

Local and live

Highways Magazine editor Alec Peachey recently caught up with Skanska's head of infrastructure services Adrian Cooke

During my conversation with Adrian Cooke he highlights innovation, funding and collaboration as key to helping the highways industry deliver improvements across both the strategic and local road networks.

Cooke, who has held various positions in the civil engineering sector including engineer, agent, contracts manager and contracts director, is well placed to give an opinion on some of the key issues affecting Skanska and the industry more widely.

Talking about the challenges currently facing local authorities, Cooke tells *Highways Magazine*: **"Councils continue to struggle with revenue budget reductions and trying to get the**

best they can out of Department for Transport (DfT) funding and capital funding. They're trying to deliver their city deals and negotiate devolution deals. We bring our clients together in forums to help try and tackle some of these challenges as a group and as a community.

"We try and do things as a group rather than through separate contracts where possible. Specifically, we've been able to help them develop forward programmes, with their asset management challenges and we've been able to support them with growth and funding."

Innovations such as Skanska's Dragon Patcher, a specialist machine that carries out reactive and preventative repairs to roads, are being used by local authorities.

The Dragon Patcher was recently awarded the Highway Industry Product of the Year at the *Highways Magazine* Excellence Awards.

"We have an annual event where we bring highways clients and experts



"I'm a road user myself and want to drive down local roads without any potholes"

Adrian Cooke

together from the UK and abroad," notes Cooke. *"We share different ideas and thoughts - and that's where the Dragon Patcher came from. Our Swedish and Polish colleagues showed us how they tackle the same problem and a trial then came to the UK before we implemented it as a daily activity.*

"We've also been talking to them about their winter service and doing things differently, which matches more of a Swedish approach. It's about taking some standard approaches from abroad, which are innovative over here and applying them." ➔



⬅ This type of collaboration is something which Skanska prides itself on.

Cooke continues: *“Relationships and collaboration are the cornerstone of everything we do. Whether that’s with our customers or our customers’ customers.”*

“Or indeed with our own supply chain and how we work as teams, or how we work as one team. If we’re all working in silos it’s a lot harder than when we’re all working together. It’s through collaboration that we come up with new and safer ways of working.”

Working with Highways England

With Highways England adopting an asset-led delivery model across several of its operational areas, what are Skanska’s thoughts on this?

“We’ve worked with Highways England on the major project side and maintenance side for many years,” comments Cooke. *“We maintain Area 2 as an asset support contract at the moment, which will soon transfer over to the ALDM. For us in some respects it makes absolute sense that Highways England are taking back the asset information ownership.”*

“They will need some help in terms of delivering their capital programme. There’s a lot of spend to go through and what will be key is for all the different partners that make up the new model to work collaboratively and ensure that it works as it’s meant to.”

The certainty of funding offered through the government’s £15 billion Road Investment Strategy is something that has been welcomed by the sector.

“It’s really important for Skanska and also for our supply chain,” remarks Cooke. *“The biggest challenge for us all has been a consistent and clear look ahead to ensure that we as main contractors and our supply chain can plan and ensure that we’ve got resources and plant equipment invested at the right time.”*

“And that we don’t have huge peaks and troughs because that creates inefficiencies and is difficult to manage. A lot of our supply chain gear up and have to put investment in as we do. They can only do that if they’ve got certainty that the work will continue to flow.”

Although there have been complaints from the highways sector about a lack of work coming through the Highways England pipeline, Cooke remains upbeat about the information Skanska are receiving on the maintenance side.

“On the Highways England maintenance side we do get a good look ahead and they’ve worked hard to put in place forward programmes and move away from the year-on-year situation that they were in. We do get a good two year look ahead now and obviously they want to look beyond that in their approach, which I absolutely welcome. In the last two or three years this has given us confidence on the maintenance side of their spending. We’ve been able to deliver against that spending very well.”

Attracting talent

One thing that has been a challenge for Skanska and other businesses across the industry is attracting new people into the sector.

Skanska is part of The 5% Club – an industry led initiative aimed at driving momentum into the recruitment of apprentices, graduates and sponsored students.

The 5% campaign encourages UK businesses to commit to raising the number of apprentices, sponsored students and graduates on formal programmes to 5% of their total workforce within five years.

