

RAC Foundation's Response to consultation on

Proposals for the Creation of a Major Road Network

1. Introduction

1.1 The RAC Foundation is an independent transport policy and research organisation which explores the economic, mobility, safety and environmental issues relating to motoring and road use. We are happy for our response to be published in full.

1.2 It is hugely to be welcomed that the Government accepts the central tenet of the Quarmby/Carey 2016 Rees Jeffreys Report that there is a tier of roads beyond the strategic road network (SRN) whose national and regional economic importance warrants special treatment. The Department is also to be congratulated for publishing a very clear, and clearly presented, set of proposals. Whilst they do not accord in every aspect with the Rees Jeffreys recommendation, nor our own views, they provide a sense of direction which we strongly support, in particular in promoting regional planning and prioritisation by bodies with strong local connections and multi-modal perspectives.

1.3 We regard the creation of the Road Investment Strategy process for the SRN as a success and suggest that the closer the framework for the Major Road Network can be brought to that, including performance measures and funding certainty, the better.

2. Defining the Major Road Network (MRN)

2.1 We strongly support the establishment of a set of easily understood criteria by which the MRN can be defined. The question we would pose about the application of the 'twin key' proposal of annual average daily flow (AADF) plus qualitative criteria is whether the ambition is to create a standard national level of service across the MRN (or for defined road types within the MRN e.g. by number of carriageways, location within or outside built up areas etc ...), akin to the performance measures applied to the SRN, which is what the Rees Jeffreys report clearly envisaged? If so then the extent of the network indicated in the consultation document looks about right compared to that in the Rees Jeffreys report, and we would welcome the opportunity to engage with the Department on the development of such measures.

2.2 However, there doesn't appear to be any current intention to set performance standards, perhaps understandable since this is not an easy undertaking. But if there were to be no appetite for going down this path then at least arguably the Sub-national Transport Bodies (STBs) could be given greater discretion over the definition of the network, working – and prioritising – within a RIS-style defined multi-year funding envelope, as discussed below.

2.3 We are not in a position to comment on the detail of the network, which requires local knowledge of economically important locations. But we do question the rigid application of a dual key where, for example, planned development would see a significant increase in AADF. Building at least some, albeit limited, discretion into the application of the criteria in this respect would appear to be a sensible move.

3. Investment planning/funding

3.1 Focusing additional funding only on 'significant interventions', in a clear echo of the old 'Local Majors' grant programme, only addresses part of the Rees Jeffreys vision. We can see that it is a logical place to start, but cannot help but observe the importance of adequate maintenance funding for roads of significant economic importance – hence we welcome the inclusion of major structural renewals.

3.2 Specifically on development of an MRN investment programme, the trick will be in finding the right balance between national and regional prioritisation. Even if the Secretary of State is to be the scheme-by-scheme decision maker we would encourage the Department to consider whether some form of regional indicative funding allocation of MRN funding could be developed so that STBs develop their Regional Evidence Base and Investment Programme with a strong sense of the financial realities.

3.3 We strongly support the development of Regional Evidence Bases, and the recognition that the DfT and Highways England will need to be active players in the process.

4. The role of Highways England

4.1 We applaud the core principle of the MRN Programme to bring more co-ordinated planning to the country's most economically important roads. Our observation on the role of Highways England in the process as described is that it puts the emphasis on providing a *supporting* function – it will be interesting to see how local and regional bodies respond to this offer – rather than a *partnering* role to ensure that thinking and planning on the SRN and the MRN is seamlessly joined up. The MRN could become an important classification for those engaged in the stewardship of roads, but for road users the watchword is 'seamless'.

4.2 The list of support functions floated for Highways England could, if enthusiastically taken up by STBs and others, risk creating an unresourced burden. Treating Highways England as a 'centre of excellence' makes sense, but only if the administrative budget and beyond that the people are there and available to do the job.

RAC Foundation

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