The Road Investment Strategy 3: Research Response

Transport Planning Society response

Introduction

In "Planning ahead for the Strategic Road Network", published late 2021, the Government sets out its plans to develop the third Road Investment Strategy (RIS3), covering the period from 2025 to 2030.[1] In 2023, the Department for Transport (DfT) will publish a Draft RIS setting out its intentions for RIS3, which is preceded by a research phase.

The aim of the research phase is finding out:

a) What people think should be the main objectives for National Highways and the SRN, both for RIS3 and beyond

b) Which locations on the SRN are most in need of improvement

c) The opportunities to unlock wider benefits from investment in the SRN

d) If there should be any changes in the roads that make up the SRN

This document is the response of the Transport Planning Society (TPS) to the research phase, focused on issues a) and c). We will share our responses with the key stakeholders identified in the reports as active in the research phase: National Highways, the Office of Rail and Road, and Transport Focus.

The Transport Planning Society is the only professional body focusing entirely on Transport Planning in the UK.[2] With almost 1500 members, we aim to facilitate, develop and promote best practice in transport planning and provide a focus for dialogue between all those engaged in it, whatever their background or other professional affiliation.

What should be the main objectives for National Highways and the SRN

We are encouraged by the opening statement in the document that confirms that the highway network supports all modes of travel, and not just mechanised modes, or private vehicles. This consideration must be extended across purposes of trips made using the network. Utility trips (commuting and work journeys) on the SRN have historically dominated cost-benefit analyses of the value derived from investment. It is pleasing to see that leisure trips will also be taken into consideration with regards to network performance. This is pertinent as almost half of transport

[1] Department for Transport. (2021) *Planning ahead for the Strategic Road Network Developing the third Road Investment Strategy*. Department for Transport. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1045938/planning-ahead-for-the-strategic-road-network-developing-the-third-road-investment-strategy.pdf].

[2] Transport Planning Society. (2022) [https://tps.org.uk/].

professionals expect the number of leisure and social trips to increase in the next five to ten years compared to pre-Covid levels.[3]

The government should be cognisant of the Transport Focus research that which highlights that users mostly value improved quality of road surfaces, safer design and upkeep of roads.[4] RIS3 should not just be about expansion of the SRN – greater value could be achieved by maintaining and improving the existing road assets, also considering the climate change threat and the responsibility to ensure resilience of the strategic road network in the face of climate events. Resilience of digital infrastructure should also be part of this.

TPS welcomes the statement that RIS3 could also intervene to improve other transport networks which can support different ways of making local journeys off the SRN. We recommend the work done by (then) Highways England in the M25 South West Quadrant Strategic Study, concluding:

"This study recommends that the focus of future work should not be on widening the existing (M25) road. Instead, attention should be given to how to reduce pressures and provide parallel capacity to relieve the motorway network. This should work first to find alternatives to travel, or to move traffic to more sustainable modes. But the volume of travel means that road enhancements are also likely to be needed".[5]

Switching existing driven trips to another mode, including car passenger (increased car occupancy is also Government policy) can be supported by land use and planning interventions. If a car trip changes from a distant destination poorly served by public transport (PT) to a destination within walking or cycling distance (or with good PT links) it not only reduces car mileage, but it also brings new modes into play – both effects reducing the need to invest in further SRN expansion.

Accessibility mapping across all modes is a key tool to analyse this opportunity across the country. It requires different, better integrated policies, (linked to Local Transport and Development Plans) instead of those which simply try to make individual modes more attractive. Working in closer co-operation with local transport and planning authorities could mean a break from capacity increases to demand management, mode and destination switching, on grounds of congestion and climate considerations that are better served that way.

Throughout the report there is too strong a focus on alternative fuels (biofuels, electricity and hydrogen) rather than increasing modal shift. For the government and National Highways to reach their respective net zero targets by 2050, a significant reduction in total car mileage is required (it has been estimated that a 20% to 30% reduction is needed by 2030, relative to 2019 levels)[6], with the additional potential benefit of also freeing up road-space to other users.

