



Road user needs and experiences

Summary Report

March 2015



Anthony Smith

Foreword

Our new remit to represent road users of the Strategic Road Network has begun. It is an exciting new phase for our organisation that is marked by a name change to Transport Focus.

We have always been guided by three key principles and they will continue to guide us. Firstly, we are an independent watchdog that represents the interests of consumers, be they passengers on trains, buses, coaches and trams or, from 30 March 2015, users of the Strategic Road Network (SRN) in England. We have no vested interest in promoting one mode of travel over any other – it is the

consumer's choice. However, having made that choice they have a right to expect a good service that reflects their needs.

We have and will continue to respect that choice, and focus on what we can do to make sure that their views are heard by the organisations that provide these services. In the case of the SRN this will be the new company Highways England.

The second principle is that we are evidence based. Insight based on research is what informs our views. Research is also our main lever to bringing about change. This is why as a watchdog we place such importance on the research we carry out to ensure that when we speak, it is with the voice of passengers or road users.

Our third principle is to be useful to the organisations that provide services to those we represent. We set great store on our effective engagement with the organisations that provide the services. Over the last few months we have been actively working with

the Highways Agency as it moves to become Highways England.

Road users are a diverse group, including motorised and non-motorised users, and embracing personal and business trips as well as freight. Building our knowledge in this new world has been our main emphasis so far and we have had the help of a number of organisations representing different road user groups to do this. We are very grateful for that assistance and look forward to strengthening these relationships over time.

There are of course many challenges ahead in developing a major road network that meets the needs of an expanding economy whilst also delivering real improvements for road users. We look forward to the challenge.



Anthony Smith
Chief Executive
Transport Focus

It's all in the name

Passenger Focus has changed to become Transport Focus.

transportfocus 

Key themes and findings

Driver psychology

It may seem obvious, but driving is a different experience from being a passenger in a car or on public transport. The act of driving requires a blend of knowledge, skill, and observation, an understanding of road conditions and of other drivers' behaviour, as well as concentration and the ability to make rapid decisions. Even when roads are relatively quiet the need to remain alert and to make decisions to changing circumstances remains important.

Both the design and management of the road environment need to take account of the complexity of the task of driving and help the driver to make appropriate decisions that will result in the experience being positive and safe.

Our research indicates that the mind set of the driver can change when they are behind the wheel. Driving is not simply a logical process – emotions are also involved. Some participants in the research talked about a shift to a more competitive type of behaviour, where they see the road as an opportunity to display their skills and to get to the front of the queue. Some participants also recognised that their language changed to reflect this.

Although just touched on in this report, we consider this is an important observation. It is worthy of further exploration, and has implications for the way Highways England manages and communicates with road users.

Knowledge of the SRN

Virtually all road users were unfamiliar with the term Strategic Road Network (SRN). Even highly-experienced heavy goods vehicle (HGV) drivers did not use this term and talk instead about 'trucking loads' up and down the 'main corridors'. Other drivers generally used the term 'motorways and main A roads'.

Road users didn't differentiate the SRN from roads run by local authorities. They thought about the door-to-door journey rather than separating out the SRN from other roads.

Engagement

Road users had a low level of engagement with the Highways Agency. They were unsure who was responsible for the SRN. Many had not given the subject consideration prior to attending the research discussion groups. When asked, most participants tended to think the SRN was either the responsibility of Government or the local authority.

When prompted participants said they had heard of the Highways Agency. However, they were unclear about its role and responsibilities.

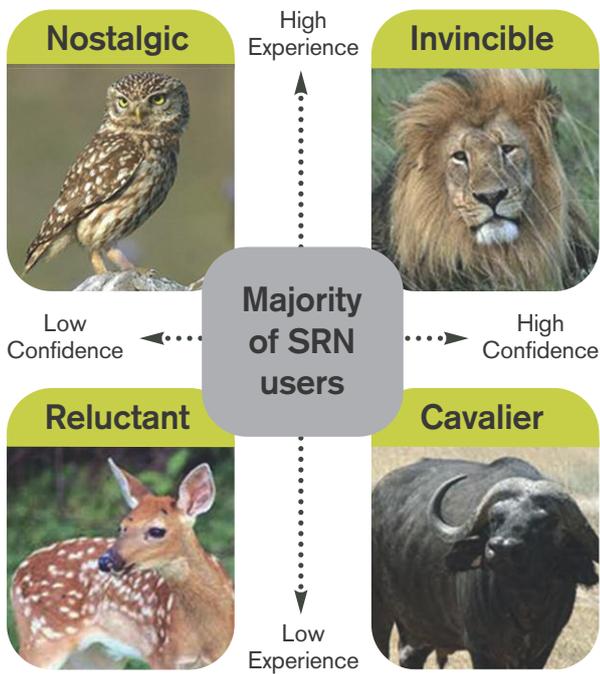
Highways Agency Traffic Officers are the most visible manifestation of the Agency. However, again they were unsure of their function and powers.



