

VIDEO SPEECH

LOCAL HIGHWAYS AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

I am pleased to be able to make a contribution to today's workshop on local highways and climate resilience.

Though

I am sorry that I cannot be with you in person.

Our climate is changing and we are also experiencing extreme weather events, including heavier rain, more flooding and even heatwaves. These weather extremes affect us in many ways: economically, environmentally, and socially – and they can affect our transport infrastructure.

Severe weather events in recent years have highlighted the fragility of our highway network. For example

the Met Office highlighted that summer 2012 was the wettest in 100 years. The heavy rains we encountered caused significant local flooding incidents in many areas which impacted on residents, businesses and our transport infrastructure.

And while last winter may not have been as cold as previous years, it, however did go on for much longer than anyone predicted which meant that this year's spring was the coldest spring for over fifty years.

These events demonstrate the need for action to be taken - not just by Central Government but also at a local level.

Last week President Obama gave a keynote speech on climate change and published a plan of action to tackle this issue.

The President is right when he said tackling climate change is a moral obligation and he is also right when he says cutting carbon will help spark business innovation and create jobs.

The Climate Action Plan that he launched was a decisive step that demonstrates the growing global momentum toward tackling the threat of dangerous climate change.

Closer to home, this Government continues to work closely with the United States on energy efficiency and low carbon technologies and on securing ambitious global action on climate finance and emission reduction.

The Climate Change Act requires the Government to publish a National Adaptation Programme following the publication of a Climate Change Risk Assessment to help build resilience.

Work is now underway on the National Adaptation Programme which will set out how Government, businesses, communities and civil society should prepare for and adapt to climate change risks.

The first National Adaptation Programme report will be published before November 2013. I know my officials have been working closely with many of you at today's workshop in helping shape this.

I pay tribute to the work that has been undertaken already by local authorities, the Environment Agency, the Met Office, Climate UK and ADEPT to name but a few.

Local roads form ninety-eight per cent of our national highway network. Local highway authorities have a duty under the Highways Act 1980 to ensure they, and the structures associated with them such as lighting and bridges, are well maintained.

This Government is providing the funding and tools to help ensure that local highway authorities can meet this statutory duty. Overall we are providing £3.4 billion to highway authorities from 2011 to 2015 for highways maintenance, significantly more than in the previous 4-year period.

The importance that this Government attaches to highways and maintenance was clearly set out last week. As part of the 2013 Spending Round announcement, we announced that we would be providing just under £6 billion to local highway authorities for maintenance over the six year period from 2015/16 to 2020/21 – this equates to around £976m per year.

This funding is 13% higher than in the previous six year period and clearly highlights the Government's commitment to the country's most valuable public asset.

As part of this funding the Department is also expecting that local highway authorities continue to ensure they achieve best value for money for the taxpayer and devote renewed energy and commitment to delivering well – maintained local roads that are fit for purpose.

I would like to see all highway authorities adopt the tools that are being made available through the Department for Transport's Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme, which can help deliver real cost savings and efficiencies.

Climate change adaptation is also a key consideration for every local authority when thinking how it can bring down costs.

Indeed planning for the impacts of climate change rather than reacting to it, is the best way to ensure the resilience of our networks and our ageing infrastructure which in turn will help reduce costs.

Climate change risk should be embedded in our everyday work and this includes planning for our roads and maintaining our highways. Resilience to extreme weather and climate change should also form part of every authority's capital and maintenance programmes as well as their decision making processes.

For example, the Highways Agency has assessed the potential risks that climate change poses to the ongoing operation, maintenance and improvement of the strategic road network. They have factored in the anticipated climatic changes to its business model and have developed management and mitigation solutions to remove or reduce these risks. They have also developed a climate change adaptation strategy and framework and record risks in a climate change risk assessment. I would encourage you all to look at this approach which is available on their website. I also encourage you all to look at the Asset Management Guide recently published through the Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme. This highlights the importance of applying asset management principles to help them achieve a more structured long term approach to maintaining their networks, including looking at risks such as climate change.

The Department for Transport is also working through the UK Roads Liaison Group and will shortly be starting a project to review sections of the Code of Practices for Well Maintained Highways and also the Management of Highway Structures. Within this, we will also be considering whether there is a need for further advice to be provided on climate change and resilience building on the work that already exists.

Conclusion

To conclude, we all need to wake up and take the action that is needed to protect our local communities and our public assets. If we choose to ignore these risks they will not just go away on their own.

The longer we leave them and not take action to future-proof our highways the greater and costlier the final bill will be.

I am encouraged by the work that is taking place across the sector to be alive to the risks and impacts of climate change. Today's workshop is a good example of ensuring that we are all aware of this issue and the challenges we are facing and to ensure that rather than working in silos, we are working collaboratively to address this risk.

We should not, however, be complacent and it is vital that we work together to ensure that plans are place for adaptation so that decisions are made now and that the investment in your highway network provides maximum value to the taxpayer, as well as ensuring that these assets are resilient not only for the 21st Century but for future generations to come.

Have a good day.

Norman Baker
Parliamentary-Under-Secretary of State
Department for Transport

1261 words