



Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Transport and Road Asset Management
Group Overview:
Department for Infrastructure

28 February 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Infrastructure

Transport and Road Asset Management Group Overview: Department for Infrastructure

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Deborah Erskine (Chairperson)
Mr John Stewart (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Patrick Brown
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Stephen Dunne
Mr Mark Durkan
Mr Peter McReynolds

Witnesses:

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|----------------|-------------------------------|
| Ms Sian Kerr | Department for Infrastructure |
| Mr Liam McEvoy | Department for Infrastructure |
| Mr Colin Sykes | Department for Infrastructure |
| Mr Colin Woods | Department for Infrastructure |

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I welcome Colin Woods, deputy secretary, transport and road asset management (TRAM) group; Sian Kerr, director of transport planning and policy; Colin Sykes, director of road asset management; and Liam McEvoy, director of road asset development. I know that members are looking forward to hearing from you today and getting an overview. Members have quite a lot of questions that we would like to get through today, so I invite you to brief us, after which we will ask questions.

Mr Colin Woods (Department for Infrastructure): Thank you, Chair, and members of the Committee, for the chance to come before the Committee today. You have introduced us already, so I will not repeat that. If I may, I will start by giving you a brief overview of the group's work, after which we will be happy to take questions. I know that members have expressed an interest in a number of areas.

A lot of the work of the TRAM group is the responsibility that we have for maintaining, managing and improving the road network to keep it safe, effective and reliable. We recognise that our road network is a real asset and an enabler for lots of things in society. In fact, it is Northern Ireland's most valuable infrastructure asset, worth over £30 billion. It extends to 26,000 kilometres of road, almost 10,000 kilometres of footways, almost 6,000 bridges and 290,000 street lights, among lots of other things, so the scale of what we manage is really big. We repair the network and make it safer for road users and pedestrians by, for example, delivering our gritting services in winter or improving sight lines at junctions. We expand the network through new road schemes or bypasses and manage the traffic that

uses it. We repurpose it to accommodate changing travel patterns and demands. We recognise the key role that the road network plays in enabling lots of other things, not least public transport and the bus network. We also provide parking and blue-badge services, which we know are matters of great significance to the public, and advise on planning applications. In doing that, we aim to protect and enhance our natural heritage and minimise environmental impact where we can.

The group is also responsible for the development and production of a transport strategy for Northern Ireland and the suite of transport plans that will support it, as well as a broad range of policy areas, many of which, as you would expect, are focused on the need to decarbonise how we travel. Increasingly, we are also planning for the transformation of Northern Ireland's active travel infrastructure, as a contribution to the health and well-being of society and to support a shift away from private cars in order to reduce congestion and help the environment.

We know that our staff are often a key part of local communities. They are often the first port of call for elected representatives and members of the public who have issues to raise about the road network.

That is a very quick overview of what we do, and the Committee will appreciate that the work of the group, in common with that of much of the Department, underpins the whole Programme for Government (PFG). A reliable transport network is an implied assumption in every public service and supports the day-to-day functioning of society. As a Department, we know some of the constraints under which we operate. We cannot always meet the expectations or desires of everyone who uses that network, but we are well aware of the significant interest that people have in the projects for which we are responsible.

I will briefly touch on matters of finance and staffing, if I may, after which I am happy to take any questions. The financial challenges facing the Department will not be news to the Committee. In 2023-24, the TRAM group was allocated a capital budget of £184 million. The Minister has recently taken a number of decisions to increase that, with additional allocations for structural maintenance. Independent analysis that the Department produced in 2018 told us that about £192 million is needed every year to maintain the network to the right level. It is therefore no surprise that, when there is a funding shortfall, less maintenance is undertaken over a prolonged period, and that means that the quality of the road network can struggle to be sustained. The capital budget for the group also covers the development of strategic road improvement schemes, such as the A5 western transport corridor, and a range of other essential functions, including replacement of our fleet, safety upgrades and bridge strengthening.

The group's resource allocation for this year was just over £159 million, which includes £35 million for essential maintenance of the road network. That covers many of the safety-related impacts and aspects of our work, such as surface defects, grass cutting, road markings and the maintenance of road signs. The Committee may be aware that the Department operates a limited service standard on essential maintenance, meaning that only the most serious defects get addressed. We do not do that because we want to or because we think that it is sound engineering practice. Rather, we do it simply to ensure that our budget can last for the full financial year so that we can still respond to emergencies, such as significant weather events in the later months.

It is a genuine privilege to lead the people who work in the group. It is a workforce whose expertise and professionalism, under challenging circumstances, does them great credit. That work often goes unseen but, as you have heard, and I am sure that you will know, it is absolutely critical to the functioning of society. We have just under 1,400 people in the group, in a mix of administrative, industrial, professional and technical roles, who are mainly, but by no means exclusively, civil engineers. In common with many public services, we have a large number of vacancies: somewhere in the region of 28%, which equates to 475 vacancies. As the Committee can appreciate, that puts a lot of pressure on the organisation. The majority of those posts cannot currently be funded. We also face some challenges in our ability to recruit new people. Work to ensure that we can retain and build the capacity and capability necessary to discharge the statutory and other duties that we have will continue to be a high priority for the group over the next few years.

In closing, we look forward to working in support of the Minister and to engaging with the Committee throughout our work. We are very happy to try to answer any questions that the Committee may have.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Thank you. We are also looking forward to working with you. You might not think that after our questions, but we really appreciate your giving of your time to come to the Committee today. I will kick things off with a few questions, and a few members have already indicated that they have questions.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report was published yesterday. It was particularly damning about the procurement of key infrastructure projects. Seeing the like of that report come out does not instil very much public confidence in the A4 and A5 projects. I am not sure whether you can at this stage, but do you want to comment on that particular report? Is any work going on already to try to sort out some of the issues that have come to light?

Mr Woods: The Department of Finance will take the lead for the Civil Service, but, when it comes to the work that we have been doing already and that we will continue to do, we recognise the challenges in building major projects in particular. They are large, complicated things, and an awful lot of detail needs to be managed. One of the constraints to which I referred is the Department's capacity. We recognise that one of the areas in which you can start to see that impacting on delivery most visibly is our major project delivery. We are looking very carefully at the suite of major projects that the Department has and certainly at those for the TRAM group. As each project advances through its design, development, procurement, tendering and delivery phases, we are making sure that we match the resource levels that we need before taking the decision to move it to the next step.

There are other things that, I am sure, the Department of Finance will want to share in general about how we might respond to the report. As you said, Chair, there have been a number of reports over the years. For now, the answer is that we are studying the report. I have read it once since it was published, but there will be a lot more studying to do, and we recognise the importance of delivering major projects well and effectively.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): On the back of that, the Irish Government stated in their press release:

"Subject to the successful completion of the statutory processes and securing of funding, a decision to proceed could be taken for construction"

— that is, of the A5 —

"to commence before the end of 2024."

How realistic is that? Does the Department share that view on the suggested timescale for work to commence? The end of 2024 will come pretty quickly.

Mr Woods: You will have heard the Minister speak in the Chamber and publicly about the importance that he attaches to the delivery of the A5 project. We are working very hard to progress it as effectively as we can. We are considering the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) report from last year, and the Minister will also consider that and take a decision on the way forward in the coming months.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I have a more general question about management, maintenance and improvements. All of us around the table drive on the roads in our constituency every day. I do so in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. How does the Department prioritise its responsibilities in those areas? Are there areas that are typically considered to be a lower priority? There is an end-user result, so what is the impact on the road network? Will you detail the list of priorities for management, maintenance and improvements?

