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From the Director

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Professor Stephen Glaister
Chair of the Highways Committee
Office of Rail and Road
25 Cabot Square
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Dear Stephen,

I wanted to follow up a matter raised by my colleague Philip Gomm at a recent meeting of the Transport Focus Chairman’s Advisory Group.

He noted the RAC Foundation’s keen interest in the resilience of the Strategic Road Network, particularly in relation to incident management and adverse weather.

Historically, weather-related problems are at their worst during winter and have often been associated with snow – indeed David Quarmby, a former chair of the RAC Foundation, headed a [government-sponsored inquiry](#) into the impact of icy conditions on the wider road network during the cold winter of 2009-10.

However, rain and flash flooding also pose a risk to the SRN. Such events appear – anecdotally at least - to be rising in frequency and severity, and can no longer be regarded as seasonal; witness the closure of the M25 between junctions 6-8 on August 13 this year.

Back in July 2014 another [government-sponsored report](#) was published which looked at all aspects of adverse weather and their effects not just on roads but also railways, ports and airports. The inquiry team, led by Richard Brown, made a number of short and long-term recommendations.

Whilst the recently-published [Highways England Delivery Plan 2020-25](#) is clear about the potential impact of flooding and sets out mitigation measures – including a maintenance programme of drain clearance and the aim during 2020-21 of completing “12 projects to address the impact of flooding at identified hotspots and carry out 20 feasibility studies to explore flooding and water quality solutions” – we think this is an area that warrants application of the ORR investigative eye.

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How good is Highways England's knowledge of flood vulnerability? What information is there on the risk of aquaplaning, short of full road closure (I have hit deep water on the A21 on an elevated section just east of Sidcup more than once)? Installing signs warning of standing water is clearly a second best to sorting out the drainage, but could be a useful stop gap if intelligently applied?

In addition, there is also the growing risk that the consequences of flooding are direct rather than indirect i.e. torrential rain can cause landslips that engulf transport networks with deadly results as was the case with the recent [train derailment at Stonehaven](#) in Scotland, though from memory the gradients of cuttings carrying the SRN tend not to be as steep as those the Victorians bequeathed us on the railway.

Perhaps, with more extreme weather predicted, now might be a sensible time to revisit Richard Brown's recommendations as a starting point, and question whether they went far enough?

Torrential rain is where this conversation started, but as I type unseasonably hot weather is also becoming a feature of our lives, again with consequences for the highway pavement.

As always, the RAC Foundation stands ready to help if that would of use, as I am sure does Transport Focus – I am copying this letter to Anthony Smith since the issue arose at a TF meeting.

Yours sincerely,



Steve Gooding