

# Fellow Travellers

*Tim Hampson rounds up a month in parliament that has seen plans to get motorists back on track, and new hopes for an even greater feat of navigation: to move health care and social services towards the same direction of travel.*



**M**Ps are often accused of going off at a tangent, digressing or missing the point but all three activities will be a thing of the past if local transport minister, Norman Baker, has his way.

The Lewes MP is to host a 'satnav summit' in March to ensure that all the UK's vehicles are on the right track, and that lorry and car drivers do not follow out-of-date directions from old models of the digital mapping systems.

With its many narrow streets, Lewes has probably seen its fair share of HGVs following satnavs down inappropriate roads.

Indeed, from around the country there are numerous stories of vehicles unable to cross small bridges, getting stuck in mud and ending up in streams. In Wales, funeral services at Llanelli Crematorium are regularly being disrupted by lorries being sent down a nearby lane by out-of-date satnavs and blocking the road.

Now the satnav Czar says he is going to put an end to such incidents.

Among others, the summit will be attended by the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transportation which represents councils on transport issues, and ITS (UK), which promotes intelligent transport technology and whose membership includes satnav companies. Highway authorities, mapping providers and satnav manufacturers will be asked to work more closely together. At present, it can take months for map updates to make their way from local councils to satnav software.

The summit is timely because, from April, the government is allowing local authorities to reclassify roads - ensuring that A roads are placed where they want traffic to run and lowering the category of roads in places that they want traffic to avoid - rather than having to come to Whitehall for approval.

"These powers will help councils make sure that drivers are using suitable routes," says Baker.

Some doubt whether all - or any - of these measures will be effective, given that it may be cheaper for people to carry on using old satnavs, but other plans are afoot: the summit is taking place alongside the introduction of new rules that mean councils will no longer need Whitehall approval to introduce certain new traffic signs.

Authorities will be able to put up signs indicating dedicated parking bays for car club vehicles, electric vehicle charging points, and permitting contra-flow cycling on one-way roads. There will also be a new sign to warn lorry drivers of unsuitable roads.

Meanwhile in the field of health care, a different kind of monitoring gadget has been in the political spotlight, but for drivers not cars; people can look forward to having access to a greater range of telehealth services, the government has pledged.

Health minister, Paul Burstow, says that he wants electronic assistive technology to be available to more people after seeing a trial of the systems in Cornwall.

Over the past three years the Department of Health has been running the world's largest randomised control trial of telehealth and telecare, involving 6,191 participants and 238 GP practices across three locations in Cornwall, Kent and Newham.

According to Burstow at least three million people with long term conditions could benefit from such systems, creating a potential net efficiency gain of around £1.2bn by 2016.

The effects on care also seem impressive, as early findings from the trial suggest that telehealth can lead to a 45% reduction in early mortality, 21% reduction in emergency admissions and a 24% reduction in elective admissions.

Burstow said: "The trials of telehealth and telecare have shown how people with long term conditions can live more independently, reducing the time they have to spend in hospital and improving their quality of life. The feedback I have heard from people in Cornwall has been incredibly

positive. They were absolutely clear that high-tech healthcare being used here has improved their lives for the better."

Burstow says that the Department of Health will work with industry, the NHS, social care and professional organisations to find ways of making greater use of the technology over the next five years.

This all fits in with government plans for social services - run by councils - and the NHS to work much more closely together.

Prime minister David Cameron has asked the health secretary Andrew Lansley to drive through changes that many analysts claim will make life more convenient for patients, improve care and save the NHS money. In turn, the Department of Health has asked the King's Fund and the Nuffield Trust to help it devise a national strategy to promote joined up care.

This will mean organisations abandoning a silo approach to service delivery based on individual funding streams and a focus instead on a shared population approach reflecting all interests and assets.

Currently there are several examples of local strategic partner intelligence hubs around the country involving healthcare and local government bodies sharing information from a variety of sources.

However there are no plans to merge formally health and social services, and with no plans for there to be a single care budget each organisation will still have its own purse to protect. Neither do the plans seem to take into account the cuts which local councils are having to bear right now. Instead, the success of the scheme seems reliant on voluntary sharing.

As every observer of such matters knows, however, getting all social services and health service providers travelling down the same road of working together, voluntarily and efficiently, is likely to require a fair bit more than an up to date satnav.