

Setting the roads agenda



In an exclusive interview with *Highways Magazine* editor Alec Peachey, Roads Minister Andrew Jones has denied that the amount of money spent on the strategic road network and local roads is disproportionate

The MP for Harrogate and Knaresborough points out that there are a number of funding streams for local roads and that they should be considered as a collective.

Last year the government released details of a £15 billion Road Investment Strategy (RIS) to Parliament. It is investing in more than 100 new road schemes over this parliament and next, but with a lot of money being spent on the strategic road network, many people in the industry believe that local roads are suffering.

Mr Jones, who was appointed Roads Minister in May 2015, said: *"There are several things going on with local highways. Firstly, we are giving them (local authorities) the tools, with significant funding, to deliver well maintained road networks. If you look at what's happening there's been greater investment in highways maintenance block than previously. We've also got the Local Growth Fund, the integrated transport block, local pinch point schemes and local sustainable transport schemes. There's been a whole raft of different packages all about the local network. The word that connects all of them is local. It's not a question that we've had one at the expense of the other."*

Some local authorities, including Surrey County Council, want money from the government's new Roads Fund to be spent on local roads.

Earlier this year Chancellor George Osborne announced that from 2017 money raised from vehicle excise duty will be spent on roads. The small print of the Budget indicates that the new fund will only be spent on motorways and major A roads managed by Highways England, despite them accounting for just 100 miles of road in the country.

Mr Jones confirmed that this is the case. *"We're already allocating a significant amount of budget into local road schemes,"* he added. *"The Roads Fund is to tackle our strategic network. I'm open to the fact people need to work together, but I've just gone through a variety of budgets, and there is already significant money going into the local network."*

"All the different funding should be looked at in aggregate instead of just looking at the Roads Fund and thinking 'crikey that's all going to the strategic network'. If you take the bigger picture you will see the two things working side by side to deliver improvements right across the country."

"We've got a very big job to do because we've under invested in

"There is already significant money going into the local network"

Andrew Jones

the key strategic routes that are the arteries of our economy. We have to catch up on those and that's what this Roads Fund is about."

Catching up on underinvestment

The Roads Minister has hailed the government's Road Investment Strategy as a "golden opportunity" for the sector.

"Our road network is absolutely fundamental to our nation's prosperity," he remarked. *"Historically we have underinvested, which goes back many years, not just on roads infrastructure, but infrastructure more broadly. We're trying to catch up on that historic underinvestment and the current Road Investment Strategy is a part of that."*

"The RIS is the first of its kind in our country's history. It is a series of programmes, includes more than 120 schemes and £15 billion worth of investment. It will take us through to the 2021 financial year."

Mr Jones confirmed that the government intends to introduce a second Road Investment Strategy after 2021.

"The intention is to break out of a stop start historic approach to infrastructure investment," he notes.

According to Mr Jones, the new Roads Fund will play a key part in helping to achieve this.

"We've seen some significant changes. The biggest change has been the creation of the vehicle excise duty, which has basically seen a move to a hypothesised Roads Fund. That provides stability and continuity" ➔



The Roads Minister (right) alongside the A69 at Scotby just outside Carlisle with councillor Keith Little (centre) and Kyle Maynard (left), A69 route manager for Highways England

☛ to our road investment. It allows Highways England to plan ahead. It allows us to put schemes into consideration that have historically been in the "too difficult" category.

"We've asked Highways England to deliver greater efficiencies. I've spoken with them and they think it is fantastic because they can now consider schemes on a regional basis or across a longer-term time horizon."

Councils fighting for local roads funding will now be allocated funds based on performance, under a pilot scheme launched by the Department for Transport (DfT) earlier this year. By 2018/19, over a quarter of funding will be allocated on the basis of either competition or performance.

But will this performance based funding put unnecessary extra pressure on councils who are already facing pressures in other areas?

"I don't think it is putting pressure on them," states Mr Jones. "To start with the Department has been encouraging highways authorities to have an asset management plan for the last six years. We should be expecting them to deliver that. I also want to encourage the best possible practice.

"It's not a question of burdening them, it is about encouraging best practice.

"We should be looking to reward good behaviour, not subsidise bad practice. We should be looking to highways authorities to work together.

"There are over 150 highways authorities and that represents a huge amount of expertise and collective wisdom, plus significant local knowledge. Equally some of the challenges they face will be similar. They should be pooling their expertise to make sure that firstly they can deliver the best deals for taxpayers, but also can share any best practice. We're all about encouraging collaboration. There are examples of good collaboration across the country and that's the model we're looking to see developed rather than restructuring."

The Roads Minister believes collaboration will be key going forward, but says it doesn't just apply in highways maintenance.

