

## ROAD USERS' PRIORITIES FOR THE SECOND STRATEGIC ROADS INVESTMENT STRATEGY, 2020-25 (RIS2)

### Foreword

Transport Focus is the independent consumer watchdog representing the interests of rail passengers throughout Great Britain; bus, coach and tram passengers in England outside London; and users of motorways and major 'A' roads in England – the Strategic Road Network (SRN).

The priorities of road users themselves should be at the heart of developing the second Road Investment Strategy, covering 2020-25 (RIS2). We have carried out significant research among road users since becoming the watchdog for users of England's strategic roads in 2015. Drawing on that insight we believe that RIS2 should cover a broad range of improvements for SRN users, focussing on the following areas:

- 1) *Enhanced safety* - further reductions in the number of accidents on the SRN, including those which do not result in death or serious injury
- 2) *Improving journey times* – including by reducing congestion and increasing predictability through better operation of the network and investment in new capacity
- 3) *Improved surface quality, signage and lighting* - a zero-tolerance approach to deficiencies in quality of the road (the road surface, signage, road-markings and lighting)
- 4) *Better information* – providing the information road users, including the logistics industry, need to take informed decisions at times of disruption, whether planned or unplanned
- 5) *Improved roadside facilities* - addressing deficiencies, in particular provision for lorry drivers and users of Highways England's 'A' roads
- 6) *Better integration with other roads* – addressing the downsides of split responsibility at junctions and ensuring diversion routes are up to scratch.
- 7) *Meeting the needs of bus and coach operators and their passengers* - improving access to communities along and just off the SRN, as well as exploring options to enhance connections between longer-distance services
- 8) *Improved provision for cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians* - addressing the needs of those who travel along Highways England's 'A' roads as well as of those needing to cross any part of the SRN

In this document we also highlight the need for proper funding of maintenance and the renewal of life-expired assets. It is vital that RIS2 provides appropriate funding for maintenance and capital renewal of the existing SRN, as well as investing in its upgrade and expansion.

I hope this document is a helpful contribution to the development of RIS2.

Jeff Halliwell

## **Introduction**

This paper sets out the key improvements and initiatives that Transport Focus believes should be embraced by the second Road Investment Strategy, covering 2020-25 (RIS2) to help meet the needs of users of the motorways and major 'A' roads in England – the Strategic Road Network (SRN).

This is based on Transport Focus research among road users, particularly priorities for improvement and on which aspects of Highways England's performance should be measured. It is also informed by analysis of other insight, and our engagement with Highways England and with users and their representative bodies since becoming the watchdog for all users of the SRN in March 2015. Going forward, we will continue to gather evidence from road users through research and discussion at our Road User Panel meetings each quarter.

Annex A summarises seven sources of research already completed by Transport Focus, and four further projects which will report this year.

## **Implications for RIS2**

Drawing on the full range of evidence available about road user needs, Transport Focus recommends that RIS2 focuses on delivering improvements for SRN users in the following areas:

### **1. Enhanced safety**

This is as much a priority for road users as it is for Highways England: getting home in one piece is a fundamental consumer need. While a new road will usually be significantly safer than the one it replaced, smaller-scale interventions can also do a lot to improve safety. 'Better-behaved drivers' is the third highest priority for improvement among car drivers (and ranks second for motorcyclists) (see Annex A, source [a](#)); it also emerged as a key theme in our performance metrics research and which is not picked up in the current performance specification. Driver education should form part of the response, and we believe there would be value in Highways England being more proactive in this area; this could include increased focus on motorway driving skills for new drivers. There is also scope for the company to invest further in equipment that helps the police enforce traffic law cost-effectively. Modest investment in road layout to tackle sub-standard design could help make the road a more 'forgiving' environment when drivers do make mistakes. It should be a priority for RIS2 to reduce the number of drivers who get onto the wrong side of dual carriageways, and to bring those who do safety to a stop. Overall, the user interest requires a culture of safety challenge to permeate through Highways England: every accident has a cause, so what can the company do to make a recurrence less likely?

Establishing a new, dedicated safety fund could provide the resources to make progress in this area. Given the evidence from Road Safety Foundation risk and star ratings of the SRN, the biggest returns would come from targeting investment on the

most dangerous parts of the network – dual- and single-carriageway trunk roads – where no ‘expressway’ upgrade is planned in the near future.