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[3] Woodhouse, I., Cowling, E., and Wain, C. (2020) *Long-term implications of Covid-19 on transport planning and policy: a perspective from the transport sector*. Rees Jeffrey Road Fund. [www.reesjeffreys.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/FTVG_Group1_Report.pdf].

[4] Transport Focus. (2021) *Check how road user priorities for improvement vary by type of user and journey.* Transport Focus. [https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/check-how-road-user-priorities-for-improvement-vary-by-type-of-user-and-journey/].

[5] National Highways. (2017) *M25 South West quadrant: strategic study: stage 3 report*. Department for Transport. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/600047/m25-south-west-quadrant-strategic-study-stage-3.pdf].

[6] Hopkinson, L., Anable, J., Cairns, S., Goodman, A., Goodwin, P., Hiblin, B., Kirkbride, A., Newson, C., and Sloman, L. (2021) *The last chance saloon: we need to cut car mileage by at least 20%.* Transport for Quality of Life. [www.transportforqualityoflife.com].

In appraisal of the RIS3 programme, we recommend that a separate objective related solely to carbon should be considered by the DfT, rather than the topic being merged (as it is currently) with the 'Improved Environmental Outcomes' objective. As a minimum, the RIS3 appraisal process should ensure that every individual scheme and the overall programme is tested against the government's Transport Decarbonisation Plan objectives.[7]

The appraisal process must reflect the now well-recognised uncertainty around future travel demand growth, be that because of a continuation of the trends emerging from Covid 19 lockdowns, or as exemplified by the two climate change scenarios presented by Prof Phil Goodwin,[8] rather than the current DfT traffic growth forecasts. The latest DfT forecasts are now more than 3 years old, and reflect pre-pandemic assumptions about the economy and associated future travel demand.[9] We disagree with the statement that changes in the forecast of future travel demand "are highly unlikely to overturn the importance of the SRN". The modelling of alternative scenarios needs to prove that, and all such scenarios must reflect unintended consequences, such as induced demand occurring where congestion is (temporarily) resolved.

Any assessment of the RIS3 programme and any of its component schemes must build on the Uncertainty Toolkit and Common Analytical Scenarios developed by the Department itself,[10] and learn from similar scenario development activities by, for example, Transport Scotland and Transport for the North.[11] [12]

By incentivising driving, through lowering the driver's time and hence generalised cost, any sustainability package aimed at decarbonisation will have to first make up for this disincentive – at least to the predicted car travel time value. The logical way to achieve this is by reallocating road space at the same time but that also reduces benefits as they are currently calculated. RIS3 needs to consider if the current approach to appraisal needs overhauling, to overcome this conundrum. Currently, the underlying justification for SRN schemes which influence urban/suburban traffic is the very thing which undermines other Government policy. Strategic schemes do interact with urban and suburban areas and policies: it's where most of the people and cars are located.

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[7] Department for Transport. (2021) *Decarbonising Transport a Better, Greener Britain*. Department for Transport. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1009448/decarbonising-transport-a-better-greener-britain.pdf].

[8] Anable, J., and Goodwin, P. (2021) *We are now facing two alternative futures (plus an untenable one).* Local Transport Today. [https://www.transportxtra.com/publications/evolution/news/69570/we-are-now-facing-two-alternative-futures-plus-an-untenable-one].

[9] Department for Transport. (2018) *Road Traffic Forecasts 2018 Moving Britain Ahead*. Department for Transport. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/873929/road-traffic-forecasts-2018-document.pdf].

[10] Department for Transport. (2021) *Uncertainty Toolkit TAG Supplementary Guidance.* Department for Transport. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/983766/tag-uncertainty-toolkit.pdf].

