STONEHAVEN

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2024

MOVING HEARTS AND MINDS

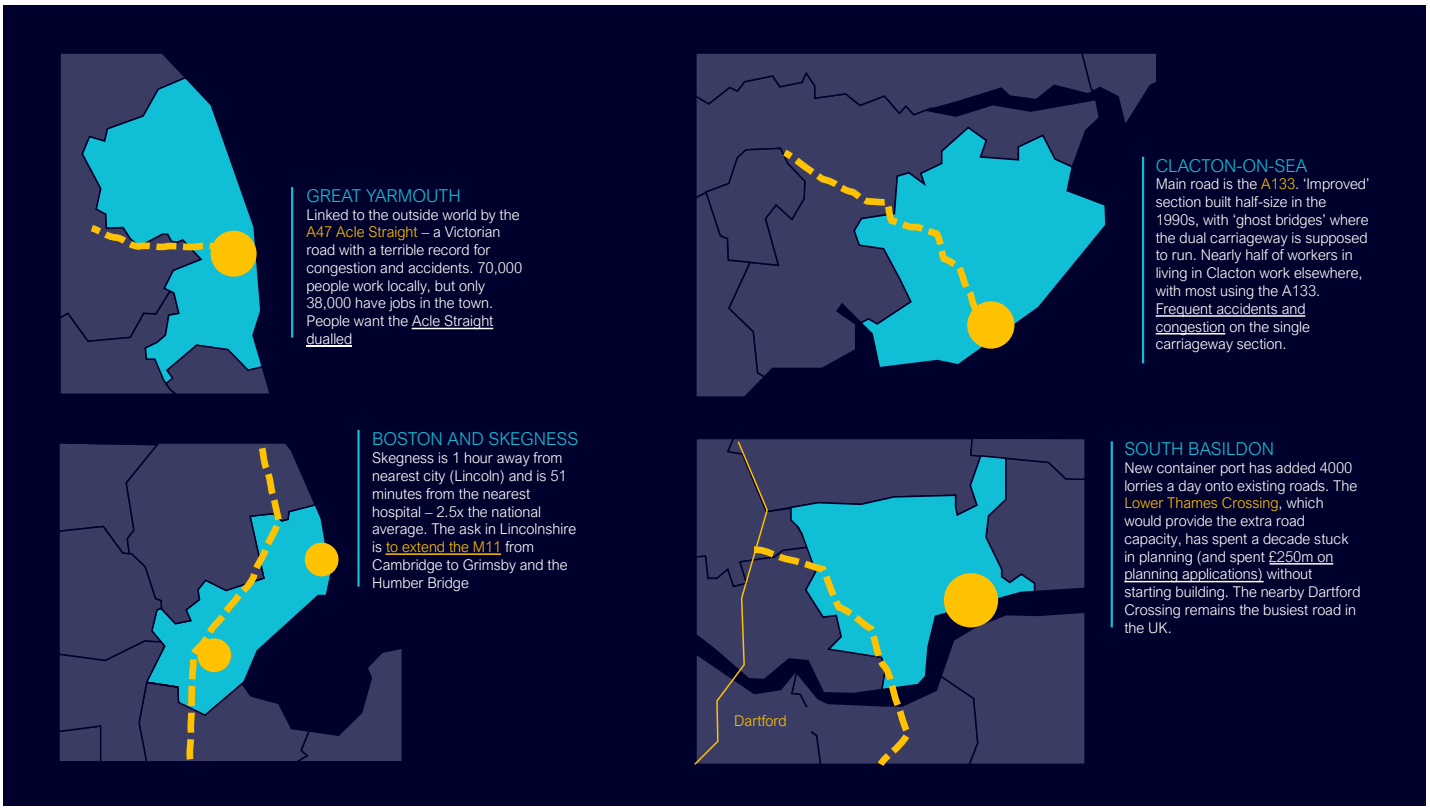
Delivering Infrastructure for the Age of Populism



DELIVERING INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE AGE OF POPULISM

In July 2024 four constituencies elected new Reform MPs. There are many reasons for the rise of populism; but, unexpectedly, there is one factor that unites all four places.