Mr Colin Sykes (Department for Infrastructure): Certainly. I will take the maintenance question, if that is OK, Chair. As Colin said, we currently operate under what we call "limited service" for maintenance. That means that, generally, we will fix only the highest-priority defects on the road network, whether those be potholes, instances of cracking or any other surface defects that we come across. That maintenance policy is very much based on traffic volumes, the category of the road that needs to be repaired and similar factors. We therefore tend to prioritise the higher-risk areas, where there is more likely to be a road safety implication. The outworking of that is that the main road network — the high-traffic roads — will generally get the greatest attention when it comes to repairing defects. The defects need to be of a certain size before we will intervene. The speed at which we will take forward the repairs is also based on the category and severity of the defect.

Mr Woods: We publish that policy, Chair. It is on our website. We are happy to send a copy to the Committee. It is focused on our engineering staff, so a briefing might help members to engage with it.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I am interested in that because we have seen policy change before. We are working in a constrained budget position; could we see that policy change, further down the track, and the repair size of a pothole change because we do not have the funds? Will we see another policy change?

Mr Woods: It will be for the Minister to decide whether the policy should change. He recognises the value of proper road maintenance and improving the quality of the roads. You will have seen that in some of the allocations that he has made since he took up office.

The question is one of resources. The limited service policy was introduced because there was not enough money to deliver the full standard service. It would be possible, at the start of the financial year, to go out and repair everything, but we would run out of money by about August, and if something bad were to happen, such as our discovering a void under a road, there being a landslide or a serious accident, or traffic signals failing, we would not be able to respond.

The point of the policy is to raise the intervention threshold so that the money lasts for the full year. Given that much of what we do is safety-related, we would not be comfortable with running out of money early in the year and not having cover to do important and urgent things. Clearly, that is part of the Minister's decision on how to prioritise within the Department's resource constraints.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): You said that you were allocated £184 million capital and that, in 2018, it was projected that £192 million would be needed.

Mr Woods: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): 2018 was quite a while ago. I am sure that those costs would be more today.

Mr Woods: Those are today's figures. The Barton report, which the Department published in 2018, used a figure of £143 million at 2018 prices, which is £192 million at today's prices. That is where those numbers came from.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Going back to safety measures, a concern that always comes up in the summertime is sight lines and the need for grass cutting. It may seem a small issue in the grand scheme of things, but it means a lot to people when they see high verges that are not getting cut. What safety measures are projected for this summer for grass cutting at sight lines?

Mr Sykes: We brought in a new environmental maintenance policy last year, which was about balancing the biodiversity that we require with the grass cutting that we need to do for road safety. Our policy is to cut grass twice on all our strategic and high-traffic roads and once everywhere else, where we can manage that. However, where there is a road safety implication, such as with sight lines, the grass will be cut as often as required, for road safety reasons. Equally, we will try to cut a minimum — a swathe of grass, perhaps 1 metre wide, or 1.2 metres if it is a wide verge. That is about trying to promote a bit of biodiversity as well as maintaining road safety.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): One of my last questions before I go to members is on street lighting. We have seen reports of street lighting being turned off to save costs. In rural areas, a lot of people want to see street lights in their area, but the policy may not match up to that. Will you talk about some of the street lighting projects? You have been upgrading street lights. Will you brief us on your street lighting policy?

Mr Liam McEvoy (Department for Infrastructure): Yes, I can take that one. On street lighting, as you say, we have had a considerable period of investment over recent years to upgrade many of our street lighting installations, particularly to make them more energy-efficient. We are mindful of the energy costs and resource costs that are required to light that network. Over the past number of years, there has been a considerable programme to invest in upgrading those street lights to efficient LED fittings, and that has yielded considerable savings in our overall energy costs. That programme has maybe got about another year to run, and 2024-25 should see the vast majority of that programme installed. Like I say, in parallel with that, we have a programme of inspection and testing under which we will look at the condition of our street lighting network. It will depend on what that inspection and testing comes up with, but, inevitably, some of our infrastructure comes to the end of its shelf life at certain stages.

You mentioned rural areas. Where installations come to the end of their serviceable life, we have to make a decision as to whether we replace those. Under our current policy, which has been there for quite some time, we will not replace those in all rural areas. We will tend to light towards the front door of people's houses. There is an issue with back alleys and things like that whereby we can no longer afford to light all those places. In that context, when we conclude those assessments of inspection and testing, unfortunately, there are instances when we can no longer afford to replace installations in all locations, and we will only do so where our current policy allows us to do it. That allows us to ensure that, given our finite resources, we can deliver street lighting where that is most essential.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Questions have come up after hearing that answer. First of all, you said that the programme to upgrade street lighting will take another year.

Mr McEvoy: The LED refitting one.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): OK. Is the money secure for that? There will be no further delays to that?

Mr Woods: The budget for 2024-25 has still to be set. The Executive will decide that, and then the Minister will make his choices on how to allocate that budget across the Department. We have ensured that we are ready to continue the programme. On the assumption that money is there, that programme can be delivered, and, obviously, if money is not there, it cannot.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): OK. On rural street lights, are you finding an increase in decisions to remove street lights from those particular areas under the policy? Again, I am thinking of the budget position that we are in. Are you weighing up budget, or is it purely based upon —?

Mr McEvoy: The policy level is the main indicator for those. At the moment, I am not aware of any instances when we are replacing a street light installation that meets the policy to light but we cannot afford to put the installation in. That is not the case.

Mr Woods: We are not taking out street lights to save money in that sense, no. We are just implementing the policy around what should be lit, what should be lit at public expense and what is worth the environmental impact of the light and everything else. We are not at the point of going round the network looking for lights that we could take out to save money.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): OK.

Mr Woods: Having said that, the electricity bill for the street lighting network is vast. It would be sensible to plan to try to see whether there are ways in which we can reduce the need for that, and that may be through the continuation of the bulb replacement programme, under which we are cutting our energy needs by about 40% by replacing a sodium bulb with an LED bulb. There are things such as that that we can do to try to bring that down and reduce some of the volatility that we have seen over the past few years in energy prices and the impact that that has had on our budget.

Mr Boylan: Thanks very much for your presentation. You are welcome. Your document mentions a vacancy rate of 28%. Will you give us a wee bit of detail about how we got to that point? Clearly, that has a major impact on us as we are trying to deliver.

Mr Woods: It is fair to say that it is the biggest impact that we wrestle with at the minute. It is a long and complicated story, but I will try to give you the short version. Colleagues will know that I could talk about this for longer than we have today. The reducing budget means that we cannot afford as many people. In the past couple of years in particular, the Department's resource budget, which is how we pay for most of our salaries, has been overcommitted. We cannot make that worse by hiring more people and incurring a greater wage cost.

Another aspect is a couple of decisions that were taken during the COVID pandemic, when the system rightly prioritised the filling of administrative vacancies to go to the Department of Health, the Department for the Economy and other organisations. A lot of what we need from a DFI perspective is industrial, professional and technical posts. We are still feeling the effect of the pause that came about in 2020. Ideally, we would have run competitions in 2020 or 2021, but those were not run. That created a bit of a gap: as people continued to leave the organisation, we did not have the same level of replacement.

