



Department
for Transport

Planning ahead for the Strategic Road Network

Developing the third Road Investment
Strategy

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1. Investing in our strategic roads

Highway infrastructure is an essential part of our everyday lives. Every time we step from our front doors onto the pavement, or ride on a bicycle, car or motorbike away from our homes, we rely on our highway network to get us safely and smoothly to our destination. Everything in our homes, schools, hospitals, shops and offices has been transported on that same highway network, even if it has also been conveyed for part of its journey on other transport modes such as rail, maritime or aviation. Maintaining the quality and performance of this infrastructure in line with our carbon targets is essential to maintaining our way of life.

Within England's highway network, there are some 4,500 miles of nationally important roads – most motorways and trunk 'A' roads, which we call the Strategic Road Network (SRN) – that are operated and cared for by National Highways. On average, around four times as many vehicles use a typical stretch of SRN road than major local roads, and 20 times as many as local roads generally. They carry more of England's road freight, taking two-thirds of all heavy goods vehicle journeys by distance.

These roads can have a big impact on the places nearby and the people who live there or value them. Investing wisely in this network can, for example, help secure new jobs and support new homes; reduce the negative impacts it can have for air quality, carbon, noise and light pollution; enhance biodiversity along the roadside; and better connect people to each other, and businesses to their customers and suppliers.

As they are so critical for our country's wellbeing, the Government sets out its strategic vision for the SRN, objectives for National Highways, and the funding it will make available for their delivery in periodic road investment strategies. This document describes how the Government plans to develop the third Road Investment Strategy (RIS3), which will cover the period from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2030.

Through this process, we want to understand people's priorities for the SRN over this period and beyond so that we make best use of taxpayers' money. We recognise that people will have a wide variety of views depending on how they use the SRN personally or for their business's goods or services; how they are affected by it if they live nearby or need to cross it; and as stakeholders interested in how this network can be developed to help secure wider economic, social and environmental benefits.

The story so far

Since the first RIS was published in 2014, and Highways England (now named National Highways) took control of the SRN in 2015, considerable progress has been made in improving the SRN and its performance. £17bn was spent during the first RIS period (2015 to 2020) and another £24bn has been allocated for the current, second RIS period (2020 to 2025) – in both cases covering all National Highways’ costs of operating, maintaining, renewing and enhancing the SRN. This significant level of funding is improving the network for road users, the communities alongside and the natural, built and historic environment.

...reduced the number of casualties on the Strategic Road Network by 11%.

...secured £1.65 billion of efficiency savings, a sum greater than the total cost of the A14 Cambridge-Huntingdon enhancement scheme.

...invested in the creation of 160 new and upgraded cycleways and footpaths across England, providing safe, attractive and accessible facilities for people to cycle for work, shopping and leisure.

...helped unlock the construction of 2,464 new homes to date and funded 25 schemes which are forecast to generate over 37,000 homes and almost 42,000 jobs.

Since 2015, National Highways has....

...laid 6,000 miles of quieter road surfacing, which equates to resurfacing the entire length of the M6 three times over.

...installed improved glazing and ventilation in 914 homes and contributed to successfully reducing noise levels in 1,174 noise important areas.

RIS3 will build on these successes of the first two road periods, adjusting focus where necessary to tackle the next big priorities for improvement and to achieve the long-term strategic vision for the network.

Any enhancement schemes that had funding approved in an earlier RIS, whose development has shown that they remain deliverable and value for money, and where construction has not concluded by 31 March 2025 will continue to be funded in RIS3 without additional assessment in the RIS-setting process.

2. Objectives for developing RIS3

The Infrastructure Act 2015 requires the Government to set a road investment strategy for National Highways. The current strategy will expire on 31 March 2025 and we now need to start work to develop the next one, RIS3, which will cover 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2030. An important first stage in this process is to gather evidence about what people want from the SRN and National Highways so we can develop the strategic objectives for RIS3.

We anticipate that RIS3 should help continue the revitalisation of the SRN begun in the first two road investment strategies and underpin genuine progress towards realising the strategic vision for the network in 2050 described in RIS2.¹ It should also help secure wider local and national policy objectives such as levelling up the whole country, net zero greenhouse gas emissions, and connecting the United Kingdom.

Understanding what road users need from the SRN now and into the future is a core input for developing RIS3. We know from the latest research by Transport Focus² that users prioritise safer design and upkeep of roads, in particular the quality of road surfaces, alongside better management of roadworks and incidents, including information on unplanned disruptions. Beyond these widely shared priorities, different road user groups will have particular needs, which we will also seek to address. In addition, people do not interact with the SRN solely as road users; we want also to respond to the priorities of communities and places, to improve quality of life.

