A belated Happy New Year to you all.

The Department for Transport has made its customary controversial start to the year.

The New Year’s Honours list brought gongs for some of those involved in large infrastructure projects distinguishable only by being behind schedule and over budget. Gatwick Airport suffered extended closure because somebody flew some drones into it…exposing flaws both in transportation and security policies. The annual rail fare increase brought with it the now standard calls for renationalisation from Labour and a collective groan from commuters who spend thousands to enjoy being rammed against a window. And there there’s the ferry contract…awarded to a company that doesn’t own any ferries. As the joke in Whitehall goes…they should have given it to Roxy Music as at least they have Brian Ferry… Away from the headlines however, the Williams Review should allow for interested parties to influence rail strategy beyond the major infrastructure projects and financial spending decisions, whilst the extension of railcard schemes should help mitigate the pain of price increases for the newly eligible.

MHCLG used the festive period to open its £675m high street regeneration fund…something many will no doubt be interested in as footfall remains down and our local shops face uncertain times in what is the age of online retail. £5m has also been put towards establishing rough sleeping hubs, a positive initiative when taken alongside the millions already being ploughed in to tackle homelessness. Building safety regulation has received an overhaul as the department continues its response to Grenfell, whilst the East Midlands becomes the first region to benefit from new manufacturing zones.  The idea to provide financial support and ease planning restrictions so companies can open up and offer high skilled employment is an interesting one that, should some joined up thinking occur, give extra impetus to Local Enterprise Partnerships, local councils and UTCs. One to watch.

At Defra, Michael Gove and his department have launched consultations looking at the protection of urban trees and the extension of plastic carrier bag charges. On a larger scale, the 25-year environment strategy consultation remains live and will unquestionably be one of the most significant domestic facing pieces of work the government does.  DEFRA however, as with much of Whitehall, is principally focused on Brexit preparations.

At HMT, one of the more interesting announcements to emerge over the festive period was the Liz Truss backed proposal to merge several departments into a new Department for Infrastructure. Such a proposal fits with Truss’ central government reductionist tendencies and supposedly has the support of de facto Deputy PM David Liddington. Mrs May is, however, not keen on what she apparently regards as a gimmicky headline gathering reorganisation and therefore nothing is expected on this anytime soon.  Rolling DfID back into the Foreign Office is a more likely merger…but don’t put the house on any kind of government reorganisation occurring at the point the country is about to reorganise its constitution. In the battle for succession however, reducing the long arm of government plays well with the party faithful and Liz Truss is nothing if not ambitious for a shot at a more senior position. We may see these proposals again…