The final aspect that we are experiencing, although we need to do some more work to figure out precisely how much impact it is having, is the general difficulty in attracting and recruiting new staff in an environment in which the pay rates that we, as a Civil Service Department, are able to offer are not always in line with what people can earn in similar jobs or in very different jobs in the private sector that they are equally able to apply for. It is a combination of those things.

Mr Boylan: There is, clearly, a knock-on effect on whatever vision we have for the future, besides doing the maintenance.

You also talked about graduate training programmes and trying to get people into the system. Will you expand a wee bit on that?

Mr Woods: Civil Service recruitment has a format and a way in which it is done. That works really well for a lot of roles. Thinking about whom we are competing with for new staff and about how they recruit and bring people into their organisations, we recognise the need to have a big focus on things such as apprenticeships, graduate training programmes and other innovative ways to bring people in. We are exploring the use of the Assured Skills programme, which is a Department for the Economy programme that is used for FDI companies and has been applied to the Civil Service in the past couple of years. We are looking to see whether we can deliver a version of that that would help us with our recruitment needs and to see whether that model can still support professional, technical or industrial recruitment as well.

Mr Boylan: I am going through my questions as quickly as I can. I have loads. What about the task force on electric vehicles (EVs)? Will somebody comment on where we are with it? We have made some progress on charge points. The task force is part of decarbonisation targets and all of that.

Ms Sian Kerr (Department for Infrastructure): We have been focusing on the task force as part of the wider transport decarbonisation plans. You probably know that it involves our Department, the Department for the Economy, the Utility Regulator and charge point operators, which are private companies. It has been set up to look at the things that are holding back the infrastructure. It is run by the private sector, and it is about how we enable that to roll out again commercially. We have seen a big increase in the number of EV charge points in the past year. That is set to continue. I think that there are six actions in the plan about connection charges, further roll-out and gaps. We are very much looking to continue that. As Colin said, it is early days when it comes to discussing with the Minister how we take forward some of these things, but I envisage that EVs will remain a key issue in transport decarbonisation.

Mr Boylan: I have two final points. What can the £16 million that Minister O'Dowd recently announced be spent on across the board? Finally, can you comment on the number of claims from damage caused by potholes?

Mr Woods: The part of the allocation that came to this group was £9.1 million for structural maintenance and potholes, and, on those, the Minister issued a written statement and made an oral statement in the Chamber. Colin, do you want to talk about how we will use that?

Mr Sykes: Two elements are going towards what we call "structural maintenance", which is resurfacing and large-scale patching. We will use £1 million to target the roads that are in the worst condition: areas that have deteriorated but may not meet the intervention levels or are a bit of a patchwork in places. We are looking to go into those areas where we have seen defect clusters and do large-scale patching. That should allow us to deliver between 40 and 50 of those small-scale schemes to give that immediate improvement in some of those worst-hit areas.

The remaining £8.1 million is more significant. That will go towards our structural maintenance programmes. That is our larger-scale resurfacing scheme. Again, the teams in the local section offices are developing the programmes and identifying the schemes that they can deliver quickly to provide the overall resurfacing schemes that will help, again, in the areas in worst condition.

Mr Woods: You asked about claims. In 2022-23, we spent about £8 million on claims arising from the road network, and we expect that, this year, it will be something similar. That is a higher figure than the historical trend. There are a lot of complicated reasons for that, and one of those, no doubt, is the deteriorating quality of the road network, which leads to more accidents and more incidents that create liability. However, we look at every claim on its merits, and we repudiate the ones that we do not

accept liability for. One of the big reasons for the increased cost of claims is how personal injury claims are valued by the courts. There was a change to that a number of years ago, and, typically, a personal injury claim is valued at a higher level than it was previously. That £8 million will include a number of large single settlements for significant personal injury claims that arise from accidents. That is the trend on that.

Mr Boylan: It is a big challenge.

Mr Woods: It is. There is no doubt that there is better value for money if you fix the defect early rather than trying to fix it late. Certainly, avoiding the possibility of someone having an accident is always a better play, for all sorts of reasons.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Before I bring in the Deputy Chair, John, I have a tiny question about that £8.1 million. It was interesting that the £8.1 million was announced and the value of claims was also £8.1 million. That was a funny little quirk. How confident are you that that money will be spent by the end of the financial year? Can you give an indication of how much of that £8.1 million is going to each division?

Mr Sykes: As soon as the Minister announced that the money would be made available, we immediately had that allocated to each of the divisional areas. That is spread across each division, and the amounts are based on the size of their road network, overall need and their capability and capacity to deliver schemes. As I said, the teams in those areas are all working hard to put together programmes to deliver that. We will start to see those schemes on the ground soon. It is challenging to spend it between now and the end of the financial year, but we will do absolutely everything that we can to ensure that it is spent.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Do you have a breakdown of the money for each individual area?

Mr Sykes: I can provide that separately to you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Perfect.

Mr Stewart: Folks, thank you so much for taking the time to come along. I do not often envy the task that you as a Department have. The work is through the roof, and it is probably the one Department whose work everybody sees every day, in that everybody uses the assets that you are there to maintain. Issues under the Department for Infrastructure's remit are the ones that come to my office, and probably everyone else's, the most through people's queries and complaints, and we have to deal with those. On that point, I thank your staff in the northern division, which includes Carrickfergus and Larne. They often go above and beyond the call of duty, and, even when they cannot resolve the many pressures that I put on them on behalf of constituents, they act fairly and try to manage expectations as best as possible. Thank you for that. I have a few points, some of which have already been addressed. I will dive into the figure of £192 million. Colin, you said that that is what you need in order to provide the ideal service and that, as a result of reduced funding, you are operating a limited service. Within that, is there a tiered limited service? How would it look if we were to get you to £170 million or £180 million? I want to tease out from you where the service gets to when the criteria threshold for assessing potholes or street lights starts to go up or down.

Mr Woods: I will attempt to answer that. Colin can come in as well. Where the threshold is set relates to the scale of the asset, and we have a duty to maintain all assets. The Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 talks about the Department's "duty to maintain all roads". The 1993 Order states that that will be done with regard to volume of traffic and other types of things, but there is not a waiver for any part of it. When we therefore think about where that threshold is set, we do so in full awareness of the fact that, to the best of our ability, we have to be able to apply that equally and consistently. That makes it harder for us to make incremental changes: we need either to take all of something out or to leave it all in. It is harder to justify a more varied picture.

We can always use additional money, however. As you have seen, we are ready and able to take money and spend it, even if that is late in the financial year. That does not quite extend to our being able to change the formal policy, not least because the courts will look to see what the Department's published formal policies are and whether it has adhered to them. We therefore need to be sure that we can do that consistently where a defect is encountered that the policy states should be addressed "if possible" or "if the resources are available". It then gets harder, as it gets a bit messier.

Mr Sykes: The way in which the breakdown of the essential maintenance budget is set is quite complicated. There are elements that are inescapable. For example, there is a bulk of money for traffic signals that cannot change. The lights are either maintained, and they stay on, or they have to be switched off. When elements of the budget are already set, small changes to the remainder do not make that much change on the ground. We have done what we can with the budget, which is why we have had to reduce ourselves to operating a limited service across the network. It would take additional money — we estimate between £55 million and £60 million — to take us up to a normal level of service.

