Department treats about 28% of the roads in the primary network, which carries 80% of the traffic. I completely understand what you are saying about funding restraints on resources, but is the Department looking at ways to improve service delivery; for example, working with DAERA or other Departments to extend or improve the service for the future, particularly given the weather that is in the forecasts for the weeks and months ahead?

Mr Loughrey: The difficulty is that it keeps coming back to a funding issue. Were there more funding available on the resource side, we could do that. It really depends on what the funding is for the year. As for the future, we will have to see what emerges in the budget for next year. The Minister will have to consider all the issues and demands and decide on allocations accordingly. If we do more, it will, ultimately, cost more. If we end up with the same money next year as we did this year, it will be at the expense of something else. It is about trying to balance all those needs.

Ms Kimmins: Thank you. I certainly think that it would be worth looking at. I do not know if it is possible. However, rural roads are probably impacted the worst by bad weather, and people have to get in and out of rural communities for essential journeys — getting to work and things like that. I do not know whether it would be possible to engage with DAERA on some of that stuff to see if there were a way of improving it over the longer term. Thank you, Conor.

Mr Loughrey: Thank you.

Ms Anderson: Thank you, Conor. It was difficult for us to pick up everything. Forgive me if I ask you something that has already responded to, but it was hard to capture that.

I want to go back to what Liz said about the winter service and pick up on the gritting of roads. I know that salt and grit piles are provided on a self-help basis for secondary roads. Those roads make up the lion's share of roads, and we have the percentages for some of those roads that are dealt with in that way.

There are a number of estates in Derry — I am sure that it is the same across the North — where you have a cohort of an ageing population. They receive domiciliary care and carers need access and safe passage to vulnerable people in the early mornings and, sometimes, late at night. I have already written to the Minister about Kingsfort in Derry, but the Department does not have any personnel to spread the salt in the estate early in the morning or at night when carers are entering and leaving, nor, the Minister told me does it qualify as a main road, as it does not have the volume of traffic.

In the spirit of build back better, would you consider engaging with the Department of Health, for instance, on a pilot project — I am obviously thinking of Kingsfort in Derry — for a gritting schedule at Ardnarea Crescent, given that it does not fit into the criteria? Would you engage with Health Department officials to devise a pilot scheme somewhere, whether it is Kingsfort or not?

Some areas have an ageing population that is in need. It would almost be on the same basis as you depend on farmers in rural areas. Rightly so, and I am glad to hear that they get some compensation for the assistance that they give. We could avail ourselves of the voluntary and community sector or someone else. Whilst salt is provided on a self-help basis, when you do not have someone in the estate who can help, we will have to find a way of being able to salt areas like that, where there is an ageing population that need carers to come in. It is dangerous when cars are coming in, in the mornings primarily, when it has not been salted or residents have not been able to use the salt boxes. They do enough. We cannot expect them to get out of their cars and do that as well as everything else that they do.

Mr Loughrey: I do not know the development. Are there salt bins?

Ms Anderson: There are, but they are provided on a self-help basis. There is an ageing population, and nobody can spread it. They are not fit, they are elderly and they get domiciliary care help. There are estates where a lot of the carers would come in to help ageing and vulnerable populations. Given that it does not fit into your criteria, I am trying to find a mechanism through which a pilot could be done on the basis of need. I am not saying that it should be done across the North, because I know that you would not have the resources to do that, but where you have a population with identified need that do not have the support in that cohort or estate to spread the salt, we could avail ourselves of the community and voluntary sector, for example, to spread salt when required, in the same way as we avail ourselves of the services of farmers in rural areas.

Mr Loughrey: In other areas, I am aware that local community representatives go in and help in certain estates where people may not be fit to do it themselves. It really needs only one or two volunteers or community representatives to help. I appreciate that it is a difficult area and that it applies across a range of housing estates. I am happy to have a look at that and speak to local elected representatives to see whether a community group or someone might be able to assist and help out there, particularly if the salt is there and it really becomes a spreading issue.

Ms Anderson: We could do that systematically so that no area is left out that needs people to come in to help who are worried about driving into the area because of the state of the roads. If you could take it on to do something like that, I would appreciate it.

With regard to the Civil Service voluntary exit scheme a number of years ago, what kind of upskilling of staff took place as a consequence of staff leaving the Roads Service — I think that we were told that there were two or three hundred at one stage — so that, when those people took voluntary exit, there would not be a lack of or gap in capacity? What happened in the Department to fill that gap?

