



Road users' priorities for the Road Investment Strategy, 2020-25



Jeff Halliwell

Foreword

The priorities of those who use England's motorways and major 'A' roads – the Strategic Road Network (SRN) – should be at the heart of the second Road Investment Strategy (RIS 2), covering the period 2020-25.

Transport Focus has carried out significant research among users of England's strategic roads since becoming their watchdog in 2015. Drawing on our research as well as other insight, we believe RIS 2 should focus on delivering improvement in 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** – 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 (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, particularly in provision for lorry drivers and users of Highways England's 'A' roads
- 6 Better integration with other roads** – addressing the downsides of split responsibility between Highways England and other highway authorities 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 those needing to cross the SRN
- 9 Future-proofing new investment** – making sure investment made in RIS 2 is ready to accommodate advances in vehicle and navigation technology, such as connected and autonomous vehicles (CAVs).

In this document we also highlight the need for the right level of funding for SRN maintenance and for the renewal of worn-out assets, alongside investment in upgrades and expansion.

Finally, measuring performance of the SRN in the terms road users think about things is vital. Our joint research with the Office of Rail and Road, *Measuring performance of England's strategic roads: what users want*, explains what road users want measured, how and why. It should be regarded as a key input to devising the Performance Specification that sets out what Highways England is required to achieve from 2020-25.

I hope this document will be used to ensure the road user is at the heart of RIS 2.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeff Halliwell". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Jeff Halliwell
Chair

Introduction

This report sets out the key improvements and initiatives that Transport Focus believes should be embraced by the second Road Investment Strategy (RIS 2), covering the years 2020-25, to help meet the needs of users of the motorways and major 'A' roads in England – the Strategic Road Network (SRN).

The report draws on Transport Focus research among road users, particularly into their priorities for improvement and their views about which aspects of Highways England's performance should be measured. It is also informed by analysis of other research, and our engagement with Highways England and road users since becoming the watchdog for users of the SRN in March 2015. We will continue to gather evidence from road users through research and discussion at our Road User Panel meetings.

The annex summarises eight sources of research already completed by Transport Focus, and four further reports which we will publish in the coming year.

Implications for RIS 2

Drawing on the full range of evidence available about road user needs, Transport Focus recommends that RIS 2 focuses on delivering improvements for SRN users in the areas set out below.

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. A key theme from our recent joint research with ORR, *Measuring performance of England's strategic roads: what users want* (Annex, paragraph h) relates to other drivers' behaviour, often perceived to impact on safety. The issue of 'better-behaved drivers' is the third highest priority for improvement among car drivers and ranks second among





motorcyclists (Annex, paragraph a). We believe Highways England should be more proactive in helping drivers understand the impact of certain behaviours as part of its wider duty of care to road users. The company should consider options to invest further in equipment which helps the police enforce traffic law cost-effectively and in ways that enjoy broad support from the majority of road users.

Modest investment in road layout to tackle sub-standard design could help make the road a more 'forgiving' environment when drivers and riders do make mistakes. It should be a priority for RIS 2 to reduce the number of drivers who get onto the wrong side of dual carriageways, and to bring those who do safely to a stop. Overall, the user interest requires a strong safety culture to permeate through Highways England: every accident has a cause, so what can the company do to make a recurrence less likely? To help ensure that lessons are learned from collisions, we strongly encourage the Department for Transport (DfT) to establish an independent

accident investigation function, as in air, shipping and rail.

Setting up a new, dedicated safety fund could provide the resources to make progress in this area. Given the evidence from the Road Safety Foundation's risk and star ratings of the SRN¹, the biggest returns would come from targeting investment on the more 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 a risk of tolerating less serious accidents, which also cause distress to users involved and disrupt traffic flow. Highways England should consider whether a better way to reduce KSIs would be to focus on reducing the number of accidents overall, whether they result in injury or not. Our performance metrics research suggests that road users think fewer collisions overall would bring considerable benefits and would naturally reduce the number of KSIs.