[11] Transport Scotland. (2019) *Scenario Planning Process Report.* Transport Scotland. [https://www.transport.gov.scot/media/45142/scenario-planning-process-report.pdf].

[12] Transport for the North. (2020) *Future Travel Scenarios Adaptive planning to deliver our strategic vision in an uncertain future.* Transport for the North. [https://transportforthenorth.com/future-travel-scenarios/].

The government's own Transport Decarbonisation Plan raises increasing car occupancy and encouraging public transport use as two measures that can immediately cut transport's carbon emissions. RIS3 needs to embrace this point and facilitate where possible. The government should investigate, and possibly trial the use of High Occupancy Toll lanes to support increasing car occupancy and provide complementary funding to enhance public transport provision. Recent press suggestions that the Bus Back Better funds have been halved from £3Bn to £1.4Bn are worrying.[13]

The Society welcomes the statement that "Action on the SRN will support the use of a decarbonised vehicle fleet and make active travel and public transport easier and more attractive to use", and would seek assurances that these actions are embedded in the designs, monitored and evaluated.

It is positive to see that the SRN is one of the safest networks in the world and that safety is, and will continue to be, the Department's top priority in RIS3. Despite this, an omission from this particular objective, and the publication as a whole, is any reference to Smart Motorways. A government statement on delaying the further the rollout of was recently published,[14] and RIS3 should reflect not only the stated intention to halt the construction of new Smart Motorways, but also assess if the completion of the 100 or so miles of Smart Motorways under construction should be paused until a full 5 years' worth of safety data is available.

The Society disagrees with the intention in the report, that enhancement schemes that had funding approved in an earlier RIS, and where construction has not concluded by March 2025, will continue to be funded in RIS3. We are of the opinion that all schemes should be reassessed, in line with the proposed review of National Policy Statement for National Networks.

Given the increase in cycle usage, and the reported 40% increase in cyclist deaths in 2020, we urge the government to ensure that all RIS3 projects have measures in place to improve cyclist safety.[15]

In terms of catering for freight, more is possible to optimise road haulage (e.g. through consolidation). Rather than simply predicting and providing for ongoing growth; the government can play a role in this. The SRN does not need to be the only network catering for the movement of goods, or investment in RIS3 be the only way to address the congestion costs experienced by road freight. Better use can be made of rail freight alternatives, not just for access to global markets but as a realistic mode that deserves consideration for investment. A more effective rail freight offering may be preferable over expansion of the strategic road network in RIS3. The involvement of the Office of Rail and Road is a positive step towards this.

Meaningful engagement with bus and other mass transit operators should also occur ahead of the RIS3 final publication. We recommend that RIS3 ensures it takes note of, and aligns with, the

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[13] Helm, T. (2022) *Boris Johnson's 'bus back better' plan in tatters as Treasury cuts funding by half.* The Guardian. [https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/23/boris-johnsons-bus-back-better-red-wall-levelling-up-treasury-cuts-funding].

[14] National Highways. (2022) *Smart motorway rollout to be paused as government responds to Transport Committee report.* Department for Transport. [https://www.gov.uk/government/news/smart-motorway-rollout-to-be-paused-as-government-responds-to-transport-committee-report].

[15] Department for Transport. (2022) *Reported Road casualties in Great Britain: pedal cycle factsheet, 2020.* Department for Transport. [https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/reported-road-casualties-great-britain-pedal-cyclist-factsheet-2020/reported-road-casualties-in-great-britain-pedal-cycle-factsheet-2020].

National Infrastructure Commission's Second National Infrastructure Assessment: Baseline Report, recently published.[16]

The opportunities to unlock wider benefits from investment in the SRN

We are encouraged that according to the report, SRN investment has also unlocked 160 new and improved cycleways and footpaths, and urge the government to look for greater opportunity to seek wider benefits for non-motorised travellers from the significant investment in RIS3. Ideally, we would like to see a percentage of the overall spend committed to active mode improvements; and a mandate that every RIS scheme has an explicit walking and cycling component, scrutinised by Active Travel England. The improvement of roads should be for all rather than private car / freight users alone.

