

Putting road users first

Bob Collis, director of strategic and local roads at TRL and a member of Highways Magazine's editorial board, offers his views on the government's new Roads Fund



The summer budget saw the announcement of a number of different changes, but arguably one of the most surprising was the creation, or reinstatement, of a dedicated fund for the development of UK roads.

From 2020 all vehicle excise duty funds will be spent exclusively on maintaining and developing UK roads. The move, which seeks to provide a long-term solution to improving Britain's road infrastructure, provides a welcome breath of fresh air in what has traditionally been seen as a 'grey area'. Until now there has been little clarity over how much is spent on the regeneration of UK roads, so any changes that provide greater transparency should be welcomed with open arms.

At this stage, there is little detail about how the fund will be administered and targeted. However, Andrew Jones' recent speech¹ indicates that the fund will be dedicated solely to building and improving the UK's highways, or strategic road network. The theory is that this will deliver a clear connection between how services are funded and those who benefit from them, creating a fairer tax system for motorists. But will focusing solely on developing strategic roads deliver the maximum benefit and address road users' greatest concerns?

Valued at £344bn², strategic and local road networks in England are our most highly valued infrastructure asset. The logic in investing in the strategic road network is that it carries, on average, four times as many vehicles a day per mile of road than locally managed roads with congestion rapidly increasing³. However, it's important that any funding decisions reflect not just economic needs, but road users' too.

While our strategic road network is critical to economic growth and development, figures show that the current user satisfaction rate for our strategic roads is relatively high at around 90 per cent⁴. Add this to the fact that there is already a strong investment strategy in place for the strategic road network⁵ and it's clear why questions might be raised about whether this fund should be spread across the wider road network too.

Getting the balance right

Currently 98 per cent of the road network is made up of local roads. These roads are typically used to start and end all journeys and provide a significant role in the road user experience. In addition, there is already at least a £12bn repair backlog in the local road network alone⁶ which if not addressed will only get worse. So we need to strike a balance between the distribution of the fund across local and strategic roads that can provide road users with a positive experience across their end-to-end journey.

Beyond the allocation of funds to local and strategic roads, the manner in which it is spent must also be carefully considered. For example, for too long the local road network has been maintained on a reactive rather than planned basis. This is neither the most efficient or cost-effective way of looking after a valuable societal and economic asset and, in many cases, could lead to safety concerns too.

If the government uses the fund for both planned maintenance and development it will be able to deliver better value, while also reducing the costly defects. However, to ensure this vision becomes a reality a solid asset management strategy will need to be developed providing greater

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intelligence around cost and risks of maintenance, enabling action to be taken at the right time.

Don't forget the bigger picture

It's also crucial we start thinking about future-proofing our roads. The mix of vehicles on our roads is changing. We already have an increasing number of electric and hybrid vehicles and in the not too distant future we may have automated vehicles too. So is building our roads in the same traditional way the best approach for supporting our future needs?

Similarly, in an increasingly diverse transport landscape, motorists are not the only users of today's roads. Therefore, the needs of all road users need to be considered. Whether this is done through this ring-fenced road fund or other funding means is a separate, but important, conversation.

With 35.6 million vehicles licensed for use on the road in Great Britain at the end of December 2014⁷, the government now has a huge opportunity to reinvest and shape the UK's road infrastructure for years to come so decisions about how this fund should be spent should not be taken lightly. By considering the end-to-end journey of all road users both today and tomorrow it can build a sustainable infrastructure that supports not just our current, but future transport needs, and positions the UK at the heart of the European and global economy. ☹

¹ Department for Transport, "Productivity means building more roads," 2015. www.gov.uk/government/speeches/productivity-means-building-more-roads

² National Audit Office, "Maintaining strategic infrastructure: roads," 2014.

³ Department for Transport, "Strategic Road Network Statistics," 2015. www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/448276/strategic-road-network-statistics.pdf

⁴ Department for Transport, "Strategic Road Network Statistics," 2015. www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/448276/strategic-road-network-statistics.pdf

⁵ Department for Transport and Highways Agency, "Road investment strategy," 2014. www.gov.uk/government/collections/road-investment-strategy

⁶ Local Government Association, "Better roads for England," 2014. www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/5854661/L14-473+Better+Roads+for+England_11.pdf/a7a5fec1-dd21-4220-a9f4-f9d4c2cee778

⁷ Department for Transport, "Vehicle Licensing Statistics Quarter 4," 2014. www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/421337/vls-2014.pdf