Mr Loughrey: We have had to accept that we do not have the capacity that we had previously. There is no easy way in which to fill that gap without taking staff back on again. We have some capacity through external consultants. We can engage them, and that goes some way towards addressing the gap. However, we are certainly a long way from where we were pre-voluntary exit.

Ms Anderson: Has an assessment been done to compare the cost of external consultants and their pay with the cost of a staff member or of someone in the Civil Service being skilled up in your Department to fulfil that role?

Mr Loughrey: It is certainly not an exercise that I have carried out. We engage consultants more on the engineering side. It is more difficult to engage external consultants to deal with the client role. Certainly, there is capacity on the design side, and we use that as best we can, again, within the funding that is available.

Ms Anderson: Maybe that is something that we will refer to, Chair, because I have noticed that, at a number of meetings, a lot of external consultants were in attendance. I have found that somewhat strange. Maybe that is because, understandably, a gap in capacity was created and has not been filled. We should go back and extrapolate the cost of that. Perhaps, we will come back to that as a Committee. I will talk to the Chair and members about that.

Lastly, I want to ask you about unadopted roads. I do not know whether that issue is within your remit. It is a massive issue across the North and in the constituency that I represent in Derry. There are 222 unadopted roads in the Derry City and Strabane Council area, and something like £12.5 million sitting in bonds. Because those roads are not adopted, many residents cannot even get their bins emptied, let alone get salt boxes put in. People have been living on those estates for many years. Has the Department looked at that, particularly around article 11 and enforcement action being taken by the Department due to the state of the roads and in relation to the bonds issue?

Mr Loughrey: Yes, we deal with that issue all the time. We have our private streets teams, but, ultimately, it is a matter for developers to finish developments. It is obviously far better that a developer does that of their own initiative. Obviously, we liaise with them to encourage them to do that. That is far better than going down any legal route. If it gets to the point that we may have to go down the article 11 route, again, that is very resource intensive, and, as you pointed out, there is an awful lot of sites right across the Province. We have to prioritise what we do in that particular area.

Ms Anderson: Given the number of sites that there are, right across the North, can you give us a sense of a time frame? Of course, we would want developers to respond responsibly and not allow that situation to continue. However, in Woodside Heights and Woodland Mews, for instance — I am talking about an estate in the Waterside — that has been going on for 10 years. We are still trying to get the roads adopted and sewerage accepted. We are still dealing with the developer in relation to that. Surely, there should be a cut-off point for that, rather than developers leaving after many families have taken out mortgages of hundreds of thousands of pounds to move into estates where the roads have ended up wrecking their cars and there have been sewerage problems.

Is there a time frame? I know that you do not want to trigger article 11 if you do not have to, but can there be enforcement action after a period of time? One, two or three years may be reasonable, but 10 years certainly is not. This is a systematic problem that you are identifying across the North. There is a trend and a pattern here, and we need to try to address it, so what kind of serious consideration is the Department giving to it so that we do not allow developers to do the same thing in another estate and end up with the same problems?

Mr Loughrey: Things have improved in recent years as the housing market has improved. It certainly went through a difficult time when the property market crashed. Developers struggled with that. It is better now in that people are buying developments and finishing them off. We have a prioritisation system, and time is a factor, as is the number of properties built and occupied in the development. They all feature in how we prioritise work. I am happy to look at — is it Woodvale Heights?

Ms Anderson: It is Woodside Heights and Woodland Mews. There are estates in the Waterside area where this has been going on for 10 years. We still have the developers in, as we speak, trying to get the sewerage and roads adopted. This has been going on for 10 years, and, after repaying mortgages for 10 years, families are still dealing with sewerage problems and unadopted roads. As you can imagine, they are angry and understandably so, because, when they purchased the houses, they did not expect to be dealing with those problems a decade later. That is only one area. Like I said, there are 222 unadopted roads in my council area and over £12.5 million of road bonds.

Chair, all of us across the North are experiencing this issue, and we might need more information about that. It is worth the Committee returning to this and having a dedicated focus on it at some time in the near future. Thank you, Conor.

Mr Muir: I thank the officials for joining us today. Some of my questions have already been asked, particularly around the resourcing issue. Related to that, during the January monitoring round, the report that the Committee got at the beginning of January detailed that £1 million was being returned

because of a reduced capacity to deliver work on the ground whilst maintaining safe working conditions during the COVID outbreak. Can you provide a bit more information on that? It is obviously a concern to see any money being returned.