The SRN interacts, inevitably, with roads lower down the hierarchy, where many of the trips visible on and benefiting from investment in the SRN, will originate. Unlocking benefits needs to recognise this interplay, for at least the following three reasons:

- Strategic roads, with a movement rather than place function, can support the creation and success of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and other place-making initiatives
- However, unlocking congestion on the strategic road network, making car-based travel faster and easier, can induce further car-based demand, negating some of the intended local road benefits, and even increase traffic in mainly residential streets as end destinations of such trips
- And in any case, investment in the SRN also needs to reflect the needs of those who live and work along the strategic road network, and who are already concerned about the redistribution of road traffic towards this network, and its externalities to their environment

The designated funds for dealing with severance and noise impacts have been well received and are a valuable potential funding source for local communities to make improvements to reduce negative impacts of road schemes on their quality of life. In RIS3, this funding pot should be increased, and National Highways should be more proactive in exploring options for using this funding and reduce the administration necessary for local highway authorities to access this. This could include earmarked allocations against local authorities with clear eligibility criteria and a 'use it or lose it' approach – perhaps linked to schemes identified in a new round of LTPs. It is essential that these LTPs and RIS3 are aligned.

The SRN's creation of jobs is welcomed but a commitment (ideally in the form of a measurable target) to the creation of long-term employment opportunities for those from typically underrepresented groups should be provided in RIS3. This action would reduce employment gaps in road and would assist both the government's commitment to 'build back better' and to 'level up'.[17]

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[16] National Infrastructure Commission. (2021) *Second National Infrastructure Assessment: Baseline Report.* National Infrastructure Commission. [https://nic.org.uk/studies-reports/national-infrastructure-assessment/baseline-report/].

[17] De Henau, J., and Himmelweit, S. (2020) *The gendered employment gains of investing in social vs. physical infrastructure: evidence from simulations across seven OECD countries.* The Open University. [www.open.ac.uk/ikd/sites/www.open.ac.uk.ikd/files/files/working-papers/DeHenauApril2020v3.pdf].

In a similar vein, the trial and rollout of new digital technologies is expected to improve safety and create efficiencies on the SRN. However, they must not exclude nor prohibit users that cannot adopt them. The involvement of Transport Focus is encouraging to see, but the Department and its partners must consider an SRN technology strategy for the network, with a heavy focus on engagement and consultation with users. Technology can also have unintended negative consequences – for example the reported increase in usage of C- and unclassified roads over the past ten years, most likely encouraged by navigational systems now commonly available in cars and on smart phones.[18]

Summary

The Transport Planning Society recognises the opportunity that RIS3 offers to improve travel conditions not just for private car and freight traffic, but across all modes of travel that make use of roads. The road investment strategy should recognise the interplay between levels of hierarchy and between travel modes, ensuring that all benefit.

In a previous study on the M25 it was found by National Highways itself that investments off the strategic road network may deliver the intended outcomes easier and cheaper than by expanding the SRN. It would be refreshing to see the funds available in RIS3 for such alternative interventions, be that the lower tier network, or other modes, such as active travel for personal trips or rail for freight movement. Climate resilience and maintenance of existing assets should be prioritised.

In any case, the strategy needs to align with strategies at the local level (such as emerging Local Transport Plans) and other national policies, such as decarbonisation. Reducing the need to travel, rather than providing for predicted traffic growth is one way of doing so.

The latest DfT Road Traffic Forecasts are now more than 3 years old, and uncertainty should be at the heart of road investment related decision-making. TPS believes that this implies a review of all schemes approved in the previous RIS.

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[18] Reid, C. (2020) *'Rat-running' increases on residential UK streets as experts blame satnav apps*. The Guardian. [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/25/rat-running-residential-uk-streets-satnav-apps].

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