Mr Woods: We fund the large-scale stuff through the capital budget and day-to-day safety maintenance through the resource budget. We have done a bit of work on trying to analyse the difference between the number that keeps the network in the right condition and what we have. Depending on how far back you want to go and the period that you want to analyse, it is close to £1 billion less, over about 10 years, than what we know to be the sensible amount of money that it takes to maintain an asset. We often use the analogy that you know rightly that you can get away without maintaining a car or a house properly for a year or two and will not suffer too badly but that you will have a problem if you do that for 10 years. It will then cost you more to fix. That applies equally to the road network as it does to those other types of assets.

Mr Stewart: I totally agree. There has been long-term underinvestment in our road network. From what you are saying, it is going to get worse before it gets better. There will be gradual underinvestment in the asset year after year, so we will see more potholes in the roads and will effectively be running to stand still to repair them out of the current budget.

Mr Woods: I do not think that we are in a position in which we are slowing the decline, if that makes sense. We are doing everything that can be done. We are working incredibly hard to keep the network functional and to ensure that it fulfils the purpose for which we all rely on it. It comes down to the laws of physics: water, temperature and interaction with materials will continue to affect roads until such time as we can fix things. Everybody knows that a small pothole will become a big pothole, especially if nothing is done about it. That is where we are at.

Mr Stewart: That leads me on to two other points. From the point of view of financial planning, how do you assess whether a road gets a complete resurfacing scheme or it gets patchwork after patchwork? I can think of one street in my town of Carrickfergus where the same pothole has appeared 10 times in the past year. Dear knows how much that has cost in compensation. It is there so often that people think that it has never been filled in. When is that factored into financial planning to say, "Right, let's do this properly rather than put a sticking plaster on it in the interests of saving money"?

Mr Sykes: Our local section officers, who design the resurfacing programmes, apply a full set of criteria to all the schemes that they develop and put into the programme. That is very much based on the number of defects, the number of claims and the amount of traffic on a stretch of road, its classification and a number of other things, including the number of complaints made about it. Those are all taken into account, along with other condition survey information that we collect. We survey the network for its structural integrity and surface coarseness, so a range of other data points and factors are taken into account. That builds up a picture and allows the officers to build up a prioritised programme of schemes, which they can then use when money is allocated to them to deliver those schemes.

While I accept that some areas will look like they could do with work, there will always be others on the list that are a higher priority. We have to make the budget go as far as we can.

Mr Woods: If we look at that position for this year, 2023-24, £192 million is the figure required for the capital restructuring that is needed. We got £90 million at the start of the year, and the Minister has been able to increase that to £99 million, which is great, but we are still quite a bit short of £192 million. So, there is always a higher priority scheme.

At 26,000 kilometres, the network is vast. The number of schemes that we would like to do from a purely engineering perspective far exceeds the available budget. So, there will be schemes that we agree need to be done but are just not able to prioritise. That is why people experience what you were talking about.

Mr Stewart: With regard to the winter service, we have been pretty lucky over the past few years that we have been measuring really cold weather in days rather than in weeks. To that end, cold weather

has not really impacted on the winter service too much. What concerns do you have about the budget for winter service, such as gritting, and the impact on our roads of cold weather getting worse without the additional investment that you need?

Mr Woods: The Department has always prioritised winter service precisely because, unlike a pothole or a bad patch of road, where you would experience the problem over a longer period of time, if the gritting is not done you will experience the impact of that at 7.30 the next morning. We saw a little bit of that in January when we had the concurrent weather emergencies and the industrial action. We have always prioritised gritting.

Equally, that has not been in our baseline. Every year, the Department has bid at monitoring rounds for the money that it needs to grit the roads. It has always got the money, so, to be fair, that strategy has worked. It would be better if the money was baselined, but there are lots of pressures on budgets across the whole system, and Ministers and the Executive will decide on that. If we got to a point where we felt unable to deliver gritting, we would treat it as a really high priority. We would be unlikely to just sit and say, "Oh well, there we are. No money." We would have to try to prioritise it ahead of other things.

Mr Dunne: Thank you, folks, for coming along and for your very detailed discussion and presentation.

Staffing was mentioned. With regard to recruitment challenges, I am aware of those challenges in my area from being in regular contact with your staff. Have you have seen a change from years ago, when a public-sector post like that was very attractive? With a competitive private sector, are you are facing a lot of competition for technical expertise?

Mr Woods: Yes. We are doing some work on benchmarking pay rates across some of the specialist disciplines to inform what exactly we should do about that, and how we should engage with the Department of Finance in particular on that. All of us could give you anecdotal examples of colleagues who have left the Department to work in the private sector, or sometimes even in our arm's-length bodies, for more pay than we are able to offer them within the Civil Service pay structure.

Mr Dunne: Getting engineers who are starting their careers is also a big challenge. The apprenticeship approach is very positive. Seeing the Department take the lead on that and making it a priority is important. Hopefully, that is something that can be built upon.

Roads maintenance, as has been mentioned, is the number-one issue that is coming through all our offices, and my constituency of North Down is no different. Is it correct that the criteria for investment in roads maintenance are not based on population and traffic volume but on the length of roads?

Mr Sykes: No. The overall maintenance policy is based on the volume of traffic on roads, so the roads with the highest volume of traffic will receive priority when it comes to defect repair. Equally, for the resurfacing programme, the volume of traffic on the road network is one of the criteria that we use.

Mr Dunne: That is OK. Leading on from that, people like to be at the top of league tables, but not in this case. In the Ards and North Down Borough Council area, over 3,800 potholes were reported. Now, I understand that, if the same pothole is reported 10 times, that goes down as 10 potholes. However, we do not want to lead that league table. The Ards and North Down council area was one of the least well funded for road maintenance. The recent funding announcements from the Minister and so on will, hopefully, address that.

We are very much in a pothole crisis. As I said, it is the number-one issue. People are very frustrated with the condition of the roads and the sometimes temporary nature of repairs. I have seen a pothole close to my office in Bangor that was repaired manually reopen within a week. There are real issues around that. I pay tribute to the section office in Ards and North Down, particularly Stephen Gardiner, the section engineer, who came into our area relatively recently and is certainly doing his best in challenging circumstances.

Finally, on the intervention levels of 20 millimetres and 50 millimetres, how realistic do you think it is that we could get back to an intervention level of 20 millimetres?

Mr Sykes: Again, it comes down to the budget that is available to do that. The intervention level is set as it is now due to the limited resource budget that is available to us. As I said, at the moment, our

essential maintenance service is funded to £35 million, which gives us the limited service. We estimate that £55 million to £60 million would take us to the service that we had previously.

I will just pick up on the point about temporary repairs, just to explain that. When we pick up a defect, it is categorised and given a time within which it has to be fixed for us to meet our statutory obligations to keep the road network safe. Sometimes, that is 24 hours, and, sometimes, it is five days. Sometimes, we get a month to fix it, just depending on where it is and its severity. Because of that time restriction and the need to make it safe, we will sometimes do a temporary repair. That is what people might see: that it is not a permanent repair. Yes, those repairs can fail, because they are there only until such time as we can get back to do a permanent repair. It is not the ideal situation for us either. Ideally, we would do a permanent repair first time, every time, but we simply do not have the resources to do that.

Mr Dunne: I appreciate that. We have seen that — for example, on the A2 dual carriageway from Bangor to Belfast, where there are 40,000 vehicle movements — when something has come up urgently, your folks are straight on to it, given the severity and the risks associated with it.

I have a couple of final points. It has been a relatively mild winter. Frost was always put down as a big cause of potholes, but heavy rainfall seems to be worse, certainly in North Down. Is that something that you have seen across the country?

