

Making the case for change

The outgoing chief executive of the Institute of Highway Engineers (IHE) Stephen Palmer reflects on four years in the job and offers his views on the current state of the industry



The last four years have reinforced my long held belief that the IHE is truly the Institute of choice for highway engineers. Large enough to carry weight when influencing government and policy makers but small enough to care and to provide individual help to engineers who aspire to advance their careers.

The IHE turned 50 years old this year and it has been an honour to help with the planning and execution of our celebrations which kick off at a special luncheon this month at The House of Lords.

The IHE is in a very satisfactory place at the moment. Membership is growing faster than at any time in our history and we now have a membership base some 25 per cent higher than four years ago. Our training and events programme is almost at capacity and many of our course and related professional certificates are gaining industry and professional endorsement.

None of this would be possible without the hard work and dedication of our volunteers and it is to these folk who I express my heartfelt thanks.

Roads matter

Whilst the Institute is in good shape, if only the same could be said about the highway network on which we all work. The state of Britain's roads is verging on the scandalous and whilst the funding earmarked for Highways England in the period to 2020 is welcome and one which we pushed hard for as the Infrastructure Bill passed through Parliament earlier this year, it must be remembered that Highways England manage just two per cent of total highways; so what of the remaining 98 per cent of highways? Here the picture is somewhat less sanguine and unless spending plans are overhauled, which is highly unlikely given the election

outcome, the overall condition of our road network (excluding motorways and trunk roads) is expected to be worse in 2020 than it is today. Almost 70 per cent of all motorised traffic uses the local highway network and our true economic performance will only be improved once our entire network is fit for purpose. It is estimated that for every £1 spent maintaining the asset, the benefit value is £5 or more. What other publicly funded programmes can claim benefits of this magnitude?

Time for a rethink

Over the next five years, the government has earmarked a maintenance package which is barely 40 per cent of the estimated cost today of bringing the network up to a satisfactory condition. As our members chase around the country filling potholes, local government is bracing itself for a further onslaught on funding. Most, if not all, highway authorities have reported significant reductions in staffing of highway departments and if reports are to be believed, the screw is about to be turned tighter still. Changes in working practices, collaborative initiatives and efficiency savings as promoted by HMEP are all excellent examples of how we can achieve more for less but they do not provide the full answer.

In my view, a radical rethink is required since more pleas to HM Treasury are unlikely to result in a positive outcome.

Governance

Many highway authorities are questioning their own sustainability and in the medium to long term I see little alternative to devolution of power and responsibility for most highway functions to new regional/sub regional

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bodies. In my view, responsibilities could comprise strategic, tactical and operational matters with concomitant powers to raise revenue and the accountability that accompanies these responsibilities.

Rationalisation of police forces may also provide opportunities for consolidation of traffic policing and enforcement and thus help build an integrated solution. Many would argue that traffic enforcement fine revenue might usefully be channelled back to the local network and I support this view.

Funding

The highway network is the UK's greatest asset and deserves to be looked after properly. The power to raise revenue locally by the responsible bodies is important since revenue collection can better reflect user expectations and help facilitate prudential borrowing to fund capital works. Technology is advancing at a rapid and accelerating rate and I feel sure that new technology will play an increasing role in providing a key policy tool to enable charging individual users at point of use. We should also not forget others who use the highway to carry goods and services such as the utility companies and in a world of private enterprise should these operators not pay their fair share for valuable access rights?

Making the case for change to the general public and policy makers is never an easy task. However, the burning platform is not going to extinguish itself. The intellectual argument is without doubt, a job for the profession and I look forward to contributing to the debate over the coming months and years. ➔

