

**Department for Transport
Shaping the Future of England's Strategic Roads:
Consultation on Highways England's Initial Report**

Whilst the County Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on Highways England's Initial Report, a number of the questions are clearly targeted at users of the SRN or those affected by it, for example, businesses and residents living in close proximity to SRN routes. The County Council has therefore chosen to submit a general response focused on those issues that are of relevance and priority to the County Council as a local highway authority.

Defining the Strategic Road Network

As a local highway authority, the County Council would be pleased to engage in discussions with the Department for Transport and Highways England over the future structure of the Strategic Road Network. The Council recognises that there will be issues that users of the road network in general find perplexing. For example, the County Council is the highway authority for a 10 kilometre length of the M65 in East Lancashire, and although significant funding has been invested recently on resurfacing and replacement of the central reservation barrier, the stretch of motorway in question between Junctions 10 and 14 does not benefit from coverage by Highways England's Traffic Officer service.

Given the Department for Transport has recently embarked on a consultation on proposals for the creation of a Major Road Network, the outcome of this consultation and proposed MRN will need to be known and understood to achieve the coherent approach to defining both networks desired. The County Council will be submitting a separate response to the MRN consultation.

Highways England Initial Report

The Initial Report is still very focused on operational requirements of the SRN, which may result in enhancements specifically to unlock economic growth (one of the Government's five key aims for the network) being overlooked. For example, in Lancashire, the County Council and the Lancashire Enterprise Partnership are supporting the development and delivery of the Bailrigg Garden Village near Lancaster, one of the Government's 14 designated garden villages. This requires the reconfiguration of M6 Junction 33, which will also unlock expansion plans at Lancaster University, one of the UK's top teaching and research institutes. Although this junction is sub-standard in terms of its current layout, there are no operational problems yet a major improvement (in the order of £40m) will be necessary to support strategic development. It is not clear that Highways England has given sufficient consideration to such interventions.

The County Council supports the principle of achieving consistency around the four categories of road outlined in the report, including the creation of 'Expressways'. The Council notes that the A56 link between the M66 and M65 in East Lancashire as a potential future candidate for upgrade, recognising this is the only length of SRN in Lancashire that could benefit from such investment.

The Department should be aware that Highways England's proposed designation of Expressways as AXX(M) could create a classification issue in that not all such designated routes are part of the SRN. In Lancashire, the County Council is the highway authority for the A601(M) near Carnforth, a short hybrid 'motorway' linking M6 Junction 35 to the local highway network.

With regard to the proposed operational priorities (Section 5.1), the SRN does not operate in isolation and more could be made of how Highways England intends to work with local highway authorities to deliver seamless journeys. This will be particularly important once the MRN concept begins to take effect.

Enhancement Priorities

The County Council supports the inclusion of the M60 Simister Island Interchange (Junction 18) as a scheme to be developed for the next road period. This junction, which forms the interchange between the M66 and the M60, is critical to supporting economic growth in East Lancashire and in particular, Rossendale. The M66 is Rossendale's key transport link with the rest of the country, as other road connections are severely constrained by topography and the borough has no station on the national rail network and is remote from it. Transdev currently operates two express bus services into Manchester city centre from East Lancashire that make use of the M66. The X43, which runs between Nelson, Burnley, Rawtenstall and Manchester, is one of the highest quality express bus services in the country, using purpose-built luxury coaches, and is very popular with commuters.

The M65 represents the key economic corridor of East Lancashire, linking the towns of Blackburn, Accrington, Burnley, Nelson and Colne with the M6 and M61 motorways at Bamber Bridge near Preston. It plays an essential role in the local economy, connecting people and businesses internally as well as providing the primary means of access to the M6, particularly for freight. Almost all existing and future strategic employment site developments in East Lancashire are located in close proximity to the M65 and/or require effective access to and from it. Unlike most motorways, the M65 is not three lanes throughout its length, with reduced capacity on some sections, particularly between the M61 (Junction 2) and Junction 6 at Whitebirk east of Blackburn. Evidence now suggests that the current level of demand at peak times is causing congestion, exacerbated by the limited capacity, traffic flow composition and the capacity and close proximity of some junctions. The County Council would therefore wish to see improvements to this stretch of the M65 in RIS2 to ensure that the motorway has sufficient capacity to accommodate future economic growth.

Local Priorities Fund

The County Council supports the establishment of a local priorities fund, but requests that Highways England work in partnership with the County Council and the Lancashire Enterprise Partnership to ensure that spending priorities align with local requirements to support economic development, create jobs and deliver new homes.

Designated Funds

The County Council supports the continuation of the Growth and Housing Fund, but requests the Department for Transport consider increasing the funding available and raising the maximum contribution towards individual schemes above the current £5m limit. Even modest network improvements can now cost in the tens of millions and consequently schemes can require funding packages that are ever more complicated in order to ensure delivery.

Future Studies

The Government has previously set out how the new National Road Fund could be used to finance improvements on the local road network where there is clear evidence that such investment will be of benefit to the SRN. It would be useful to understand how the Department for Transport and Highways England intends this to work, ie will there be a structured approach to ensure a degree of national consistency or will such proposals need to be promoted by local authorities working in association with sub-national transport bodies on an ad-hoc basis. There is the potential for regional collaboration towards a national programme linked to a future MRN Investment Programme.

The County Council would welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with Highways England and Transport for the North to investigate the wider resilience issues facing the SRN in Central Lancashire including potential benefits to the M6 from the establishment and future development of the Preston/South Ribble Western Distributor route. This route, which will link the M55 at a new Junction 2 with the M6/M61/M65 motorways at Cuerden and together with the SRN will effectively create an orbital route around Preston, is critical to the ongoing delivery of strategic housing and employment growth across Central Lancashire and beyond through the Preston, South Ribble and Lancashire City Deal.