This section explores the six objectives that we have provisionally identified for RIS3 which will shape our initial evidence gathering. These will be reviewed and updated as necessary in the light of our findings and public consultation (described in chapter 3).

Improving safety for all

Safety will always be our top priority for the SRN as it is for road users, and RIS3 investments should help drive further reductions on the numbers of people killed or injured while using the SRN as well as people working on our roads. The SRN is already one of the safest in the world and, with National Highways, we are ambitious to do even more to prevent incidents arising in the first place and to reduce the severity when they do occur.

¹ See: www.gov.uk/government/publications/road-investment-strategy-2-ris2-2020-to-2025

² See: www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/road-users-priorities-for-improvement

Improved environmental outcomes

The future of road travel is a decarbonised one, with vehicles powered by electricity, hydrogen and biofuels, running on infrastructure that has been built, maintained and operated using near zero carbon products, techniques and practices. Even with a higher share of journeys made by active travel or public transport, a net zero United Kingdom will still be travelling by road in 2050.

In particular, the clear majority of longer journeys, passenger and freight, will be made by road; and rural, remote areas will always depend more heavily on roads. That is why we are keen to ensure we understand the priorities people and businesses have for these roads, so we can pursue them in tandem with our ambitious plans to decarbonise their use.

More generally, the people who live, work and relax in communities and places alongside the SRN are affected by what National Highways does as much as the people using the network. Consequently, RIS3 should respond to their needs too, in particular how the network can be managed and developed in such a way as to reduce the negative impacts that road use can have on people's health and wellbeing.

Already, National Highways is working hard to address locations on its network where there is poor air quality and where people living alongside the road suffer from noise pollution. Building on the work done in the first road period, RIS2 provides funding for National Highways also to reduce the severance effect that the network can have where it is hard to cross, so communities can be reconnected and people can more easily access facilities they want to use.

The SRN's impact on the natural, built and historic environment is also something that can, and must, continue to be improved. In particular, we will need to consider how best to achieve biodiversity net gain, minimise light pollution and flooding risks, and protect water quality as we develop RIS3.

RIS2 described how infrastructure design should be respectful of place everywhere, and especially where it passes through areas of substantial environmental and cultural value. In developing RIS3, this should continue to be a guiding light when thinking about any intervention on the SRN or performance requirement of National Highways.

Future demand for travel in a decarbonised transport system

While overall demand for travel on a decarbonised SRN is expected to remain strong, the pattern of demand may change in response to changes in demography, technology and the net zero economy among others. As we develop RIS3, we will seek to understand the possibilities for future changes in travel demand to help make sure our investments are worthwhile across a range of potential scenarios.

For example, there is uncertainty about the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on road travel demand. The Department continues to closely monitor the impact of the pandemic and to develop tools to understand and present this uncertainty alongside other drivers of

future demand. The latest traffic figures, however, suggest total traffic volumes are close to pre-pandemic levels, but there may be changes in the spread of traffic through the day. Whether these patterns persist remains to be seen.

The Transport Decarbonisation Plan set a credible and ambitious pathway to deliver transport's contribution to the five-year carbon budgets and meeting net zero by 2050, amplified for the SRN by National Highways' own net zero highways plan. Action on the SRN will, for example, support the use of a decarbonised vehicle fleet and make active travel and public transport easier and more attractive to use. The way the SRN is maintained and enhanced will continue to adapt to reduce carbon use and help improve air quality. Investment in the SRN should support a thriving net zero economy. These are all important issues to explore in developing RIS3.

These changes are highly unlikely to overturn the importance of the SRN and its prime role in supporting long-distance journeys, especially the movement of goods. However, they may suggest a different focus or range of interventions in RIS3 to secure the best value for the taxpayer.

Network performance

As we develop RIS3 we will want to explore what steps can be taken to make journeys smoother, as well as safer, while protecting and respecting the environment. For example, RIS2 has already committed to phasing out the oldest type of concrete road surfaces over multiple road investment periods. The development of RIS3 is an opportunity to review what more can be done with new technology and low-emission processes that can keep road surfaces in good repair, ensure that road users have the information they need when they need it, and how operations can best be managed to keep traffic moving.

The SRN's prime focus is on longer-distance journeys and we intend that it should be developed to improve people's experience of those journeys, whether as driver or passenger; for work, commuting or leisure. However, the SRN does not stand alone from other transport infrastructure, in particular local roads, and users expect journeys to be seamless regardless of transport mode or ownership. RIS3 should seek to improve whole network performance rather than looking at the SRN in isolation.

