

APSE Summer Roundtable – Local Authority Highways

To: All English Authorities

For info: Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales

1. Context

Following the general election on the 4 July 2024 and the change in government, this roundtable session was convened for APSE Members with responsibility for highways, street-lighting and winter maintenance, to examine the proposals set out in the Kings Speech and the potential impact on the local authority highways services.

This briefing provides a summary of the current position, and overview of the roundtable discussion, and outlines the key asks of the new government.

2. Current position

The incoming Labour administration has appointed the Rt Hon, Louise Hague MP as Secretary of State for Transport, supported by the Minister for the future of Roads, Lillian Greenwood MP. The Department for Transport has outlined the following priorities:

Priorities

- Improving performance on the railways and driving forward rail reform.
- Improving bus services and growing usage across the country.
- Transforming infrastructure to work for the whole country, promoting social mobility and tackling regional inequality.
- Delivering greener transport.
- Better integrating transport networks.

Kings Speech

Specific measures around local authority highways were absent in the speech, however there were specific pledges on employment, devolution and infrastructure

- **Employment Rights Bill:** *Introduce a new deal for working people to ban exploitative practices and enhance employment rights*
- **English Devolution Bill:** *Legislation will be introduced to give new powers to metro mayors and combined authorities. This will support local growth plans that bring economic benefit to communities*

- **Skills England Bill:** *“Skills England will work with industry, the Migration Advisory Committee, unions and the Industrial Strategy Council to build and maintain a comprehensive assessment of current and future skills needs. This will also inform the Department for Education’s policy priorities.”*
- **Planning & Infrastructure Bill:** *seek to accelerate the delivery of high quality infrastructure and housing*

Manifesto commitments

- Sir Keir Starmer said a Labour government would deal with [potholes](#) by helping councils to use funding more "effectively".
- Labour said its plan would mean an additional £320m over five years on top of this, which it said would be funded by deferring the planned A27 Arundel bypass in Sussex.
- The road upgrade in West Sussex was [put on hold last year until at least 2025](#). It is not clear if and when Labour would aim to get it built.

The condition and maintenance of local roads in England – National Audit Office

Held back until after the election, the National Audit office report was damning in its finding about highways funding in England. It seems unfeasible for the new Government to continue with the existing regime which has been shown to be so flawed.

Key findings:

- 7 There are currently significant gaps in DfT’s information on the condition of local roads, limiting its understanding of condition of the network.
- 8 The limited data that DfT collects show the surface condition of local roads as stable over time, but information from industry bodies and people using roads suggests that road condition is getting worse.
- 9 DfT’s data do not allow it to understand how the funding that it provides for local road maintenance improves the condition of local roads.
- 10 Unlike its longer-term funding for the strategic road network, DfT’s funding for local roads has generally been short term and provided through multiple funds.
- 11 DfT does not consider the condition of roads or the factors that contribute to their deterioration when allocating funding to local authorities.
- 12 DfT’s use of funding incentives to improve local authorities’ approach to asset management no longer works as intended.
- 13 The increasing backlog in road maintenance work hinders local authorities in undertaking preventative work that could deliver better value.
- 14 DfT has announced £8.3 billion in additional long-term funding for local roads maintenance, but it is not yet clear how this will be allocated.
- 15 DfT has not updated its road maintenance guidance or tools that can help local authorities deliver maintenance more effectively for several years.
- 16 DfT needs to plan now for how it will support local authorities to meet challenges on the road network, such as climate change and the introduction of autonomous vehicles.

DfT should:

- a Review its coverage requirements for local authorities on surface condition reporting.
- b Request information on the condition of other key road network assets.
- c Review its approach to allocating capital funding to local authorities for local road maintenance to ensure its allocative effectiveness.
- H Review the tools and guidance that it has provided to local authorities.

APSE have issued an earlier briefing 24:33 on the NAO report.

3. APSE Comment

All the data, including that collected by the APSE Performance Networks benchmarking club, points to a steady, if not ideal, state for classified roads and a marked deterioration in unclassified ones. The Alarm survey suggests that current roads will only be resurfaced every 80 years on current spending of which an additional £16.3 billion is required to clear the backlog.

The piecemeal approach and constant bidding favours the larger authorities and takes little notice of actual need. Future allocation of funding needs to be based on need, something picked up by the NAO. Whatever the methodology, without substantial investment, our roads will continue to deteriorate and the words 'managed decline' are already being used by some.

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