

Department for Transport

Consultation: shaping the future of England's strategic roads (RIS2)

ACE response
January 2018

Response to consultation questions

1. Do proposals in the Initial Report deliver what SRN users want?

ACE believes the proposals in the Initial Report are broadly capable of delivering what users of the SRN want, with some caveats. Highways England desire for a zero-harm network is critical for road users, and the proposed measures for achieving this will go some way to achieving the objective. However, it is vital that the proposals are carried out in conjunction with traditional awareness campaigns to continue to drive down the number of incidents on the SRN.

Following on from this, it will be crucial the public perception of these new proposals, that are intended to improve the customer experience, are not seen as cheaper ways to increase capacity whilst compromising on safety; users need considerable assurances that every avenue for providing the adequate safety measures has been explored, as well as making sure that the proposals represent best value for money.

For proposals to be effective in delivering what road users want, ACE believes the key will depend on how well they are communicated. Highways England will need to conduct extensive information campaigns to inform users about changes to the network, particularly if an unconventional approach is being used that road users are not familiar with.

ACE believes proposals in the Initial Report should build further on Highways England's customer service strategy by focusing on changing user perceptions and creating a 'customer' identity. Road users do not currently consider themselves 'customers' of the network and it will therefore be difficult to implement and measure a 'customer' focused approach without building this foundation.

Furthermore, ACE believes effective asset management, particularly for road maintenance, is crucial to improving customer service and reducing the whole life cost of an asset. ACE is encouraged to see whole life costs of assets discussed in the Initial Report, however we believe there should be more proposals on how to improve this approach. ACE therefore recommends a proposal for an appropriate funding increase for asset management, and an additional proposal on how Highways England can drive innovation and smarter ways of working in effective asset management and road maintenance.

In regard to extending the life of the network, ACE believes users of the network want to see exceptional value for money. When considering renewing, upgrading or constructing new assets, users do not want to experience extensive works or high costs. ACE believes an increased emphasis on good design at the start of a project can help to achieve increased customer satisfaction and improved safety by maximising the longevity of assets and minimising the need for future work.

2. Do proposals in the Initial Report deliver what businesses want?

On the whole, ACE believes Highways England's proposals in the Initial Report will deliver a number of benefits for businesses across the country. For example, the desire to continue improvements to safety standards, to create more free-flowing roads and to ensure the network is supporting wider economic growth are goals in the report that will, if successful, improve the experience of businesses using the SRN.

Specific proposals in the Initial Report that will also benefit businesses include:

- providing better information to give road users more certainty when using the SRN,
- focusing on ensuring more journeys are reliable and seamless,
- introducing expressways and more smart motorways,
- initiatives to improve the quality and safety of roads on the SRN,
- the construction of new schemes to provide greater access to new markets, and
- tackling congestion at the local level.

As two-thirds of all freight in England is moved on the SRN, more than all other road and transport modes combined, ACE believes the Initial Report could include further analysis on how the next roads period (RP2) can include more proposals specifically focused on freight, as well as ways to improve how it is transported. Using data on the movement of freight to target investments in areas with significant congestion for heavy goods vehicles is one example of how a proposal could be specifically focused on improving how freight is transported on the road network.

Lastly, in regard to how the proposals impact on the supply chain of the SRN, particularly ACE members, the ongoing commitment to build a stable managed pipeline of improvements to the SRN is once again positive. The key will be ensuring this pipeline is realistic and achievable, as this will help the supply chain to plan their businesses sustainably and continue to invest in their workforce.

3. Do proposals in the Initial Report meet the needs of those impacted by the SRN?

ACE believes the Initial Report should include additional detail on how Highways England will minimise the impact of the SRN on its surrounding environment. Highways England could improve its proposed approach to RP2 by including proposals on reducing the noise of roads, particularly around surrounding communities but also for road users, through better design practices.

However, there are a number of proposals in the Initial Report that will benefit those impacted by the SRN. The commitment to reduce the environmental impact of the SRN and the view that additional investment in road infrastructure provides an opportunity to create a cleaner network in one example. Additionally, the focus on supporting wider economic growth and

minimising the impact of the SRN on the local road network through better connections are other proposals that will benefit those impacted by the SRN.

