

Transport Committee Inquiry: Strategic road investment

Submission from Transport Focus

Transport Focus is the independent consumer watchdog representing the interests of all users of England's motorways and major 'A' roads (the Strategic Road Network (SRN)). We welcome the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence.

Our role in the Road Investment Strategy development process is to articulate SRN users' priorities in relation to their journeys in order that those priorities inform decisions by the Department for Transport (DfT), National Highways and the Office of Rail and Road (ORR). We are not in a position to comment on (1) *how effectively the RIS2 enhancement portfolio has been managed to date*, or on (2) *whether risks to the enhancements portfolio for the remainder of the RIS2 period are being well managed*. However, with regard to (3) *the impacts of delays and cost overruns in that portfolio on the overall programme* we would be very concerned if inflationary pressure within the enhancements programme led to reduced capital spending on renewals. Our research has consistently found a clear preference among road users for keeping existing SRN roads in good order before building new ones, consistent with users' top priority for improvement to journeys on the SRN being better road surface quality.

(4) What progress is being made on planning for the next Road Investment Strategy: Transport Focus is playing an active role in the RIS3 Programme, providing advice to DfT, National Highways and ORR on how the investment plans can best meet the needs of all users. Having made a set of recommendations for what in road users' interests DfT should look to include in RIS3 (see response to point 6 below), we are continuing to help DfT, National Highways and ORR develop a set of metrics covering the things that matter to users of the SRN – and which can be used to hold National Highways to account for its delivery in those areas. In particular we wish to see strengthened metrics on the delay resulting from planned roadworks and on the accuracy of advance information on full, planned road closures.

(5) What lessons from RIS2 need to be incorporated into RIS3 to ensure it is achievable and delivers on policy objectives:
In reviewing what has been learnt from RIS2, Transport Focus argued that the investment planning process should first determine what improved service the Government wants to see provided, in line with its policy objectives; and only then agreeing with National Highways the investments that are required to deliver that. This approach has been adopted in part for RIS3 but could go further in subsequent RIS.

(6) Whether the Government's current and forthcoming roads investment programme is meeting the current and future needs of consumers and business:

Effectiveness of RIS2:

The current RIS2 programme has been shaped by input from Transport Focus highlighting road users' priorities. It sets out how, in addressing the nine themes that ran through our input, the programme has been set up to deliver what users want.

Transport Focus ensures that, in being the voice of transport users, its work is always evidence-based. Our submissions to RIS2 were founded on specific research with a wide range of users in 2017¹ into their priorities for improvement, and on ongoing tracking of user views through the Strategic Roads User Survey (SRUS)² since 2018. Government has set out as its first priority in RIS2 the need ‘to fix the strategic roads we have today ... to continue to serve all users well into the future’; that emphasis on operation, maintenance and renewal of the existing network emerged strongly as users’ preference from our research. This applies to business users of the SRN as much as to individual drivers.

Key components of the performance specification set up for RIS2 track outcomes on ‘fast and reliable journeys’ and, more generally, on ‘meeting the needs of all users’ (the latter being primarily assessed through satisfaction as measured by SRUS). Effective management of the network – in respect of both traffic flow and the quality of the infrastructure – is central to success on these counts, but enhancement projects also have a vital role to play in improving performance levels in the longer term. Investment in improved connectivity and capacity will support business growth and lower costs, but our research has established that business users are as focused as individual drivers on being able to make journeys reliably on the network now.

Much of what matters most to road users comes from spend by National Highways on day-to-day operation of the network, on core activity such as incident response, clearing debris and keeping signing and lighting in workable condition. This requires revenue funding alongside capital investment in renewals, and it is essential that the Government makes sufficient provision for both. Without an adequate revenue or RDEL (Resource Departmental Expenditure Limit) budget, DfT’s capital investments will not be fully effective and user needs will not be fully met.

Preparing RIS3:

In preparation for the third RIS, Transport Focus explored through qualitative research with a wide range of SRN users their attitudes to the strategic objectives proposed by DfT³. We found that the draft objectives aligned with what users feel to be the most important priorities for investment, with network performance most front of mind. There were more similarities between road user types than differences, although fleet managers placed greater emphasis on economic growth implications than did personal road users.