¹ Road Safety Foundation, *Making Road Travel as Safe as Rail and Air*, page 28 – 34, November 2016, <http://www.road-safety-foundation.org/media/33779/britisheuroapresults2016.pdf>

2 Journey time

Journey time is the main driver of user satisfaction among those taking part in the National Road Users' Satisfaction Survey (Annex, paragraph c). Our research, *Measuring performance of England's strategic roads: what users want* (Annex, paragraph h), also shows the importance of journey time, which drivers think about in three main ways (which often blend together). They are: actual journey time; arriving when you estimate you will; and not having wide variations day-to-day for the same journey.

RIS 2 should therefore focus on measures that will tackle these issues, whether by higher standards of managing roadworks and incidents; additional focus on reducing the number of incidents; making better use of existing road capacity; or by providing new capacity.

In terms of roadworks, RIS 2 should require Highways England to plan them so the journey time impact is as low as possible – whether for routine maintenance, capital renewal or new construction. RIS 2 should recognise that research shows drivers do not like roadworks extending over long distances, preferring shorter stretches even if a project takes longer to complete as a result. This is partly about reducing the journey time impact, but is also a desire to minimise the heightened stress, almost claustrophobia, caused by seemingly endless miles of narrow lanes.

On the assumption that RIS 2 contains proposals for further smart motorways and expressways, we make the following points:

Smart motorways: further conversions should incorporate refinements identified by the review undertaken in response to the Transport Select Committee report², together with any issues identified in Transport Focus research which will be published later in 2017 (Annex, paragraph l).

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 the default not be to build a motorway rather than a lower standard road?
- 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 (particularly motorcyclists) see and feel the bumps in the road and they see the worn-out signs in a way, for example, that consumers are not, generally, impacted by leaks from a near life-expired water main. Given this, Transport Focus believes it is vital that RIS 2 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 to bring forward capital renewal to just before road users notice the deterioration? Whichever it is, the way RIS 2 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 research Transport Focus will publish later in 2017 (Annex, paragraph k).
- **Signage and road-markings** – although navigational technology is becoming commonplace in vehicles, throughout RIS 2 and beyond it seems likely that the need for clear directional and safety-related signing and road-markings will remain – not least as reassurance to drivers that their satnav is accurate and that they have correctly followed its instructions. It is clear from our research that road users want all signs to be fully 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



² House of Commons, Transport Committee, *All lane running*, June 2016, <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmtrans/63/63.pdf>

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 needs to encompass lighting of signs (where lighting is provided), not least over 'no entry' and other safety-critical signs.

RIS 2 provides the opportunity for a campaign to clear the backlog of renewal work on the SRN. We suggest that DfT considers establishing a dedicated 'renewals backlog' fund in RIS 2. 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 worn-out 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 RIS 3, the 2025-30 investment period, and beyond. There is a precedent for this approach in the then 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 as a whole, litter and debris on verges of the SRN is a concern to some. RIS 2 should ensure that the funding provided to Highways England is sufficient to 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 recognise that Highways England is probably better placed to carry out litter picking on major, high-speed 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 RIS 2:

- **Making variable message signs (VMS) more easily understood, relevant and reliable.** This may involve upgrading VMS installations across the whole SRN, using technology that gives operators greater scope to provide the most useful information in the circumstances. Are dot matrix signs adequate to the task? Are additional VMS signs 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. DfT should consider transferring full control of what can and cannot be displayed on VMS to Highways England. 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 about planned roadworks as covered in our *Incidents and roadworks – A road user perspective* report (Annex, paragraph e). Highways England should ensure that public-facing information about scheduled roadworks is 100 per cent accurate from 14 days in advance of the day in question, emulating the approach now being taken in its 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 made a number of recommendations in its *Take a*



break – Road users' views about roadside facilities report; (Annex, paragraph d) these include:

- Highways England needing to explicitly acknowledge that roadside facilities are an integral part of its customers' experience. It should develop a strategy to play an active role in facilitating high-quality provision to meet their needs, whether on the motorways or major 'A' roads; and
- Highways England should 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.

