



House of Commons
Transport Committee

**The major road
network: Government
Response to the
Committee's Eighth
Report of Session
2009–10**

**First Special Report of Session 2010–
11**

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The Transport Committee

The Transport Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Transport and its associated public bodies.

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Mark Egan (Clerk), David Davies (Committee Specialist), Marek Kubala (Inquiry Manager), Alison Mara (Senior Committee Assistant), Jacqueline Cooksey (Committee Assistant), Stewart McIlvenna (Committee Support Assistant) and Hannah Pearce (Media Officer).

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First Special Report

On 21 July we received a response from the Government to the Transport Committee's Eighth Report of 2009–10, on the major road network,¹ which we publish with this Special Report.

Government response

Introduction

This paper sets out the Government's response to the House of Commons Select Committee report on the Major Road Network (HC 505), dated 24th March 2010. The Government welcomes the Committee's consideration of this subject, and will work to ensure that the range of issues the Committee has identified is given due consideration.

At present, the whole of Government is focused on the challenges posed by the budget deficit and the associated fiscal crisis. The Government recognises the importance of the road network to wider economic development, and will do everything it can to improve conditions on the network by maximising the value of existing assets. However, the amount that is available to invest in new or expanded capacity is fundamentally limited by the wider financial situation. This is likely to remain the case for the rest of the period covered by the spending review. We would welcome the Committee's views in deciding how to improve conditions within the constraints of existing resources.

The Committee's recommendations are addressed in the order that they appear in the report.

The wider transport policy context

1. Some sustainable travel initiatives, such as Smarter Choices, have delivered tangible and encouraging results in terms of modal shift and integration of different modes. Whilst we recognise that private cars are likely to remain the preferred mode of travel for a significant number of people due to convenience, we urge the Government to intensify its efforts to encourage sustainable travel as part of an integrated transport policy. (Paragraph 22)

The Coalition Agreement sets out a commitment to support sustainable travel initiatives including the promotion of walking and cycling. It also commits to encourage joint working between bus operators and local authorities. Norman Baker, as minister for local transport, has adopted this issue as a key part of his portfolio.

The results of a recently completed study showed that in a target population of around 180,000, car trips have reduced by 9% with significant increases in walking, cycling and bus use. Local authorities are encouraged to consider these results and include sustainable

¹ HC 505, published on 24 March 2010.

travel initiatives as a part of their local transport plans, the third iteration of which are currently being prepared for the period 2011–16.

2. Apart from initiatives such as Smarter Choices, a range of technological improvements as well as improved land-use planning and better co-ordination between developers, transport planners and other parties could make it easier for many people to be less reliant on cars. Such measures are not necessarily costly, and the benefit to cost ratio can be very positive. Whilst the direct impact tends to be greater in urban areas, the knock on effect in terms of reduced congestion and emissions on the major road network is significant also. No single policy instrument will encourage travellers out of their cars. The Department for Transport therefore needs to show greater leadership in bringing together all the disparate professions and bodies to work together to harness the significant benefits of a co-ordinated policy implementation. (Paragraph 23)

The new Government welcomes and agrees with the value of improved land-use planning and good co-ordination between the parties concerned. As indicated in the Coalition Agreement the Government wants more planning to be done at the local level in accordance with its localism agenda. Indeed the Coalition places partnership working between central and local government and wider partners as a core element of the Agreement.

The current road network

3. This country has one of the lowest motorway densities in Western Europe. This puts England at an economic and competitive disadvantage. The remedy for this should include some new initiatives to construct and upgrade motorways. (Paragraph 25)

Many of England's strategic roads are built at a standard that would be classified as motorway grade in other countries. When these roads are taken into account, the density of strategic roads is higher in England than in France, Germany, Italy and Spain.

The climate for significant publicly-funded investment in the road network is extremely challenging given the current fiscal circumstances. However, there are clearly locations where congestion is causing problems for motorists, businesses and nearby residents. We will explore the full range of opportunities, including looking at innovative methods for funding additional capacity and making greatest use of our existing assets.

4. The Secretary of State has effectively rejected the main reasoning and arguments in the Eddington report by agreeing to High Speed Two. We recognise that the major problems facing the road network relate to capacity and coverage. (Paragraph 27)

Eddington's concern was that all options should be considered on a robust assessment of their benefits. This is what we have done, and what we will do as we review the evidence regarding new high speed lines provided by HS2 Ltd.

