

Transport Planning Society

Response to the Consultation on 'The Strategic Road Network and the Delivery of Sustainable Development'

March 2013

Introduction

We have focussed in this response on the high level consultation document and the questions. We consider that a more open discussion of what the Government wants to achieve and the details of the draft guidance is needed to avoid misunderstanding and bad decisions, in this case those which would harm and not promote economic growth.

There are three key problems with the consultation proposals which mean they should not go ahead in their current form:

- 1. the removal of essential regulation and guidance instead of its reform and simplification;***
- 2. the lack of clarity in the NPPF; and***
- 3. apparent contradictions within the proposal and with other guidance.***

1 Remove or reform?

Government policy is showing a general failure in transport planning terms to distinguish between indiscriminate "deregulation" and a simplification of the guidance and regulation which is critical to the operation of complex networks in a highly developed country such as the UK. This simplification is overdue, but the complexity has often been to make national guidance flexible enough to allow local special cases to go ahead. An example of this is how the whole appeals procedure, designed to allow proper democratic involvement, has become a power struggle between developers and local communities. Local authorities have blanched at the cost of appeals and the risk of legal fees to the extent that many housing developments, for example, are effectively bullied through. It is time this was recognised and not treated as though it is part of an essential economic recovery. Greater respect for the decisions made by local planning authorities, and a reformed approach to Section 106 to avoid the virtual blackmail tactics sometimes employed, would be a welcome reform.

To give an example, building houses in the wrong place does provide more economic activity in the short term, but will cause far more long term damage in terms of economic costs, particularly congestion. Developers will always prefer green field sites because they

are cheaper to build on, easier to design, and have fewer directly affected individuals to object. In the UK, the “build, sell and move on” pattern is dominant (this is not always the case in Europe) and thus the long term impact of development is well down the developer agenda. It is the planning system which seeks to address this, and in many ways it has indeed fallen short. This is largely because the system is too weak, not that it is too draconian. A few thousand pounds towards some new traffic signals or a roundabout do not address this issue.

2 *Lack of clarity*

There is a specific failure to achieve clarity in the NPPF in relation to transport, for example not adequately defining “severe” in relation to transport impacts. This is particularly important because transport impacts are context dependent. In other words a handful of extra vehicles being loaded onto already congested network links or junctions will lead to additional delays to large numbers of existing users which far outweigh the benefits to the small number of additional users. This is the whole rationale behind an integrated land use and transport planning approach in general, and in particular the referral of schemes which affect trunk roads to the Highways Agency.

To give an actual example, a scheme to enlarge an industrial area on the fringe a smaller UK city was supported by the local authority and had its major road access via a roundabout linked to a slip road to a trunk road. This was already congested at peak hours. The queue length on the existing slip was already causing some intermittent problems on the trunk road, used by thousands of commuters and business travellers. Adding the new development would have meant a regular queue extending onto the trunk road with both safety and congestion problems. The Highways Agency (HA) were consulted, objected, major redesign was undertaken. In fact it would have preferable if the HA could have had a more positive role, for example pointing to the value of travel planning in reducing demand and providing room for growth. This should of course have to be reflected in a lower number of parking spaces allowed for the development. This in turn would have been opposed by developers and the local authority, but reveals the conflict of interests and the need for a national perspective.

We consider that the result of not taking such matters into account is to add to congestion and thus to costs, and damage existing economic activity at the expense of a tiny minority. We suggest this is both economic and environmental folly.

3 *Lack of consistency*

There appear to be differences between the high level consultation document and the draft guidance, with the consultation sometimes going further. We have heard this comment from our members and others and suggest that there needs to be a drafting meeting with

those involved in this area, or at least a web based discussion. There are however, some areas where there seem to be contradictory messages within the consultation.

Perhaps the key problem is the failure to acknowledge that economic growth will be inhibited by congestion, and enabled if congestion is reduced.

In the second Proposals bullet point the HA is supposed to have a *“role as a delivery partner to growth and as a development enabler”*. This is something most people would support, including ourselves.

However, this is assumed to mean that it will require *“the removal of protectionist and/or negative statements that may be seen as a block on development.”* Avoiding development which harms the rest of the economy is a key part of delivering growth.

This is made worse by two further bullet points about the purpose of the new guidance:

Removes the expectation that the traffic impact on the SRN as a result of development should be mitigated so as to be no worse off after the 10 year review period

Allows any capacity within the network to be used after traffic demand has been managed down through the implementation of travel plans and other appropriate measures.