Mr Sykes: Yes, without doubt. Any form of severe weather will cause a marked deterioration in the network. It is usually at this time of year that we see that. Frost and ice will damage the road surfaces, but so will heavy rain where it is able to get in and wash away what is underneath the road and undermine the integrity of the road network.

Mr Dunne: I have a final point, if I may, please, Chair. The issue of weed spraying comes up every year. From speaking to section engineers, I know that they are keen to get going at it early with the contract quads that we all see out in the spring. Is that very much a priority for this year?

Mr Sykes: Yes. We currently intend to carry out a full weed-spraying operation in the coming year. The weeds almost have to start to come up before we can start the spraying applications. There needs to be something for the weedkiller to get into to destroy. Subject to budgets, the intention is to carry out a full weed-spraying operation this year.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): We will not even touch on the rain in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Mr Boylan: Or the floods in Newry or anywhere else.

Mr Durkan: I thank the team for coming along. I start by echoing other members' appreciation of the work that you and your colleagues do. It is obvious that the circumstances are very difficult and strained. It is fair to say that our road network is the most visible symptom of the stripping of public services that we have seen for more than a decade. It is reflected in the volume of complaints and calls that we get, and that you then get from us.

Many of the points have been touched on. With respect to the A5, we are obviously delighted and welcome the announcement from the Dublin Government last week. I am sure that there are still hurdles to jump and hoops to go through. It is the desire to get that on the ground in this calendar year, but there's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip, and we have probably been here before. I wonder whether, in the interim, there is the capacity or intention to front-load any of that work. Is there stuff that can be done along the route to prioritise particular accident black spots or more dangerous areas outside the main scheme?

Mr Woods: Obviously, the Minister has made his position on the A5 really clear generally and to us as officials. That is the focus for our work. You are right: there are a lot of challenges ahead when you are delivering something as large and complex as 85 kilometres of new dual carriageway. The existing A5 road has not been forgotten about. We have delivered a range of safety improvements to that road over the past number of years and we continue to look for safety issues that can be effectively addressed. The extent to which that is a strong option is reflected in the fact that we have proposed an 85-kilometre dual carriageway offline road as the main and optimal safety intervention available. While there are other things that could, in theory, be done, they would not benefit safety as much as the scheme would. However, that is something that we continue to look at. Certainly, the staff in the

section offices in the western division continue to look at the existing A5 road to see whether schemes there could be addressed. There are a couple of things. We are looking to improve a junction in Omagh as part of the plan this year. Members will be aware that we publish an annual report to each council, and the councils that encompass the A5 have a number of schemes in there aimed specifically at improving the existing road.

Mr Durkan: That is the A5. After that the A6, you will not be surprised to hear. Colin, great work has been done on it, but we are not there yet. I wonder whether the completion of the A6 is anywhere on the radar. How can we move it up the agenda? As I say, great work has been done, but a huge bottleneck has been created at Drumahoe. It is actually worse than Dungiven ever was. It causes associated issues, not just for motorists but obviously for residents and the environment.

Mr Woods: Last year, in the absence of Ministers, the Department published a prioritisation of major road schemes. The A6 was one of the schemes that we identified that would continue to be developed. We are continuing to develop it. Obviously, it was an Executive flagship scheme as well, and we are conscious of that. You will be aware that the route for the final section goes near the Mobuoy waste site. At the minute, we are working with DAERA and we are part of the working group that is looking at that. Once we understand the plans to remediate that site, which we need before we can finalise proposals for the Minister's consideration of that road, we will be able to do that. We need to see what that is going to look like. Obviously, we are building alongside the River Faughan and we are going to build a bridge over it. It is a complex ecosystem, and we do not want to do anything that will make the situation worse or will interfere with the ability to remediate the site. I suspect that we will wait for that, obviously subject to the Minister's consideration.

Mr Durkan: I fear that that could take a while, sadly. I wonder whether there is potential to look at the decoupling of Caw to Maydown and Maydown to Drumahoe, to skip the Mobuoy site until that is sorted. Everyone has mentioned the state of the roads, and we welcome the recent ministerial statements and additional investment. You have touched on how much of a difference that will make. It will more than scratch the surface, but just about more. People have talked about the maintenance methodology, if you like, with particular focus on the pothole repairs. Similar logic could be applied — I think that I have mentioned it to you before, Colin — to gullies, given the reduction in the number of times that they are cleared. In the good old days — we did not know that they were good when we were in them — gullies were cleared four times a year. That was reduced to two, and now it is one. It is not even one, because, if, when the lorry comes, a car is parked over a gully, it just batters on and will not be back until next year. We have, obviously, seen an increase in flooding events across various constituencies, and that plays a part. Are there any plans to review how those things are done?

Mr Woods: We are conscious of it. When we see heavy rainfall and flooding, we recognise that road drainage has a part to play and that preventative maintenance is better than reactive maintenance. We have talked a bit about financial constraints, which are relevant, but, equally, particularly with something like gully emptying, it is about staffing constraints. Given the number of vacancies in our industrial workforce, we do not have enough bodies for multiple crews to do gully emptying at the same time. We have to deploy our people resources as carefully as we do our financial ones, so that is relevant. We certainly recognise the impact that it can have. We discuss it regularly, and we are considering what we might do, but that is always on the understanding that there is no additional money at this point and that, until there is, it will be difficult to do much more than the current policy states.

Mr Durkan: We have asked for a breakdown of how the additional investment will be spent, which will be welcome, but I am also interested in the formula that is applied. It seems to be a cocktail of need, traffic volume and capacity to deliver the schemes in time. That concerns me, because where the need is greatest sometimes reflects a lack of capacity to address stuff as you go along, and you would not want to perpetuate that in any way.

Mr Woods: When we talk about capacity there, it is mostly about contractor capacity to deliver. We employ contractors to deliver large schemes. Our staff do the design work, supervision and so on, but we do not do the actual work. That becomes more of an issue at short notice, depending on what our contractors have programmed. One of the reasons why a multi-year budget would allow us to deliver better value, even with the same sort of numbers, is that we could work with our delivery partners and suppliers to programme that work carefully and effectively.

Mr Durkan: Are you at liberty to say where exactly the money has come from? Is it money that you were saving for, literally, a rainy day that has not arrived in this financial year? In response to the question about winter services, you said that you were successful in monitoring rounds every year. Sadly, for five of the past seven years, we have not had any monitoring rounds, and I know how dependent on them the Department has been, so there has surely been a huge cumulative negative impact of the lack of government in those years.

Mr Woods: The absence of monitoring rounds makes it impossible to bid for money in-year and has an impact. The money that was reallocated in the current year on the capital side came from a mixture of some schemes not progressing as fast as we had hoped and therefore needing less money this year and a number of technical accounting allocations to account for whether something was resource or capital. The winter services resource budget is primarily the cost of labour. There are some supply material costs for salt, and there is vehicle maintenance and so on, but the drivers, the supervisors and the scouts who populate the out-of-hours rota are a large part of the cost. That has come from the resource budget. One reason why the absence of monitoring rounds was particularly difficult is that the resource budget is under even more pressure than the capital budget.

Mr Durkan: And finally, Chair — I promise *[Laughter]* — you have not got your budget for next year. Budgets are always a challenge and are becoming more so every year. Under the Climate Change Act 2022, they could become more challenging, given that the Act compels you to spend 10% of the roads budget on active travel schemes. Have you worked out how you will do that? We welcome investment in active travel and attempts to tackle the climate crisis, but how much of a challenge will that present for the Department?