Every constituency is 'missing' a road. Not only that, but this gap is something that is a matter of serious local concern. The exact shape and nature of these problems varies, but the end result is the same: the transport available to this community is less than they expect it to be. Not only that, but the fact these roads are the one essential link to the outside world means this is one of the most visible ways in which the state 'fails' these areas. In the strongest cases, they crystalise what being 'left behind' means for the people living there.



To be clear, this paper does not argue that the presence or absence of a road is the root cause of populism, or recommend building these particular roads. But it does argue that a place without good transport links to the outside world – especially by road – is a place where a populist critique would ring true.

Whatever their wider merits and drawbacks, roads are the public service that are used most regularly by members of the public. A resident of Great Yarmouth may have no children in school and no reason to visit the hospital, but they are likely to be driving the Acle Straight regularly or even daily. Problems here are more visible than any other. Roads are the conduit through which people reach a wide range of other services – from weekend shopping trips to hospital dashes – making roads a 'hygiene factor' for wider life. Accidents, when they come, can mean tragedy or ruinous expense. And in terms of transport, roads matter most to ordinary people. Households in the bottom 20% for income make an average 362 trips a year by car or van, compared to 67 by bus or 14 by train. Even in the poorest households, people spend almost nine times as much on cars and fuel as they do on other modes of transport.

WHY NOTHING HAS BEEN DONE

Improvements to these links have been discussed for many years, and in some cases partial improvements have been made. Three main objections have been raised, which are generally seen as persuasive within central government. However, away from Whitehall, local people remain unpersuaded.

LONDON OBJECTION	LOCAL VIEW
Transport needs to move away from the car towards other modes of transport	The local rail service, if it exists at all, is at best a branch line with an hourly service. Buses have as much trouble on these roads as cars.
The roads are likely to cause environmental damage	These are projects aimed at fixing a serious local problem, which often costs lives. Some environmental compromise can be justified, especially if the proposal is to dual an existing road in its current location.
Appraisal shows the benefits of investment do not justify the costs	Numbers do not reflect the problems that local people think are key. Transport appraisals are built around time savings, and only consider the wider impacts of improvements in generic terms.

Past experience shows that there is more to the local viewpoint than the central authorities like to admit. The 2015 Road Investment Strategy was created at pace, meaning that it was (unusually) built around pre-existing local opinion and priorities. Subsequent appraisal found that it generated £7 in benefits for every £1 invested, including £5.7bn of productivity improvements to the wider economy.

However, in allocating transport funding, the decisions are usually made in London. As a result, these enduring problems are normally last in the queue for new investment. With the 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy being designed in Treasury in under 12 months, this is likely to be the case in the coming round of investment as well.

DEEP DIVE: GREAT YARMOUTH

Great Yarmouth is on the eastern end of the A47, linking the town to Norwich along a 7-mile single carriageway road known as the Acle Straight. This functions as the town's principal connection to the outside world, and is totemic to local people.

Over 22,000 vehicles use the road every day – making it an extremely busy single carriageway. This reflects its importance to the local economy and services – there are only 38,000 jobs for the 70,000 workers living in the town – the rest commute out. Freight, from the Midlands, the South East and beyond, comes in and goes out by the same route.

There is deep local support for dualling the road, which is manifest through the views of local politicians, the editorial position of the Eastern Daily Press, the local council and the vocal A47 Alliance of local MPs. This is near-unanimously agreed amongst locals, and even features in the discography of The Darkness (who come from nearby Lowestoft).

"Oh, gimme the keys To any old bucket of rust
Acle Straight gonna take me to where I wanna be."