RIS 2 should be explicit that roadside facilities are integral to making safe, comfortable journeys on the SRN and therefore Highways England has a role in driving improvements. Particular areas where RIS 2 should concentrate are providing sufficient, secure capacity for lorry drivers to take statutory rest breaks and improving provision for all drivers on Highways England's 'A' roads. This may require new investment and an effective tool could be a dedicated roadside facilities fund enabling Highways England to, among other things, part-fund investments led by the private 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 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. RIS 2 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 also 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 or 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 temporarily free to use through a commercial arrangement with Midland Expressway? We recognise that this may require improvements to roads connecting with M6 Toll junctions so they can cope with the additional traffic.

7 Helping scheduled bus and coach services run smoothly

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 RIS 2 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.

Transport Focus believes RIS 2 should require Highways England to develop a strategy in this area, supported by a new dedicated fund.

8 Improved provision for cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians

RIS 2 should provide clarity about the SRN's long-term role in relation to cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians. This is particularly important 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 RIS 2 included the objective to invest in fit-for-purpose alternatives



for the whole SRN, so that cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians are no longer required to share the carriageway with cars and lorries?

We recognise that there are some locations where this may not be desirable, for example where the 'main street' in a town or village is part of the SRN and motorised and non-motorised transport need to coexist. However, without a clear long-term vision in this area RIS 2 risks continuing a piecemeal approach to improvements on behalf of cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians rather than effecting substantial improvement.

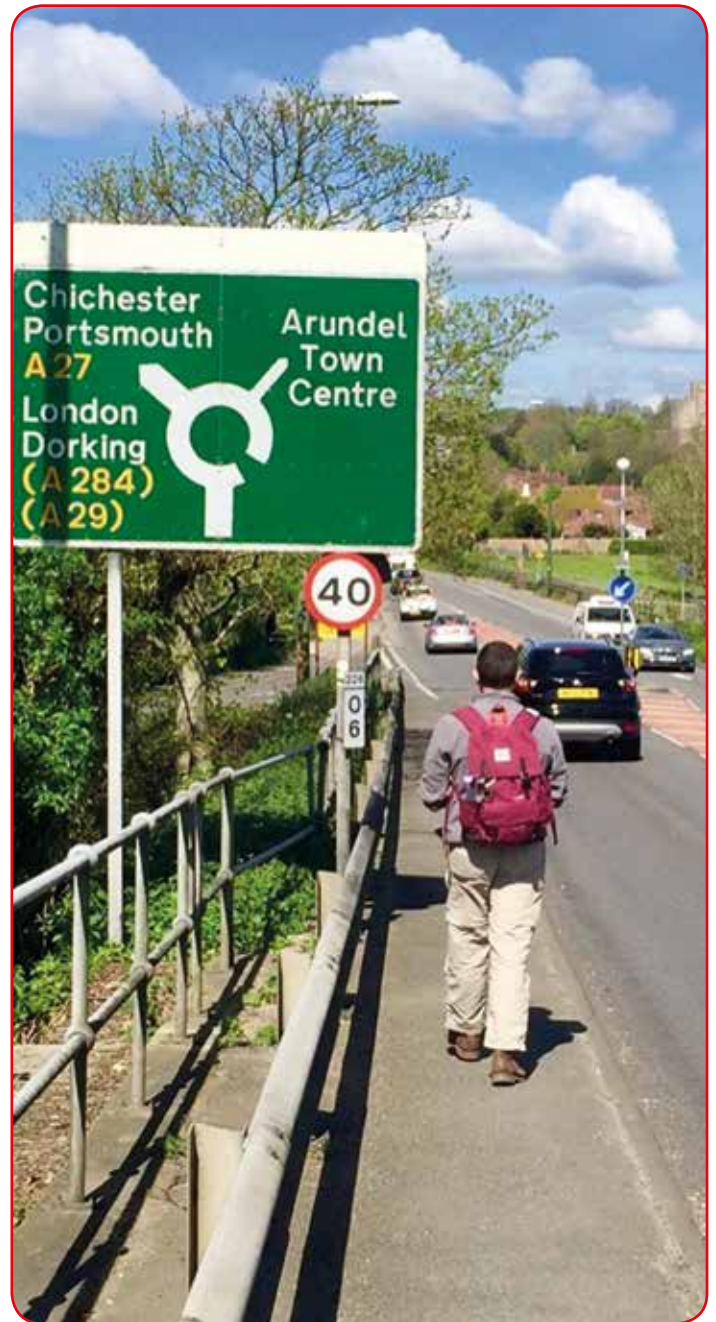
Notwithstanding the above, our research (Annex, paragraph f) identifies several areas where improvements should be incorporated into scheme design or retrofitted to existing roads. For example, this might include providing safer routes for cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians around junctions and roundabouts, and ensuring that crossings 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.