Mr Woods: It will, undoubtedly, present a big challenge. There are a number of different challenges: 10% of the transport budget includes public transport and roads — the whole lot. Those are budgets that are already under significant pressure. Think about what we have spent on active travel over the past number of years: in and around £12 million or £13 million year. To deliver 10% of the transport budget that DFI spends could take multiples of that, and it is not easy to readily identify where the money can be taken from in the context of a flatlined budget rolled forward. It will be for the Minister to decide his priorities and the budget allocations.

Over the past year, we have focused on having the capacity to grow our ability to spend sensibly and in a value-for-money way so that we can deliver the 10% target. We take it very seriously: it is, literally, the law. How we respond to that has been the challenge that we have set ourselves. An organisation that spends £12 million one year cannot spend £70 million the next year. We need a plan to grow our ability to deliver, and we have a lot of work under way that we hope to engage with the Minister on over the next number of weeks and months to allow him to make some choices on how he would like us to proceed.

Mr Baker: Thank you for your presentation and answers. You will be glad to know that I do not have three or four final, final questions; I have only a couple. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Durkan: I had only one final question? *[Laughter.]* It just took me a while to get there.

Mr Boylan: Blow the whistle on him.

Mr Baker: Colin touched on this issue in an answer to Mark. The challenges of budgetary constraints and austerity that we have experienced over the past 14 years have come to the fore, and there are staffing issues as well. In our experience as MLAs, projects and schemes in our constituencies are sometimes held up because of contractual issues. Has that pressure eased?

Mr Woods: I will jinx myself if I answer that question. We have done a lot of work on our procurement over the past number of years, and everyone is aware of the challenges that the Department has had over a five- to 10-year period, particularly around procurement. We revised our procurement strategy for roads procurement, and we have introduced term contracts for things like asphalt resurfacing. We have progressed the procurement of things that we need in a different way.

In a number of cases, we have created framework options for contracts, and they give a little more flexibility and ensure that the capacity can be there when we need it, because we recognise the damage that was done in years when we did not have resurfacing contracts and could not deliver large schemes. We know that that was not optimal by any means, so we have improved that position.

We procure all the time. Anyone who does not get a contract has the right to challenge, and you can never be sure of the exact grounds on which someone might seek to do so. However, recognising the complexity of it, we put a lot of effort into making the process as robust as possible in a way that is compliant with the law and fair to all the bidders, and, hopefully, that will continue to be the case.

Mr Baker: Climate change and decarbonisation have been touched on. The Minister's statement mentioned that some of the £16 million was for the Translink fleet to move to zero emissions. Can you provide an update on where that is sitting?

Mr Woods: Translink does not sit within our group. I will invite my colleagues to talk about that next week.

Mr Baker: No problem.

Mr Woods: We have a similar challenge with DFI Roads' fleet. We operate a lot of vehicles, and, typically, they are not cars and vans that can most easily be switched to electric. We therefore have to look at alternate fuels, such as hydrogen. Again, the resource constraint can be a limiting factor. The cost of the decarbonised version of a standard vehicle costing £120,000 can be £470,000, and we do not have that. That is part of the challenge and balancing act that we need to do.

Mr Baker: Thank you.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you for coming along. As others have done, I thank the people on the ground who work with us day and daily to solve our problems. I have several questions, and I will rattle through them fairly quickly.

The grass is cut twice on A roads or higher-volume roads. If you set a contract with a contractor to cut the grass, whether it is a C road moving to a B road or a B road moving to an A road, does the contractor have to cut more than a 1-metre width? Is the width specified in their contract?

Mr Sykes: Generally, we will instruct the contractors to cut one full swathe everywhere, except at sight lines. Generally, we expect to see the 1- or 1.5-metre cut along all verges, other than at sight lines where the whole verge may need to be cut.

Mr K Buchanan: Do they do that, and is it in their contract? Do you expect them to do it, or do they know to do it? I do not always see it. When you go from a B road on to an A road, there is a massive sight line, but if only a 1-metre strip of grass has been cut, you have to put the nose of your car out on to the road before you can see. Are they supposed to cut wider than 1 metre at sight lines?

Mr Sykes: Yes, certainly. Anywhere that there is a sight line, the grass should be cut —

Mr K Buchanan: Who polices that?

Mr Sykes: Again, it is our section offices that instruct and look after those contracts. Grass cutting is done through a combination of internal contractors and external contractors. It is done by both. Again, there are difficulties with resources, as mentioned, and the staff on the ground are very busy. We certainly do not get round to check the work that is done as often as we would like.

Mr K Buchanan: You referred to lighting. Where does the saving that you make from an LED retrofit go to, when you are changing from sodium or whatever? Does that stay in the lighting budget, or does it go back into the resource budget?

Mr Woods: It is managed at a departmental level. Typically, we save about 40% of the electricity cost when we switch from a sodium bulb to an LED bulb. That reduces the amount that we need to be allocated to deliver the same service. We do not get that money and keep it.

Mr K Buchanan: On weed spraying, I do not mean to be rude, but sometimes it is more like weed feeding than weed spraying. Who tells the contractor which product to use? Is that a direction from you or the contractor? Sometimes, they spray the weeds, and nothing happens.

Mr Sykes: Certainly, the types of materials that they use are set in the specifications. We do not state products, but we tell them which types of chemicals they are allowed to use. Those are set in conjunction with whatever codes of practice there are around environmental maintenance. It is up to the contractor, at that stage, to source the correct product to treat the weeds.

Mr K Buchanan: Again, who polices that contract? I see workers on little quad bikes out spraying, but it is not effective. Normally, in two weeks, the weeds should be gone. I appreciate that rain can affect it. In and around estates specifically, there are weeds growing that high. People will say to me, "Those weren't sprayed", but they were sprayed. It is as though you are feeding them. There is an issue with the product or its application.

Mr Sykes: Certainly, it can be a combination of both, or, as you said, the weather can make it less effective. It is up to our contractors to go back and treat them again to ensure that we maintain a weed-free environment.

Mr Durkan: Can I ask a wee supplementary? *[Laughter.]* There are restrictions on the product that can be used, due to environmental and health concerns.

Mr K Buchanan: Fair enough, but the point is that you are applying the product, but it is not doing the job.

We have talked about new roads: the A6; the A5; the Magherafelt bypass; the Enniskillen bypass; and, possibly, the Cookstown bypass. We are building new roads, but we are not maintaining what we have. What is your personal opinion on that? You have built the A6 up to Castledawson. I travel on it most days, and it is great. However, in time, that will need maintained, and the road structure feeding into it is in bits. How will we get our resource and capital correct? Yes, we need new roads to a degree. What are your thoughts on that, given that we are not maintaining what we have?

Mr Woods: You will forgive me for pointing out that I do not have a personal opinion; I will have my Minister's opinion in due course.

Mr K Buchanan: You can tell me later.

Mr Boylan: Good answer, Colin. That is a good start.

Mr Woods: Your question on the balance between maintaining what we have and building new roads is an excellent one. It can only be answered almost at a societal level. There is a question for the Department, through the Minister, the Executive and everyone else around the relevant priority of all sorts of things across government. Road maintenance is at the heart of every aspect of day-to-day life. We all use it. None of us can leave the house without thinking about work, because the second you cross your driveway or your front door, you are on to the network that we are in charge of and responsible for. There is a legitimate debate to be had on that.