The Darkness, Stuck in a Rut

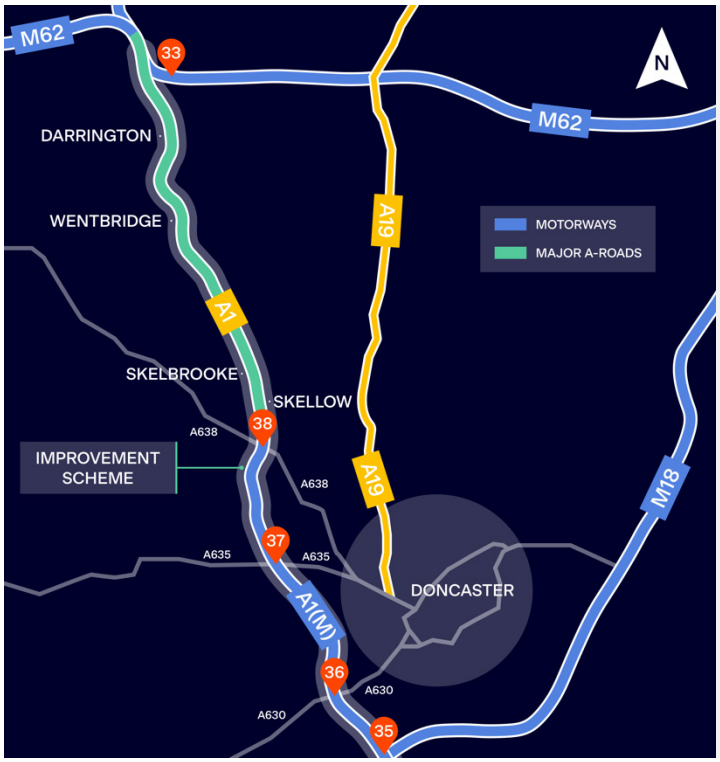
But no action has been taken to dual the road. In 2014, government promised to widen the roundabout at the start of the straight by 20 metres, and investigate the case for full dualling. After eight years, this has seen repeated consultations, no construction, and the scheme cancelled at the Budget. In July National Highways announced a 50mph speed limit and speed cameras on the Acle Straight, making journeys safer, but longer and slower.

The new MP in Yarmouth is now promising to campaign hard for dualling, and the neighbouring seat of Lowestoft is a key Reform UK target.

NEXT IN LINE? DONCASTER

Reform is targeting Doncaster for 2025 elections. This has a similar 'forgotten road' – the A1(M). In our October polling, five of the six Labour MPs with constituencies along the road (including three cabinet ministers) were on track to lose their seats to Reform.

The A1(M) around Doncaster is the **oldest unimproved section of motorway in the UK**, not having changed materially since it opened in 1961. It is still two lanes wide, even through traffic has risen 70% since 2000; and **it now carries more lorries per lane than any dual carriageway in the UK.** A major junction with the M18 (and in effect the M1) means that the road is reliably delayed as five lanes of motorway meet. When the road breaks down, traffic backs up and disrupts local roads and local bus services, bringing much of Doncaster to a stop.



"When the A1 collapses our whole service goes to pot, all the way to the M62 junction."

Alan Riggall, First Group South Yorkshire

The road to the north of Doncaster is also of a poor standard, having been left out of the long A1 improvement programme of the 1990s-2010s. It is the only gap in this motorway route between the M25 and the Angel of the North. It carries nearly 14000 lorries a day on the busiest section – more than double the number driving into the country's largest container port. During essential maintenance earlier this year, local drivers had to queue an average of 30 minutes at peak times to get through.

Action was promised in 2020 to widen the motorway and upgrade the non-motorway road to the north. This was intended to form a 'Great Yorkshire Bypass', which would unblock Doncaster and relieve the busy M1 between Sheffield and Leeds. The project was frozen in 2023, together with all other major road pipeline projects, in order to reduce future financial pressures.