Lastly, to ensure the SRN is delivering benefits to those impacted by its operation, ACE recommends that Highways England and the Department for Transport look for opportunities to build roadside facilities, such as rest stops, in areas that can be used by surrounding communities. For example, constructing toilet facilities near to walking trails or local tourist attractions would offer significant benefits to communities alongside the SRN.

4. ACE's view on key proposals in the Initial Report

Four categories of roads and the development of Expressways

ACE notes the proposal to establish four categories of roads on the national network by adding 'expressways' to the SRN. We agree there is a lack of consistency in the standard of A-roads across the country and we support Highways England's view that this lack of consistency can result in a poor experience for road users. Introducing clear categories of roads with clear standards will go some way to addressing this concern.

ACE believes the rollout of four categories of roads should be carefully implemented and be complimented with new road designations to avoid confusion across the network. New road designations for smart motorways, motorways, expressways and all-purpose trunk roads would help road users clearly understand the type of road they are on and the level of service they should expect. It would also be an opportunity to remove confusion from historical names for roads, such as the M1 and the A1(M). It may be useful to look at how transport routes are named in other locations or transport modes, such as rail, where there is a focus on making things clear for first-time users.

We also support the significant expansion of smart motorways and expressways across the SRN in RP2. As mentioned in ACE's Funding Road for the Future Report, we believe the use of smart technology on the national road network should be considered the new normal due to the range of safety and efficiency benefits they offer. Embracing smart technologies on the national road network. A caution we offer with expressways is their rollout needs to avoid being a short-term solution in areas requiring more significant investment through motorways and smart motorways.

Operational priorities

With regard to better information, ACE believes the provision and employment of live data for users of the SRN would be a significant advancement in Highways England's capacity. Live information would help users of the network make informed decisions about their journeys, such as which junction to exit at, assisting with journey planning or accurately communicating the length of delays.

These messages can be relayed through the use of variable message signs (VMS) or through devices such as mobile phones or navigation systems. Highways England has stated the aim

to provide as much information as possible for road users to help them make informed decisions. ACE recommend reviewing the guidelines for the provision of the number of VMS per distance so as to help road users make informed decisions whilst on the network. Having live data and providing it to the users of the network is only useful if this information can be processed frequently.

With regard to better roadworks, ACE supports the proposals about trialling different working hours and in shorter sections. ACE suggests going further and looking at developing a philosophy or a set of principles that can be applied that guides how best to approach roadworks. These might include trying to complete works in conjunction with other objectives, such as repairing water pipes, so as to avoid digging twice or adopting a high intensity high disruption as opposed to low intensity and low disruption.

Additionally, users of the network do not always understand why work is being carried out. The length of disruption is communicated, albeit often by signs at the start of the works, but the purpose is often much harder to discern. This may be in part due to the fact this message is not easy to condense down so it is quick and safe for road users to read whilst driving. However, ACE recommends more information should be readily available online and Highways England should explore options to make this information easier to read at the point of contact with roadworks.

With regard to managing more smart motorways and expressways, ACE agrees with the proposal to upgrade technology on A roads and reemphasises the need for these projects to deliver good value for money. However, ACE again stresses the need for Highways England to communicate effectively with users of the SRN; it must be made plain to road users about the specific features or capabilities of the road they are travelling on as new classifications and technologies are introduced. An information campaign would be a good way to inform road users about changes happening to the network and to avoid any confusion.

Finally, ACE notes that Highways England recognises that fully driverless vehicles are expected on the roads network by 2021. Given that this is now under three years away, ACE would like to see more evidence about what is being done to ensure that the SRN is ready to accommodate these vehicles. It would be useful to know what portion of the network, in its current form, is ready for connected and autonomous vehicles.