The other question is about maintenance works. The paper says:

"Gullies will be cleared at least once during the year."

Is that all gullies, and is there ever an increased frequency in clearing of gullies?

Mr Loughrey: I will start with your second question. Yes, when we had more funding, we used to clear gullies twice a year. That had to be cut to once a year as part of the limited service, and, yes, the plan will be to do all gullies in a year.

You asked about the £1 million that was returned. That was returned by the Department to reflect the Department's wider position, but for structural maintenance, we increased our intake in January by £4.5 million. One was the wider departmental position, but structural maintenance actually increased.

Mr Muir: OK. Has the requirement to maintain safe working conditions as a result of COVID had an impact on structural maintenance, or have things managed to proceed?

Mr Loughrey: It is OK now, but it meant that, for the first couple of months of the year, it took us a while to adjust to that, to agree what was emergency works and to get safe working practices in place in the industry. We had a slower start to this year, but we are now working as well as we can under the new arrangements.

Mr Muir: I will go back to the gullies. I have seen many incidents where blocked gullies have resulted in localised flooding and ponding after heavy rainfall. Surely the frequency of gully clearance needs to be re-examined as it has a potential impact on local businesses and nearby homes.

Mr Loughrey: Hotspots or higher-risk areas can and should get more treatment if the local section office is aware of the problem. I am aware that a general increase in frequency will have funding issues. I agree that local hotspots should be addressed. In any flooding situation, the hotspots need more treatment.

Mr Muir: If those areas are identified, are they visited twice a year?

Mr Loughrey: It depends. Certainly, an eye is kept on the hotspots. If there is a flooding event, the gullies in hotspots should be cleared and should be treated more than once a year.

Mr Muir: I have two other issues. Are there KPIs in place to turn round any structural road maintenance requests that are reported? Many residents are very frustrated that incidents that they have reported are still not fixed years later. Is there a framework in place to prioritise requests?

Mr Loughrey: Do you mean defects that have been reported through the public portal?

Mr Muir: Yes.

Mr Loughrey: No. We adhere to a systematic inspection and repair regime that we have in place. When people pick up on defects, it may be that they are picked up and repaired on the next cycle of inspection and repair. It is very inefficient to ask contractors to work outside a sector and spend more time on the road than repairing the defects. It is good if contractors can stay in a particular area and do everything that is needed there before moving to the next area. Obviously, if the defects are significant enough to need more immediate repair, we will do that work. It may be a temporary repair, and that was mentioned earlier. Just because something is reported on the public information portal (PIP) does not necessarily mean that it has an increased repair time. It makes us aware of it, and depending on the nature and size of the defect, we will act accordingly.

Mr Muir: People who report defects online should get feedback on how it has been categorised and dealt with. Unfortunately, when some reports are made, the person gets a reference number, and the issue disappears into the ether. They do not hear anything, so they are not sure whether it will be

prioritised, if it is down the list or will be fixed in the next schedule of works. A way to give people feedback would be useful. People go online to report the defects in good faith, and they do not hear anything more about that.

Mr Loughrey: I thought people were advised if we are going to pick it up in the next cycle. There may be a time lag between the report being made and being uploaded into the system. However, I understood that response was going out.

Mr Muir: I have reported a lot of defects and not heard anything back. I only hear if residents tell me that the work still has not been done, and I chase it again.

Finally, I agree with the thanks from other members for the winter service. While many of us are in bed, workers are gritting roads and clearing snow. We really appreciate that work.

At the moment, primary schools are only open for key workers, although special schools have been open throughout this latest lockdown, and we appreciate that. However, the rural roads that link the primary schools to main roads are not always gritted. Has any consideration being given to ensuring that the rural roads that link primary schools to main road networks are gritted? Your report outlined that a certain number of roads were gritted, but it is not every road. Schools have been in contact because they are concerned about the lack of gritting to enable safe travel to the school.

Mr Loughrey: What we have agreed is that there is secondary gritting to a number of schools. What qualifies a school is if it had to close for days due to severe weather events or a snow event closed the school. That is what has been happening with those schools that are on the list.

I am sure that there are hundreds of rural schools, and the ones that I know that are local to me are served by a number of roads coming from different directions, so it is hard to cover all the roads in the vicinity of a school. Again, we are looking at having salt bins in the vicinity of a school and grit piles on the roads, which is as much as we can do at the minute.

