

# **LGA response to Strategic Route Network proposal**

## **7 February 2018**



### **About the Local Government Association (LGA)**

The Local Government Association (LGA) is the national voice of local government. We work with councils to support, promote and improve local government.

We are a politically-led, cross party organisation which works on behalf of councils to ensure local government has a strong, credible voice with national government. We aim to influence and set the political agenda on the issues that matter to councils so they are able to deliver local solutions to national problems.

### **Summary**

The LGA welcomed the creation of Highways England and the Road Improvement Strategy (RIS). Long term funding certainty and sustained investment are welcome developments for the strategic network.

The LGA also welcomes the levels of investment that have characterised the first RIS period however we note with concern the extreme disparity in funding between the local and strategic networks. For example over the first RIS periods were awarded 52 times more cash per mile for routine maintenance from central government than local roads.

There is a need for this investment and long term approach to be replicated with long term funding certainty for local networks to ensure investments on both networks can complement each other and the schemes planned in RIS period 2 achieve the best possible value. Much of the language of the Strategic Route Network proposal shows Highways England has listened to areas that could be improved.

### **General Comments**

The LGA is supportive of the principle of the RIS period and the transition from the Highways Agency to Highways England. Councils have welcomed the changes to the organisation to be more customer focused as well as the significant additional investment in the strategic network. Improvements to the road network are vital for many authorities to unlock economic growth and so are supported. As well as the increased investment into the strategic network the long term funding certainty that has been given to Highways England has helped it plan a pipeline of projects going forward. Whilst this process is not perfect and spending in the first RIS period will be heavier at the end of the five years it is an improvement on previous processes and we hope it will continue to be improved for the second RIS period.

However investment in only one part of the road network rather than the network as a whole will always be an incomplete solution. Almost all journeys start and

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end on the local road network. If we allow investment on the local network to continue to lag behind the gains we hope to see through strategic network investment will be reduced due to delays at the start and end of journeys.

This is a point the LGA has made repeatedly and will make throughout this consultation response however it should not be misconstrued as meaning we don't support the investment made on the strategic network or the changes that Highways England has made. The long term investment in the strategic network is welcomed in areas that it effects and is supported by the LGA. We wish to see greater levels of investment and long term funding certainty for our local networks to compliment this large scale investment.

There are many examples throughout the consultation of language that the LGA will welcome with firm commitments to local partnerships, working on integration between different networks, recognising the different groups impacted by the MRN and the greater cost benefits of smaller schemes. We have highlighted the elements we welcome through the document but it is important that this high level strategic commitment is translated to delivery on the ground.

#### **Question 1**

**Do you think Highways England's proposals will deliver what users of the SRN want?**

**If not, what could be done differently?**

The assumption underpinning the RIS process that users want reliable journey times and minimal delays is hard to argue with. Indeed there is an extent to which reliability is more important as if a delay can be anticipated it can be mitigated but unreliable journeys are hard to plan for. One of the important factors the new RIS strategy needs to acknowledge is that it is the reliability and delays of an entire journey that need to be considered not just the strategic element. The general public do not differentiate between the two different networks. It is positive that Highways England have made caring about journeys a key part of their strategy but it is important that they work in alliance with local authorities to ensure that all parts of journeys are improved.

The LGA has highlighted the differences of investments between the two networks. Currently the strategic network has been allocated 52 times more cash per mile for routine maintenance. We accept that the SRN has unique challenges that make the maintenance of the network more challenging and it has a higher specification which makes it more expensive to maintain but this differential is disproportionate. A lack of investment in one part of the network will naturally hold back the whole network overall especially given the importance of safety and consistency of a journey highlighted in the report.

#### **Question 3**

**Do you think Highways England's proposals meet the needs of people affected by the presence of the SRN?**

**If not, what could be done differently?**

Highways England needs to continue to develop its relationship with local authorities that it travels through. As the democratic representatives of local communities this partnership is an important one to ensure that local community views are reflected in the design of the SRN and improvements along the network.

It is important that Highways England acknowledges its role as a barrier as well as a means to connect places. Having the SRN run through a community acts as

a barrier for other types of users and it is encouraging that this is acknowledged through the initial report by considering the needs of pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians.

This is a new and emerging area of work for Highways England and the LGA supports investments that mitigate the role of the SRN as a barrier. We very much hope that the new RIS will engage with local authorities especially those planning investment in cycling and walking networks. Cycling can be significantly inhibited by the strategic network and HE needs to ensure it has adequate channels to allow councils to engage with it when crossings of their network could significantly unlock growth in active travel networks. This is especially important as it could reduce demand for the strategic network and improve journey times.

