Darren Capes, City of York Council – Supplementary written evidence (AUV0093)

Letter from Darren Capes, Transport Systems Manager, City of York Council and Member of the Transport Policy Panel, IET

Please note the opinions expressed in this submission are mine, based on my experience as an engineer working in the delivery of local transport technologies and they do not necessarily represent the views of City of York Council or IET.

I am sure I speak for a large number of the smaller local authorities when I write to thank you and your Committee for the opportunity to give evidence to the Autonomous Vehicles Enquiry. When closing the session you invited Michael Hurwitz and I to write in with any subsequent thoughts regarding evidence and I thought it might be useful to do so to emphasise some points that were touched on during the discussions.

There are more than 140 Highway Authorities in the UK ranging from those serving the major city conurbations (Transport for London, Transport for Greater Manchester etc) to those even smaller than York. These authorities are all faced with the similar challenges of meeting increased demand for transport and increasing complexity in the services we are expected to provide, against a backdrop of continuing reductions in levels of resourcing and staffing. There are two serious consequences of this challenge which may not be immediately obvious.

First the cuts in staffing and resources mean that many Authorities no longer have a critical mass of technical specialists in post, yet transport provision is moving into the connected and digital age in which we need more, not less, support to understand what technology decisions need to be made as existing infrastructure reaches the end of its life and new systems are considered. More specifically Authorities need to understand what supporting connected and autonomous vehicles will mean for the policy and funding decisions they need to make now. We also need clarity on how the co-ordination of countrywide delivery of connected and autonomous vehicles will be managed between national and local government and the public and private sectors.

Most local authorities, and I include the big ones, have very little understanding of how a mixed autonomous / manual vehicle fleet could operate on the UK road network, and we do not see any guidance or much research to help us with that. There is a lot going on both here and abroad regarding the technologies but we feel that there is not enough sufficient activity at a UK national level to collect evidence and formulate best practice around how the deployment transition could be managed. For example, how might we manage the use of mixed vehicles in the same road space? Do we need to segregate them? How might we manage autonomous vehicles with pedestrian and cycle flows – more segregation between autonomous vehicles and pedestrians and cyclists or less?

There are a few associations of Authorities, usually with a regional grouping, who share experience and discuss common problems and there are also excellent technical interest
groups organised by ITS(UK) and by the IET, but these groups have no funding and no powers to designate standards. There is also a national group linking local authorities and suppliers starting to form in the shape of the Transport Technology Forum. However, if steps are not taken by DfT towards long-term further support of these activities then study of the issues I have highlighted will be restricted to the few Authorities able to find resources, or will be undertaken in isolation by well-intentioned researchers funded either independently or by interested parties in industry. There will be much duplication and wasted effort and the danger that technological development lead by industry will result in proprietary standards and may not yield outcomes that are most beneficial to the public sector or nation as a whole. The work required needs to be done once, properly, with a steering group of representative Authorities so that in the same way as DfT issues sets of standards and guidelines for traffic signals, road signing etc we will have one common set of guidance. This is essential for all Authorities to support our planning and policy development for city centres to help us across the next 10 or 15 years when we will be in some sort of mixed environment.

Second, I mentioned when answering the Committee’s questions the difference between the majority of UK local authorities and the very large ones such as Transport for London. TfL is of a size where it can influence the market and negotiate as an equal partner because of that size. Most of us are too small to carry that weight so we react to what the market does. That is the way it is, unfortunately, or fortunately and cities such as York are in the hands of the manufacturers. If there are no recognised standards or procedures for deploying autonomous vehicles – as seems to be the case – then many Authorities will be vulnerable to manufacturer lock-in as a result of having to use proprietary standards. We need DfT to intervene and give guidance on open standards so that we can in turn have genuinely open procurement and guaranteed interoperability. There is nothing new in doing this: it is exactly what DfT did some years back when the smart card market had no open standards.

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