Mr Muir: Is there any criterion for the number of days that a school had to close in recent times because of adverse weather that triggers it getting that salting?

Mr Loughrey: I do not have that information to hand. I would need to double-check with the policy. The policy certainly mentions how specific it is. I just could not say off the top of my head. I would need to look at that.

Mr Muir: It would be useful to get that, and we would appreciate it. Thank you very much.

Mr Boylan: I had better put it on record, Chair, that, while we are all lying in bed, my brother and nephew are out gritting the roads, keeping us all safe.

Conor and Joe, you are very welcome. Unfortunately, you missed an opportunity because funds were available. The Finance Minister stated that over the past four months. Unfortunately, I think that we missed a great opportunity to carry out some of the work. I want to tease it out further, if I may.

Unfortunately, Conor, some of the presentation was bouncing back and forward, but I got some detail, and thanks very much for the presentation. I want to start with the January monitoring round last year. You said that you bid for £11 million and did not get it. I seek clarity on that. What was the difference this year? You say that money was moved in round the Department this year as opposed to last year: what exactly was the difference in the total January monitoring situation last year and this year? Could you elaborate a bit on that, please?

Mr Loughrey: I do not have the figures for last year to hand. Our sense is that any additional money that we got last year was earlier in the year and did not come in January monitoring, but I do not have exact figures to hand.

Every year, the Department will look at its easements and pressures across all its functions and decide, accordingly, where funding should sit. It is no different this year. Whilst we indicated that we had a capacity to do more, that was able to be managed internally.

Mr Boylan: A total of £11 million was bid right across the monitoring rounds for structural maintenance, is that right?

Mr Loughrey: Last year or this year?

Mr Boylan: Last year.

Mr Loughrey: Last year *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Boylan: The main point is that there were bids for moneys. Obviously, we are dealing with a capacity issue, Conor, so maybe you will come back to the Committee with some figures on what you bid last year, what the bids were this year, and what you spent on structural maintenance in relation to those bids across the monitoring rounds.

I want to go down the capacity issue route. Others mentioned the voluntary exit scheme. Clearly, we have not built that capacity back up. Can you step through, for the benefit of the Committee and for me, from design to delivery, right through to work on the ground, exactly what that entails, so that we can get a better understanding of the lack of capacity?

Mr Loughrey: It is, I suppose, different depending on where it is. If you look at an urban scheme, for example, you need to survey the site, to check where all the utilities are and to liaise with the utility companies to see whether they have works planned for the area. We then need to design the scheme. We need to see whether anything can be done on the active travel front within urban or other schemes. It has to be looked at across a range of parameters, and a design is done. Depending on the scale of the scheme — if it is within our measured term range — we can give it to the contractor. The contractor has other schemes that we are looking for it to do as well. It is a combination of internal and external, but there is a range of design and —.

Mr Boylan: I appreciate that. Martina referred to the capacity issue. Clearly, we have not recovered those positions; if we had, we would be able to deliver more. Is that a fair assumption?

Mr Loughrey: It certainly is. The loss of staff from voluntary exit has certainly taken a toll; it has reduced our capacity to have schemes designed and ready to go. That is particularly obvious at the end of the financial year, where our capacity is reduced.

Mr Boylan: All elected representatives, including councillors, talk about "shovel-ready" projects and being able to spend money, especially at this time of year. We deal with contractors. I did not look at last year, but certainly this year, because of COVID and everything else, there are other factors in why things have not been carried out. I have been talking to contractors on the ground, Conor. You have alluded to the fact that there may be issues with contractors. Some of them have said to me that, if they had received the money, they would be able to spend it. Will you elaborate a bit on that? What exactly were the issues with contractors on the ground?

Mr Loughrey: I believe that we will have enough work for contractors between now and the end of the year. If some of them think that they have capacity, I am happy to talk to them about what is on their books and in their programme between now and the end of the year. Obviously, as you said, a scheme needs to be shovel-ready before we can give it to a contractor. The design bit is possibly the more difficult bit; it takes more time.

Mr Boylan: I appreciate that. How many years ago was the voluntary exit scheme?

Mr Loughrey: Five or six years ago.

Mr Boylan: We have not regained that capacity. It seems, from talking to some of the local contractors, that the relationship between you and them has changed in terms of how they would have delivered projects. Clearly, there is a capacity issue; a number of years ago, you would have talked to them about whatever they could achieve from £1 million of work or whatever that was. Has that relationship changed because of the capacity issues?

