

## REES JEFFREYS ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION: A FRESH PERSPECTIVE ON ENGLAND'S ROADS

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David Tarrant, Chairman of the Rees Jeffreys Road Fund, led a round table discussion on strategic challenges involving senior figures from several of the key organisations involved in future planning for England's road network.

### **Part 1: STBs Governance and the Major Road Network (MRN)**

Discussion drew on the paper by WSP (February 2019): [A Vision for the Governance of the Major Road Network](#), and noted the following as it covered five main aspects:

#### *How Sub-national Transport Bodies (STBs) should be adding value*

The essence of the STBs' role should be coordination and advice – a 'guiding mind' for the transport networks in their region, never becoming an operator; and thinking cross-modally, considering transport corridors first. For roads, they should steer the Strategic Road Network (SRN) and MRN collectively, acting, for the SRN, as a co-client with DfT. STBs should focus on how they are improving outcomes for transport users, over the longer-term, not just for a specific scheme; there might be a case for extending this into a wider responsibility for 'well-being'. They should certainly have initiatives such as bus franchising within scope. STBs should not intrude in local councillors' accountability for local roads.

#### *How they should best go about that*

The strength of STBs is in bringing together a range of partners, including district councils with their planning responsibilities. They need to get the most out of all those members, recognising the constraints within which they operate – for example, local highway authorities (LHAs) will not be pushed towards uniform constitutions or practices if these do not promote the interests of their members.

The shared objective must be regional growth, rather than transport operations as such. This therefore requires engagement across Government departments, and funding sources beyond transport. STBs need to develop arguments for greater devolution of funding streams (to be accompanied by full accountability). And whilst there is benefit from the varying approaches that individual STBs are taking to composition and priorities, there are clearly more similarities than differences in STBs' approaches.

#### *How STBs can make the most difference for users*

Notwithstanding the emphasis on strategic planning, STBs must recognise the importance for users of ease of making existing journeys, 68% of which are under 5 miles; and indeed,

be sure to balance the interests of current road users with the additional usage that growth will bring. Stewardship of the road network requires a focus on operations and maintenance, not just on enhancements. STBs need to take an interest in challenges such as safety and congestion pinchpoints.

### *How to respond to future challenges*

Whilst current work in finalising plans for the RIS2 period is dominated by continuity, for Road Period 3 and beyond (2025 on) a fresh approach will be needed, to take account in particular of climate change imperatives. Longer-term strategy will take on greater importance once robust governance arrangements are in place, but STBs will be in a good place to tackle this, as long as they maintain a focus on end-to-end journeys.

### *How the MRN itself fits in*

The Government's policy for the MRN is at an early stage still – as the concept develops over time, the STBs will have a key role to play. If they are to get greater control over funding for the network, they ought to take on obligations in return. This could well be tied to the proposal (next section) for outcome-focused service standards, applied initially to the combined MRN and SRN. Whilst getting MRN (and SRN) fit for purpose is key in managing demand across the whole road network, these form just a small part of the network that supports end-to-end journeys.

## **Part 2: Service Specification**

Discussion then moved on to the issue of service standards from the road network, and the paper by Phil Carey, published by Rees Jeffreys in April 2019: [What do we want from our Roads: Outlining a Service Specification](#).

### *Is a Service Specification worth pursuing?*

There was consensus on the desirability of putting a service specification in place, as it would:

- be an essential precondition for driving improvement in the service offered, and to raise standards over the longer term;
- pin down what is expected from highway authorities in return for the funding made available to them – and ought to be a key element in future Spending Reviews for roads. Measuring the service provided has to act as a proxy for the pressures of a free market, which cannot practically be a feature of road use;
- provide the basis for informed debate on priorities, engaging the public too – with realism about the starting point of the level of service that is currently affordable. This would require in particular honesty in respect of the prospects for improving the

thousands of miles of unclassified roads, which are a key consideration for local communities and elected members; and

- be a precondition for attracting private investment, noting the precedents of eg water utilities. Any move towards road user charging would require clarity on the service that is offered in return, to understand better road users' willingness to pay (a key focus of research by water companies).

This range of objectives from a Service Specification highlights the need to tailor it to meet the needs of different audiences.

### *What's already been tried?*

The paper refers to a number of precedents, but much the most relevant is the Performance Specification for the SRN, which is already succeeding in driving desired behaviour change from Highways England. Comparable mechanisms feature in the self-assessment regime for highways maintenance funding for local roads, although this focuses on inputs more than outputs. Several larger local highway authorities have in place the starting point of their own categorisation of road by purpose, used as part of the Local Transport Plan process if not yet actively in dialogue with the public. At least one city authority has commissioned work on how to best to allocate scarce road space amongst user types, requiring a detailed quantification of the level of service that each can expect.

### *What would users expect?*

It may be difficult to define what constitutes good service across the network as a whole; the public may well be resigned to relatively poor service, perhaps recognising that a comprehensive uplift in service may be unaffordable. The nature of road use makes it unique amongst public services – most users will make frequent use of several different highway authorities' roads, and are, at least in theory, able to make comparisons between the service offerings. The evidence base on what users want is building up, although largely restricted to SRN usage. It is important in all this to recognise the distinct needs and expectations of user groups such as freight, and the bus & coach industry.

### *What should the specification look like?*

The key consideration is how far the Specification should be a national standard, probably set centrally, or be more locally determined, potentially leading to a different specification for every single LHA. A single set of national standards would serve to concentrate minds on what ought to be achieved, but would risk irrelevance in many areas. Emphasising instead local content would better meet local need, and could nonetheless be overlaid with a national standard for MRN (and SRN) roads only. But even there some degree of disaggregation is essential – national average measures, even for the SRN, are generally meaningless to users.

The Specification would also have to be clearly forward-looking, drawing strongly on the distinct priorities of younger road users (who prefer, for example, more flexible solutions than car ownership); and it would need to assess the network's suitability for electric and autonomous vehicles, likely to dominate the fleet over the longer term.

It would make sense to at least start with a simpler Specification than the 26-point proposal suggested in the paper; but some of the metrics that have hitherto been less prominent, such as litter and clarity of road markings, might be the ones to engage users most, given the importance users attach to routine maintenance activities.

### *How to proceed*

We considered whether the aims of a Specification could be promoted by users themselves, with central and local government being limited to facilitating the technology platforms needed to make this happen, and setting a specification for newly built roads only. But it was felt that, unlike other service sectors, road users had insufficient clout as consumers for this to gather momentum. Government would have to get this started, and establishing a specification for the combined SRN and MRN would set the tone for the network as a whole; a focus on what needs to be measured for the MRN could be a useful first step.

It could also be worth developing the concept of the licence to deliver a road network, as is in place for Highways England. But the key question would be whether a national template for all roads is needed, or whether it should be for LHAs to draw up their own specifications. It would help to establish ownership as much as possible within the roads sector, and there would be an opportunity for national associations, or for the STBs, to take a prominent role.

### **Next Steps**

With the publication of the second RIS this winter, including the enhanced performance specification for the SRN, attention will start to turn to RIS3. This provides the context for a programme of work to develop a broader service specification and to enhance the role of the STBs.

**Rees Jeffreys Road Fund**  
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