The latter is particularly dangerous because it implies that there should be no aim of reducing congestion through travel planning, or allocating road space which is released to sustainable transport modes such as walking, cycling and public transport in order to further improve their mode share.

Overall this reveals a misunderstanding of how a developed economy is able to function and grow. Development needs to be designed and implemented so that existing activities are not subject to increased costs. If they are, they will grow more slowly, or fail to grow at all. In a country with a great deal of existing infrastructure, this is a serious problem and transport planners have been trying to devise solutions, many of which have to be encouraged by planning controls and guidance. This is because the individual interest of a single company may be served while causing widespread costs to others. Allowing this to happen will damage the economy and prevent growth.

This serious error is compounded in the next two bullets:

... mitigation will only be required to the extent that capacity is adequate at time of opening, thus removing the requirement to cater for future background growth

Through this, frees up capacity to be available unless the cumulative impacts are severe.

Following this to its logical conclusion, new development would be allowed to consume new capacity in a specific place without taking into account the cost to other road users. It may be that the Government wishes to abandon its current methods of transport appraisal and from now assume that time savings have no value. If this is the case, the Government should at least consult on it. Meanwhile the idea that new capacity can just be allocated to any development that is proposed at zero cost completely contradicts existing DfT and HA

appraisal methods and indeed Government Guidance. For this reason we also suggest that the ambiguity in the draft circular over the 10 year time horizon should be changed to make it consistent with national appraisal (currently base year, modelled year, 60 year discount period). We would not want this to imply we support the 60 year discount period or other parts of the current system. The point here is that it should be consistent.

Points of support

Finally we must add that we strongly support the idea of consolidating and simplifying guidance, as in bullets 8 and 9. We also support the idea of a proactive role for the HA in relation to the SRN (first half of bullet 2).

We have also answered the specific questions in the consultation in the Annex below, with the strong caveat that they do not appear entirely to flow from the proposals.

Our conclusion remains that the change should not go ahead as set out, but that a way forward should be sought through engagement with practitioners. We are of course happy to participate, together with other stakeholders, in a more targeted discussion of these important issues.

TPS

March 25th 2013

Answers to specific questions from the consultation document

1. *Does the proposed Circular explain clearly the Highways Agency's commitment to engage at all stages with the planning system, and how this will happen?*

No

2. *Does the proposed Circular achieve the correct balance between supporting economic development and ensuring that the strategic road network fulfills its function of providing safe and efficient movement for current and future users?*

No

3. *Does the proposed Circular signpost clearly the criteria that the Agency will use in evaluating planning proposals that affect the Strategic Road Network?*

No

4. *Do you agree with the approach to use of existing road capacity, and the provision of new capacity?*

No – the full cost of development traffic must be accounted for, relative to the reduced base level after any improvement (whether from infrastructure or demand management).

5. *Do you agree with relaxation of policy on new accesses to motorways and other strategic routes? Please explain the reasoning for your view and provide any evidence you may have to support it.*

No – if the trunk road network is of any national significance maintaining flow must be a priority.

6. *Do you agree that it is appropriate to remove from the Circular minimum spacing criteria for roadside facilities, subject to junction separation standards, leaving consideration of such matters to planning authorities and commercial enterprise/opportunity?*

No – see answer to 5 above. However, we consider that if the Government wishes to see more competition, it should increase on-site competition rather than between sites. This would of course take time as existing agreements come up for renewal.

7. *Do you agree with the removal of a restriction on retail space at motorway service areas, as a matter to be assessed and decided according to demand through the planning system? Please explain the reasoning for your view and provide any evidence you may have to support it.*

No – the whole issue of car based out of town retail development and the undermining of town centres is undervalued. Again, there are small short term benefits, followed by higher costs in terms of viable town and smaller centres. By definition MSAs are road based, not accessible by walk and cycle, and not near to densely populated areas. Experience of travel on motorways suggests that there is already a range of retail facilities at many MSAs using existing criteria.

8. *Do you agree with the minimum requirements for signing of the various roadside facilities? What should be included or excluded? Please explain the reasoning for your view and provide any evidence you may have to support it.*

In part - we consider that the needs of commercial vehicle drivers have not been well catered for in the past, and that this needs to be improved following consultation with the industry. This should cover issues such as overnight stops for the largest vehicles which have had to meet new drivers'

hours regulations, and opportunities for traditional low cost refreshments (possible on site competition, rather than between sites)