Government must take a view on the status of this project as part of the 10 year infrastructure strategy in April, shortly before the local elections. Given the status of the project, this will involve giving a statement on whether the upgrade is expected to proceed or not.



WHERE NEXT? THE INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY

In October, government announced that it would publish a National Infrastructure Strategy in 2025, setting out a ten-year investment plan for the UK. The intention of this is to provide a platform for an ambitious investment programme that can deliver the government's growth objectives, both by improving the country's infrastructure and by providing a positive context for wider growth.

However the timeframe involved has two unavoidable implications – it will necessarily extend beyond the current pipeline into a new series of projects; and it will be the moment at which many proposals will be locked out of investment for a decade. There is therefore a very high price to getting the plan wrong.

The nature of the Infrastructure Strategy makes this more challenging. This will not be a document built on years of local study and careful stakeholder engagement, in the manner of the rail and road investment strategies. Instead, it will be produced in-house by the Treasury, where locally-specific knowledge is in short supply. In times of tight resources, it is likely that the focus will be on getting the highest return on investment from a centrally-selected shortlist, and that this will be calculated through department-sanctioned benefit cost ratios. Local people will not form part of the discussion.

This bodes poorly for longstanding local asks: where the temptation will be to dismiss them as perennial no-hopers. It is unlikely that officials will ask why local people have been making the same request for decades, or whether the appraisal process is judging the problem accurately.

WHAT TO DO – ONE GOOD LINK

The film director Howard Hawks said that the secret of a great film was "three good scenes and no bad scenes." A similar logic shapes a programme aimed at rebuilding public trust in the transport network. People need one good link that they can rely on to reach the wider world; and no links that are so visibly bad as to undermine faith in the system as a whole.

Precisely what this means will depend on local perspectives. For example, there are many villages where people have been asking for a bypass or a fix to a railway station for generations, but where the problem will be invisible only a few miles away. But we can use the growing populist vote to attempt a more structured approach to the problem. Using Stonehaven's MRP model, which provided the most accurate forecast of the 2024 election result, we have identified a number of constituencies that were on track to elect a Reform MP in October, and where there are notable infrastructure gaps or needs.

