

The value of local roads

President of the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport (ADEPT) and Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme (HMEP) advocate Steve Kent, talks about the value of local roads, and what can be done to help secure funding for maintenance



Christmas has passed, a new year is upon us and the talk is of economic growth, albeit slow at first, and an end to the current period of recession. Encouragingly, for those of us involved in these matters, it has been widely recognised that transport and infrastructure will play a significant part in stimulating and then sustaining what everyone hopes will be a progressive improvement in our financial circumstances – nationally, locally and personally.

Government funding has been newly structured and channelled towards the recently formed Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and their younger siblings the Local Transport Boards (LTBs). The 39 LEPs are all different, quite rightly so, and should be in a better position to recognise and respond to local economic opportunities, and the vital transport improvements that will be needed if the anticipated benefits are to be realised. There is even the sense that the reduced funding streams (in both number and quantum) are a more complementary set than was previously the case, with devolved majors, LSTF, pinch point and the rest providing greater opportunity for joined-up local action.

But what of the infrastructure we already have? Does the local road network, maintained by more than 150 local highway authorities, have a role to play in this growth agenda and, if so, how will this role be fulfilled?

Our local roads, from former trunk roads down to unclassified rural and residential lanes, must surely be part of this drive to prosperity. For every local highway authority it represents the single biggest asset under their responsibility; collectively it is 97 per cent of the nation's highway infrastructure asset with a replacement value widely accepted to be in excess of £400bn. It supports our travel to work, schools, shopping and leisure, while our local economies are dependent upon an efficiently functioning road network for their commercial wellbeing.

Prioritising funding

So it follows that central and local government (and the LEPs) will be making the maintenance and improvement of our local roads a high

“The overall pressures on local council resources, allied to the un-ringfenced nature of the funding, means that we will be lucky to see a significant proportion of money turned into tarmac over the period in question”

Potholes image courtesy: AIA

Delivering prosperity

I believe there are three areas where we can sharpen up our game, individually and collectively, to bring home to politicians and the public just how important the local road network is and how it too can be instrumental in delivering improved national prosperity.

Firstly, we can improve how we communicate what we do, how and why we do it with that most important group of people, the customers, road users and residents for whom we provide the service in the first place. The use of social media ('Twitter Gritter', for example) has shown how understanding and appreciation can be hugely improved, but we must extend these approaches to cover the whole range of maintenance activities if we are to get the public on our side when it comes to establishing local needs and priorities.

Allied to better communications with the network's users is demonstrating to them that their taxes are being spent wisely and efficiently. A structured approach to managing the asset is essential in this regard – an approach which then must be adhered to in practice. Good practice and efficient working looks just that to even the most casual of observers and, with the Highway Maintenance Efficiency Programme (HMEP) gaining influence and momentum, we have no excuse for not delivering a visibly efficient service.

Finally, we must work harder, individually and collectively, to make a better, more comprehensive case for continued and improved investment in the local road network. We know, intuitively, that this makes sense, but local council treasurers and HM Treasury need to be convinced by an evidenced business case, incorporating not just asset-based reasons but wider social and economic factors to fully demonstrate the value of our local road network. ☺

priority over the coming years? If only that were the case! To be fair to central government, and the Department for Transport in particular, the case has been argued well enough to secure a reasonable settlement for capital funding - £976m per annum over the five year period 2015/16 – 2020/21. But how much of that will actually reach our ageing and deteriorating local roads? The overall pressures on local council resources, allied to the un-ringfenced nature of the funding, means that we will be lucky to see a significant proportion of that money turned into tarmac over the period in question.

What then can we do to improve the chances of this funding ending up where it is intended, such that our local roads can be maintained at least in their current condition, and preferably improved?