



CCDCC Park Bridge Sub-Committee Position Statement (revised as at 14 January 2020)

Crathes Drumoak & Durriss Community Council (CCDCC) is stepping up its campaign to have the Park Bridge re-opened to vehicular traffic ten months on from its “temporary” closure in March of last year.

We are very concerned that Aberdeenshire Council’s own Road Asset Management Plan published in October 2019 envisages a “Scenario 4” whereby bridges, like Park Bridge, on C class and unclassified roads will simply not be maintained and repaired and will be left to fail, with the consequent negative impact to the roads they carry and the communities these roads serve. This compares with “Scenario 1” which involves the full funding of the estimated £5.1m per year needed to properly maintain the shire’s bridges, and with two other intermediate scenarios neither of which would support the maintenance of the C/U road bridges.

A review of Aberdeenshire Council’s website now discloses that there are over a dozen C/U bridge closures in the shire, several of which have been closed in recent months including Milltown of Towie and Kinnairdy bridges. Given Scenario 4 envisages a maintenance spend of £1.5 million on only A and B classified road bridges and the Council’s actual annual spend has been £1.6m per annum over the last 10 years we suspect that Scenario 4 has been in play, de facto, for a long period of time: the apparent absence of maintenance work on C/U road bridges is “coming home to roost”.

We are still awaiting confirmation of the outcome of a recent consultation exercise on the future of Park Bridge in September of last year but our latest information is that the bridge has already been “coloured blue” by the Council meaning it will not be returned to vehicular access. We suspect this has been the status since March 2019 when the bridge was closed on a “temporary” basis for 18 months, the maximum allowed by law, as the end date for the closure quoted on the Council’s roadworks webpages was, until recently, stated to be 1 January 2030, which read like permanent closure to CCDCC.

We have been particularly concerned by the Council’s actions during the first week of December 2019 when they installed permanent road closure signs on the approach roads at either side of the bridge. This coincided with an unexplained amendment to the Council’s website to effect that the bridge was closed until 14 September 2020 (the maximum permitted by law) and not the 1 January 2030 date which was stated on the website between March and December 2019.

We would question seriously whether or not the recent consultation exercise was simply “window dressing”. The preferred option expressed by 85% of the participants to reinstate the bridge for vehicular use has been ignored and all the evidence points to a pre-ordained decision that the bridge will be re-set for pedestrian and cyclist access only.

We have reviewed the inspection reports for the Park Bridge commissioned by Aberdeenshire Council from 2011 through to 2019 and these disclose a chronicle of progressive neglect and decay in recent years inconsistent with the Council’s statutory obligation to maintain and repair the bridge under the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984.

The current deck was installed in 1987 and 24 years later in 2011 the bridge was found to be “in good condition with minor anomalies”. However, a clear warning was given that the timber deck was in danger of decay if a waterproofing system was not installed. Only 8 years later we are told that the timber deck and the steel transverse deck immediately below are both seriously decayed and corroded.

As well as the failure to install the waterproofing, the evidence points to damage being caused by the decision to place a tarmacadam surface over the timber deck. This blocked off the weep drainpipes. The cracking and breaking up of the road surface, clearly visible in the 2011 report photographs, created a direct access route for water penetration



and this was exacerbated by salt gritting over the winter which appears to be main contributor to the corrosion of the steel transverse deck.

The 2016 report clearly shows the gutters at the sides of the road over the bridge full of silt and vegetation blocking the draining of the road and the 2019 report states that the resurfacing of the road in May 2018 completely tarred over the gutter drains. It's clear that the road surface has operated as a wet and sometimes salty wet mattress lying over the timber deck and steel transverse beams.

However, the 2016 report found that the bridge was actually stronger than the Council has been led to believe as a result of a calculation error in an earlier report from 2006. Only the timber deck has the current 3 tonnes maximum loading weight and the remainder of the structure can take 7.5 tonnes. This means that a stronger top deck, which is where most of the repair works will be focussed, could see the bridge improve from the 3 tonnes limit imposed in 2008 and allow more commercial vehicles to use the bridge.

Having failed to implement a waterproofing course in 2011 for £40,000 and basic annual cleaning, weeding, painting and pointing, the reported repair costs have escalated to £1.7 million or £12.4 million for a new bridge according to the Council. The Council needs to answer why public assets and funds are being managed in this manner.

Beyond local access considerations, the bridge is a Grade A listed asset dating from 1854 and it forms part of the Victorian Heritage trail. CCDCC also believes the bridge's role can be promoted as an integral part of the North East 250 Trail, the Castles Trail and the Historic Bridges Trail to bring additional economic development benefits for the community.

We understand that Aberdeenshire Council has access to the region of £750 million for the 2019/2020 financial year from central funding, business rates and council tax, excluding other sources of income and borrowing capacity. Indeed, according to the Council's own references to its Medium Term Financial Strategy "which helps the Council look at all of the budget streams (revenue, capital, reserves, IJB) together.....the wider resources of the Council reach around £1 billion". We appreciate the constraints and demands on the annual budgets and are faced with it in all our CDDCC meetings. However appropriate and timely investment on infrastructure is crucial to prevent accelerating decay and the subsequent serious impact on community cohesion and economy.

According to the Road Asset Management Plan, the Council's road assets are stated to be valued at £4.3 billion. An allocation of an additional £11m per annum (1% of the MTFS resources quoted) to the road assets budget would meet the required £26 million per annum needed over the next 20 years to maintain these road assets to current service levels. Given this context and the recent major investment in the AWPR and the pending investment in the A96, it makes no sense – on community service, economic development, heritage and asset preservation grounds - to leave the Shire's C and U class road assets, such as Park Bridge and the C35, to decay and disintegrate.



Responding to community needs

We note, specifically, that the Council has reserves of £40 million including a general reserve of £9 million and a roads maintenance reserve of £2 million. CDDCC is demanding that Aberdeenshire Council returns the bridge to full service as soon as practicable in accordance with its statutory obligation and to implement a proper planned maintenance programme going forwards.

CDDCC is looking for a commitment to this effect before the anniversary of the closure of the bridge on 15 March 2020.

We will also be looking to engage further with the Council about the negative impact of a “Scenario 4” maintenance policy on other C/U road assets in the CDDCC area.

Peter Renwick, Chair

Chris Charnley, Secretary

The Park Bridge sub-committee members

Crathes Drumoak and Durris Community Council

14 January 2020