We firmly support a national high speed rail network, and expect that high speed rail can play a significant role in promoting a low carbon and flourishing economy over the coming decades. It will do this by catering for very substantial growth in demand for inter-urban transport in a way which is broadly carbon neutral, as well as by transforming journey times between our major cities. This conclusion has been reached based on the high standards of evidence that Eddington expected.

5. While we accept that for some stretches of road, dual-carriageways will not be feasible, this type of road offers benefits for both road safety and journey times. While not every A-road needs to be dual-carriage, the Highways Agency has acknowledged that dual-carriageways should be the minimum standard for the strategic road network that it manages. Over 900 miles of trunk roads are currently single carriageways. Wherever possible the Highways Agency should ensure that these roads are upgraded to dual-carriageways. (Paragraph 27)

The strategic road network is designed to link together major urban areas and international gateways. However, in practice different stretches of the network face quite different pressures and constraints. Some roads are used overwhelmingly by long distance traffic, like the M5, while others are used as quick ways for commuters to get to town centres, like the M32. Some are heavily used for freight, like the A160 to Immingham. Some, like the A5, run through town centres while others, like the A628, run through national parks.

The important issue is not whether a road meets a particular abstract standard, but whether that road meets an appropriate standard given what it needs to do. For the purposes of investment, it is also important that we focus on schemes where the benefits to the economy are greatest. As the Committee recognises, resources are tightly limited at the moment, and spending on road schemes will be dictated by the wider fiscal context.

6. We urge the Department to ensure that local authority road condition reports and National Road Maintenance Condition Surveys are closely monitored to ensure that they provide a reliable picture of the condition of all major roads. Although we support budgetary flexibility for local authorities, the Government must ensure that the condition and safety of the major road network is not compromised. Given a real terms increase in funding, it should be possible to maintain the major road network adequately in most areas. Local authorities need to be more transparent about the funding being made available for roads maintenance, and the way in which it is used. The Government and local authorities need to work together to ensure that the proportion of emergency maintenance on the major road network is reduced. If funds do not suffice for the maintenance and repairs required in a particular area, councils need to be open and transparent about it, and they need to take responsibility for rectifying the problem in collaboration with the Government. (Paragraph 33)

The Department for Transport publication Road Conditions in England 2009 includes condition information on all roads: Motorways, classified roads (A, B and C roads) and unclassified roads.

Accounting changes introduced by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, which take effect in the 2012/13 accounts, will require local authorities to report the value of highway assets in their annual accounts on a depreciated replacement costs basis. When implemented, maintenance policies should become more transparent as they will affect changes in the valuation of highway assets.

Some short-term reactive maintenance will always be necessary. However, the Department agrees with the Committee that, as a normal approach to repair, it presents poorer value for money than planned maintenance.

There is to be a spending review in the autumn which will consider demands across the public sector in the context of today's extremely challenging fiscal circumstances. Funding proposals for highway maintenance will take account of the conclusions of that work, which will focus on improving efficiency to get the best out of existing assets.

Investment and funding

7. Tensions between national and local needs and priorities are inevitable. On the whole, the process of de-trunking has reduced the frequency and intensity of such tensions because ex-trunk roads have been integrated into local planning processes. We commend the efforts of the Highways Agency and local authorities to minimise conflicts of interests and ensure that they have productive working relationships. However, where a de-trunked road continues to meet the criteria for trunked roads and local conditions imply remedies outside the local resources available, the Department should consider the merits of re-trunking or providing additional resources to the local authorities responsible for managing and maintaining the road. (Paragraph 41)

The Government is happy to consider the case for re-trunking any road, although we are not aware of any local authority that has recently suggested doing so. We believe this reflects the fact that detrunking has successfully allowed local communities to take greater control over transport and development in their areas. We do not think that a local authority would seek to transfer a road back to the Highways Agency without good reason.

The detrunking of roads was accompanied by a financial settlement, designed to bring the road up to an acceptable standard. Authorities received a lump sum payment, could originally bid for additional resources for extra maintenance, and received an increase to their annual grant to cover their new commitments. We therefore believe that authorities have already received appropriate resources to manage their detrunked roads particularly given the challenging fiscal climate. If any road were to be re-trunked, we would expect it to be handed over in a good condition, or for the authority to provide their own lump-sum payment to bring it back to the right standard.

8. The Department for Transport must provide clear and timely leadership in terms of the strategic development of the road network. (Paragraph 44)

The Government believes that a functioning, effective strategic road network is crucial to Britain's economic growth prospects. This means that the Government's focus will be on developing policies that recognise today's economic realities, most importantly, improving efficiency to get the best out of existing assets. However, the single most pressing problem facing the nation is reducing the deficit left us by the previous administration. At the moment, all other issues are second to this fiscal crisis.

