



The importance of the relationship between the city regions and the Highways Agency

The Highways Agency is responsible for the Strategic Road Network (SRN) and is also a statutory consultee on major developments affecting the SRN. The SRN comprises only 4,338 route miles (3% of the total) but carries a third of all traffic in England.

In the 2013 Spending Review the Highways Agency's capital budget to 2020/21 was expanded to approximately three times 2012/13 levels with expenditure of £15 billion over six years. This includes £4 billion on road maintenance and delivery of "the largest road building programme since the 1970s". The programme includes commitment to 52 projects nationally, including Smart Motorways (formerly managed motorways) and enhancements to 'A' roads. Approximately half of the improvements budget has not yet been allocated.

At the same time the Highways Agency is to become a Government Corporation with five year funding budgets from the Government under similar arrangements to the Control Periods that apply to national railways.

Key issues on how the Highways Agency operates

The Highways Agency has a specific modal and national remit so it is not surprising that relationships with other modes or sub-national bodies are not a key area of focus. However, a lack of consideration for the importance of these relationships can lead to the following problems:

- Insufficient regard to the way in which changes to the capacity of the SRN have a knock-on effect on wider city region highway networks.
- Insufficient consideration of alternatives to highway capacity increases (such as improvements to parallel rail corridors).
- Sub-national internal management, maintenance and engineering units that do not always map well onto the city regions (for example in the West Midlands).

- Objectives and indicators that do not always take account of city region growth objectives, including a roads programme that has developed incrementally over the years as a result of mix of political and transport planning imperatives.
- A mixed record on meaningful consultation and engagement with city region transport authorities.
- Highways Agency use of technology (both for driver information and for route management) may not dovetail with, or relate to, the systems being adopted in the city regions.
- One-size fits all national traffic forecasts which do not take into account the extent to which city region transport policies, and the limited capacity of urban road networks, could result in very different outcomes.

In turn these issues can result in:

- Mismatch between approaches and portals for driver information between the SRN and city region road networks.
- Inefficient use of resources through not objectively assessing all the options (including non-highways options) for the use of available Highways Agency resources, and missed opportunities that might have come from pooling Highways Agency resources with local funding streams as part of wider and co-ordinated packages of transport improvements.
- Key developments being held up which have manageable traffic implications, and which form a key part of a city region's growth strategy.

Towards a national highways policy that better supports city region economies

A more collaborative approach between the Highways Agency and the city regions

Firstly, there is a question mark as to whether or not it is sensible for national rail and road plans to be developed in relative isolation from each other by agencies which are clearly focused on their own mode. A recent House of Commons Transport Select Committee report on the Highways Agency said:

'The DfT should commission integrated passenger and freight plans for strategic transport routes or regions, rather than looking at one mode of transport in isolation. Such integrated plans, which should be developed in consultation with local authorities, local enterprise partnerships and community and road user groups, must take into account how different options for the use of infrastructure and technology will impact on transport movements and on economic development. The DfT must then identify projects—including maintenance schemes—within the chosen plan for implementation within the five-year funding cycle. Every project should be subject to a post-implementation review to assess the effectiveness of the investment. We recommend that this process be set out in the forthcoming Roads Investment Strategy.'

Even assuming less radical change, there is clearly a strong case for better joint working between the Highways Agency and the city regions.

This could take the form of one or more of the following:

- Adopting a budget / objectives led, rather than scheme led, approach to the deployment of available Highways Agency resources. So instead of starting with a national roads programme and then examining the implications for each region, there could be a more collaborative approach to looking at how shared objectives like growth, air quality and network performance could best be achieved given the available resource.
- A formal role for local government within the Highways Agency national governance structure.
- More structured and regular engagement between the Highways Agency and key city region bodies at both the strategic and operational level.
- A formal consultation process on the Highways Agency's regional strategies and plans.

A fresh look at the national traffic forecasts

Key issues around the national traffic forecasts are:

- The rate of traffic increase projected by undifferentiated national traffic forecasts is high and suggests that traffic congestion will rise, in some cases to impractical and unsustainable levels (given existing traffic congestion) in the city regions. The ramifications of those traffic forecasts being realised include serious implications for air pollution, road maintenance, parking policies and modal shift. The validity of the forecasts are subject to debate particularly around a) whether they reflect long term trends such as 'peak car' b) that large urban areas may adopt policies that restrain traffic growth (as London has done).
- Whether or not traffic forecasts (and the journey time savings that derive from them in scheme analysis) should continue to be so central to the prioritisation of spending when city region priorities are more directly focused on growth, congestion, air quality, supporting mode shift and so on rather than proxies like journey time savings.

We propose that specific Highways Agency / Department for Transport research should be undertaken (in consultation with the city regions) on: the implications of the national traffic forecasts for city regions; whether or not these forecasts are appropriate, credible or desirable; and whether there is a case for a more localised approach to traffic forecasting and related scheme appraisal methodology.

Riding the wave of technological change

Rapid technological change is affecting highways policy and management in a host of ways – from open data to more autonomous vehicles. The Highways Agency clearly has a major role in shaping and overseeing the way in which the benefits of these technologies unfold, but so does the private sector, the Catapult centres, the Office for Low Emission Vehicles (OLEV) and the city regions. The clear danger is that these approaches will not be sufficiently joined up leaving road users with a less than seamless experience.

Key areas that would benefit from a more coordinated approach include:

- The provision of information for drivers (including around the options for use of alternative modes, and the relationship between roadside and in-vehicle information provision).
- The use of data (such as AVL on public service vehicles, anonymised mobile phone data, CCTV) for transport planning and network management.
- Fuelling and prioritisation policies for electric and other low emission vehicles.

There is a need for a specific city region dimension to the work of the Highways Agency, OLEV, Catapult centres and other bodies with a key role in facilitating and promoting the application of technological change. A one-size fits all approach outside London is not appropriate given the opportunities that large conurbations beyond the capital offer for the widespread application and take-up of new technologies.

The Highways Agency could also play more of a leading role in researching and assessing the ways in which technologies are emerging, developing, and being taken up. This is both in relation to the SRN and in the city regions, with the overall objective of seeking to promote a more seamless experience for users.

'Fix it first'

There is a £12 billion maintenance backlog on the local road network. This translates into more accidents, inefficient patch and mend, and £30 million a year on dealing with compensation claims in relation to poor road condition.

Furthermore, the way which funding is allocated to Local Transport Authorities for highways maintenance is based on road length which heavily skews funding towards rural areas rather than to urban areas, where roads are more heavily used, and thus suffer the most damage.

There is a strong case for more of a 'fix it first' approach to highways spending with greater focus on road maintenance. This would bring significant benefits in terms of congestion reduction, fewer accidents and more efficient use of overall resource. National road maintenance funding should also be allocated in way that reflects how well used roads are.

Cleaner air

Road traffic can play a significant role in poor air quality and consequent breaches of EU air quality standards. National highways policy contributes to this either through emissions from traffic on national highways, or through the traffic that flows from national highways onto local roads. This in turn has knock on implications for the viability of schemes on the national and local road network which could worsen air quality.

These challenges are further heightened by the lack of a clear overarching strategy and framework from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (with associated funding) for meeting EU air quality standards. Such a strategy should be developed, providing shared objectives on air quality and a clear direction for national and local government – and other stakeholders – to work towards.