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Front cover shows fast moving tyre on durable thin surfacing

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Time for an integrated approach



Peter Head, Chief Executive Europe of consultant Maunsell, with his electric Th!nk car

For far too long the transport debate in the UK has been polarised into a battle between the pro and anti-roads lobbies. Entrenched positions on both sides have only succeeded in damaging public perception of both car and public transport.

Those positions are outdated and mask the genuine issues concerning Britain's transport needs. The real debate should embrace every form of transport in an attempt to find solutions that promote sustainable development by balancing the social, environmental and financial issues.

Too often the sole justification for new road schemes is their ability to relieve congestion and cope with existing high levels of car use. It is no wonder people fighting to reduce car use find this hard to take - especially when research shows that new roads also contribute to traffic increases.

If that is the only justification for a new road, then the decision makers should think again.

Roads should never be considered in isolation, but as one element in an integrated approach to transport as part of a sustainable development strategy.

Transport's key role should be to support sustainable development, and all transport solutions must be justifiable by their ability to achieve this. The economic benefits of reduced congestion and improved traffic flows may be easily identifiable on new road schemes, but are the other benefits being given equal consideration?

An effective transport solution must meet the triple bottom line of economic, social and environmental benefits. Public transport, light and heavy rail solutions are often promoted as offering the best environmental benefits and contributing more to the development of

a sustainable economy, while roads are easier to justify economically.

There can be environmental benefits to roads - just as there are social and economic benefits to public transport. Schemes developed through an integrated, multi-modal approach to transport should be able to demonstrate benefits on all three levels.

Huge improvements have been made in the environmental performance of roads, and the public needs to know more about these: the role of modern asphalts in noise reduction and the inclusion of tunnels on major schemes, for example.

But these are mitigation issues. It is equally important that the positive contribution of roads to sustainable development is considered and promoted within an integrated transport framework which takes account of the need to move people, goods and waste.

Modern road construction materials have a valuable role to play in the transport debate. The latest asphalts dramatically reduce noise and use considerably less raw materials than traditional surfacings. The safety benefits should also be factored into the equation.

Designing transport for sustainable development means approaching road design from a completely new angle. A major challenge is lining up regional sustainable development and transport strategies. If the decision is taken to build a road as part of these strategies, then all parties must be satisfied it is the most sustainable solution.

It is time to move the debate away from the destructive "us against them" attitudes of the past, and into the more sophisticated arena of finding the best transport solution to develop Britain's quality of life while also contributing to global sustainability.