

Strategic Transport Forum 7th December 2018

Agenda Item 5: Major Road Network: Next Steps

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Forum:

- a) Agree with concerns raised about the delayed announcement of MRN early entry schemes.
- b) Consider the DfT's approach to the structure of the MRN, including the breakdown of the National Roads Fund between the SRN and the MRN.
- c) Note the proposed approach to developing a methodology for the investment prioritisation of the MRN in the Heartland area.

1. Strategic Context

- 1.1. The Strategic Transport Forum has consistently been supportive of the development of a Major Road Network, funded by the National Roads Fund. This support was first set out in our position statement 'Planning for Growth', in October 2016 and repeatedly since.
- 1.2. DfT set out their objectives of the Major Road Network to be:
 - reduce congestion
 - support economic growth and rebalancing
 - support housing delivery
 - support all road users
 - support the Strategic Road Network
- 1.3. The Department for Transport consulted on proposals related to the identification of the Major Road Network between December 2017 and March 2018. The consultation document set out the key role that emerging Sub-national Transport Bodies would have in developing a Regional Evidence Base and in shaping and influencing the MRN investment priorities.

2. Early Entry Schemes

- 2.1. In June 2018, England's Economic Heartland Strategic Transport Forum was invited to put forward packages of proposals for consideration as 'early entries' to the MRN investment programme. Two proposals were submitted for consideration by DfT: A414 Corridor Hatfield to Watford Capacity Improvements; and the Aylesbury Eastern Link Roads.
- 2.2. In September 2018, five MRN early entry schemes were announced, none in the England's Economic Heartland area. We are yet to hear outcomes on either of our proposals, and have pressed DfT on a number of occasions about the need to demonstrate commitment to the MRN process and the need for a clear, transparent decision making process for these early entry schemes.

- 2.3. The continued lack of an announcement on the 'early entries' will be a deep concern to Forum members. While it is respected that the Government does not want to over-commit MRN funding in advance of the wider prioritisation process, the proposals submitted are ready to proceed, will bring significant benefits in line with the objectives of the MRN and demonstrate continued commitment to the growth of the Heartland area. If decisions on these schemes are delayed until the 2019 Spending Review, we are at risk of missing the opportunity that these schemes present.

3. **Structure of the Major Road Network**

- 3.1. The Government has not yet announced the final map of the proposed Major Road Network or the final structure of the fund (see below).
- 3.2. This Forum has previously identified a number of key aspects which should be used to define our approach to the Major Road Network as a concept:

- A single road network – the original Rees Jeffreys Road Fund research proposed that the Major Road Network should be a combination of Highways England's Strategic Road Network and the more significant local authority owned roads – the argument being that it is the combination of the two that forms the Major Road Network.

However, in the Autumn Budget, the Government confirmed funding for the National Roads Fund of £28.8bn (2020 – 2025). Of this, £25.3bn has been allocated to the Strategic Road Network, leaving just £3.5bn for the Major Road Network and Large Local Major schemes across England. The split of funding between the MRN and Large Local Major schemes and associated annual profiling is still to be determined.

Introducing a distinction between Highways England's Strategic Road Network and Major Road Network represents a significant departure from the original concept proposed by the Rees Jeffreys Road Fund. This continues to be a concern for the Forum: our users do not differentiate between road 'types', and a user-derived system would not differentiate between the SRN, MRN and local roads.

Additionally, separating the roads funding so clearly reduces the chances of designing the right investment solution in a defined corridor as it won't be exploring solutions across the network as a whole, regardless of who 'owns' the road.

- Responding to Change- the MRN map cannot remain static. Transformational growth planned for the Heartland region through multi modal solutions, such as East West Rail as well as the Expressway will fundamentally affect travel patterns: functional economic geographies are likely to change as are strategic housing market areas. The Major Road Network must be able to respond to these changes.

England's Economic Heartland has been clear that there will be a regular need for a review of the MRN map to ensure it continues to be fit for purpose. We expect this to be on a five yearly basis.

- Programme Approach – the proposal to introduce greater certainty to investment in the Major Road Network is welcomed. However, to realise maximum value of the investment, DfT should adopt a 'programme approach' – and agreed package of investment within each STB area. This approach would allow the Strategic Transport Forum to lead the identification of investment priorities based on an overall programme, and informed by wider work on the EEH transport strategy.

Taking the MRN forward as a managed programme – in a similar way to that employed by Highways England in the form of the Road Investment Strategy – would offer significant benefits in terms of: ensuring that investment supported delivery of economic opportunities across the STB geography; allowing better management of funds; and enabling local partners to secure reductions in the overall cost of delivery.

- 3.3. EEH Business Unit continues to reinforce the implications of these design issues to DfT Officials.
- 3.4. Once final guidance on the MRN has been published, we will have clarity over DfT's approach. If these issues have not been resolved, Forum members should consider writing to Ministers to reiterate our concerns.

4. **Consideration – Developing a Prioritisation Approach**

- 4.1. We expect the final map of the MRN, and DfT's proposed approach to managing the MRN to be published imminently.
- 4.2. Once published, England's Economic Heartland will need to develop an approach for our own investment prioritisation. The deadline for submission of prioritised proposals for the MRN programme is expected to be summer 2019. At that point, schemes to be included in the first five year programme of the MRN will need to have developed an outline business case.
- 4.3. In addition to prioritisation of schemes within the Heartland, the EEH approach will need to ensure improved connectivity across the Heartland is met with a similar commitment to investment in schemes within neighbouring areas. This includes Norfolk and Suffolk where corridors such as the A47 and A11 are critical to the successful flow of traffic to, and from, the Heartland area.
- 4.4. The EEH Strategic Forum's work programme has already developed a Heartland wide regional evidence base. This puts EEH in a good position to commence the prioritisation process for the MRN during spring 2019.
- 4.5. The Forum's approach to establishing the evidence base includes creation of a database that provides the baseline evidence. This is supported by a GIS front end – ProjectView – which enables the interrogation of data over various time periods and presents key information in an interactive user-friendly map. To ensure the data

held within the Databank reflects current membership of EEH, the work expanding the coverage of the existing Databank, including Swindon Borough Council and Hertfordshire County Council, is now complete.

- 4.6. In addition, EEH has developed a policy scenario model that draws on the 'Projectview' database. Through this tool, it is possible to consider the relative impact of a range of policy scenarios over a longer time period. The extent to which we use the policy scenario model for informing the MRN Prioritisation will be limited for the first five year period of the MRN investment programme, but its role as we move forward into the longer term planning will become increasingly significant.
- 4.7. Once we have clarity over the MRN map and process, EEH Business Unit will provide Forum Members with a proposed approach to investment prioritisation of the MRN. This approach will be for the first five year period of the MRN (2020 – 2025). We expect to present our proposed approach to the Strategic Transport Forum in January 2019.

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