

# Investing in infrastructure

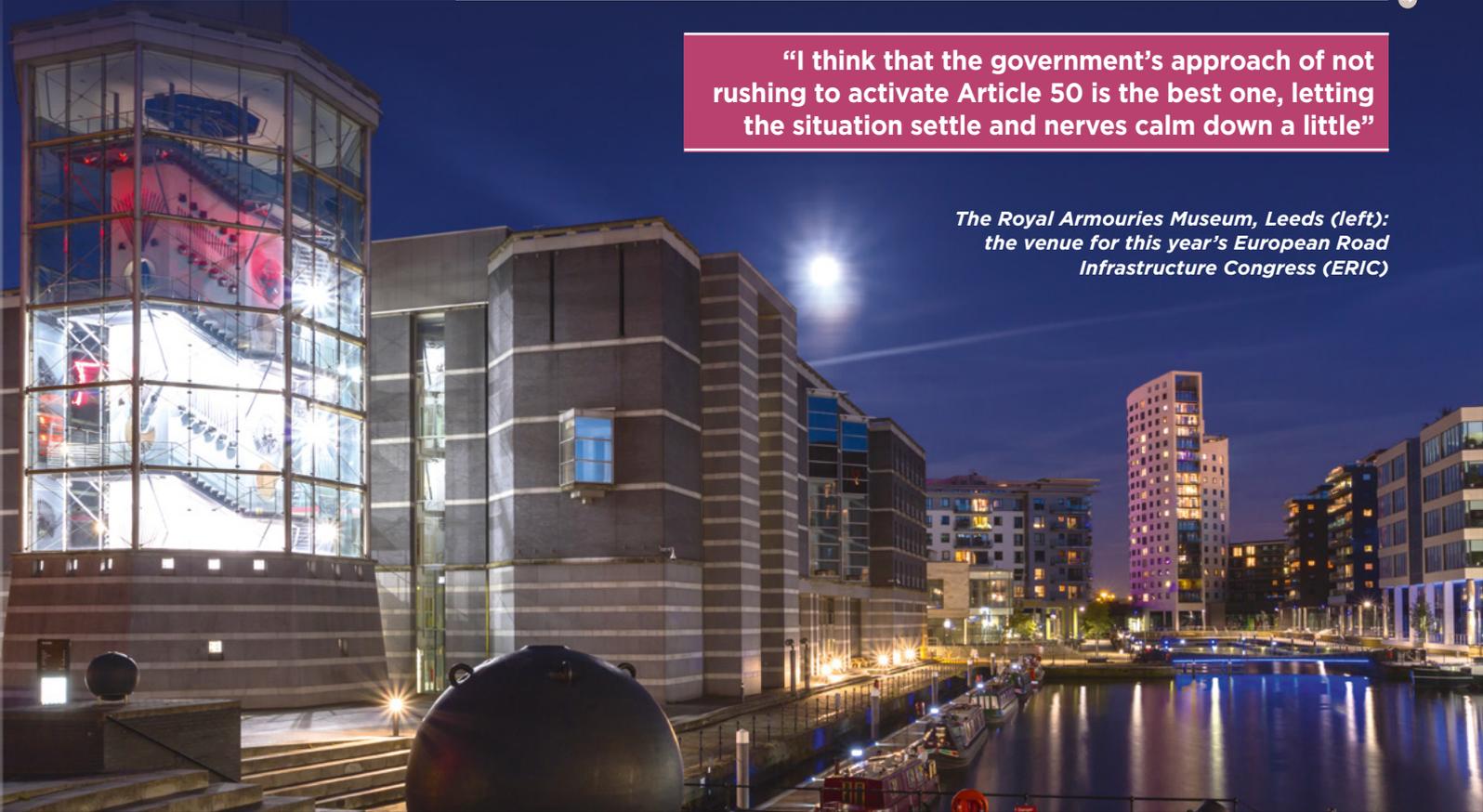


Ahead of October’s European Road Infrastructure Congress (ERIC), Alec Peachey caught up with the chief executive of the Road Safety Markings Association (RSMA) George Lee. Here, he gives his views on what to expect from the event and provides some thoughts on the highways industry at large

