

Tackling street works

One of the worst features of past highways mismanagement in the UK has been the practice of putting water pipes, gas mains, phone and broadband wires and electricity cables down the middle of busy roads and covering them with large amounts of concrete and tarmac.

The Highways authority has to grant access to the utility undertakers to close all or part of the road, dig it up and repair, monitor or replace the pipe or wire. Parliament has tried to impose some discipline, giving the Highways Authorities the power to schedule the work, to time limit it and to fine the contractor for non performance. Of course access has to be granted immediately if there is a gas burst or a water mains leak where safety is paramount. There are roads that are designated sensitive where the Authority can demand that repairs and replacements be done off peak or at night owing to how busy and crucial the road is.

I have urged utilities and Councils to put new networks and replacement networks into verges, under pavements or away from main roads, preferably in accessible conduits so there will be no need in future to drill through layers of tarmac and concrete to find your particular pipe or cable without skewering someone else's. Wokingham Borough tell me they are doing this with new developments. It would be good if universally we were starting on a long work out to get rid of this problem.

In the meantime we have to manage a situation where most cables and pipes are under main roads. So today I ask how should Councils manage the demands for access to repair and replace? Do they need any new legislative powers? Is the balance right between the needs of the utilities and the needs of the users? Should we be tougher and demand more off peak working?