When you look at the need to ensure that we have a network that provides the same connectivity to communities across Northern Ireland, looking particularly at regional balance, you see, over recent years, a number of schemes designed to improve regional connectivity on the strategic network, in particular. We can all see the value in that. We can, equally, all see the value in maintaining all the existing roads to a higher standard. If you were to ask us to answer that from an engineering perspective, we would say that we should do all of that. That would be the closest that we would have to an opinion on the relative priorities for budgets. I will, respectfully, leave that to others.

Mr K Buchanan: This is my last question, Chair. The £8.1 million will cover the public liability claims. Were you to take that £8.1 million and break it down for me — let us call it potholes and damaged vehicles — how do you analyse that figure year-on-year, based on what you are paying into resource to repair the roads? In answer, perhaps you could explain what happens when you inspect a road. Let us say that you inspect a road on 1 January; that is your inspection day. I come along two weeks later, a pothole has appeared, and I damage my vehicle. When does the clock start to tick? You do the check on 1 January, and a vehicle is damaged a few weeks later, with no yellow paint. Can you explain to me or to the motorists out there how that process works?

Mr Sykes: To put it into overall context, in the last financial year, we had about 3,500 claims on the road network. This year, to date, we have had almost 4,000. We are receiving about 200 claims a week.

Mr K Buchanan: What percentage of those do you pay?

Mr Sykes: It varies: I do not have the exact figures in front of me. As I said, we have a statutory defence where we are maintaining the road network, and we will certainly investigate all claims in order to ensure that we have carried out our obligations. The Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 requires us to maintain the road network in a reasonable condition. That comes through our inspection regime and then the speed with which we repair the road, depending on the volumes of traffic and where the road is.

From whenever we pick up the defect, we will have a certain amount of time to fix it. Were there damage to a vehicle, however, or if anything were to happen in the interim, we would defend that on the basis that we are carrying out our reasonable maintenance regime. We cannot be everywhere, and we cannot fix everything all at the one time. However, there will be cases where, perhaps, we have not fixed the defect within the required period or have not picked up the defect. In those cases, there may be a legitimate claim for compensation.

Mr Woods: Ultimately, we would invite the court to decide whether we have successfully discharged our duty to maintain the road. Obviously, if the court determines that we have not done so in a particular case and determines that the Department is liable, a claim would be paid out.

Mr K Buchanan: I am just seeing one last question here — *[Laughter]* — which is about abandonment. Do you get any income from abandonment, perhaps from a contractor looking at a piece of property? I appreciate that you do not always own the bed of soil generally.

Mr Woods: If we own the underlying ground, it would be disposed of —

Mr K Buchanan: As in sold through the process?

Mr Woods: — through the normal government disposal of land process. We never abandon for a direct exchange of money or anything like that. We generally only abandon when we are satisfied that a road is no longer needed for traffic.

Mr K Buchanan: Let us say that I owned the bedrock below a road, and you had the road and abandoned it. Where does liability lie?

Mr Woods: With the landowner.

Mr K Buchanan: Is that because you have abandoned it at that point, legally?

Mr Woods: Legally, that means that we are no longer under an obligation to maintain it.

Mr K Buchanan: To maintain it. OK, thank you.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I was not lying when I said that everybody is very keen to ask questions today. Peter, you are next.

Mr McReynolds: Thank you, Chair. Thank you everyone, for your answers to our questions. By virtue of coming towards the end of the question session, a number of my questions have already been answered. I was eyeing up Cathal Boylan for stealing all the good ones from me.

Mr Boylan: I will not apologise, Chair. *[Laughter.]* Hansard can record that.

Mr McReynolds: I have about four questions but they are all quite scattergun, so I will take them one by one. I would like an update on the Eastern Transport Plan 2035, in the context of the climate emergency and the need to move to multi-modal travel? I put on record my thanks to Tony Rafferty for taking me on a tour over the summer and telling me all about how exciting the plan is. During those

briefings, which Mark Durkan and Cathal Boylan also received, I saw that a really exciting project is going to be delivered. Where is that at the moment?

Ms Kerr: Those tours have become known as Tony tours. *[Laughter.]* If anyone else is interested, I am sure that we could line him up for further tours.

Where are we? You will know that there was a public consultation on the objectives and vision of the plan. We had a staggering number of responses, and we are still going through those at the moment. We hope to bring it to the Minister for further discussion. Obviously, we have not had a chance to talk to him about it, and he has not been out on a tour yet, to the best of my knowledge. That is something that we are very keen to talk to him about.

Mr McReynolds: Has it gone to Belfast City Council yet?

Ms Kerr: The council has been involved throughout the whole process *[Inaudible.]* That includes the other councils; it is obviously not just Belfast.

Mr McReynolds: Can I get an update on the DFI policy on introducing 20 mph zones in residential areas? I know that that was trialed at a number of schools. Are there any thoughts about introducing those in some residential areas?

Mr Woods: Consideration of things such as speed limit changes would be part of the decarbonisation plan, so, in the context of having to produce proposals and policies to deliver net zero in transport, that might be one of the things that we will look at. We are still working through exactly what the climate action plan needs to have in it and are supporting the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on its lead on that, but speed limit changes might be part of that. Ultimately, it will be for the Minister to decide the blend of policies that he wishes to take forward. One of the things that we are trying to do is to make sure that we have a very good understanding of the impact that interventions across the board would have on carbon emissions in particular.

Mr McReynolds: Thirdly, this question comes from a conversation that I had with someone very recently. Do you have any plans to introduce more average speed camera systems to improve road safety? I never really knew the distinction between fixed speed cameras and average speed cameras. Average ones sound like a really good idea to me, as someone who drives quite early in the morning to go to the gym. The Newtownards Road turns into a motorway at that stage. I have seen cars driving quite slowly before the fixed speed camera, and then they speed right up again. Have you looked into having average speed cameras?

Mr Woods: Speed enforcement is both very popular and very unpopular at exactly the same time.

Mr McReynolds: I know.

Mr Woods: We do not have any current work to look specifically at that, but we do look at speed in the context of safety, so, when we are looking at the safety of a junction or a stretch of road, the speed limit is part of our consideration. That is happening regularly across the network and at a number of specific locations where speed studies are being conducted but not necessarily, at this stage, at a network-wide level.

Mr McReynolds: Lastly, I was a bit triggered by John's question earlier about gritting the roads. It reminded me of my time in Belfast City Council and asking about the gritting of the Comber greenway. Danny will be aware that I was always raising that issue. As an East Belfast councillor at that time, I was constantly being contacted about people who had slipped on the greenway because it is not gritted currently *[Inaudible.]* Have there been any conversations about maybe trying to include that in a monitoring round bid but also about transference to the councils? I know that that suggestion has been bandied around for a while.

Mr Woods: We do consider it, and we talk about it from time to time, but we do not have a current plan to grit the Comber greenway. We grit only the 28% of the roads that carry most of the traffic, so lower-traffic roads do not get gritted. If the Comber greenway were to be treated in the same way as a road, the traffic volumes would not justify inclusion in the gritting programme, but I appreciate that it is a different type of service and is used for different purposes. We would need additional equipment and a different methodology, so it would not be a matter of just adding it to our existing gritting schedule.