Mr Loughrey: Without a doubt. If we were in a position to get more schemes out the door, contractors would be asked to react to that and possibly deliver more, but we can do only what we can do within the resources available.

Mr Boylan: I appreciate that. My colleague Martina Anderson asked the Committee to look at the capacity issue and go back to the Department.

I have a final question about the winter stuff. Surely the likes of potholes on some stretches of road can be done under the rural maintenance grants; there should not be many problems in delivering those. They are simple enough.

Mr Loughrey: The rural road schemes?

Mr Boylan: Yes.

Mr Loughrey: Those are certainly easier to deliver than an urban scheme; there is no doubt about that. It all comes down to the totality of the work shortage that we have with contractors. We do not have our end-of-January figures through yet, but our end of December figures show that we had over £30 million still to spend. There is a lot of work out there on order that we need our contractors to do. That is where I am coming from in thinking that they have enough to see them through to the end of the year, but I am certainly happy to have a discussion with any of them that think that they may not.

Mr Boylan: So many Facebook posts are about potholes or craters on the road, but you said that you think that you will achieve a fair bit of that work over the coming months, before the end of the financial year.

Mr Loughrey: Yes. If it is on the programme for this year, we certainly expect to deliver it.

Mr Boylan: Thanks, Conor. Thanks, Joe.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We cannot hear Roy. We will see if we can get this sorted out. In the meantime, I will go to Mr Hilditch.

Mr Hilditch: I have a couple of questions. On the relationship with councils for gritting during winter, is there any policy in place to work together, or is it just done on an ad hoc basis? There are a lot of footways in our town and city centres that require winter service.

Mr Loughrey: We have arrangements with the councils but, really, that kicks in when there are prolonged snow events. Typically, it is to do with clearing snow in town and city centres, and that is linked to the thinking that, obviously, in such an event, operatives are limited in what they can do compared with what they normally do. It is agreed that that resource should be diverted to help with the clearing of snow in town and city centres. That arrangement is in place with all councils.

Mr Hilditch: Do you supply the grit to councils for those times?

Mr Loughrey: Yes, we do. One of the difficulties is that the town and city centres are not dying about the colour of the grit that we supply. The town and city centres tend to want white salt, which we do not use. Our salt is the brown salt that goes on the roads. What we have does not meet the needs and expectations of the public. In some cases, councils provide white salt themselves, but our salt is available to them if they wish to use it.

Mr Hilditch: OK. Thank you. I know that the annual operation of grass cutting and weed spraying was cut back previously. Constituents comment on what they term as poor service on that front. How is that going? Are there one or two cuts and sprays a year?

Mr Loughrey: In the year that will soon finish, we are down to two cuts; it was five previously. Where it is next year remains to be seen. It will depend on what our budgets for next year look like. The Minister will obviously have some key decisions to make on next year's service. So, at this minute in time, we are just not sure about next year's grass cutting. We will have to see what comes out of the budget discussions.

Mr Hilditch: Gone are the days when residents would go out and put the spade along the kerb and take out the weeds themselves. We are such a needy people these days. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Mr Beggs seems to have disappeared. Mrs Kelly, would you like to ask a question?

Mrs D Kelly: No. I think that everything has been covered. I am happy enough. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Conor and Joe, thank you very much for attending this morning. That was not the easiest session with the difficulty in hearing you at times.

Mr Beggs indicated that he wanted to ask some questions. He is back; we can hear him.

Mr Beggs: I am sorry; the technology was not working. I could hear and watch you, but you were obviously unable to hear me.

Thank you for the background information, Conor. Please pass on my appreciation to all your key staff. They are essential workers, who keep our roads open during winter conditions and carry out emergency repairs.

You talked about the pothole repair standard. You said that some roads, the busier ones, are being repaired with a 20 mm fault, but, with other roads, it needs to be a fault of 50 mm. Now, 2 inches is quite a sizeable hole. Can you clarify the volume of traffic that qualifies a road for the 20 mm repair?

Mr Loughrey: Off the top of my head, I think that roads that carry more than 5,000 vehicles a day qualify. Joe, do you know that figure?

Mr Lawson: Yes, Conor. That is correct. A "high traffic" road is one that carries more than 5,000 vehicles a day. The 50 mm defect relates to all roads, including low trafficked rural roads.