“We’re competing with many different industries and how we attract the new generation to the construction industry is really important,” states Cooke. *“To me it still remains a very exciting place to go and work, whether you’re a road worker or indeed a civil engineer. It’s important that we engage with schools, colleges, and how we look for a diverse and inclusive workforce by just thinking differently, for example ex-military that have many transferable skills. Also looking at ex-offenders and how we can help reintegrate them back into the workplace. There is still a huge amount of technology involved in construction. Probably more so today than there ever has been. I think we can play to the interests of the younger generation and that’s an area they could be part of in the construction industry.”* ➔



◀ Safety is key

Road worker safety remains Skanska's number one priority and with reported incidents of abuse against operatives on the rise the company is committed to stamping out the problem.

"We want to make sure that our people go home safely every day," comments Cooke.

"We also share the Highways Term Maintenance Association's (HTMA) view that there has been an increase in road worker abuse. Some of it has been physical and some of it has been verbal. Quite often it is people acting out of frustration and not respecting the work we're doing to help them in making their journey more efficient in the future."

"Sometimes we do have to close roads to make our workers safer, but in doing so the diversion itself can create some conflict with members of the public. In those areas where we've seen high levels of conflict we've ensured that our personnel wear cameras on their PPE. When they have been approached and the camera has been noticed the behaviour has improved significantly. We've done a similar thing with cameras in stop and go boards, which has had a similar affect. It's an ongoing problem - this week alone we've had two incidents in two different locations."

So should there be a more widespread adoption of this type of technology?

"The camera is another form of PPE, but it's really a last resort to keeping our people safe," adds Cooke. *"I think there are some more proactive pieces of work around communication, either through radio, Facebook and good signage that help people understand why we're there, what we're doing and how long we'll be there for. The use of technology that allows information to get to vehicles will also help in the future. Could we do with some more help from the police? Certainly when we've captured evidence on cameras they've been very receptive to following through. Otherwise it has been difficult to get the police to follow through with any form of action."*

Local roads matter

The findings of the latest Annual Local Authority Road Maintenance (ALARM) survey revealed that the estimated cost to get the local road network in England and Wales back into reasonable condition is at almost £12 billion.

Cooke would like to see secured funds brought forward for local road networks, but says other options to help improve their condition must also be looked at.

"I'm a road user myself and want to drive down local roads without any potholes. If there isn't a budget then we need to find new and innovative ways of working to prevent the roads from deteriorating at the rate they are. Some of that is through good innovations with surfacing materials. And through other techniques such as the Dragon Patcher helping to fill cracks and holes in advance of them becoming potholes."

"In terms of investment every single authority would welcome more money to enable them to improve their local roads. I think local roads always get a smaller budget, yet they've got the largest coverage of roads compared to the strategic ones. It's very important from a road user perspective that all of the roads they travel on are of a good and safe standard."

What impact does Cooke think the Brexit decision might have on the future of the UK's highway network?

"What I hope they (the government) do is invest in some roads that will help get the economy moving quickly. Invest more in local roads so that there are some shovel ready projects ready to go which we can start working on. But also continuing with the bigger longer-term projects that help create growth between regions. And unlock some of the areas where travel is a big problem. Investment in infrastructure

has been welcomed over the years and we certainly hope post Brexit that it continues."

Devolution and the future

With combined groups such as Transport for Greater Manchester, Midlands Connect and Transport for the North, springing up more regularly, Cooke believes further devolution will occur.

"There's an awful lot of devolution deals on the table at the moment. The consolidation of authorities services, whether that's through a devolution deal or just authorities collaborating and sharing resource. I think it's certainly the route of travel to be able to reduce their costs and in terms of providing a better local service for local residents. It certainly enables more local decision making and spending of money in the right areas."

Finally, Cooke outlined what key things he'd like to see in the government's Road Investment Strategy 2.

"From my perspective I would like the government to continue to focus on widening roads to improve capacity, whilst rolling out the expressways and route based strategies to unlock growth. It would also be nice to see some recognition of local roads and a real push in terms of a strong intent and ambition to move the technology agenda. Particularly connectivity and communication for road users. And a clear direction as to how driverless vehicles will be implemented." ▶