Photo courtesy of Highways England

“Driving is not simply a logical process – emotions are also involved.”

Driver attitude typology



Segmentation

Drivers' attitudes to the SRN are not all the same. Some of the differences in attitudes appeared to be a result of their experience of driving on it, and confidence. A simple 2 x 2 division into segments (groups) identified four types of attitude (as illustrated left).

The four types are Invincible, Cavalier, Nostalgic and Reluctant.

- **Invincibles** include most HGV/professional /coach drivers and some business and leisure drivers. They tended to see other drivers as less able than themselves, and had little respect for 'Sunday' drivers. They thought other drivers needed more education to drive safely.
- **Nostalgics** were mostly leisure drivers, typically older drivers who remembered when driving on motorways was easier and less busy. They were anxious about busy motorway driving and preferred using A roads.
- **Cavalier** drivers tended not to have held their licence for long and/or had limited motorway experience. They underestimated risks, and were over-confident in their own driving skills.
- **Reluctants** tended to find driving on the SRN to be stressful and behaved very cautiously in difficult driving situations. Occasionally this cautious behaviour was considered to be dangerous by other drivers.

We consider that this approach, though simple, can be helpful in understanding attitudes at the extremes of using the SRN. The majority of drivers will be closer to the middle of this chart, and there are other limitations. If we develop a more detailed breakdown based on future research we think it will help us to better understand road users.

Control

Views about the driving experience were dependent on the journey purpose, the length, the driving environment, how time critical the journey was, and other drivers' behaviour.

When talking about their experience of using the SRN, many drivers talked about a need to feel in control. A good experience was one where the driver felt in control. By contrast, a bad experience was one where they felt less in control.

When recounting their SRN experiences, drivers tended to focus on negative events – even though they were relatively infrequent.

The positive aspects of driving on the SRN were primarily the cost, convenience and comfort of the journey. The negative aspects were primarily concerned with the external environment and other drivers' behaviour. Negative experiences often involved bad weather, poor visibility and road conditions, delays and congestion.



“The main bugbears were using a mobile phone when driving, speeding, lane switching, middle-lane hogging, tailgating, overly-cautious drivers, and drivers who ignored rules.”

Safety

All drivers saw the provision of safe roads as their most fundamental requirement. In general the SRN was seen as good in this respect.

However, bad weather was a major concern as it affected visibility and created a variety of problems (longer braking distances and aquaplaning). A few road users were concerned about their own driving skills, but many more were concerned about how safely their fellow drivers were responding to difficult conditions.

‘Other drivers’ were always seen as responsible for bad behaviour on the roads – drivers were often blind to their own shortcomings. The main bugbears were using a mobile phone when driving, speeding, lane switching, middle-lane hogging, tailgating, overly-cautious drivers, and drivers who ignored rules.

Car drivers and HGV drivers had concerns about how well each other drive. HGV drivers complained about cars. Car drivers complained about HGVs and light goods vehicles (LGVs). Drivers complained about cyclists and pedestrians.

Car drivers were largely unaware of the speed restrictions on HGVs, and of the implications this had for HGV drivers. They were critical of HGVs slowly crawling past when overtaking. Car drivers also criticised HGV drivers for tailgating and driving in a convoy to prevent car drivers cutting in.

HGV drivers generally felt other drivers are less skilled and had limited understanding of their issues.

Journey planning

HGV drivers were very familiar with the SRN and their need for journey planning was usually only for the last few miles after leaving the SRN. They used a variety of data sources including a satnav, journey planning apps, Frixo

(an online road traffic information service), Facebook and word of mouth. Often HGV drivers also kept a paper map.

