A vibrant national economy needs a well-maintained local road network, as all presenters and delegates at April’s RSTA industry conference agreed. The issue is how to convince the Government that the Cinderella of the UK transport system should go to the ball, as Steve Gooding, former Department for Transport director and current director of the RAC Foundation, pointed out in his opening speech.

In framing the conference by describing the local road network as the ‘Cinderella’ network – one that does most of the work but receives far less than it deserves – Mr Gooding cited the National Travel Survey England 2016, which reported that road travel (including car, bus and cycling) accounted for 69% of all journeys undertaken and a total of 83% of all travelled distance.

Despite overwhelming preference for road transportation, the latest ALARM survey from the Asphalt Industry Alliance reported a maintenance backlog of £9.31bn of work and said it would take 14 years to bring the local road network up to a reasonable standard.

What is really worrying about the latest survey’s findings is that 24,300 miles of local roads will need repairing next year and one-in-five local roads could fail within the next five years,” explained Mr Gooding.

He went on to stress, with only a touch of irony, that the ALARM survey is not alarming enough. It’s all too easy for those in Westminster to lose sight that the local road network is the public sector’s most important asset. For those outside the Westminster bubble, for the two thirds who travel by car to work, the availability of a well-maintained road network is an important issue.

Mr Gooding went on to comment that this is also of concern to local councils. He pointed to the State of Local Government Finance Survey 2018 by local government think tank LGiU and Highways’ sister publication The MJ, which showed that while funding for social care and education is high on the agenda of local authorities, maintaining the local road network is not in the top list of their issues to be concerned about.

“The fact that road maintenance does not seem to be on their radar is very worrying,” he said.

Making local matter
Unfortunately, local road maintenance is not as ’sexy’ as the ribbon-cutting ceremony of some impressive new infrastructure project. Mr Gooding pointed out. It needs to raise its image and emphasising the business case for a well-maintained road network while engaging more with the private sector might be one solution.

‘The more the business world complains, the more government may listen, if not, the future could see us all having to buy 60p’s in order to navigate our potholed, rutted roads,’ he said.

Business is fully aware of the negative impact of the poor state of the road network. Chris Richards, head of business environment at the manufacturers’ organisation, EEF, reported that it was the number one challenge for its members who are calling for a resilient network providing reliability of journeys for staff and deliveries. EEF members reported that over the last two years the deterioration of the road network had worsened.

Mr Richards also focused on the ALARM survey findings that 20% of local roads risk failure in five years. This is of particular concern to those 25% of manufacturing businesses based in rural locations for whom a well-maintained road network is vital.

The Government must realise that a well-maintained local road network is an economic enabler,” he said. “A way forward, perhaps, could be taking a more funding decisions away from Westminster and developing more funding...
“Local road maintenance is not as ‘sexy’ as the ribbon-cutting ceremony of some new infrastructure project; it needs to raise its image”

Steve Boddie - RAC Foundation

Simon Neilson - ADEPT

streams at a local level. Mr Richards believes that devolution could see local authorities adopting a more strategic approach, resulting in better local governance at a local level.

The view from local authorities was provided by Simon Neilson, outgoing president of council directors’ body ADEPT and executive director for economy and environment at Walsall Council. He underlined the role of ADEPT to bring together local authorities, private companies and local enterprise partnerships to highlight issues to government and, touching on the Cinderella theme, called for local roads to have much more prominence, particularly in the digital/smart arena where innovation can prove that roads can be much more than just asphalt.

The need for greater prominence is demonstrated by the Government’s proposals for the creation of a major road network. Mr Neilson said: “The creation and funding of a major road network is to be welcomed. But the Government should acknowledge the important role the local road network has for the national economy. Government needs to include in its Industrial Strategy – its plan to create an economy that boosts productivity and earning power throughout the UK – the provision of a well-maintained local road network.”

While Mr Neilson accepted that austerity has helped to focus attention on how to get the best results in the best way, he reiterated his frustration with the Government’s desire for competitive bidding for funding, calling it “a waste of resources, particularly when, ultimately, funding is a political decision”.

The final speaker, Angus Bodie, programme manager of the Scottish Roads Collaboration Programme, also saw some benefit in austerity as it has resulted in greater collaboration and sharing of resources, and it has focused minds on how to deliver efficiently managed roads and identify opportunities. Of course, much of this focus is due to necessity and Mr Bodie reported that in Scotland there has been a reduction of around 25% in local road maintenance budgets over the last five years, possibly rising to 60% or 70% by the end of the next five years. The subsequent deterioration in the road network has not gone unnoticed by the public, with the latest Customer Experience Survey from the ADEPT Foundation finding that 76% of respondents were dissatisfied with the road network and 68% saying it has become worse over the last two years.

Believing that the public does not differentiate between the governance and funding of strategic and local roads, and that “a road is a road”, Mr Bodie called for the rationalisation of road governance that, in Scotland, is shared between local road authorities, one national road authority and seven regional transport partnerships. He also called for dedicated road funding, possibly protected by statute. In support of this, he highlighted that the Customer Experience Survey found 28% of respondents were ready to pay more tax for better road maintenance.

The resulting Q&A session saw further reference to the Cinderella analogy with delegates wondering if local road maintenance would ever be given a “glass slipper” and if so by whom? Prince Charming was certainly not felt to be national government, but maybe the new city mayors could be persuaded to come to the ball. Whichever the Prince Charming may be, for increased maintenance funding it was agreed the local road network needs to get out of the kitchen, put on its best face and prove that real investment in maintenance is good for safety, the economy and the environment and, in short, good for society as a whole.