For example, while continuing to recognise the needs of users making shorter distance journeys on the SRN, in some places RIS3 should intervene to improve other transport networks that can support different ways of making local journeys off the SRN. In particular, there could be opportunities to support the Government's ambition to make walking and cycling the natural choice for short journeys. National Highways is already one of the biggest funders of cycling infrastructure schemes, and RIS2 has set a vision for developing high-quality routes, physically separated from motorised traffic on the SRN, that would make the journeys of cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians safer.

Securing benefits for the whole country

We expect to continue investing significant sums of taxpayers' money in the SRN so it is vital that this expenditure works as hard as possible in securing wider benefits for the country beyond the immediate transport improvements. From supporting new jobs and growing skills, to unlocking new housing and achieving environmental gain, RIS3 should be an ally for many central and local government programmes.

For example, improving connectivity is an important underpinning for levelling up every area of the country. While National Highways operates the SRN in England, it is part of the wider UK road network and works collaboratively with network operators elsewhere. This recognises the need for seamless freight connectivity across the UK, to ensure business have equal access to domestic and international markets, no matter where they are based in the country. RIS3 will need to take these issues into account, responding to the findings of the *Union Connectivity Review*.

When it comes to delivering RIS3, there will continue to be a need for National Highways to demonstrate it is working as efficiently as possible. The Office of Rail and Road will play an important role in the development of RIS3 in providing expert advice about the efficiency of the plans proposed and the opportunity for further savings.

Growing the economy

The SRN is a significant economic asset for the UK on which we all rely. Most obviously it is essential for businesses and logistics firms moving goods around the country. Yet if the SRN performs that role well then everyone benefits in terms of getting hold of the food and products they need and want to enjoy life more efficiently, making money go further, growing the economy and encouraging the creation of more jobs.

Research for the National Infrastructure Commission³ has highlighted the impact of congestion for road freight. Congestion could account for over 16% of the cost of road freight, equivalent to around £6 billion per year. The causes of congestion are complex, and a number of solutions could contribute to reducing congestion levels in future. There

³ See: [nic.org.uk/app/uploads/Future-of-Freight_The-Value-of-Freight_Vivid-Economics.pdf](https://www.nic.org.uk/app/uploads/Future-of-Freight_The-Value-of-Freight_Vivid-Economics.pdf)

are international shortages of heavy goods vehicle drivers, and the poor quality and distribution of facilities where they can rest and refresh themselves is a factor.

Addressing these issues can help people and businesses prosper, by dependably connecting people to jobs and companies to customers, and by making the movement of employees and goods more efficient. This includes ensuring reliable and resilient integration with our ports, airports and rail terminals through which we access global markets. As we seek to build a stronger economy, levelling up opportunity and productivity across the country, the economic asset that is the SRN will play a vital role.

Managing and planning the SRN for the future

Responding to the interests of road users today must be balanced with the interests of users tomorrow. This means continuing to improve our understanding of the condition of the SRN, its structures and associated equipment, and ensuring they are maintained and renewed on a rolling basis so they continue to serve the country, safely and reliably, long into the future. Not only does this reduce the risk of severe disruption, or worse, arising from the deterioration of these assets, but it is also more cost-effective for taxpayers and enables National Highways and its supply chain to plan and invest in the skills and equipment needed to keep the SRN in good condition.

Much of the SRN was constructed between the late 1960s and late 1970s. All of that infrastructure will have exceeded 50 years in active frontline service by the end of RIS3. While it remains safe and serviceable, more elements require deeper maintenance. For example, waterproofing and bridge bearings need replacement, salt corrosion must be addressed, and equipment reaching the end of its design life needs renewal. National Highways has, since its creation as Highways England in 2015, focused on what is needed to address this wave of renewals now and into the future, including as part of RIS3.

The development of RIS3 will respond to the Government's plans to decarbonise transport and deliver infrastructure investments better, greener and faster.⁴ Project Speed is reviewing every part of the infrastructure project lifecycle to identify where improvements could be made, and its findings will be built into RIS3 delivery. Supporting the broader Transport Decarbonisation Plan set by the Department, National Highways has published details of its pathway to achieving 'net zero highways', by 2030 for corporate activities, 2040 for maintenance and construction and 2050 for the use of the SRN.⁵ Consideration must also be given to how to embed resilience and climate change adaptation into plans, and safeguard against extreme weather conditions caused by climate change.

A technology-enabled network

The context in which National Highways and the SRN operates is shifting and will continue to evolve. Changing ways of living and working, new services and technologies, and different priorities and choices for how to do things will all make their mark on what we expect of the SRN and how it interacts with local roads and the wider transport network.