We therefore wish to focus on sweating the existing asset, and making sure that the road network is being used efficiently and effectively. By avoiding disruptions, long delays in clearing up accidents and unnecessary roadworks, we can improve conditions without extra expenditure. Larger scale capital works should also focus on making the best use of the assets already on the ground.

In the longer term, the Department will seek to identify and prioritise the most significant remaining challenges facing key routes. It will then work with partners to identify and prioritise appropriate and affordable interventions which meet the challenges. For roads projects, as for capital projects in all other transport modes, economic growth will be the key criterion for investment. Given the constraints we face on spending, it is particularly important that investment goes to the schemes that produce the greatest benefits for the wider economy.

9. We accept that difficult funding decisions will have to be made in the coming years, but we urge the Government to ensure that the safety and maintenance standards of the major road network are not compromised. As the Eddington study demonstrated, transport infrastructure is critical to the generation of economic growth. It is therefore important that investment in, and maintenance of, basic infrastructure, such as our major road network, is not put on stand-by. With vast—and very welcome—funds likely to be invested in high speed rail over the next two decades, the Government must guard against the temptation to neglect the major road network to reduce costs. The major road network serves a wide range of needs and communities, and it is only a relatively small proportion of journeys on our major roads that could be transferred to rail, let alone high speed rail. (Paragraph 48)

The Government recognises the need to cater for a wide range of journeys and modes of travel and the importance of the road network in ensuring Britain's return to economic growth. Some of these journeys can be completed using a number of different modes. Others, particularly away from the main inter-urban corridors, are more dependent on a particular mode. Road transport plays an important role for isolated communities, and is also integral to the logistics sector.

Investing in High Speed Rail is a major strategic commitment to Britain's transport future and will play a key role in contributing to our climate change targets, but it does not

preclude improvements in other modes as well, particularly as construction of high speed rail is not forecast to start for several years.

10. The Government must clarify the basis which it assesses and allocates funding to infrastructure projects. Mechanisms for allocating funding to transport schemes should be transparent and give greater weight to economic benefit. (Paragraph 54)

We have committed in the Coalition Agreement to reform the way decisions are made on which transport projects to prioritise. We want to ensure that low carbon proposals are given due recognition. The Government has also confirmed that in the 2010 spending review, the provision of substantial economic value will be the primary criterion against which Government programmes will be prioritised. All schemes will be assessed on the basis of a rigorous and fair appraisal of the benefits and costs.

11. We are concerned that the Department for Transport appeared not to be involved in discussions about the remit of Infrastructure UK at the initial stages. Infrastructure UK could have a critical impact on strategic transport investment. It will have the opportunity to improve the co-ordination of infrastructure decisions across Government, facilitating more coherent and strategic decision-making. We look forward to hearing, in the course of 2010, precisely how Infrastructure UK is going to achieve this and how it will improve decision making on transport investment. (Paragraph 56)

The Department is closely involved with Infrastructure UK. The Department for Transport's Permanent Secretary is a member of Infrastructure UK's Advisory Council, and a member of the Department's staff has also been seconded to Infrastructure UK.

12. No method of allocating finite funds will satisfy everyone. However, we are pleased that there seems to be general support for the Regional Funding Allocation process. We welcome the introduction of a mechanism which has allowed regions a bigger say in what infrastructure investments should be prioritised and which looks across the transport modes. (Paragraph 59)

The Government welcomes the Committee's acknowledgement of the benefit of allowing local communities influence in how funding is allocated to infrastructure investments. We are committed to giving more power to local communities.

Congestion and capacity

13. We fully accept that maintenance work on the road network is likely to cause delays and that the safety of staff carrying out this work must be safeguarded. However, local authorities and the Highways Agency must minimise disruption and road closures as much as possible and they should consider ways to improve the way they communicate with road users to explain disruptions caused by maintenance. (Paragraph 63)

The Highways Agency is firmly focussed on addressing the challenges of maintenance. To reduce disruption to motorists, many works are already undertaken outside of peak hours, including at night (which adds pressure to the cost and overall time to complete works), and work is usually stopped at bank holiday weekends and other peak times. To ensure the best trade off between costs and disruption, the Agency is creating a long-term integrated asset management programme. This builds on the Agency's well established capability to optimise maintenance to road surfaces, and extends and improves this capability across other parts of the road asset including structures and drainage.