Later in 2021 we published the findings of a fresh round of research, including surveying over 5,000 drivers and interviews with a wide range of users, into priorities for improvement to journeys on the SRN⁴. This confirmed that the majority want the focus to be on keeping National Highways’ existing roads in good order before building new ones. Their top priority for improvement remains road surface quality,

¹ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/road-users-priorities-for-the-road-investment-strategy-2020-25/>

² <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/insight/strategic-roads-user-survey/>

³ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/strategic-objectives-for-englands-motorways-and-major-a-roads-2025-30-road-users-views/>

⁴ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/road-users-priorities-for-improvement/>

followed by the safer design and upkeep of roads. They also want to see better management of roadworks and of unplanned delays such as accidents or breakdowns, and better information about such unplanned disruptions. We probed for detailed views about road surface quality, establishing that action is primarily sought on potholes and cracks, but also on road markings and cat's eyes. We also asked about priorities for investment across a range of measures on behalf of users of electric vehicles.

This research embraced those driving in the course of business, along with professional van and lorry drivers, and they put much greater weight on the need for better roadside facilities, and less emphasis than other users on tackling poor driver behaviour. Our understanding of the needs of the business sector is enhanced by our survey of Logistics and Coach Survey: Strategic Roads⁵, interviewing business managers, as opposed to the drivers themselves, three times a year. This is showing that only 50% of operators are satisfied overall with how well the SRN is meeting their business needs. This highlights the need for National Highways to sharpen its focus on this key user sector, for whom it is in effect a monopoly provider.

Transport Focus has worked to ensure that the RIS3 Programme is fully apprised of the evidence base now in place on user experience and priorities; this includes analysis of SRUS findings to understand which factors have the greatest influence on how satisfied a road user is overall with their journey. Using this we have set out a series of recommendations about what RIS3 should require National Highways to deliver in order to meet the needs of users⁶.

The report highlights the need for RIS3 to be shaped by three overarching themes:

- Explicit recognition that National Highways' purpose is to provide a service to its customers, road users of many different types, rather than simply be the builder, maintainer and operator of infrastructure;
- The priority that users place on the maintenance of existing roads, rather than on enhancements, means that funding, including the associated revenue provision, must be sufficient to keep up the user experience on existing SRN roads – and if possible improve it.
- Roadside facilities must be treated as an integral part of the SRN, and so National Highways should have a clear role in facilitating provision to meet users' needs, in particular for lorry drivers and the businesses they work for.

The recommendations themselves are aligned with DfT's strategic objectives for RIS3, made under the following headings:

- Improved quality of road surfaces
- Safer design and upkeep

⁵ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/logistics-and-coach-survey-strategic-roads-2021-22/>

⁶ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/putting-users-at-the-heart-of-road-investment-strategy-3/>

- Better behaved drivers
- Better roadside facilities
- Better management of roadworks and unplanned delays
- Better information about roadworks happening in future
- Increased reliability of journey times and shorter journey times
- Ensuring that electric vehicles can be charged at services on the SRN
- Making bus and coach more attractive for journeys on the SRN
- Better separate facilities for cyclists and pedestrians
- Park & Ride as an alternative to driving all the way on the SRN
- Meeting the needs of freight logistics
- SRN 'network extent' and focusing on road users and their whole journey
- Managing and planning the SRN for the future
- A technology-enabled and enabling network

DfT and National Highways are now preparing the SRN Initial Report and draft RIS, with our recommendations in mind.

(7) Whether the Government's roads investment programme aligns with other policy priorities, such as decarbonisation, levelling up, productivity and growth:

Transport Focus is not able to judge how far investment in roads meets other Government policy priorities. However, we have highlighted the road user dimension to decarbonisation, setting out three specific recommendations for National Highways to work with partners to ensure that electric vehicles can be charged at services on the SRN; this will entail increasing the number and reliability of chargers, and improving information about them. We have advocated that RIS3 requires National Highways to consider its role in facilitating the decarbonisation of heavy freight, whether through electrification, hydrogen or other means.

Furthermore, we note that all road users will benefit from faster, more reliable journeys, and that this might be reasonably expected to contribute to increased productivity and economic growth.

(8) How RIS3 should take account of technological developments, and evidence on ways of increasing capacity on the Strategic Road Network (such as smart motorways and potential alternatives to them):

Transport Focus has made specific recommendations for RIS3 in respect of deploying improved Variable Message Sign technology, and working with third party service providers, to provide the more reliable, helpful information that road users need to be able to make informed decisions about their journeys.

Transport Focus
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