

The activities of the Board during the past financial year are more particularly described in its annual report appended to this Statement. The report shows that the total expenditure from highways funds on actual works, as distinct from loan and special charges, amounted to £1,600,000, which is nearly £400,000 more than was expended on similar works during the year immediately preceding. In addition, interest and loan charges accounted for £292,000, while general-rate subsidies, together with a special subsidy on rates levied upon farming-land, involved further payments aggregating £371,000. The question of charging rate subsidies to the Main Highways Account is one which the Government intends to review in connection with its general financial policy as soon as circumstances allow.

Although the present urgent requirements have not yet enabled the matter to be completely investigated, the financing of highways operations entirely from revenue instead of partly from loan-money as hitherto is also receiving serious consideration.

The progressive increase in annual loan charges, in respect of highways, now involves the appropriation of approximately £300,000 per annum, and it is desirable that if at all possible future works be financed from current revenues.

Expenditure from the Highways Revenue Fund throughout the entire highways system averaged the equivalent of £122·4 per mile, compared with £100·3 for the previous year. At present the maintenance costs are relatively high in some localities, due to various factors, such as scarcity of metal, increased traffic, and adverse weather conditions. Where circumstances warrant, permanent surfacing is carried out and the cost of maintenance can then be reduced. The increase in the average expenditure per mile per annum is due to the fact that for a number of years past insufficient funds were available to provide for necessary maintenance works, and it was the aim of all concerned to restrict expenditure in every way, but last year a larger sum was allocated, and this is reflected in the figures quoted.

In its report the Board refers to the steady increase in motor traffic generally as disclosed by the additional registrations of motor-vehicles and the greater importation of motor-spirit. It is apparent that, with the increased traffic, there is an immediate necessity to intensify the maintenance of highway surfaces, and improve, as far as possible, present unsatisfactory alignment. Improvement of alignment is a substantial factor in the elimination of accident risk, and, while much good work in this direction has already been accomplished, a great deal remains to be done.

In order to meet present requirements it is proposed to allocate £1,000,000 from highways funds this year for maintenance purposes.

In addition to this sum, £200,000 is being provided for urgent bridge renewals. The problem of replacing decayed and obsolete bridges is still somewhat acute, and, while this class of work is being carried out as expeditiously as possible, further acceleration is largely dependent on the progress that can be made with engineering surveys, site investigations, foundation-testing, and the designing of suitable and economic structures based on the peculiar features of each case.

The permanent surfacing of trunk routes and radial highways, which carry a sustained volume of traffic, resulted in the completion, during the past year, of 277 miles of dustless pavement. At the 31st March, 1936, the total length of highways thus surfaced was 1,943 miles, which is 16 per cent. of the total main-highways system. This class of work will be continued during the current year, the intention being to concentrate primarily upon the main arterial routes, although other highway sections will receive attention where traffic considerations and maintenance costs justify this form of surfacing.

A number of construction works are in process of completion, and these will be continued during the present year. In addition, further works comprising reconstruction, realignment, widening of narrow and dangerous sections, general improvements, new bridging, and level-crossing eliminations will be undertaken, and for this purpose the sum of approximately £1,300,000 is being appropriated.