More and more people are accessing traffic information services, and the opportunities to access traffic information are increasing. Information about works on the strategic road network is already available through the Directgov portal and the Agency operates telephone services, radio services and electronic message signs on the road network. Information is also widely delivered through broadcasters and commercial travel information service providers. However, we accept that it isn't always easy for road users to calculate the likely impact of road works on their specific journey. The Department is working with the Agency to consider whether more can be done to inform motorists within the tight fiscal constraints in which we must operate.

14. We are sympathetic to the Minister's point that congestion is a complex issue. However, while some of our witnesses may have questioned the exact figure for the cost of congestion, it is clear that congestion does have a significant cost to the UK economy. Given the scale of the cost, we support effective investment in the road network to reduce congestion. (Paragraph 69)

Congestion has a significant cost to the UK economy, and one of our highest priorities is to support the wider economic recovery by promoting the more efficient and effective use of existing roads. In the current fiscal climate, we are focusing options where congestion can be tackled at low cost or, in conjunction with local authorities, where it is possible to avoid unnecessary journeys. In the longer term, when the fiscal situation has eased, we will look further into ways of supporting businesses and relieving congestion.

15. The Government should prioritise schemes which reduce the uncertainty over journey times that congestion causes. (Paragraph 70)

Due to the fiscal situation the new Government has inherited, resources for major new public spending programmes are extremely limited. The Government is therefore examining how existing assets can be used more effectively in order to relieve congestion in the most affordable way possible. The forthcoming spending review will determine which major road projects will go ahead. However for the strategic road network, managed motorways schemes have already replaced widening in many cases. Managed motorways deliver more capacity at the times when demand is greatest and at lower cost than widening, and they have the added benefit of managing traffic, for example by smoothing traffic flow with variable speed limits.

In order to meet Local Transport Plan congestion targets, local authorities have promoted alternatives to car travel as well as general improvements to road capacity and traffic management. Schemes include bus lanes, traffic calming, cycle routes, pedestrian crossings, urban traffic control, park and ride, junction improvements, better information and work with employers and schools on travel plans to promote non-car travel.

16. The predominant view at present is that population growth and the increasing number of vans and other non-car vehicles on the road make it unlikely that traffic volume has reached, or is nearing, a plateau at this stage. However, it is important that the Government's forecasts do not simply map past growth patterns onto predictions for the future. The growth in car traffic, for example, has slowed considerably in the past decade and there has been a rapid rise in mileage by vans. (Paragraph 73)

The Department's National Transport Model (NTM) Forecasts for Road Transport 2009 (Road Transport Forecasts 2009: Results from the Department for Transport's National Transport Model) show that overall traffic is forecast to grow by an average annual growth rate of around 1.1% between 2003 and 2035, which is slower than the equivalent recent historic rate between 1995 and 2008 of 1.3% (source: TSGB). The NTM forecasts traffic to grow by an average annual rate of 0.5% between 2008 and 2015. The actual average annual growth rate for traffic between 2000 and the provisional 2009 figure is 0.8%. The Department's forecasts therefore take account of the trends driving the slow down in traffic growth over the recent period, and reflect these in future forecasts.

The NTM forecasts that van traffic will continue to grow faster than all traffic, at an average annual rate of 2.2% for the period 2003 to 2035, although not as quickly as the rate for the last decade which has averaged nearly 3% per annum.

17. We are concerned that the Department is unable to disaggregate traffic growth predictions in order to establish how it expects roads to be used by different population groups in the future. This information is of critical importance—without it, planning is, at best, guesswork—and we urge the Department to look at how to improve these forecasts. (Paragraph 74)

The Department's forecasts for road traffic produced by the National Transport Model do take account of the trip rates and purposes for different age groups, and how these will be affected by a changing future population structure.

18. The Government and the relevant transport authorities must consider the impact on surrounding local roads of any increased capacity on the major road network, whether through construction, widening or hard-shoulder running. We have to acknowledge that, whilst we recognise in some instances such schemes could have a beneficial effect by relieving the pressure on local roads, there can be no assumption that a reserve of unexplored capacity exists which can be used indefinitely. It is also important to consider the sustainability problems with using road construction as a significant part of easing congestion. (Paragraph 79)

It is true that the local road network can act as both a complement to, and substitute for, the major road network, and that increases in capacity on the major road network can lead to localised increases or decreases in demand on parts of the supporting local road network. Our computer modelling techniques take full account of the impacts that changes in behaviour have on the local road network. Furthermore, by factoring in any additional traffic that the scheme may generate, and by forecasting that travel behaviour into the future, we are able to make a full assessment of the environmental sustainability of the proposed solution and assess it in the context of the Government's climate change targets.