9 Future-proofing – new technology

Today's road users rarely mention what will be required in 10, 15, or 20 years' time – they are understandably concerned with the here and now. However, they are likely to be critical in retrospect if RIS 2 does not require investments made from 2020 to 2025, whether brand new construction or major renewals, to be 'future proofed' to the greatest extent possible. Whether it be ensuring (at least) passive provision for 5G coverage, electric vehicle charging or infrastructure to support connected and autonomous vehicles (CAVs), RIS 2 should seek to minimise major retrofitting costs where future needs are already reasonably foreseeable.

Greater engagement with road users, including the freight sector

We believe all investment made through RIS 2 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. RIS 2 should set out the level of user engagement Highways England is expected to deliver, and provide the funds for it to be carried out effectively.

It appears that there is much scope to improve the relationship between Highways England and freight operators, key users of the SRN. 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. This would have parallels with Network Rail's 'freight and national passenger operators' function, led by its own director.

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 **Road to the future – what road users want from Highways England's 2020-25 Route Strategies**

November 2016: this extensive programme of research involved interviews at 137 locations across the SRN, commissioned in partnership with Highways England. The results have now been featured in the Route Strategies published in March 2017. Tackling congestion emerged as a consistently high priority, above road surface quality. This difference (from paragraph 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 Users' Satisfaction Survey (NRUSS) data**

as part of taking over – from Highways England – the running of 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 **Take a break – Road users' views about roadside facilities**

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 **A safe place to park – what lorry drivers want during disruption to cross-Channel services**

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 at times other than during major disruption.

h **Measuring performance of England's strategic roads: what users want**

March 2017: this research, commissioned in partnership with ORR and involving DfT and Highways England, gave insight into how road users think Highways England's performance should be measured.

Forthcoming publications

i **National Road Users' Satisfaction Survey 2016-17:**

publication of results for 2016-17 measuring SRN user satisfaction.

j **Motorway Services Users Survey:**

publication of our first survey measuring customer satisfaction with all motorway service areas in England.

k **Road surface quality:** research commissioned in partnership with Highways England probes the issue of road surface quality (identified in paragraph a. above) and will give a thorough understanding of the aspect which SRN users see as the greatest priority for improvement.

l **Smart motorways:** research into road users' experiences of and views about different types of smart motorway, including all-lane running.



Contact Transport Focus

Any enquiries about this research
should be addressed to:
Guy Dangerfield
Head of Strategy
e guy.dangerfield@transportfocus.org.uk
w www.transportfocus.org.uk

Fleetbank House
2-6 Salisbury Square
London
EC4Y 8JX

Transport Focus is the operating
name of the Passengers' Council.

© 2017 Transport Focus

Design and Print by TU ink www.tuink.co.uk (15398)