<b>Alec Peachey:</b>	<b>George Lee:</b>
<b>When was the idea of running the European Road Infrastructure Congress (ERIC) first discussed?</b>	As a member of the European Road Federation (ERF) board, we started discussions on the concept of a Europe-wide event in Spring 2015; there are so many different and exciting things happening in all facets of the highways sector, across the continent, that the delivery of a large event to explore different aspects of highways development and delivery seemed overdue.
<b>What are the event’s main objectives and what’s the format?</b>	The Congress’ key themes are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ <b>Delivery of the road infrastructure:</b> How can we improve its delivery model in a way that enables road authorities to ask for better solutions while providing industry with an optimal use of public resources and obtaining value for money?</li> <li>→ <b>Road safety:</b> How can we work together in order to identify practical solutions enabling Europe to achieve its ambitious target of a 50 per cent cut in road fatalities?</li> <li>→ <b>Adaption of the road infrastructure:</b> Technological changes and innovations in vehicle technology, road usage and road infrastructure mean that the road of the future will differ significantly from what it is today.</li> </ul>
<b>Why is the event being held in Leeds?</b>	A pledge from the government in early 2015 was to redress the balance between London/South East and the North of England, which has often been seen as neglected. The aim was to establish the North of England as an economic powerhouse of its own, with infrastructure being pivotal to generating jobs and growth across the region. A vast region, stretching from Liverpool and Manchester in the West, Newcastle in the North, and Hull in the East, geographically, Leeds is central to this and is seen as an infrastructure hub; consequently it makes sense to hold the Congress in Leeds.
<b>How will the RSMA’s annual conference be integrated into the event?</b>	The annual RSMA conference is running in tandem with the Congress. As the RSMA has grown, as has its influence. We are able to be a part of larger events, while not overlooking our own membership. We will still have a successful conference, complete with a broad range of speakers, ending with the traditional RSMA dinner and industry awards. The third day of the Congress is specifically tailored for the RSMA conference, but there is also an abundance of other speakers and sessions on the other days of the Congress which will be of interest to many.

**“I think that the government’s approach of not rushing to activate Article 50 is the best one, letting the situation settle and nerves calm down a little”**

*The Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds (left): the venue for this year’s European Road Infrastructure Congress (ERIC)*



