

Connecting the Country Consultation
National Highways

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CONNECTING THE COUNTRY: NATIONAL HIGHWAYS CONSULTATION

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 are pleased to respond to the consultation on National Highways' long-term strategic plan to 2050, following up discussions we have had with your Planning and Development team as the plan took shape, as well as our ongoing engagement in the process of developing the new Road Investment Strategy.

Over-arching comments

National Highways is right to develop a vision of what the strategic network should be offering to its users in the longer-term. It is important to take a cross-modal view of what people and businesses will want from the transport system as a whole, and Transport Focus will be able to contribute to National Highways' understanding of that broader question. We will be able to draw on our Future of Transport exercise, an assessment now being finalised of the wider societal trends that are likely to influence how people get around over the next 20-30 years. In determining what that means for a service such as the SRN, it will be important to strike the right balance between ambition and realism, not least so as to present a proposition that users can buy in to. A goal of making your roads 'the safest in the world' would need a full understanding of what other road administrations are achieving to be credible.

We are disappointed by the document's approach to ensuring that SRN 'network extent' is appropriate. The Foreword asserts that 'our network is reaching maturity in its extent', but offers little evidence to support the statement. While the concept of trunking and detrunking is defined in the Glossary, it is not picked up anywhere in the Vision statement. Transport Focus has made specific recommendations about network extent and National Highways has identified a number of potential additional routes, none of that is reflected in this document.

There are several references in the document to the SRN as part of a seamlessly integrated transport system, but the key interface for the user, that with local roads, is barely mentioned. It is essential that National Highways sets out its plan for working with local highway authorities as partners, so that jointly they can provide a quality service from the combined road network and correspond to users' own focus on the end-to-end journey.

We welcome the identification of ‘how much our customers will travel’ and ‘how our customers will experience travel’ as two of the core themes of the plan, although the essential focus on the user is diluted by the choice of the nine ‘focus areas’ within those themes. ‘Customer experience’ should be more than just one component of how you will manage your network, and should instead be the end product of all the activity in the individual focus areas.

We suggest that more work will be needed to map out the sequence of aspirational targets for 2030, 2040 and 2050. As currently presented, the progress proposed is unreasonably slow on several counts (for example not alleviating ‘the most acute congestion and safety issues’ until 2050; and holding back on tackling the remaining 2% of roads not benchmarked as low-risk under iRAP for another ten years beyond 2040).

Categorising the network

Do you feel that national corridors, inter-regional routes and regional connections are the correct categories for the Strategic Road Network?

Transport Focus supports work to identify the service level that SRN users should be able to expect from the network. But the emphasis should be on consistency across the whole SRN, tailored as necessary to the volume of traffic on each road and the proportion of freight traffic. We are not persuaded of the case for distinct tiers of service expectation using what risks being an arbitrary sub-division of the SRN based on infrastructure standard (for example the presentation on p55 indicates that regional connections will not be ‘multiple-lane roads’). Any attempt to sub-divide on the basis of the journeys being made on a road will fail because all SRN roads, whether the M1 or a single-carriageway trunk road, serve a mix of longer-distance and much more local traffic, and all of those users are your customers.

The presentation in the Executive Summary of how standards might be differentiated between three tiers of roads already shows how this approach would be challenging: there is little difference in many cases, and some distinctions that are proposed are questionable, for example the monitoring only of key junctions rather than the route as a whole on ‘regional connections’ which might include vital ‘A’-road corridors for large parts of the country.

It seems likely that the process of agreeing what roads fall into which category could be prolonged and controversial with regional stakeholders, and we fear this would distract from the necessary focus on improving standards across the network as a whole.

In short, we recommend a rethink about this concept.

The nine focus areas

Do the nine focus areas match your view of where we should focus the future of the Strategic Road Network?

As noted above, the key outcome of customer experience doesn’t sit easily alongside inputs such as Digital and Asset Resilience, important though they are. And the way the focus areas have been grouped by core theme makes it more difficult to see a clear strategy: ‘Digital’ is presented as a component of ‘how our customers will travel’ but the discussion that follows is largely about using technology to improve asset management. Digital connectivity as it affects users is not picked up until the section on Customer Experience.

On substance of the proposals, we comment here on three of the focus areas:

Growth & levelling up

A long-term strategic plan should reflect deeper analysis of the forecast evolution of demand for SRN usage from different sectors of the economy. There is a passing reference (p17) to ‘road-reliant sectors, which include logistics, manufacturing and construction’ but no insights are presented into what road reliance entails and how the service provided by the SRN might be adapted for different types of HGV user to make the most effective contribution to economic growth.

Digital

With consideration of the opportunities from digital connectivity spread across both the Digital and Customer Experience focus areas, there is insufficient clarity about the contributions that improved 5G and wireless connectivity on the one hand, and Connected Vehicle-to-Vehicle (V2V) technology on the other, can make to the user experience. The Digital ‘Vision’ section (p53) sets the goal of having all national corridors ‘CAV-enabled by 2050’, but the ambition should be for this to apply to the whole SRN; and the distinction should be made between readiness in the longer term for Autonomous Vehicles and the steps needed to make the most of V2V capability that is already spreading across the vehicle fleet.

Customer experience

The strategy would be strengthened by placing a fuller assessment of the customer perspective at its heart; this would include an analysis of what makes for both a ‘trusted’ and a ‘stress-free’ experience. Transport Focus would be happy to advise on what this foundation of the Plan should comprise. Key components are already set out in the Customer Experience section, including journey time and roadside facilities, but there is no reference to ride quality, users’ top priority for improvement.

We support the ambition for charging infrastructure to be customer-centric; our new tracker survey of the EV charging experience will provide valuable insight into what this should entail and how well it is being delivered. It is essential that National Highways ensures chargepoint provision is more intensive than the standard cited on p42 (‘95% of our motorways and A-roads within 20 miles of a chargepoint’).

We are aware that the resources available to National Highways to deliver on this plan will be under great pressure in Road Period 3 and possibly beyond, and we urge that the primary focus be always on improving the user experience. There will need to be careful scrutiny of how far in practice National Highways will also be able to ‘act beyond roads to improve the quality of life in local communities’: we would expect the limited Designated Funds at its disposal to be spent only on the SRN itself or addressing its adverse impacts.