



# A missed opportunity?

**As a nation we tend to take our roads for granted – only noticing them when they aren't working, when roadworks prevent us getting from A to B, or when potholes that have increased after a cold and wet winter make simple journeys slightly more problematic. Brian Fitzpatrick, head of highways at EC Harris, discusses the quality of UK roads and how a different approach to funding could help improve them**

**In 2013 the overall quality of roads in the UK fell below the state of those in Portugal, Spain and Chile according to international competitiveness ranking scales – falling from 24th to 28th place. In fact, UK road infrastructure is only marginally better than Namibia and Puerto Rico (30th and 31st respectively). In retrospect this is not surprising really; the ranking reflects the historical lack of capital and maintenance investment in the whole network, as well as the growth in road investments by other countries. In 2010 the expenditure per capita on French roads was 75 per cent higher than in the UK.**

The current disparity of focus between local and strategic road networks is revealing. The strategic road network (SRN) is critical to our economic performance, carrying about a third of all vehicular traffic but makes up just 2.4 per cent of the total in England. Yet trunk roads and motorways are already the best maintained roads, and are also relatively new compared to non-principal local authority roads, which is where the real need and deficit lies.

The Highways Agency will now be transformed into a government-owned company backed by six-year funding. The theory is that long-term funding

**Our entire network is critically important to mobility and liveability, and any sensible investment strategy must consider the need to invest and maintain all of it**

would enable the pinch points and corridor solutions on our trunk road and motorway network to be built, and provide confidence in work load and pipeline for the sector, giving the bigger construction firms that build and maintain the strategic road network the opportunity to invest more in apprenticeships and training, securing the current and next generation of workers for the wider sector.

## A holistic approach

From this initial step towards regulation it was hoped by many that this was the start of a considered and consistent approach to looking at UK roads holistically, and that the local highway authorities which manage the rest of the network, and cater for SRN traffic when it leaves the motorway, would receive appropriate and proportionate operational funding to tackle their residual structural deficit with some more certainty. Our entire network is critically important to mobility and liveability, and any

sensible investment strategy must consider the need to invest and maintain all of it.

The recent announcement by Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin of a £168 million Pothole Challenge Fund, to deal with reactive problems, could therefore potentially be seen as a headline-grabbing move rather than a serious attempt to consider the investment needs of the wider network. The 'simplistic' allocation of £168m (based on road length rather than actual need) spread across all local highways authorities leaves a very small budget to address the state of under-maintained roads at a local level. It's a short-term fix rather than a long-term solution, and continues a pattern that the sector has seen before.

The creation of the government-owned company could have been the catalyst for longer term funding and resolving the structural deficit across the wider sector. Instead it looks like we are determined to continue with the sticking plaster approach to local roads, whilst the known, more recently constructed SRN is carved out (perhaps understandably) as a potentially lucrative asset for future investors.

Beggars can't be choosers, any highways focus is welcome, but we may well reflect that this was an opportunity missed to reform the way we manage and maintain our roads beyond the SRN. ☹️