Pursuing a target based on the number of road users who are killed or seriously injured (a KSI-based metric) brings some risk of tolerating less serious accidents, which also cause distress to users involved and disrupt traffic flow. Highways England should consider if a better way to reduce KSIs would be to focus on reducing the number of accidents overall. Our performance metrics research suggests that doing so would accord more closely with how road users think about the issue.

## 2: Journey time

Journey time is the main driver of user satisfaction among those taking part in the National Road User Satisfaction Survey (as per **c** in Annex A). The issue is seen by drivers as the key element of SRN performance that needs to be measured, with drivers thinking about journey time in three main ways (which often blend together): actual journey time; arriving when you estimate you will; not having wide variations day to day for the same journey. RIS2 should therefore focus on measures that will tackle these issues, whether by higher standards of roadworks and incident management, further focus on reducing the number of incidents, making better use of existing road capacity or providing new capacity.

On the assumption that RIS2 contains proposals for further Smart Motorways and Expressways, we make the following points:

*Smart motorways:* further conversions need to incorporate refinements identified by the review undertaken in response to the Transport Select Committee report, together with any issues that will be identified in Transport Focus research (**k** in Annex A).

*Expressways:* in welcoming commitments to upgrade existing and building new ‘A’ roads on the SRN, we encourage DfT and Highways England to reflect on two questions:

- If there is a case for a completely new section of strategic road, should it not be built as motorway rather than to a lower standard?
- Does creation of a new ‘brand’ of road – the expressway – risk confusing drivers about the right way to use them, as with Smart Motorways?

## 3: Improved surface quality, signage and lighting

It is important to highlight that the condition of Highways England’s assets has a more direct bearing on customer experience than is the case with most regulated utilities. Road users feel the bumps in the road and they see the worn out signs in a way that consumers do not, generally, see leaks from a near life-expired water main. Given this, Transport Focus believes it is vital that RIS2 maintenance and capital renewal funding allows Highways England to keep all its assets in a condition that delivers the quality road users want. Is the answer increased maintenance, or is it

bringing forward capital renewal to just before road users notice the deterioration? Whichever it is, the way RIS2 is specified, funded and monitored must take account of this challenge.

Highways England and DfT should aspire to high standards in the areas that are most prominent to road users. Funding must be sufficient to support a zero-tolerance approach to defects in these areas:

- *Surface quality* – detail to be informed by the further research Transport Focus is carrying out (h and j in Annex A).
- *Signage and road-markings* – although in-vehicle navigational technologies are becoming commonplace, throughout RIS2 and beyond it seems likely that the need for clear directional and safety-related signing and road-markings will remain. It is clear from our research that road users want all signs to be legible at all times. Road users perceive deficiencies in signage to be a safety hazard, as well as adding unnecessary stress to a journey.
- *Lighting* – how could low-maintenance technologies be harnessed to minimise ‘outages’ and reduce disruption to traffic during maintenance. Are the following possible candidate technologies? Conversion to LED; deployment of guaranteed-life bulbs to dovetail with ‘campaign changes’ (that is, changing all the bulbs at once); and fault self-reporting. This also needs to ensure lighting of signs (where lighting is provided), not least over ‘no entry’ and other safety-related signs, is maintained to a high standard.

RIS2 provides the opportunity to consider a campaign to clear the backlog of renewal work on the SRN. We suggest Highways England and DfT consider establishing a dedicated ‘renewals backlog’ fund in RIS2. The purpose would be to bring road surface quality across the network up to the target standard no later than 2025 (based on a more user-relevant definition of good), and to renew life-expired or missing assets such as signs and lighting.

This would make it possible to then fund maintenance and renewal on a steady-state basis in RIS3 and beyond. There is a precedent for this approach in Railtrack’s programme in the late 1990s to tackle the backlog of station maintenance inherited from British Rail.

Although the issue does not register as a high priority for improvement among road users, litter and debris on verges of the SRN is a concern to some. RIS2 should ensure that the funding provided to Highways England is sufficient to properly discharge its duties effectively under the Environmental Protection Act 1990. DfT should also consider transferring responsibility for litter clearance on the SRN ‘A’ roads from district and unitary councils to Highways England, along with the appropriate funding. This would give Highways England full control over this aspect of its customers’ journey experience, and would reflect that it is probably better placed to carry out litter picking adjacent to major roads than local authorities more geared up to sweeping local streets.