PROJECTS

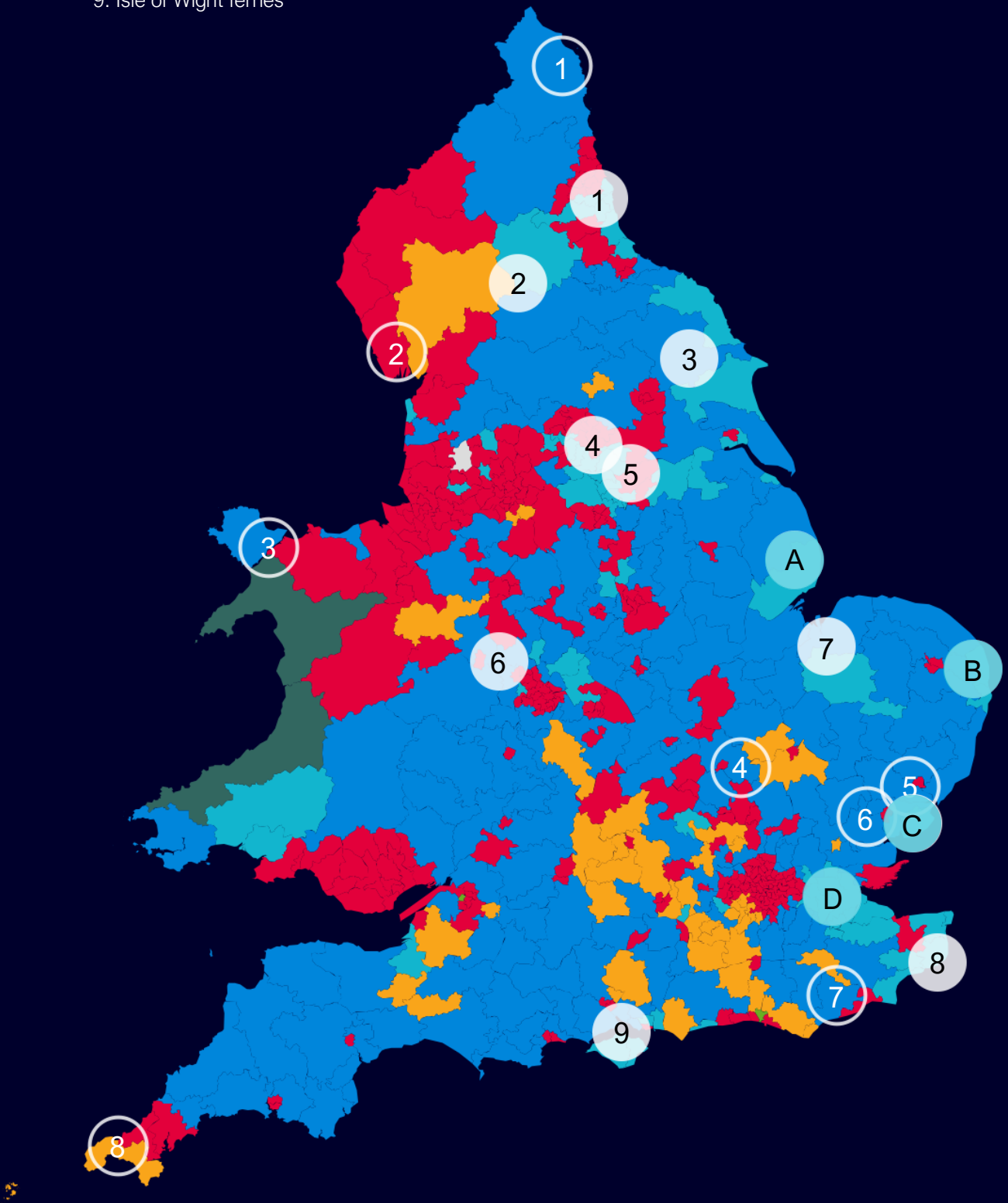
1. Leamside Line
2. A66
3. A64 to Scarborough
4. Lofthouse Interchange
5. A1 Doncaster
6. A47 Dualling
7. M6 Toll & A5 Dualling
8. A2 Dualling and A2/M2 Brenley Corner
9. Isle of Wight ferries

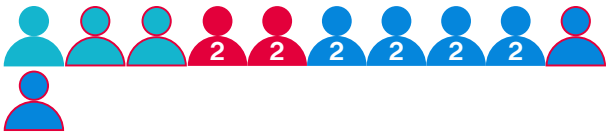
WATCH LIST

1. Northumberland
2. Barrow in Furness
3. Anglesey
4. Central Bedfordshire
5. Ipswich
6. North Essex
7. Hastings
8. Cornwall

"MISSING ROADS"

