

Making the connections

Dom Browne speaks to David Quarmby and Phil Carey, the highways experts who are helping to map out a blueprint for a Major Road Network

Imagine you are the head of a local highways department. This should not be much of a stretch for many of you. You are struggling with cuts, bidding processes, self-assessments, asset-management plans and a possible new risk-based approach to maintenance. Beneath your feet are the shifting sands of devolution and district councils' planning concerns. One day Chesterfield is in Derbyshire, the next it is trying to leave for Sheffield and take transport with it. Above you a regional transport body is possibly being established and Highways England is so flush with cash it can afford to spend some of its forthcoming strategic roads fund – ringfenced Vehicle Excise Duty (VED) from 2020 – on local networks connected to the strategic road network (SRN).

What could help make sense of this situation? How about an independently assessed, evidence-based blueprint for a Major Road Network (MRN) combining the strategic road network and the most important local authority routes? How would this help, you ask?

Well, as the co-creator of such a concept, with former Department for Transport (DfT) civil servant Phil Carey, transport sector grandee David Quarmby explains: 'We believe that alongside the SRN needs to be added a selection of the more "strategic" local authority roads, to truly reflect that kind of national and regional network that we need to support England's economies. The resulting MRN is then almost the natural road network for the new sub-national transport bodies (STBs) to adopt. And because in each case the STB is a creature of the local authorities in the area, prima facie they should be willing, and so far some appear interested, to upload to the STB the responsibility for the strategic planning (alongside Highways England) of the main roads in their area. That is the MRN: part SRN, part local authority "strategic" roads.'

'For their own roads in the MRN the local highways authority retains the day-to-day responsibility of the statutory functions but they upload the strategic planning and funding. That is quite a neat solution, which does not disturb the basic local accountability

but it does create the opportunity for a more coherent body to take a view on what is needed for the regional road network, including the SRN, in a sensible, wider area. And the STB is also more the kind of organisation able to deal

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eye-to-eye with Highways England in thinking about both the SRN and the local authority roads on the MRN.'

In short you are about to be handed a blueprint for the strategic planning and funding responsibilities for the major roads that you could pass up to your STB, a tool to win funding from central government from 2020, and a means to frame planning decisions within the wider perspective of regional needs. You also have the chance to re-focus efforts on the local roads that have taken the brunt of the budget cuts. And, as if that wasn't enough, they are also developing an outline of what it means to make a road in the MRN 'fit for purpose'.

It is a proposal that is already being taken on by at least one would-be STB, England's Economic Heartland – see the map on pages 28-29 showing how the addition of local authority "strategic" roads achieves better east-west connectivity, to



Phil Carey (left) and David Quarmby (right)

complement what the SRN does for the area. The concept is also apparently already gaining traction within the DfT.

This proposed indicative network is the product of the *Major Roads for the Future* study that Mr Quarmby and Mr Carey are working on for the Rees Jeffreys Roads Fund.

Sadly, towards the end of our interview, Mr Quarmby reveals that it is likely to be his 'last substantial piece of work'. The report is scheduled to be published in October (*Surveyor* has an exclusive preview, pages 28-29), after which he says he will finally retire.

When asked about any advice he has for the transport secretary, Mr Quarmby says: 'My comment is more for the government as a whole. Their commendable plans for devolution and handing responsibilities for economic growth and regeneration to local bodies have been made more complicated by the overlapping geographies

and functions of local enterprise partnerships, city regions, local transport boards and various other sub-national initiatives since 2010. Government could and should act as ringmaster to help ensure these initiatives achieve sensible geographies and properly joined-up functions; this then frees up the energies of those involved locally to concentrate on working together to plan and deliver the right programmes for their areas.'

'Many readers of *Surveyor* will wonder why it is that only London and its mayor have statutory obligations to produce spatial and economic development plans for London, and a transport strategy designed to deliver these plans? And they will be only too well aware how the resulting clarity of policy and continuity of investment has hugely benefited London's economy and quality of life. Let's hope that the deals being put together for the combined authorities and other areas begin to achieve a similar clarity and continuity – in spite of

wandering pedestrian is bad enough, but an autonomous vehicle doing so would be unacceptable. One of the consequences of making them highly risk averse is likely to be vehicles moving more slowly and hesitantly on the network. You may actually get lower capacity utilisation as a result.'

Meeting in *Surveyor's* offices, Mr Quarmby is flanked by Mr Carey (55), a perfect foil for him and a former civil servant with many years of experience at the DfT.

Mr Carey has the skillset to complement Mr Quarmby's. He has 10 years' wide-ranging experience as a senior civil servant leading a number of high profile exercises in policy development and managing change, particularly in roads and maritime policy.

Mr Carey was head of the ports division at the DfT from 2003 to 2007 and carried out the first fundamental review of ports policy for 25 years, alongside securing planning consents for major container port developments. He has now moved on to become the Road User Policy Advisor to Transport Focus, which brings an invaluable user perspective for this study.

Unsurprisingly, the two have worked 'very well' together and even finish each other's points at times. With the benefit of his experience in the department, Mr Carey offers a keen insight into the DfT.

'Inevitably, with the shrinking of DfT's capability over the last five or six years and at the same time the increase in workload on specific projects, there has been a much more single-minded focus on delivering particular infrastructure programmes and projects, with more of the thinking carried out away from DfT. I am thinking of the Treasury and the single-minded focus on infrastructure and growth there, without any sort of an equivalent capability to develop the logic and perhaps apply it to the existing network within the department.'

However, they should not be seen as being overly critical of the current situation. Both refer to experiences of seeing LEPs working well and of Highways England engaging well with stakeholders, and are encouraged by the creation of STBs and the Key Route Networks being developed in areas such as Greater Manchester. They are also, it should be said, at pains to stress the importance of local knowledge and decision-making and refuse to state categorically where responsibilities should lie and re-organisations fall. They are laying down an indicative map, it is for others to choose the exact route to take.

And when it comes to the DfT itself, Mr Quarmby says: 'What I have found in dealing with the DfT in recent years is that they are open and willing to debate and discuss what they are doing, the assumptions on which they are doing it and engage with the circle of interested parties and stakeholders – whether on road traffic forecasting, rail franchising, and so on. I think that's a great example and is very confidence-building.'

the confusion of boundaries and functions'.

Mr Quarmby's influence on the world of UK transport is based on a long multi-modal career in policy, strategy and research, in government, consultancy and research bodies, as well as over 30 years' board level responsibilities in London Transport, DLR, TfL, Strategic Rail Authority and in the private sector in Sainsbury's. He has advised the Airports Commission and led a government review on winter resilience in 2010. However his understanding of transport is not just a historical one.

Looking to the future, Mr Quarmby addresses the issue of driverless cars, with a considered point that is seldom raised: 'Some of the current thinking recognises that [driverless] vehicles need to be programmed to be very risk adverse, in order to make them acceptable on a busy urban road.'

'A human driver causing an injury to a