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President: Gerry Fleming IEng CEnv
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Chief Executive: Peter Walsh CEng
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Registered Office: 22 Greencoat Place,
London SW1P 1PR
Tel: 020 7630 1111
Fax: 020 7630 6677
Email: soe@soe.org.uk
www.soe.org.uk

Editor: Brian Tingham BSc CEng
MInstMC FSOE FIPlantE FIRTE
Email: btingham@findlay.co.uk

Industry Editor: John Challen
Email: jchallen@findlay.co.uk

Contributing Editors: Brian Weatherley,
John Kendall, Ian Norwell, Keith Read,
Robin Dickeson, Steve Banner

Art Editors: Martin Cherry, Neil Young
Illustrations: Phil Holmes
Production Manager: Nicki McKenna
Email: nmckenna@findlay.co.uk

Advertisement Manager: Craig Molloy
Email: cmolloy@findlay.co.uk
Tel: 01322 221144

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IRTE
engineering success

'Driving success' strategy hints at seed funding?

At first glance, the government's 'Driving success – an industrial strategy for growth and sustainability in the UK automotive sector' appears to have little to offer the commercial vehicle sector. However, there may just be more to this than articulating longer-term support for the all-important British passenger car market.

Launched at last month's Goodwood Festival of Speed by Business Secretary Vince Cable and Professor Richard Parry-Jones (who together co-chair the Automotive Council), the strategy majors on four main action points. First, government wants to grow the automotive supply chain to sustain already healthy export business. Secondly, it intends to attract and develop relevant skills. Thirdly, it aims to focus on building the right business and finance environment. And fourthly, it's about getting ahead with R&D, particularly around low-carbon vehicles – widely acknowledged as the future for transport.

Bringing all that to reality is about another four initiatives. Government and the automotive industry will together invest £1 billion in an Advanced Propulsion Centre over the next decade – focusing on R&D, but also commercialisation of technologies for future vehicles. Meanwhile, Automotive Council members intend to recruit more than 7,600 apprentices and 1,700 graduates for the sector over the next five years. Also, the Automotive Investment Organisation (led by former Ford of Britain chairman Joe Greenwell) is aiming to double the number of jobs (to 15,000) in the automotive supply chain over the next three years, through Foreign Direct Investment. And there will be a £10 million competition for low-carbon vehicle R&D projects, funded by the Technology Strategy Board – although this is not new money.

No mention so far of commercial vehicles. But, get beyond the executive summary, and the strategy document immediately trumpets commercial vehicle manufacturers as among key players in the automotive industry. It cites, for example, "Leyland Trucks, Dennis Eagle, Wright Bus, Optare and Alexander Dennis". And it goes on to laud construction, agriculture and specialist vehicle manufacturers, ranging from Case New Holland to Caterpillar, JCB, Perkins, Terex and Thwaites. Further on, in the section on competitiveness, the report brackets together cars, light trucks and commercial vehicles in its global growth forecasts, and goes on to extol the virtue of Britain "playing a decisive role in developing and manufacturing low and ultra-low emissions vehicles and technologies".

This latter surely has 'commercial vehicles' written all over it? And indeed, in one of its more self-congratulatory sections, entitled 'Investing in innovation and technology', the government's report boasts of OLEV's (the Office of Low Emission Vehicles) activities to date in funding R&D, while also supporting growth of the requisite refuelling infrastructure, and of the new Transport Systems Catapult and funding by the Technology Strategy Board for the Low Carbon Truck Trial, designed to support UK haulage operators in buying and using low-carbon trucks that implement emerging technologies.

Yes, it's well hidden, but, fingers crossed, Britain is serious about commercial vehicles, too.



Brian Tingham BSc CEng MInstMC FSOE FIPlantE FIRTE