Other drivers generally only undertook journey planning for unfamiliar or longer routes. They were mainly interested in journey length, directions and expected journey time. They used a variety of online sources, but rarely checked for information on roadworks, unplanned delays, and congestion prior to setting out.

Although increasingly common, there is a low use of satnavs for SRN journeys across all driver groups. When used it is mainly for information on speed cameras and live traffic information.

Congestion and disruption

Road users considered that the SRN is a network of high-quality roads that are well maintained in comparison to those maintained by local authorities. However, the fact they are well maintained means that road works are frequent.

The majority of drivers adopted a pragmatic view that road works are necessary and inevitable. However, they are critical about the management of planned disruption. Drivers often thought that the stretch of road affected by the road works was too long, that the duration of the works was too long, and that too frequently work was not taking place, despite cones being in place.

Many felt that road works were poorly planned with a lot of work during the summer holidays causing high levels of congestion when roads are at their busiest.

Generally drivers were more understanding of delays due to breakdowns and accidents. However, there was a view that the Highways Agency is not responsive enough, that they tended to over-react to health and safety issues, and take too long to reopen roads.

Diversions

As diversions were rare, most private motorists generally had relatively little to say about them. HGV drivers considered that some diversions were unsuitable for their vehicles and that the Highways Agency did not fully take into account the length, height, width or weight of HGV vehicles. They also felt detours are excessively long and involved unsuitable roads. This impacted particularly negatively on HGV drivers as they have legal limitations on their daily hours.

Information and signage

For the most part both fixed signs and variable message signs were seen as helpful in providing useful information or directions. They were reassuring, and generally confirm what drivers already know. However, sometimes signs were difficult to understand as they required the road user to be aware of the road name, junction name, whether they were travelling north or south, or going in a clockwise or anti-clockwise direction.

There was also an issue about trust. Some drivers considered that variable message signs were not updated frequently enough and as a result they did not know whether to trust them. Sometimes this information was at odds with other sources of information such as radio travel updates and satnav information. Some drivers didn't feel the information was reliable enough to inform their decisions.



Smart motorways

While some drivers were aware of smart motorways, some were not. Even those who have driven on smart motorways were not always familiar with the term, nor did they understand clearly how they operated.

Among those that were knowledgeable, they were generally very positive about the introduction of smart motorways. They were seen as a good example of effective traffic management and a sensible alternative to building new roads.

However, across different road user groups there were concerns about safety, particularly around the use of the hard shoulder and breakdowns. Nostalgic and Reluctant types had the greatest concerns.

The M25

The M25 had an almost mythical status in the minds of many drivers – it was perceived to be a unique driving experience in this country. This was the case for both those who drove on it frequently and others who rarely, if ever, drove on it.

Service areas

HGV drivers were concerned about the lack of appropriate facilities alongside the SRN. Availability of suitable spaces at motorway service areas was often limited as were truck stops on other roads. This forced HGVs to use lay-bys. Using lay-bys caused a number of problems for HGV drivers such as access to facilities and security concerns.

Other drivers had concerns about the quality, cost, and facilities available at motorway service areas. Access for disabled users was also a concern.

Education

There was recognition that driving has changed over the years and that there may be a need for further information or training on good driver behaviour and new developments such as smart motorways.

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In the future

Transport Focus will share the detailed findings from this research with Highways England and other key stakeholders.

Results from this and other research will be fed into our next investigation. This will look at motorised road users' priorities for improvement on the SRN. Following this we will look at the priorities for non-motorised users.

Transport Focus is also working on developing research to measure road user satisfaction, and in the coming year we plan to pilot some innovative approaches to research design.

About this research

This research was commissioned by Transport Focus to look at the needs and experiences of road users. We wanted to use the research to get a clear picture of what road users thought about the motorways and main roads that make up the Strategic Road Network (SRN). What was their experience of using the SRN? Was it a good experience or not? What did they think worked well and what could be improved? What did they think about the management of the SRN?

The research was carried out by Aecom in October to December 2014. It covered a diverse range of around 130 road users, from cyclists and motorcyclists to drivers and passengers of cars, vans, coaches, and large goods vehicles. The type of journeys they made included leisure, commuting, and business. Drivers ranged from novice to highly experienced drivers on the SRN. The research was carried out using discussion groups, interviews and accompanied drives. The full details of the types of participants and method is included in the full report which is available on Transport Focus's website.



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Contact us

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