The next RIS should examine the targets HE sets itself on walking and cycling delivery. Currently some of the targets for spending of designated funds is output based rather than outcome based. RIS measured success by the amount of crossing schemes that had been built future RIS periods should base targets on whether walking and cycling have been increased and problems have been mitigated.

#### **Question 4**

**Do you agree with Highways England's proposals for:**

- ☐ **Four categories of road and the development of Expressways (Initial Report sections 4.4.3 and 5.3.6)**
- ☐ **Operational priorities (Initial Report section 5.1)**
- ☐ **Infrastructure priorities (Initial Report section 5.2)**
- ☐ **Enhancement priorities (Initial Report section 5.3)**
- ☐ **A local priorities fund (Initial Report section 5.3.8)**
- ☐ **Future studies (Initial Report section 5.3.11)**
- ☐ **Designated funds (Initial Report section 5.4)**
- ☐ **Performance measures and targets (Initial Report section 6.3)**

**If you disagree with any of these, what could be done differently?**

Overall the use of designated funds is an encouraging development which allows Highways England to invest in a variety of functions that can have a complimentary effect on investment in the network. However there are two major concerns with how designated funds have developed throughout the first RIS period

The first is that targets for spending the money have not been reached, whilst HE have given assurances that the money will be spent having a heavily back loaded spending profile risks the delivery of all the scheme. Funding certainty is intended to deliver a more even spending profile throughout the five year period. We hope this is something that will work better in the next RIS period.

The other concern with the system of designated funds is that it risks making activities that should be a mainstream part of all major schemes appear like additional 'nice to have' optional extras. The kind of investments secured are described as 'beyond business as usual' however investment in the environment, active travel integration and air quality should be considered as part of business as usual. The designated funds should entail a process of how these kind of investments which are currently not part of the core business of road investment will be mainstreamed and how in future will form a core part of road investment schemes.

We are pleased with the proposal for a local priorities fund which recognises that small local schemes often have the greatest pay back and offer the greatest

congestion relieving benefits. We hope that Highways England will work with STBs and alliances of local authorities to identify where schemes could deliver benefits without the need for complex and bureaucratic bidding processes.

We are also supportive of the suggestions for future studies. In particular we welcome the proposals for last mile improvements and integration hubs. The LGA has long believed that investment in modal shift in particular the use of park and ride would deliver significant benefits to both the strategic network as well as urban local road networks. The last mile improvements will hopefully recognise the need for investment across both the local and strategic network in order to drive improvements in journey times and reliability. We look forward to these studies and would be happy to assist in any way we could.

We would be interested to see work examining the performance of local networks and how these relate to performance on the strategic network and the extent to which improvements on one network can complement the other and the extent that problems on one feed into problems on another. Understanding this relationship better will be key to getting best value from RIS 2 and driving performance improvements. It will also be key to understanding the emerging MRN network and how investments should be focused there to compliment investment on the strategic network and vice versa.

#### **Question 7**

**How far does the Initial Report meet the Government's aims for RIS2 (economy, network capability, safety, integration and environment – described in paragraph 2.3)?**

Two of the key aims of the RIS are economic development and integration with other networks. The LGA supports both of these aims and significant amount of planning for local growth will be predicated on investment in infrastructure. We have also mentioned the disparity in investment levels between the strategic and national network. One aspect that can't be ignored is the need for integration within local authorities' economic plan. With the roll out of local industrial strategies it will be important that major investment programmes are aligned with the growth plans for local areas.

Many of the solutions proposed to meet environmental challenges through the RIS process are engineering based. Where there are environmental problems like air pollution the default response seems to be some kind of mitigation based upon building something. Highways England needs to look more closely to demand management and behaviour change to tackle some of the environmental challenges faced by a growing network. This will fit with the integration agenda that Highways England is promoting with other modes, rather than constant mitigation of increasing numbers of journeys there should be an appraisal of whether some journeys can be moved to other modes in order to meet the environmental challenges as well as the capacity challenges the network faces.

#### **Question 9**

**Is there anything else we need to consider when making decisions about investment in the SRN?**

**If so, what other factors do you want considered? Please provide links to any published information that you consider relevant.**

The Government should consider whether greater value could be got from strategic investments if complimentary investment could be made on the local highway networks and other modes of transport. In the current regime of roads funding this remains difficult with most authorities having to bid for fragmented

pots of funding year to year often with different criteria. The LGA has long called for more funding certainty for local authorities with more consolidated multi-year transport budgets. We are encouraged that some progress has been made in the latest connected cities funding it would be helpful if the whole fund had been made available on this basis and it will be useful to see how this programme of investments is complimentary to HE investment.