#### 4. Better information

The need for better information is a constant message from road users in much of our research. Two issues should be prioritised in RIS2:

- Making variable message signs (VMS) more easily understood, relevant and reliable. This may involve upgrading VMS installations across the whole SRN, using signs that give operators greater scope to provide the most useful information in the circumstances. Additional VMS installations may be required in certain locations. But it isn't just about the equipment. Operators may need greater autonomy to present messages in the way that is most helpful to drivers, backed up with training in understanding the information road users really need. There may also need to be a fresh assessment of the capabilities of the underpinning IT system.
- Information about scheduled roadworks. Transport Focus has been highlighting the importance that freight operators, in particular, attach to reliable information on planned roadworks (as highlighted in our Incidents and Roadworks report, source e). Highways England should ensure that public-facing information about scheduled roadworks is 100% accurate 14 days in advance of the day in question, emulating the approach being taken in the East Midlands maintenance area. As well as ensuring accuracy, Highways England should improve how this information is presented – making it as useful and easy-to-use as possible for different types of road user.

#### 5. Improved roadside facilities

Users consider roadside services to be an integral part of the SRN, particularly when making longer journeys. As well as the customer service benefits, providing the opportunity to rest is an important contributor to safe driving. Transport Focus has already made a number of recommendations in its *Take A Break* report; these include Highways England needing to:

- Explicitly acknowledge that roadside facilities are an integral part of their customers' experience. It should develop a strategy for the company to play an active role in facilitating high-quality provision to meet their needs, whether on the motorways or major 'A' roads; and
- Develop a strategy to ensure there is sufficient capacity for lorries to park in the right places and with facilities that meet drivers' needs. It will need to work with the freight industry, government, local authorities and others to do this.

These may require new investment and an effective tool could be a dedicated roadside facilities fund within RIS2 enabling Highways England to, among other things, part-fund investments led by the commercial sector.

#### 6. Better integration of the SRN with other roads



Localised problems can arise at Highways England's interface with other highway authorities. Road users are generally unaware of the boundary between the SRN and local roads, but they may experience adverse impacts resulting from no single body being responsible for the entirety of their safety and journey experience.

Consideration should be given to 'trunking' all parts of all junctions on the SRN so that Highways England has full responsibility for the safety and customer experience of users getting on and off its network. Clearer accountability should simplify and speed up improvements at junctions, and ensure that the gateways to the SRN are maintained to the same standard as the SRN itself. Having one organisation responsible for the safety of a junction, including the management of approaches to it, should reduce risks – including to users of the principal SRN route – arising from split responsibilities.

In some locations getting from the SRN to service areas involves use of short stretches of local authority road, which because of the volume and nature of the traffic can be in poor condition. Consideration should be given to 'trunking' these stretches of road, giving Highways England full responsibility for its customers' experience accessing these facilities.

Local authority roads play an essential role as diversion routes in the event of disruption, planned or unplanned, on the SRN. The journey experience for SRN users is arguably at its worst when they have to be diverted off the network. RIS2 should incentivise Highways England to work with local authorities to maintain and enhance the standard of diversion routes. At a minimum they should be properly signed; but there may be a case for supporting local authority investment in physical improvements to increase a road's performance when used for diversions, paying particular attention to the challenges that low/weak bridges present for lorries.

There should also be a fresh assessment of how the M6 Toll can be used most effectively when there is disruption on Highways England's M6 route. If the latter is blocked, could the M6 Toll be made temporally free to use with an appropriate commercial arrangement with Midland Expressway? We recognise that this might require improvements to roads connecting with M6 Toll junctions so they can cope with additional traffic at those times.

## **7. Better facilitation of scheduled bus and coach services**

Bus and coach operators are important users of Highways England's roads, and by extension so are their passengers.

For scheduled bus services that run on the SRN, modest investment within RIS2 could improve access to and safety at bus stops, particularly at night. It could also improve bus access to communities just off the SRN, enhancing safety and helping buses to run on time.

Longer-distance scheduled coach services provide a valuable alternative to trains and private cars; Highways England should work with the industry to help it provide an even better service. This might include facilitating development of interchange

facilities between routes at service areas, or the provision of park and ride sites at junctions on the SRN to encourage multi-modal journeys.

As well as benefiting its bus and coach operator customers and their passengers, helping to make these modes a more attractive option could contribute to reducing congestion on the SRN by making more efficient use of road space. To gain sufficient momentum, we see a case for RIS2 to have a new dedicated fund specifically for the purpose.

## **8. Improved provision for cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians**

Transport Focus feels that RIS2 should provide clarity about the SRN's long-term role in relation to cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians, particularly given the ambition to upgrade large sections of the network to expressway, from which they would be prohibited. Would it be in the interests of all users if RIS2 included the objective to invest in fit-for-purpose alternatives for the whole SRN that did not require cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians to share the carriageway with cars and lorries? Without a clear long-term vision we think there is a risk that RIS2 will continue with what appears to be a piecemeal approach to improvements on behalf of these road users.