Obviously, it is narrower and needs different access, but we would also have to use a different type of salt. The salt that we use relies on heavy traffic grinding it into the surface to be effective, and you would not get that on the Comber greenway at all, particularly on a cold, icy morning when fewer people would attempt to use it. However, we recognise the value that it would have, and we have done some work to improve the usability of the greenway, such as, for example, the lighting scheme that was installed last year to try to extend the time that people can use the greenway, but we do not yet have a proposal for gritting.

Mr McReynolds: No final questions from me. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Unfortunately, I do have some final questions. On gritting, it seems a bit crazy to me that you would have to do it through monitoring rounds rather than that be a basic. How long has that been happening?

Mr Sykes: That has pretty much always been the case. We have always had to bid in year.

Mr Woods: When I joined the Department, it was a point of interest to me that the Department does not have a legal obligation to grit the roads. It has a legal obligation to clear snow and to maintain the roads but not specifically to grit the roads and remove ice. That is part of the picture as well. Leaving aside the legal technicality, we know instantly that if we do not grit the roads, we have a significant issue because the transport network does not function and so many other things do not function as a result of that. As I said, we have always been able to divert the money even though it has not been in the baseline.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): It is an interesting point. There is something that has come up for me — for other members, too, I am sure — and I am interested in knowing the reason for it. Obviously, there are resurfacing schemes that will be happening, and there have been quite a few in my area. I have been speaking to my local section, who are absolutely fabulous: they are brilliant at dealing with any of the issues that I raise.

Road closures and maintenance can really get people irate, particularly in smaller towns. I can think of towns in my area where you are literally going through what I classify as "back roads" if the town is closed off for road maintenance schemes. They do not use lane closures, which can sometimes make it very difficult. In my constituency: there are no motorways and very few dual carriageways, so motorway traffic has to come through certain towns. Is that a sectional decision that is made, or is it policy at a higher level? Are those roads closed in order to get the work done more quickly and, therefore, to reduce the cost of a project? Is that why we are seeing more road closures, rather than lane closures, for road maintenance projects?

Mr Sykes: It very much depends. It is not that there is a particular policy around it. The need for road closures very much depends on the health and safety of the travelling public and, equally, our staff and contractors who work on the road network. There are always a lot of very detailed discussions between our traffic sections, contractors and maintenance teams on minimising the disruption to road users, but, equally, giving enough time to actually complete a scheme.

We are not the only ones who work on the road network — utility services work on it as well — so there are thousands of road closures throughout the year. It is about that balance between minimising disruption, maintaining safety and being able to complete the work where we can. If a road has to be closed, we will do what we can to divert road users to the shortest and most appropriate alternative route that is possible. Equally, I recognise that some people will find their own way and end up on some roads that are not necessarily appropriate for that level of traffic.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I have seen an increase in road closures in my area. Very sadly, in some circumstances, because of the rural nature of our roads, motorway traffic coming through on them has led to fatalities. It is about trying to minimise some of those impacts as well. I hope that that matter can be taken away and looked at from your perspective, because it has caused quite a few issues in my constituency.

The Deputy Chair is indicating that he has a question, but I have one last question —

Mr Stewart: That old chestnut.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): — on street lights. I want to check about LED lighting, because some issues in relation to wildlife have cropped up. While we love to see improvements and while you are saying that it is brilliant for cost saving, there can be an impact on wildlife. How do you balance those things?

Mr McEvoy: For those particular schemes, environmental considerations are a key part of the assessment process, and we are very mindful of the impact on biodiversity. Those are key parts of the design of those schemes, and there have been particular incidents in certain locations where we have had to go back and redesign or refit certain aspects because of an adverse impact on biodiversity. We are very mindful of that during the design process.

Mr Woods: I offer the example of the Comber greenway again. I do not know whether you have ever had the chance to see the Comber greenway lit. We use red bulbs for red-spectrum lighting, because it has less of an impact on wildlife while maintaining some degree of lighting. It is not lit like this room — obviously, it is different — but the point is that it can be used. We take those issues into consideration when we design schemes.

Mr Stewart: Everyone else had five final questions, so it is only right and proper that I get a final, final question. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Boylan: I might just put my name down for a final, final question.

Mr Stewart: You have been generous with your time, folks. Thank you for that. I have one point and one question. Colin Sykes mentioned utility companies. They are doing your cause no favours. I do not want to name and shame the companies, but some of the resurfacing jobs that they have done look as though they were done blindfolded, considering the quality of the work when it is finished. There is meant to be a minimum standard to which the work is done, but, invariably, your good staff are having to go back out and redo the work because those multi-million-pound utility companies are not doing it to anywhere near that standard. How that is done needs to be looked at drastically.

My question is about three-year budgeting. We really need to get to a three-year budget cycle so that your Department and every other one can properly plan. I am interested to tease out how beneficial that could be to you for strategic planning.

Mr Woods: It would be immensely beneficial. It is one of those potential big changes that you can envisage. It would be lovely to think that we might get an extra £2 billion to spend on the road network, but, in the absence of that, knowing, three years out, what we are going to get would make a real difference. We would certainly welcome that.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I will call Mark in, and then I will call it a day. We have run over our time. Members, we were keen to get answers to some of our questions.

Mr Durkan: I have a wee supplementary question to your one about street lights, Chair. What scope is there to adjust them for brightness, colour etc? Issues have been raised, on occasion, by people with sensory issues about the impact of the new LED lights, whereas the old "Lucozade" lights did not seem to faze them as much. You said earlier that you were not taking lights out to save money, but, at the same time, I think, you said that you were choosing not to replace lights in places to save money.

Mr Woods: Colleagues will know more about the history of this, but a lot of those light fittings were put in when roads and street lighting were the responsibility of other people, particularly local government. We are talking about some time ago. A light fitting could be there that is not compliant with our policy. Our policy may say, "You don't need to light that area". We do not go around taking those lights out, but, when they come to the end of their natural life and need to be replaced in order to continue to operate safely, at that point, if the policy does not support the need for lighting there, we would not typically replace it. That is the distinction.

Mr McEvoy: Your other point was about the types of lighting and the degree to which they are dimmed. Our design process takes account of standards of lighting provision. Those types of lighting levels and brightness and things are a key part of that design consideration.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Cathal, I will let you in, but you have to be quick.

Mr Boylan: Thanks, Chair. I really appreciate it. I feel sorry for Stephen, because North Down is now top of the league for potholes. Armagh was like that for 40 years.

I have one last wee question that you may be able to answer: is there any update on the north, west and east link roads in Armagh?

Mr Woods: The prioritisation of major road schemes that was published last year indicated that those schemes were paused, partly because there is not the money to deliver them. Obviously, the Minister will review that decision. We intend to bring him a review of that that allows him to consider his prioritisation. Unless there is, all of a sudden, an awful lot of extra money, by the time that we do the flagships, the city deals and the things that already have a funding stream, there may not be an awful lot of money left for other schemes, but, obviously, that is part of the debate that he will need to have.

Mr Boylan: We use starlight, by the way; we do not have LED lights. We use the night sky to get around Armagh.

Mr Stewart: It is better for the environment.

Mr Boylan: Not many questions are asked about the night sky.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I was going to make a joke about wise men, but I think that we will leave that one.

Thank you very much. We have taken up a bit more time than, I am sure, you were expecting, but there were an awful lot of questions, as, I am sure, will you understand. I appreciate the work that goes on. You will have heard the members say how thankful they are for the teams that are on the ground. We would be really grateful if you could feed that back. As I said at the start, we are looking forward to working with you. No doubt we will have you before the Committee again. Thank you for your time today.