Infrastructure priorities

ACE supports Highways England's proposals for keeping infrastructure in good condition. As a majority of the UK's motorways were built in the 1960s and 1970s, these motorways are in significant need of upgrades. We therefore agree that a major focus of RP2 will need to be improving the quality of the existing network. We also encourage Highways England to ensure infrastructure improvements to the existing network are completed in a 'future proofed' way, minimising the need for further improvements again in the near future and embracing new technologies where possible. Good design from the outset will be critical for ensuring our road infrastructure is of a high standard and able to last well into the future.

ACE believes the Initial Report should also include a proposal highlighting the importance of roads that are well designed. A commitment from Highways England and the Department for Transport on the design of roads would be an important step towards influencing the delivery culture of the sector.

Enhancement priorities

ACE recommends Highways England undertake a more realistic approach to the planning for the projects it is expecting to complete in road periods going forward. We note some of the challenges in the first road period and welcome recent efforts by Highways England to smooth out peaks for construction starts, particularly at the start of 2019-20. However, going forward ACE recommends the Government work with the supply chain to better understand workload limitations. This will ensure the Department for Transport and Highways England are able to ensure projects for future road periods are sustainable to deliver and there is a smooth pipeline of future work.

We note that any uncertainty where delivery is concerned will have a knock-on effect for future road periods, as it will push work further back down the pipeline to create unrealistic workloads. Not only does this impact Highways England, but it also affects their supply chain; if plans to start work on a project in RIS2 are redrawn due to overrunning work in RIS1, this has a negative impact on business planning for the supply chain.

Lastly, ACE has concerns that the Initial Report suggests some sections of smart motorways are already falling behind the latest standard. ACE hopes the upgrades to these sections would be easy to implement and do not require extensive disruptions. ACE stresses the need for planning for future capacity, as well as building in the ability to easily upgrade assets in the future as new technology becomes available.

Local Priorities Fund

Highways England's ambition to build on the success of the Congestion Relief Fund, by working with the Department for Transport, to develop a new fund responding to local priorities and emerging issues through smaller schemes is very positive. ACE agrees that these schemes deliver high value for money and can unlock significant benefits for local areas.

Future studies

ACE supports the future studies proposed in Highways England's Initial Report. In addition to the five future studies proposed, we believe further investigations into resilient smart motorways and integrating autonomous vehicle with human-controlled vehicles on the SRN would be useful.

Designated funds

ACE support the continuation of the current designated funds in RP2. The designated funds play an important role in ensuring strategic priorities are being focused on and help achieve broader benefits from road investments.

ACE recommends Highways England and the Department for Transport work hand-in-hand with the newly established Homes England on the growth and housing fund. Alignment of this fund with the objectives of Homes England will ensure this funding is being used in an effective and coordinated manner.

Lastly, ACE believe the current innovation fund is too broad by focusing on both construction practices and customer experience. ACE recommends splitting the innovation fund into two; the first focusing on improving technologies and techniques in road construction, and the second focused on improving the customer experience and road management.

Performance measures and targets

As outlined in ACE's Funding Roads for the Future Report, we believe there should be more performance measures and targets for Highways England in RIS2 on reducing congestion and increasing the productivity of the network. As a starting point, Highways England should be given targets for performance metrics focused on congestion and the network's productivity that are currently monitored but have no goal to meet. These are:

- time lost per vehicle per mile,
- reliability of journeys, and
- average speed of vehicles.

These performance metrics should be designed in a way that factors in roadworks and other variables, such as weather.

Performance measures and targets should also be developed further to focus on how Highways England is preventing congestion on the SRN, for example by how it manages the flow of traffic on smart motorways and how it communicates with the public on delays or detours. These metrics will be somewhat difficult to develop, but they will be helpful in creating a better understanding of how Highways England is proactively managing the network, rather than responding to issues, and identifying areas where it can improve.

6. ACE's view on Highways England's assessment of future SRN needs

ACE believes all priorities highlighted in the Initial Report are positive, however an additional category focusing on the future workforce required to deliver is a worthy addition to Highways England's assessment of future needs. In order for a successful and productive SRN in the future, projects will need a skilled and committed workforce in both the construction and engineering sectors able to make these projects happen.