<b>What should delegates expect to take away from the event?</b>	ERIC is all about knowledge, information, innovation, networking and hopefully inspiration; as a consequence, delegates should expect to take a mix of these experiences from the event. With the diversity of speakers and information available, the range and mix of outcomes for delegates will be immense.
<b>What sort of impact do you think the Brexit decision might have on the future of the UK's highway network?</b>	The recent referendum result to leave the EU has unearthed a plethora of questions over the impact of Brexit on the highways and construction sector, as well as the wider country. We have been repeatedly told that Brexit means Brexit and that UK will make a success of it, but as of yet, we really do not know how Brexit will evolve and what it will mean for individuals or businesses. Additionally, any changes are likely to be at least a couple of years away. It's unlikely and undesirable that the UK will seek to cut itself off completely; it may well remain a member of the single market and may well continue to implement European safety standards in relation to transportation, highways and construction. Like all of these things a balanced and pragmatic approach will have to be taken to ensure the best outcome for the UK; it is also worth remembering that it is also in the interests of EU member states to retain strong trading links with the UK, it is not all a 'one-way street'.
<b>Do you think that the government will continue with its investment in infrastructure in light of the Brexit decision?</b>	It is a concern that investor confidence could diminish because of Brexit, companies could relocate out of the UK and reduce the demand for infrastructure, and there could be extended periods of weak public finances. This is clearly something we don't want to see, however, the true impact of Brexit will not be fully known for some time. I do think that the government's approach of not rushing to activate Article 50 is the best one, letting the situation settle and nerves calm down a little.
<b>How is the RSMA working with government to ensure that investment in road markings and road safety continues?</b>	RSMA maintains regular and detailed contact with government over a range of issues impacting upon the road marking sector - we continue to make the case for the importance of road marking investment on all UK roads in addition to the case for sustained and planned investment and maintenance to ensure companies can plan for future investment and employment.
<b>What are some of the key things that the UK highways industry can learn from Europe when it comes to innovation?</b>	At a road marking level there is plenty to be learned from our European counterparts in respect to issues such as robust and accessible road trials and credit to Highways England who are supporting the UK road marking sector to secure an appropriate site to implement such trials in the UK. I also think that as a country we could relax some of the regulatory structure around installing new road marking materials for short duration 'experiments'. Across the highways sector as a whole I think that we do pick up and implement some innovatory ideas from Europe, however, there are also many UK innovations that we are actively exporting to Europe and beyond. ERIC will provide a focal point for innovation from across the UK and Europe and this will provide additional value for delegates.
<b>What are your thoughts on the continued cuts within local government and how do you think this is impacting on the condition of local roads?</b>	Roads under the control of local authorities are often in a poor state. With local authorities under increasing financial pressure, we are seeing a vast chasm between the quality of the strategic road network (SRN) and local roads. It would be beneficial to see the new Chancellor and Chris Grayling working together to produce a long-term funding solution to improve local roads. Although clearly beneficial, the funding for action on potholes and the highways maintenance incentive funding for local authorities does not address the lack of investment of the past. A ring-fenced overall maintenance budget, similar to the ring-fenced funding for the SRN, would do more to alleviate concerns of local road users.
<b>If you were the new Transport Secretary, what would be the top three things on your 'to do' list?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Reaffirm government commitment to reducing KSIs on UK roads</li> <li>→ In light of Brexit, a government commitment to maintain current spending on infrastructure</li> <li>→ A commitment to sustainable funding for local roads.</li> </ul>
<b>In what ways would you encourage the industry to better share ideas?</b>	Attendance at practical and informative events such as ERIC should be a focal point for the industry to share and promote new initiatives, ideas and best practice.
<b>What needs to be done to address the challenges around skills in the sector?</b>	Skills, capability and capacity are key issues in the sector and I am concerned that some proposals from government, especially around the structure and delivery of apprenticeships, are likely to cause short term damage to how we broaden the skills base in the sector. Specialists within highways need to be much clearer on their future skills needs and more collaborative about how skills and training are delivered and supported. A good start for those interested in these things would be to attend the Highway Skills event on 29 September 2016, held at the London Transport Museum; further information can be found at <a href="http://www.highwayskills.com">www.highwayskills.com</a>



There is a lot of collaboration within the highways sector at the moment. Do you see combined groups such as Transport for Greater Manchester, Midlands Connect, etc, becoming the norm? And do you see these groups being given more powers to make statutory decisions around transport infrastructure in their respective areas?

Certainly government is promoting these broader groupings and further devolution will, I expect, accelerate further development of combined authorities and services; I suspect that the real challenge will come in ensuring smaller areas within devolved authorities are not starved of specific resources and services by the larger administrative area. In the days of the old Metropolitan Counties there were too many examples of devolved power leading to greater resource shortages in non-urban and rural communities.

What key things would you like to see outlined in the government's Road Investment Strategy 2?

In addition to securing funds for the strategic road network it is imperative that secured funds are brought forward for local road networks. I support David Quarmbly and Phil Carey in their 'Major Roads' initiative and this needs some fiscal drive behind it too.

Finally, what are your hopes for the highways sector going forward?

At this time I remain relatively optimistic that we will see sustained investment, however, vigilance is the key word as other political, social and economic priorities are always present and we must continue to see improved efficiency in the sector as well as always making the case for ongoing investment. —

**WHAT:** European Road Infrastructure Congress (ERIC)

#ERICLeeds16

**WHERE:** Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds

**WHEN:** 18-20 October 2016

**WHY ATTEND:** ERIC will bring together industry representatives, academics, policy makers, research institutes and road authorities from across the continent to network, engage and share their knowledge on the highways sector. Delivery, safety and adaptation of road infrastructure will be the key themes that run through the Congress; addressing technological changes, new delivery models and innovations in vehicle technology helping Europe to work together in achieving safer roads.

**WEBSITE:** Visit [www.eric2016.eu](http://www.eric2016.eu) to find out more information about the event.

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