Highways.

The UK Highways Sector

Insights Report: January to June 2026

People powered problem solvers.

Executive summary.

This report provides a concise update on the UK highways market between 1st January 2026 and 1st June 2026 for clients and candidates working across the sector.

The aim is to help employers understand how to improve attraction, hiring and retention in a tightening labour market, while keeping professionals informed about where investment, opportunity and demand are growing.

The biggest market shift came from Road Investment Strategy 3. Published in March 2026, RIS3 set out a £27bn package for the strategic road network for 2026 to 2031, with £8.4bn allocated to renewals. Alongside this, the Department for Transport confirmed £7.3bn of long-term local highway maintenance funding for England between 2026/27 and 2029/30. Together, these signals show that highways investment is increasingly focused on maintenance, asset condition, resilience, safety and smarter network management rather than only on major-project expansion.

Executive summary: what matters most

- For employers: the strongest hiring demand is in maintenance, renewals, asset management, safety and smart highways, so workforce planning needs to start earlier and be more structured.
- For candidates: the best opportunities are in sectors with long-term funding visibility, especially maintenance, technology and consultancy-led delivery.
- Fastest-growing sector: Highway Maintenance.
- Best supporting growth area: Technology and Smart Highways.

· KEYFACT ·

Funding confirmed

£27 billion

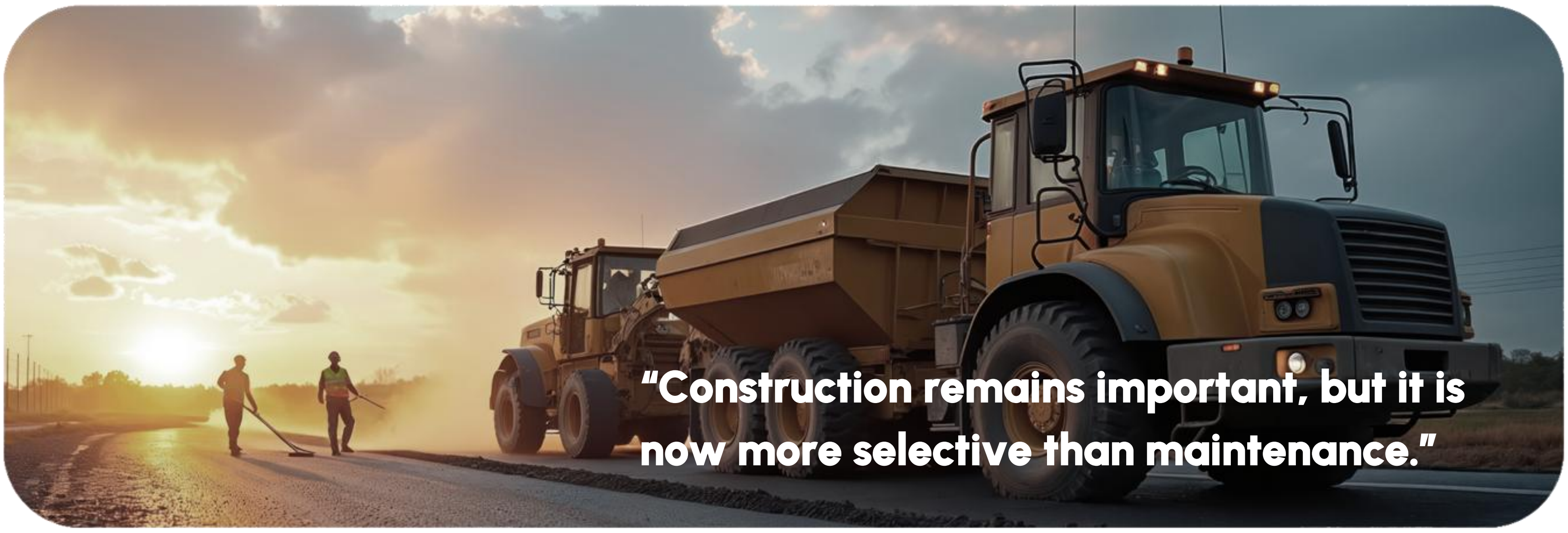
for the Road Investment Strategy 3 (RIS3) (2026 – 2031)

General market view.

The highways market became more investable in the first half of 2026 because funding visibility improved, but delivery pressure also increased. The Asphalt Industry Alliance's ALARM 2026 survey found that the local roads maintenance backlog in England and Wales rose to £18.62bn despite higher spending. That means need has not reduced. For clients, this supports a long-term view of headcount and capability rather than reactive vacancy filling. For candidates, it points to a market where practical delivery experience, asset-management knowledge and highways maintenance expertise remain in strong demand.

Policy also widened the opportunity base. The national road safety strategy, published in January 2026, set a 65% reduction target for people killed or seriously injured on Britain's roads by 2035. In April 2026, the Better Connected national transport strategy reinforced more integrated planning across roads, active travel and public transport. Growth is therefore no longer limited to traditional highway construction. Employers and candidates are seeing stronger crossover with safety, data, public transport integration, traffic systems and urban network management.

Sector breakdown.



Highway Maintenance:

Highway maintenance was the strongest sub-sector over the six-month period. Funding is concentrated here, and that funding is converting into live delivery.

