

The Government has arranged for the Main Highways Board to proceed with a vigorous programme of railway-crossing eliminations, and a considerable amount of investigation and design work has already been completed in this connection. Already a large number of these grade separations are in hand, and within the ensuing twelve months I anticipate that many of the most dangerous locations will have been dealt with. Within the next two years it is hoped to dispose of the majority of the present crossings, thereby removing a considerable source of danger and preventing accident and loss of life which unfortunately result from the failure of road-users to observe adequate precautions when negotiating these danger spots.

The value of State assistance to local authorities in respect of the maintenance and improvement of main highways generally may be gauged from the fact that during the past year the Main Highways Account provided from public funds 80 per cent. of the cost of maintenance and 84 per cent. of the cost of construction.

Such assistance will be continued and wherever possible extended.

SETTLEMENT AND OTHER ROADS.

The net expenditure from capital funds on this class of work during the last financial year amounted to £444,377, as compared with £371,573 for the previous year, an increase of £72,804. These figures do not include any sums which were found by local authorities in respect of subsidies granted towards works under their control.

Most of the expenditure under the immediate control of the Department related to the formation and metalling of roads in outlying areas. Last year 336 miles of road were reformed or formed as against 303 miles for the previous year, while 645 miles were metalled, compared with 714 miles for the previous year.

I am convinced that, notwithstanding the attention which has been given in the past to the provision of some form of access to those in backblock districts, the time has arrived when this question must be given special consideration.

The primary production of the Dominion has been developed most intensively in those places where reasonable and adequate roads exist, and it is practically impossible to expect efficient farming in partially developed areas until proper facilities are available for transport of materials and produce.

It does not follow that improved roading is necessarily justifiable in all parts that have been taken up for settlement, but where further settlement or greater development is possible the need for proper road access is well recognized, and it is intended to devote more attention to this phase of activity with a view to improving present unsatisfactory conditions.

However, apart from the purely commercial aspect, reasonable road access must be provided as a community service where settlement has become established. In the interests of education and public health, and to overcome isolation in periods of emergency, communication by land is vital to the welfare of our people, and it is my intention to give special consideration to improving road conditions wherever possible.

In addition to the formation and metalling of roads, grants and subsidies have been expended in bridging. This class of work often imposes such a burden on local authorities and their ratepayers that it is very necessary to allocate capital moneys by way of assistance towards establishing proper means of communication to developmental areas.

The services of my Department have been made available in the economic design of structures in order to conserve the funds of both the State and local authorities. From a close study of modern methods and practice, it has been possible to design bridges in permanent materials at reasonable cost, and by this means the amount required for regular maintenance expenditure is reduced, with consequent savings to the public taxpayer, without impairing the efficiency of the structures. In a few instances, because of special circumstances, it has been deemed advisable to utilize suitable timber for bridging, but as a general rule this course is not adopted.