"It applies to many other parts of local government and more broadly across public services as a whole. We should be looking to collaborate and focus on what we're able to deliver for people locally rather than worry about structures.

"I want more focus upon collaboration, sharing best practice, pooling budgets and expertise to deliver improved services locally."

Ringfencing money

Mr Jones revealed that he is not in favour of seeing money for local highways maintenance ringfenced.

"Generally we should be moving away from ringfencing. We should be trusting local authorities to make the right decisions for themselves. Ringfencing and targets has been a means of central control and we want to move away from that and trust local people to make the right decisions for themselves."

Highways England became a government-owned company in April this year after taking over the management of the strategic road network from the Highways Agency.

Oversight of Highways England now comes from the Office of Rail and Road, formerly Office of Rail Regulation, who monitor the performance and efficiency of the company and Transport Focus who act as the watchdog for road users.

"We should be looking at communication and delivery for customers. If you're thinking about drivers as customers, it changes your attitude. That's the key point here. I want to see more communication from them, which means more communication with road users, explaining what schemes are happening and the progress that is being made. It's about delivery, communication and outward looking customer focus."

Scaling up

With the industry gearing up for the biggest investment in the road network since the 1970s, Mr Jones has called on everyone to be ready for a huge upturn in work.

"We want people to scale up and to skill up," he confirmed. **"This should be viewed as a golden opportunity for the sector. I don't just want transport schemes delivered quickly. I want people to have a rolling programme of highways schemes which will deliver a step change in our infrastructure. For that to happen we have to have a supply chain which will be fit to deliver. I think that means investment in skills, investment in apprenticeship programmes, but part of that is having the continuity of budgets. No company is going to set up large amounts of recruitment schemes or**

bring in apprenticeship programmes unless they can see some kind of return on their investment. Part of that transparency into the future on budgets – the hypothecated Roads Fund – is giving people the certainty that they can prepare themselves for the future. I want us to have top levels of skills within our sector."

With the government working on other improvements like HS2, rail electrification and Crossrail, Mr Jones described the government's ambition for infrastructure as "huge".

"They're all important and we need to have a supply chain which is geared up to deliver our ambition. The way to do that is to skill up, but that can only happen when people can see transparency into the future that there is guaranteed funding coming." ☛

Andrew Jones takes a look at a road scheme



Technology is key

Smart motorways use the latest technology to improve journeys by sensing traffic flow and setting speed limits accordingly to keep vehicles moving smoothly, instead of continually stopping and starting. The hard shoulder is also opened as a traffic lane at peak times and during heavy congestion to add vital extra capacity on key routes.

"I think they've been a success. They are a good idea that has helped deliver flow on our motorways and smoother running," Mr Jones told *Highways Magazine*.

"We should be using technology to improve our infrastructure's performance. I think that's one imaginative way of creating extra capacity without having to build major new highways. It is basically about getting greater use out of the existing footprint of our road network."

The Roads Minister says technology will play a key role in helping to deliver infrastructure improvements and will also lead to changes in the types of

vehicles seen on the roads – including driverless cars and more advanced electric vehicles.

"Vehicle manufacturers will be bringing out far more models so we're going to be seeing a significant amount of development in electric vehicles," he confirmed.

"We also know that as technology develops we'll be looking at driverless cars. I want the UK to be a great place to develop technology. Historically, we have a fantastic record of delivering automotive innovation and I want us to keep that as we go into a new generation of technology."

"Not just because of what it will deliver for transport infrastructure, but also the manufacturing element. One in four electric vehicles that were sold in Europe last year were manufactured in the UK. There is a British manufacturing benefit here and a quality of life benefit as we move towards ultra low emission vehicles."

"These are pretty exciting times in the transport sector, not just from an

investment perspective, but also in that we're at the start of some significant transformational benefits that will come from technology."

Mr Jones pointed out some of the benefits that this new technology will bring to people:

- ➔ Potentially significant benefits in terms of air quality from ultra low emission vehicles
- ➔ Helping people drive more safely with better connected vehicles
- ➔ Making sure the UK is at the forefront of manufacturing, which is about British jobs and technology.

He continued: *"The Road Investment Strategy is about making sure the arteries of our economy are flowing. It is about people's quality of life and being able to travel around the country. Our infrastructure investment is a key driver for economic growth and we will need to continue with our efforts to drive our economy. Infrastructure investment will be a key ingredient in doing that."*



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An open door policy

The Roads Minister finished with an upbeat tone and repeated his call for collaboration across the sector.

"I decided from the very start of this role that my door would always be open. We need to work together to get things done. I've already met with many different organisations and look forward to continuing that. I want to have a very open transparent approach to this job. This is a golden time in terms of investment and what it will deliver for the infrastructure of this country. But it will require people to work together and for that to happen my door needs to be open," he concludes. ☺