Balfour Beatty secured a £900m highways maintenance contract across Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull, while Kier mobilised on its £700m Norfolk highways term contract covering 9,836km of network. For employers, this creates a clear need to secure delivery-critical people before the market tightens further. For candidates, it means steady opportunity in maintenance engineering, inspections, drainage, surfacing, structures, supervision, commercial management and client-side asset roles.

Highway Construction:

Construction remains important, but it is now more selective than maintenance. RIS3 still includes £3.8bn for enhancement schemes. Scotland's A9 programme also progressed through a new £1.94bn framework for the remaining dualling sections. However, hiring in construction remains more sensitive to programme timing and approvals.

Employers in this space should focus on retention and succession planning around key project staff, while candidates should expect a more mixed pace of hiring than in maintenance-led markets.

Technology and Smart Highways:

Technology and smart highways is one of the clearest growth areas in the sector. ITS UK analysis published in March 2026 found that the transport technology sector contributes £3.2bn in gross value added and supports 45,000 jobs. Separate survey data showed 62% confidence in growth, rising to 65% in the private sector. For employers, digital capability can no longer sit on the edge of a highways business. For candidates, this is an attractive area to upskill into, especially in ITS, traffic systems, data-led condition monitoring, digital enforcement, modelling and network analytics.

Consultancy, Materials, Safety and Integration:

Consultancy and design remains strong because frameworks continue to require planning, design assurance, environmental support, asset strategy and project controls.

Materials and supply chain is smaller from a hiring-volume perspective, but decarbonisation is increasing its relevance, illustrated by Heidelberg Materials' hydrogen-powered asphalt trial in Wales and Tarmac's lower-carbon asphalt carbon calculator. Safety and public transport integration also increased in importance through the new national road safety strategy, National Highways' £13m South West safety investment and Belfast Rapid Transit Phase 2. These areas matter for candidates looking to diversify experience and for employers wanting to future-proof technical capability.

Workforce & hiring insights.

The labour market remains tighter than the talent pool can comfortably support. There is no single published national figure for total UK highways hiring during this exact six-month period, but the market evidence is clear: demand is stronger than supply in many core technical areas. The hardest-to-fill positions continue to sit in engineering and commercial functions, particularly where employers need experienced professionals who can add value quickly.

Salary from benchmarking from our vacancies in the last 6 months highlighted continued demand for site engineers, senior engineers and quantity surveyors, with benchmarks around £34,000 to £45,000 or up to £450/day for site engineers, up to £72,000 or £520/day for senior site engineers, £46,000 to £62,000 or around £450/day for quantity surveyors, up to £77,000 or £545/day for senior quantity surveyors and £90,000 plus or £600/day for managing quantity surveyors.

For clients, the lesson is straightforward: employers who move slowly, rely on outdated salary bands or cannot explain development opportunities will lose good people. Stronger hiring outcomes are likely to come from clearer workforce planning, faster processes, competitive packages, better communication and visible progression routes. For candidates, the current market continues to reward specialist highways experience, commercial capability, digital skills and the ability to operate across maintenance, delivery and asset-led environments.

Geography, clients & what employers can do.

The strongest geographies in the period were the Midlands, East of England and selected strategic corridors in England, supported by the Midlands maintenance award, Norfolk mobilisation and wider RIS3 renewals. Scotland also strengthened with the A9 pipeline and framework visibility. Northern Ireland is smaller by scale but still offers selective opportunity.

From a business perspective, some of the most visible and commercially relevant names in the period include Balfour Beatty, Kier, AtkinsRealis, WSP and Costain. More important than the names alone is what they signal: the market is rewarding employers that combine delivery capability with long-term planning, innovation and technical depth.

- **What clients can do from a recruitment point of view:** plan hiring earlier against funded programmes, work closed with an specialist agency that can help with benchmark pay realistically, shorten recruitment stages, improve communication with applicants and invest more visibly in retention and progression.

- **What candidates should watch:** maintenance and renewals roles, ITS and digital traffic positions, consultancy and design opportunities, and regional hotspots linked to frameworks and long-term delivery contracts.

- **What helps both sides:** clearer expectations, faster decision-making, transparent salary conversations and a stronger focus on long-term skills development rather than short-term vacancy management.

Conclusion.

The clearest conclusion from the last six months is that highway maintenance and renewals has been the strongest growth area in UK highways and the part of the market with the most dependable long-term opportunity. Technology and smart highways is the best supporting growth area, while consultancy and design remains important for frameworks, planning and integrated delivery.

For employers, the message is to treat recruitment as part of business planning rather than an operational afterthought.

The organisations most likely to perform well will be those that work with a specialist recruitment agency to hire early, retain well, communicate clearly and build capability in maintenance, safety, digital delivery and asset management.

For candidates, the outlook remains positive, particularly for those with practical delivery experience, strong technical grounding and a willingness to build skills in digitally enabled and lower-carbon highways environments.

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Key statistics at a glance.

£27bn

RIS3 package for 2026-31

£8.4bn

of RIS3 allocated to renewals

£7.3bn

long-term local highway maintenance funding for England

£18.62bn

local roads maintenance backlog in England & Wales

£900m

Midlands highways maintenance deal won by Balfour Beatty

£700m

Norfolk highways term contract mobilised by Kier

£1.94bn

A9 framework launched in Scotland