A. M11 Extension
B. A47 Acle Straight
C. A133 dualling
D. Lower Thames Crossing



PROJECTS	OCTOBER FORCASTS
Leamside Line – railway south of Newcastle that was closed in 1964 and stolen (literally) in 2003. Currently a key priority for NECA to integrate the line into the Tyne & Wear Metro, with planning underway.	
A66 dualling – transport capacity across the Pennines has gone down in the past fifty years. Dualling the A66 was first promised in 1946, the project has nearly 90% local support and is shovel-ready.	
A64 York to Scarborough – as with Great Yarmouth, a crucial road from the coast into Yorkshire, consisting of unimproved single carriageway. First stage upgrade has been consulted on by National Highways, but frozen in 2023.	
M62/M1 Lofthouse Interchange – the busiest junction in Yorkshire with 75k+ vehicles/day. Well over-capacity and built with unsound experimental engineering techniques. Design consulted on with 85% of consultees saying improvements were needed, but frozen in 2023.	
A1 Doncaster – the oldest unimproved stretch of motorway in the UK, with the densest lorry traffic of any UK dual carriageway. Upgrade frozen in 2023.	
A47 Dualling – Problems on the A47 are not limited to Great Yarmouth. Local MPs and councils have a bipartisan campaign pushing for dualling and better junctions from Lowestoft to Peterborough. Some improvements under construction already, with local campaign identifying next steps.	
M6 Toll & A5 – The A5 near Cannock has not been upgraded since the M6 Toll opened – but the toll road now costs £9.70 a journey. Upgrades around Nuneaton have been pending for a decade without action.	
Lower Thames Crossing – the long-running scheme to support the Dartford Crossing (the busiest road in the UK) and improve links to the Channel Ports. Shovel ready.	
A2 & M20 routes to Dover – when disruption comes at Dover, Operation Stack is used to turn the M20 into a temporary lorry park. Access to Dover via the A2 is via a single carriageway road, with upgrades paused.	
Isle of Wight ferries – taking a car to or from the Isle of Wight costs £50-300 return. The distance between the island and the mainland is shorter than the Dartford Bridge, which costs drivers £2.50. 15,000 signed a recent petition calling for action – more than a tenth of the island's population.	

KEY

Figure is full = Projected Win Border = Current incumbent Star = Cabinet Minister/Displaced Cabinet Minister

2 = Reform in 2nd place Small Figures = MPs further away from the area of effect

SHOVEL READY?

Infrastructure projects take time to prepare. Historically, a road scheme would typically take at least six years to get from concept to the start of construction – which can be challenging for a government with a mandate to get building.

Under the existing regime, government would be limited to delivering what its predecessors had left in development. For roads, this would be doubly challenging, as the previous government announced a five-year delay on all pipeline projects, meaning in effect there would be nothing to build other than a short list of previously committed projects.

However Labour has promised reforms to the planning regime early in this Parliament. If successful, this process would put suitable projects back on the table, especially on sites where prior work has been done or where construction is relatively simple and uncontentious. Its changes to the borrowing rules have also removed the need to compete for a finite supply of funding – another historic trap that has caught such projects. Swift action, particularly on containing the risk of legal challenge, would make it possible to have construction taking place on the ground before the next general election.

Shortly before going to press, there were also signs that the government realises this. Louise Haigh has announced that, as Transport Secretary, she will adopt a vision-led approach to investment. While this could mean many things, the one thing that it is clearly intended to convey is that she is not beholden to the narrow process of investment appraisal that has historically barred the projects that local people consider critical.

There are also projects that have already received planning permission, which address popular concerns, and which are genuinely shovel-ready. Key early decisions for the government are.

- Proceeding with the A66 – No new railway line or lane of road has opened across the Pennines since the 1970s. The A66 dualling fixes this. It is another example of a totemic local project in an area where Labour won many new seats in the election, but is increasingly inclined towards voting Reform.
- Approving the Lower Thames Crossing – the Thames Estuary around the proposed crossing and the parallel Dartford Crossing is one of the strongest areas of populist settlement. The project itself has become a watchword for non-delivery, as governments have lacked the courage either to deliver it or close it down.
- Approving the A46 Newark Bypass – which together with the A66 and A1 Doncaster upgrades creates the 'Great Yorkshire Bypass'

A MOMENT OF CHANGE

The new Labour government is facing up to the challenges of planning in a way that its predecessors have not. For the first time in a generation, there is an intention to use the power of the state to make lives better for people across the country. This does not mean the same thing in every community – but in some towns and cities, it means delivering the things that they have been asking to see for a very long time. Whatever this thing is – a road, a rail service, or something completely different – it is something that is found bottom-up.

With five years to deliver, the question may be whether the government finds those totemic changes by listening, or rests its hopes on the power of central expertise to find solutions with the same reach and impact. But the rise of Reform shows that leaving problems unsolved will solve nothing.