Notwithstanding the above, our research (source f) identifies several areas where improvements should be incorporated into scheme design or retrofitted to existing roads – for example, providing safer routes for cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians around junctions and roundabouts, and ensuring that crossings provided fit with 'desire lines' (that is, the way users would go if left to their own devices) and with roads and paths serving local communities. Specific action should be taken to avoid the need to walk for short distances along the SRN where Public Rights of Way do not quite meet on either side of a road.

### **Greater engagement with road users to deliver improvements effectively**

We believe all investment made through RIS2 will be most effective if users are engaged in planning what is to be delivered, so that the finished product better meets their needs than might otherwise be the case. Transport Focus is working with Highways England to increase user input to scheme design, emphasising the need to start dialogue with all types of road user from project inception, never taking their needs as a given. 'All' in this context means drivers, freight companies, cyclists, pedestrians, equestrians and others. This engagement with road users should extend to seeking their input to decisions about *how* work is delivered, to make sure their needs continue to be met during construction work.

It appears that there is much scope to improve the relationship between Highways England and freight operators, key users of the SRN. We note that Network Rail has a senior director dedicated to freight. While the parallels are not exact, we believe that the road freight sector could be better served if Highways England set up a small cross-directorate, national business unit focused solely on meeting their needs.

## ANNEX: SUMMARY OF RESEARCH REPORTS

### What we know already

- a) *Road users' priorities for improvement (published in two parts: car and van drivers, July 2015; HGV drivers, December 2015)*: Improved quality of road surfaces on the SRN emerged from this research as the clear top priority for improvement for all drivers. For car and van drivers, it was followed by safer design and maintenance of roads, better-behaved drivers and the better management of roadworks. For HGV drivers 'better management of unplanned delays' took the place of 'better-behaved drivers' in their top four.
- b) *User priorities in each of the 18 Route Strategies, November 2016*: This extensive programme of research involved interviews at 137 locations across the SRN, commissioned in partnership with Highways England. Tackling congestion emerged as a consistently high priority, above road surface quality. This difference (from **a** above) is because in the route strategies research road users were explicitly asked to think about the longer term (2020 and beyond).
- c) *Drivers of satisfaction - analysis of National Road User Satisfaction Survey (NRUSS) data*: As part of taking over – from Highways England – running of the NRUSS alongside developing a new Strategic Roads User Survey (SRUS), we probed past NRUSS data to understand which aspects of the journey experience most influenced overall satisfaction; journey time was found to have a high correlation.
- d) *Roadside facilities - 'Take a Break' report on road user views, July 2016*: While car drivers are generally satisfied with services on motorways, professional drivers are less so, with lorry drivers in particular feeling that their needs are not well met. All users lack confidence in the consistency of provision on Highways England's 'A' roads.
- e) *Incidents and Roadworks - a road user perspective, November 2016*: SRN users feel their interests should be more strongly considered when planning and implementing roadworks. While sympathetic when there are accidents, they would like to see bolder measures to get traffic moving again quickly. Accurate information in both contexts is a key requirement.
- f) *Cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians - a summary of priorities, November 2016*: A series of discussions with the main representative organisations has led to a set of recommendations to Highways England for how the needs of these users should be taken into account.
- g) *What lorry drivers want during disruption to cross-Channel services - 'A safe place to park' December 2016*: there needs to be better communication with HGV drivers about waiting times during the now-routine TAP (Traffic Assessment Project) queue on the approach to



Dover; and drivers want the planned lorry holding area off the M20 to offer secure parking and be available not only during major disruption.

### **Currently under way**

- h) *SRN performance metrics*: this research, commissioned in partnership with ORR and involving DfT and Highways England, will report in Spring 2017. It will give insight into how road users think Highways England's performance should be measured.
- i) *Strategic Roads User Survey*: the successor to NRUSS, being piloted in Spring 2017, will be in operation from early 2018. It will produce a far richer understanding of SRN user satisfaction at a much more granular level than is currently possible.
- j) *Road surface quality*: research commissioned in partnership with Highways England will probe the issue of road surface quality identified in (a) above and by spring 2017 will give a thorough understanding of the aspect which SRN users see as the greatest priority for improvement.
- k) *Smart motorways*: research findings will be available in spring 2017 on road users' experiences of and views about different types of smart motorway, including all-lane running.