Highways England should also consider the resilience of the network in their assessment of future needs. This includes the security behind smart technologies and resilience from environmental damage, such as fallen trees, or from vehicle accidents on the road network. The priority should be on identifying how to proactively minimise failures and disruptions to the network.

Lastly, as funding for the SRN will be ringfenced in the next roads period from Vehicle Excise Duty (VED) revenue in England, ACE believes Highways England should also assess if this funding will be sustainable over the medium-long term. As highlighted by ACE's Funding Roads for the Future Report, the significant uptake of zero-emissions vehicles will see revenue from VED decline, directly impacting on funding for the national network.

7. Alignment of Initial Report to the UK Government's aims for RIS2

ACE believes the Initial Report is well aligned to the UK Government's aims for RIS2. However, ACE also recommends an additional aim to take into account the focus that Highways England places upon user satisfaction, and the customer focused approach behind their creation. If the purpose of these aims is to help measure the success of RP2, then ACE believes that it is critical that concerns of road users is a key barometer for measuring success. To only have the needs of road users reflected solely in the dimension of safety is a significant shortcoming of the RIS2 aims.

8. Changes to the makeup of the SRN

ACE broadly agrees how Highways England pictures the makeup of the SRN over RP2. However, a few suggested improvements to the makeup of the SRN are below.

- Connections to Scotland: currently the sole major connecting routes are through the M6 and the A1. As we have seen, closure to the firth of forth bridge combined with flooding in Dumfries and Galloway can effectively cut off Scotland from the rest of the UK.
- Connectivity between Leicester, Nottingham and Peterborough. This triangle is poorly served in terms of interconnectivity, particularly between Leicester and Peterborough.
- Access to the West country is inhibited by a large bottleneck where the M4 and M5 meet around Bristol.

Lastly, ACE recognises that Highways England has suggested upgrading some of these routes to expressways, which is encouraging as it will ease congestion. However, we believe there is a need to consider the long-term requirements to ensure Highways England is not simply delaying the inevitable or the existing need build motorways in these areas.

9. Other investment considerations for the SRN

ACE believes Highways England could look at working with small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) with their local priorities fund. Focusing on delivering these smaller schemes through local SMEs would help spread the benefits of roads investment across the country.

ACE also has a range of investment considerations for the proposed Major Road Network (MRN) and will outline these further in the Department for Transport's separate consultation on the topic.

10. Does the analytical approach taken have the right balance between ambition, robustness, and proportionality?

ACE welcomes the analytical approach taken by the Department for Transport and is encouraged by the ongoing collaboration between the Department for Transport, Highways England, the Office for Rail and Road, and Transport Focus. ACE highlights the value and expertise that industry members can bring to this debate and welcome the opportunity to contribute in any capacity.

About ACE

As the leading business association in the sector, ACE represents the interests of professional consultancy and engineering companies, large and small, in the UK. Many of our member companies have gained international recognition and acclaim and employ over 250,000 staff worldwide.

ACE members are at the heart of delivering, maintaining and upgrading our buildings, structures and infrastructure. They provide specialist services to a diverse range of sectors including water, transportation, housing and energy.

The ACE membership acts as the bridge between consultants, engineers and the wider construction sector who make an estimated contribution of £15bn to the nation's economy with the wider construction market contributing a further £90bn.

ACE's powerful representation and lobbying to governments, major clients, the media and other key stakeholders, enables it to promote the critical contribution that engineers and consultants make to the nation's developing infrastructure.

Through our publications, market intelligence, events and networking, business guidance and personal contact, we provide a cohesive approach and direction for our members and the wider industry. In recognising the dynamics of our industry, we support and encourage our members in all aspects of their business, helping them to optimise performance and embrace opportunity.

Our fundamental purposes are to promote the worth of our industry and to give voice to our members. We do so with passion and vision, support and commitment, integrity and professionalism.

Further information

For further details about this consultation response, please contact:

James Robertson
Policy Manager
ACE Policy and External Affairs Group
jrobertson@acenet.co.uk
www.acenet.co.uk