19. There are some areas, we heard evidence of such from the North East of England, that are underprovided for in terms of major roads. It is unacceptable that some parts of the country are discriminated against in terms of transport investment. (Paragraph 83)

We want to encourage growth and development in all areas and believe all regions should be targeted fairly.

Work is already underway to deliver major schemes that will benefit the North East. The largest road scheme, on the A1 between Dishforth and Barton, is continuing to schedule. Ministers are also minded to reclassify the A1 North of Newcastle as a route of strategic national importance, which forms part of the Highways Agency's core network, and work is underway to prepare the necessary consultation.

20. We welcome Active Traffic Management (ATM) as an example of the Government employing innovative solutions to congestion. ATM has the potential to reduce congestion on the major road network, although it will not resolve the problem of congestion on its own. However, we are concerned that the focus of the current ATM roll out appears to be on hard shoulder running as a substitute for motorway widening rather than as part of a package of measures to regulate traffic flow. Hard shoulder running must not be separated from the other elements of Active Traffic Management, such as speed controls, needed to ensure it is a safe and effective measure. (Paragraph 88)

While the most obvious element of a Managed Motorway is hard shoulder running, there are many other important components. Intelligent signs regulate speed limits along the road and open or close lanes as appropriate. Message signs keep drivers informed about conditions and incidents on the network. Ramp metering and queue protection systems regulate flows onto the motorway. The whole operation is monitored by specially trained technicians working in one of the Agency's regional control centres.

The result of this is not simply a cheaper alternative to widening. It is a fundamentally safer, cleaner road. In the five years before the trial scheme started on the M42, there were 7 fatal and 42 serious accidents on the relevant stretch. Since September 2006 there have been no fatalities and only three serious accidents. Managed Motorways represent a major advance in the way we manage the road network.

21. The Government must ensure the public is well informed about the benefits of Active Traffic Management techniques, such as hard shoulder running and flexible speed restrictions, and how it works. This is the only way road users are likely to accept such new arrangements, and indeed help to make it as effective as possible. (Paragraph 89)

The Highways Agency runs a Strategic Driver Information Programme to ensure that motorists are fully prepared to drive on Managed Motorways. Research shows that Managed Motorways are largely intuitive to the vast majority of drivers.

The Agency's efforts now focus on raising awareness for occasional drivers. The particular aim is to ensure proper understanding of all variable signs, and to prevent improper use of emergency refuge areas.

22. While we welcome the Government's commitment to promote and support rail and water-borne freight, it is unlikely that this will provide a solution to road congestion. Tangible steps, such as the development of the Strategic Freight Network, are required to encourage modal shift for freight. This in turn will help to reduce congestion and pollution on the major road network. This is beneficial for road users, the environment and the national economy alike. (Paragraph 92)

We recognise that there are limits on the extent to which it is economically feasible for freight transport to transfer from road to rail or water. 68% of road freight movements are within the same region, over relatively short distances: road haulage will therefore continue to play an important part in the transport of goods and hence in future economic growth.

Even where the distance of haul means that rail or water provide economically viable alternatives to road, it will almost invariably be the case that the final leg of the journey has to be made by road.

We need to make the transport sector greener and more sustainable, including for freight movements. And as we have already indicated, we will work towards the introduction of a new system of HGV road user charging to ensure a fairer arrangement for UK hauliers.

Conclusion

23. Given the significance of the major road network in relation to economic, environmental and social policy objectives, the Government must be clear both on what it sees as the future role of major roads and how best to deliver the policies and infrastructure necessary to fulfil that role. (Paragraph 95)

The major road network makes an important contribution to the national economy and will play a crucial part in restoring Britain's economic prosperity. But at present the greatest problem our country faces is the threat to economic stability, posed by the size of the budget deficit. With this in mind, any new investment must be prioritised against its likely economic benefits to the UK.

Therefore, we will continue to look for ways to improve the road network, targeting modest investments to clear bottlenecks. We will place a particular emphasis on sweating our existing assets, thereby getting the best value from the network already in place. There is more scope to actively manage roads, to maximise the efficiency and reliability of our roads.

Even under normal conditions, we would be determined to ensure that taxpayers money was spent wisely. Given the limits on investment at present, the need for well-reasoned decision-making is even stronger. Money must be targeted where it makes the greatest difference, and we will ensure that all spending is backed by a rigorous, fair cost-benefit analysis.

Once the spending review has concluded, and there is greater certainty on public sector spending in the coming years, the future funding position for strategic roads projects will become clearer.