⁴ See: www.gov.uk/government/publications/transport-decarbonisation-plan and www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-infrastructure-strategy

⁵ See: highwaysengland.co.uk/netzerohighways/

RIS3 will not be able to predict all these changes, but it should help prepare the ground for them, building in flexibility to respond to different dynamics as they emerge. This is likely to include enabling information and data flows that help people make the best, most efficient, lowest carbon journey choices, and ensuring the infrastructure – both physical and virtual – is in place to facilitate that. For example, preparing for the growth in the use of electric vehicles with more connected capability and charging point requirements.

We want to be ready to harness the rapidly developing possibilities of new technology to change the way people think about transport and how vehicles and physical infrastructure respond to that and each other. Such developments can help improve network capability, safety, reliability and resilience; transform road users' experience; and reduce carbon emissions across road use, maintenance and construction.

National Highways has set out a 'Digital Roads' vision for embedding digital, data and technology in everything it does.⁶ More change is expected for road infrastructure and the way it is used in the next decade that has been seen in the last century. This presents great opportunities for RIS3 if it can be both proactive and flexible in securing the benefits of technological developments.

For example, technology will have a key role in optimising the use of existing capacity and managing congestion at peak times. The Department has promoted innovation through the Transport Technology Forum (TTF) which has demonstrated the benefits of connected and digital road infrastructure to improve network management and user experience on the local road network. This includes the piloting of smart traffic signals which inform road users of the approach speed they should adopt to arrive at a green light. Following the success of these pilots, Highways England trials (A627(M) and M66 slip roads) demonstrated significant decarbonisation benefits and a further trial is being designed to demonstrate fuel efficiency and emission reductions for HGVs delivering to Hinckley Point from the M5.

These findings are further supported by the outcomes of the A2M2 Connected Corridor Pilot on the A102/A2/M2 route between London and Dover. Results indicated that users of the connected services (in this case in vehicle signing, roads work warning and smart traffic signals) found them to increase feelings of comfort, reduce stress and provide a positive influence that should lead to improved road safety and reduced congestion.

Technology is essential to improve the interface between the SRN and local road network. The Collaborative Traffic Management programme, managed by Highways England, has demonstrated the benefits of integrating systems and data between the networks to improve traffic signal operation and ensure measured and controlled access to both networks. This is the first step towards delivering a seamless digitised road network, where road users have access to consistent digitally enabled in-vehicle connected services that improve safety, tackle congestion, reduce emissions and improve journeys.

⁶ See: highwaysengland.co.uk/industry/digital-data-and-technology/digital-roads/

3. How RIS3 will be developed

To ensure that RIS3 is as effective and robust as possible, we will utilise the next few years gathering and assessing evidence about the current and future needs of the SRN and the opportunities to improve its performance for road users, local communities and the natural, built and historic environment. This is the start of our formal engagement with all interested parties on what should be considered for RIS3.

Who is involved in setting a RIS?

There are four organisations with statutory roles in developing RIS3:

- **Department for Transport:** the government department responsible for setting a RIS and with overall oversight of transport policy.
- **National Highways:** the government-owned company responsible for both day-to-day management and long-term stewardship of the SRN. It publishes a Strategic Business Plan and Delivery Plan setting out how it will deliver a RIS.
- **Office of Rail and Road:** the independent monitor responsible for assessing the performance of National Highways and advising on the efficiency and deliverability of a RIS.
- **Transport Focus:** the independent watchdog that represents road users' interests throughout the process of developing a RIS and more generally.

All four organisations will be seeking the views of other interested parties to inform their contributions to the development of RIS3.

Getting ready for RIS3

There are three broad phases for developing and preparing RIS3: Research, Decision and Mobilisation. The first of those phases is where we will do the bulk of our evidence gathering and where interested parties have the best opportunity to shape RIS3.

Research Phase (2021 to 2022)

The focus of this phase is finding out what people think should be the main objectives for National Highways and the SRN, both for RIS3 and beyond; which locations on the SRN are most in need of improvement; the opportunities to unlock wider benefits from investment in the SRN; and if there should be any changes in the roads that make up the SRN. This work includes three significant processes for gathering evidence:

Route Strategies: Looking across the whole of the SRN, the most important source of evidence will be National Highways' work to refresh its route strategies, which has already begun. The strategies explore the current performance and future pressures on every stretch of the SRN, covering matters such as safety, reliability, congestion, environmental impacts and local ambitions for economic and housing growth. Through National Highways' extensive engagement on these strategies, we will gain insight into local, regional and national priorities for the SRN.

