

ICE West Midlands response to National Highways (Highways England) Net Zero Highways: our 2030/2040/2050 Plan

Introduction

ICE West Midlands welcomes the National Highways' 'Net Zero Highways our 2030/2040/2050 plan' and looks forward to them achieving the ambition of becoming carbon neutral by 2050. We also welcome their plan to work towards this target through a series of staged goals to achieve net zero for their own operations by 2030; their maintenance and construction activities by 2040; and travel on their roads by 2050.

These are ambitious targets that align with the recommendations made in the UK's Committee on Climate Change sixth Carbon Budget and the 1.5°C goal of the Paris Agreement. But, as the plan itself says, a *"net zero Britain will still travel by road in 2050"* and given that the major source of emissions is from road users, rather than maintenance or road building activities, these will not be easy targets to achieve.

Focus of this response

In respect to road building, maintenance and operational activities, we commend the updated Design Manual for Roads and Bridges in its *"clear requirements to assess and report on the climate impacts of our operation, maintenance and construction projects"*. However, the real challenge is less about assessing and reporting but in sourcing plant and materials to deliver zero carbon schemes.

The role of National Highways, as a major client, to drive innovation will be crucial and in this respect the plan highlights their proposals for *"supply chain to trial zero emission plant ... work with our suppliers ... give our supply chain surety to grow capacity and capability in zero carbon products pipeline of new materials ... providing delivery confidence and industry certainty"*. This will be a crucial activity to move from the limited examples that are currently available to industry-wide, commercial products and services.

We also welcome the recognition that some materials will be very difficult to decarbonise and note their intention to deal with some specific materials through Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) when they say that they will continue to use *"materials such as steel and cement that are hard to decarbonise ... we will provide market surety for CCS versions of these materials"*. This is an important commitment, but we wonder if the proposal to develop CCS on their estate is sufficient. *"Our green space removes around 15,000 tonnes of carbon ... we will plant at least an additional 3 million trees by 2030 ... lock up these residual emissions on or near to our roads and open spaces, for example, by planting trees on our roadside verges."* Such actions are important, both for CCS and biodiversity, but the quantities of carbon trapped by these measures are trivial in comparison to those produced by the sector.

Finally, we are pleased to read in the section *'Net zero carbon travel on our roads'* that National Highways recognises that *"many of the actions that will deliver this ambition are out of our direct control, but that does not mean we cannot play our part."* Engagement in this field will be crucial in achieving these changes. Establishing a stronger public image and media support will play an important part too.

Conclusion

Many of our ICE West Midlands members work in the highways sector, some for National Highways, so we recognise the importance, scale and challenge of this work. As always, we will support the professional development of our members in order to help them carry out this work and we will support Highways England and the whole sector to help them achieve a net zero carbon strategic road network.

For more information, please contact:

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