Mr Beggs: People can visualise 2 inches, usually, more easily than 50 mm. That is quite a sizeable hole. Frequently, once a pothole gets to that size, there is a considerable amount of damage done that might have been saved by a lesser, earlier repair. Have you carried out any analysis of long-term additional cost in carrying out repairs at that later stage?

Mr Loughrey: In the service that we had before the limited service — I go back to 2015 — we were repairing 20 mm potholes on all roads. However, the budget for cross-route routine maintenance functions then was probably £20 million greater than it is now. We agree with you totally that the earlier that we get in, the better. We would like to be at the 20 mm threshold on all roads, but it is an affordability issue.

Mr Beggs: Does it not cost the public purse more when the road is repaired at that later stage?

Mr Loughrey: You need to look at the financial settlement of claims that come in over a given year, versus the cost of doing the service. I do not have those figures to hand.

Mr Beggs: On top of that, the cost of carrying out a repair when there is a 50 mm pothole must be greater. There is probably a bigger area to be dug up and repaired than perhaps with a smaller patch. Has there been any analysis of the maintenance cost in following the 50 mm standard?

Mr Loughrey: There is no doubt that it is better value to get in earlier. However, it is a numbers game. Among the number of potholes that are in the 20 mm to 50 mm range, certainly, some of them will lead to claims etc, but we are not funded to do all of those, much as we would like to.

Mr Beggs: I turn to resurfacing schemes. You got £75 million earlier this year and could plan accordingly. You indicated that there is difficulty in reacting late in putting schemes on the ground. In the private sector, you would not choose to put large amounts of tarmac down in cold, wet, winter months, if you could wait for better weather conditions. What assessment has been carried out of the durability of repairs or resurfacing carried out at this time of the year? Admittedly, you may not have a choice in some instances. How effective is it to put a large amount of tarmac down at this time of year?

Mr Loughrey: It is better to do it in the warmer weather, and there are rules about laying. A number of our schemes have had to be cancelled or delayed in recent weeks because of the frost. There are certain temperatures below which we will not lay because of that durability issue. There are rules for

what our contractors do and when they apply the material. There are greater risks at this time of the year with the colder weather, and we will stop works if it gets too cold to lay the material.

Mr Beggs: What is the critical temperature then?

Mr Loughrey: I do not have it to hand. I would need to get that checked to see exactly what it is.

Mr Beggs: There is obviously a requirement for your staff to put schemes in place, but there is a limited capacity to put a large amount of tarmac down at any one time. If you are putting out a lot of schemes at one time of the year, does it all happen at a standard cost or do the quotes go up when there is a bottleneck, as there is at the moment?

Mr Loughrey: The rates are part of the contracts. To be fair to contractors, it is very difficult for us and them to switch resource on and off. The more linear we get the spend, the better, because, if we are scurrying at the end of the year, if we have schemes designed, they have to increase their workforce, and then, come April, they are laying them off again. That is not ideal from an industry point of view. It keeps coming back to the fact that the earlier we have this money in a year, the better, and, for longer-term budgets, it is even better again. That has all come out of Barton and the Audit Office report. It is something that we aspire to, but we have a bit to go yet.

Mr Beggs: Turning then to the winter gritting programme, a request was made to grit a new spine road — Killyglen link — in my constituency, which is used by 3,800 vehicles a day, and there are numerous new developments off it. I was disappointed when, despite that huge volume of traffic, it was not accepted for gritting. When are other criteria applied to exclude such roads?

Mr Loughrey: I do not know the detail around that particular instance. I would have to have a look at it. I know that there is a parallel routes issue. A road may carry more volume, but, if there is another route close by that takes people from a to b that is gritted, that is a factor to be considered. However, I do not know the detail around that particular location.

Mr Beggs: There are other roads round the town. This is in the outskirts of Larne town, but, nevertheless, hundreds of homes have been built off that route that have no alternative route and, therefore, are not being supplied. There is a sense of a lack of equality being applied in not gritting such routes. How often is that criteria applied to exclude such major spine roads?

Mr Loughrey: Was a reason given for not including it? I am not aware of the detail.

Mr Beggs: Parallel routes were mentioned.

Mr Loughrey: I am happy to have a look at it. I need to look at the detail of it.

Mr Beggs: OK. That is fine. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you, Conor and Joe, for your attendance this morning. On behalf of the Committee, I ask you to pass on our thanks to your staff for the work that they have continued to do not only throughout the COVID period but throughout the winter period. We very much appreciate their efforts. Thank you.

Mr Loughrey: Thank you.