Strategic Studies: These are intended to address complex problems facing the road network that may need to be addressed over multiple road periods. RIS2 announced two new strategic studies covering the M4 to the Dorset Coast geographic area, and a thematic study on the role of the SRN in urban areas. In addition, some work continues in response to earlier strategic studies, for example a study of options to improve congestion around the end of the M65 in Colne.

RIS3 Pipeline: RIS2 (on pages 114-115) identified 32 projects that National Highways should develop so they could be considered for funding in RIS3. One of these (the A21 Safety Package) has already been accelerated for delivery by 2025. The rest are having options identified and assessed to provide a good understanding of which would be affordable, deliverable and meet the objectives to be included in RIS3.

All four organisations involved in setting a RIS have an important role to play in this phase, pursuing consultation, research and analysis that can inform the long-term strategic direction for road transport; sustainable operations, maintenance and renewals requirements; appropriate performance and efficiency objectives; and the case for funding enhancements and other interventions to improve the performance of the SRN.

In addition, we will seek to make full use of evidence put together by the sub-national transport bodies (Transport for the North; Midlands Connect, England's Economic Heartland; Transport East; Transport for the South East; Western Gateway; and Peninsula Transport). Their work examining the transport priorities for their areas offers an invaluable perspective for the development of RIS3.

This phase concludes with the publication by National Highways of its SRN Initial Report on the state of the network and its suggested priorities. The Department will hold a formal public consultation on this report to gather views and ensure we have as complete a picture as possible of what RIS3 should seek to achieve.

Decision Phase (2023 to 2024)

Using the range of evidence gathered to date, including the responses to the public consultation, the Department will publish a “Draft RIS” setting out its intentions for RIS3. This is the basis for a period of discussion between the Department and National Highways, informed by statutory advice from the Office of Rail and Road about the efficiency and deliverability of emerging plans. This phase concludes with the publication of RIS3 and National Highways’ Strategic Business Plan.

Mobilisation Phase (2024 to 2025)

National Highways will publish its Delivery Plan and start to mobilise resources ahead of the start of the third Road Period on 1 April 2025.

What does a RIS contain?

We expect that RIS3 will conform to the structure established for previous RIS:

- **Strategic Vision:** a long-term vision for the SRN outlining what the Government wants to achieve with the network now and in the future through its investment.
- **Performance Specification:** the high-level objectives and performance standards that National Highways will be required to meet.
- **Investment Plan:** a multi-year investment plan, identifying what operations, maintenance, enhancements and designated funds spending should achieve.
- **Statement of Funds Available:** the funding committed by the Government that will enable National Highways to deliver the objectives and investments specified.

Summary timeline

At this point in the RIS3 development cycle, we cannot be definitive about this timing of the key milestone. We anticipate that National Highways will close its online Route Strategies tool at the end of December 2021. Using insights from this process, together with other evidence gathering, National Highways will publish an SRN Initial Report that assesses the current state of the network and user needs from it; potential maintenance and enhancement priorities; and future developmental needs. The Department will then consult on the SRN Initial Report in summer/ autumn 2022 ahead of producing the draft RIS.

How to get involved

During the Research Phase, the Department will work with National Highways, the Office of Rail and Road, and Transport Focus to engage with a wide range of organisations and individuals. This includes road users, Parliamentarians, local government, sub-national transport bodies, business and environmental groups, and safety organisations. There are several ways in which stakeholders can input:

- If you want to identify issues on a specific part of the SRN, or impacts the SRN has on connecting roads and its wider setting, please get involved in National Highways' route strategies work. National Highways has published information on how to do that at: highwaysengland.co.uk/our-work/our-route-strategies/ and for further information contact: routestrategies@highwaysengland.co.uk
- The Office of Rail and Road will be seeking views from stakeholders, in the autumn, on its proposed approach for advising on the efficiency and deliverability of the draft RIS and Highways England's draft Business Plan. Further information can be found at: www.orr.gov.uk/monitoring-regulation/road/investment-strategy
- Transport Focus carries out research designed to put road users' interests at the heart of RIS3. If you would like to keep up to date with its work, sign up to its monthly electronic newsletter *Transport User Voice* at: www.transportfocus.org.uk/newsletter/
- While this is just the start of the process of developing RIS3 and we are not yet commencing a formal public consultation on proposals, we welcome your questions and suggestions on points raised in this document via email to: RIS3Engagement@dft.gov.uk
- You may prefer to make your views known through your local sub-national transport body, or organisations representing road users or environmental, business or safety interests. We seek to involve such groups in developing RIS3, recognising the expertise and experience they embody.

If you want to follow the process of developing RIS3 over the coming years, further information will be published online at: www.gov.uk/government/collections/road-investment-strategy-post-2020.