



Proposals for the Creation of a Major Road Network

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Introduction

By way of Introduction I am Clive Hall, a Chartered Civil Engineer working for a Local Highway Authority, Herefordshire Council. Herefordshire along with Cheshire, Derbyshire, Lancashire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, Rutland, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire are founding members of what is now known as the Midlands Service Improvement Group, or MSIG. This Group was established in the late nineties to deal with matters concerning Best Value and Performance Management, specifically within the Highways and Road Safety Disciplines of Local Authorities.

MSIG is now embedded as a beacon of good practice and service improvement. The membership has expanded to some 23 Local Highway Authorities including Derby City, Leicester City, Nottingham City, Stoke on Trent, Telford & Wrekin, Cheshire East, Cheshire West & Chester, Coventry City Council, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council and our latest recruit Cumbria County Council.

MSIG is currently made up of 15 different Task Groups who operate under the guidance of the Steering Group. The group employs a Support Officer to help facilitate the work of the Task Groups and act as a link between them.

Through collaborative working the members of MSIG are realising significant improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of their highway services.

The Government are consulting on the proposal to create a Major Road Network, of approximately the same mileage as the network for which Highways England is responsible. This network is to be supported by a specific new funding stream which will be dedicated to investing in this network and raising the performance standards which motorists experience on it. It is proposed that through involving local and regional interests the introduction of the MRN will ensure that improvement will bring the most value to the economy.

This consultation document seeks views on the plans for defining the major road network, investment planning and the criteria for eligibility and assessment.





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The Highway Network as a Whole System?

To quote Highway England from their Strategic Road Network Initial Report, published in December 2017, '9 out of 10 businesses in England are located within 10 miles of the [Strategic Road Network] SRN and 47.5 million people (90%) live within 6.2 miles of the SRN.' These statistics clearly demonstrate the importance of the SRN to the nation's economy. But put another way these figures also demonstrate that to support growth, the local road network that connects the SRN to those 90% of businesses in the 12.4 mile (6.2 mile either side of the SRN) corridor is of equal importance to their growth. Surely, this corridor should also receive substantial and sustained investment if we are to secure good connectivity, through a road network that is fit for purpose?

The investment in these SRN corridors is only part of the picture. What about the 1 in 10 who live and work outside of these routes? Clearly, the creation of a MRN can also promote growth through improvements that will enable more reliable travel for road users, more certainty over freight deliveries and more capacity for the journeys which are the lifeblood of our economy. This investment can improve quality of life by opening up land to allow much-needed housing and the development of bypasses to relieve communities of intrusive traffic.

Like the SRN, growth will happen in the MRN corridors, it will sprout from the nodes on those routes where Enterprise is enabled to happen. Just like the SRN, the MRN will be a component of a highway network that must work well as part of a whole system, if we are to secure good connectivity and maintain a road network that is fit for purpose. Further, as is the case with the SRN, it will be the local roads that will provide the connection between the MRN and the front door of the majority of businesses.

The investment in network capacity, bypasses or the like, is important in the creation of this whole highway system that will serve its purpose well, but the MRN, like the SRN, will be only part of that whole system. The missing component in the MRN proposals is its maintenance. Without investment in the maintenance of the MRN it will not operate well as part of a whole system.





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The Extents of a MRN?

It is difficult to disagree with the core principles set out for the MRN, but as ever the devil is in the detail. It is important that those principles are applied in a balanced way to achieve the best for the Nation. When it comes to defining the extents of the MRN the consultation sets out a range of quantitative and qualitative criteria.

Traffic flow should be part of the picture, but HGV flow alone is only part of the real picture. A true customer focus should be taken to the intent to grow the economy. Government and Local Authorities have, for example, invested in Enterprise Zones. The connectivity of these sites to their markets via resilient routes is vital for their growth. This growth potential is not necessarily reflected in current traffic volumes on the routes that actually connect these nodes to their markets.

It is vital that in arriving at the extents of a MRN, connectivity beyond England, not just to Europe and the World, but also to Wales and Scotland should be factored in. For example, the people of mid Wales do access regional services, such as A&E Services, delivered from English Cities (such as Hereford). This regional connectivity ultimately supports the economy and the quality of life for residents. The regional context of routes is as important as actual traffic flow. This if the MRN is to perform in the eyes of the customer and serve their purpose well.

The MRN should be a coherent network. To achieve this further consideration might be paid to industries that do not manufacture and ship goods, but do provide raw materials (such major quarries) or other industries such as tourism.

Also should certain roads be included as part of the MRN on the basis that they were once a trunk road? The MRN should be identified on the basis of a route's current and future importance to the economy and resilience of the region. Not all de-trunked routes have retained such importance, particularly in areas of the country where the density of the SRN and proposed MRN is comparatively high.





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How Will Funding Influence Behaviours?

The roles proposed for local, regional and national bodies in managing the investment the MRN appear appropriate. This provided that all have a true appreciation of the network as a whole system. For that whole system to operate well it is vital that the lifecycle of the MRN asset must be properly understood. This so that asset is managed well, with least whole life cost, else the MRN will not represent good value for money for the nation.

As it's proposed, the funding for the MRN can be put towards major renewals. Yet if all bodies do not promote the importance of lifecycle planning, then the MRN will not work well as a whole system. It is routine highway maintenance works that will keep the condition of the MRN on its intended deterioration curve. This is the revenue maintenance that will fall to local authorities. The burden on LA revenue budgets can be mitigated if sound lifecycle planning is in place across the MRN. Without sound asset management in place it will be impossible to LAs to support network functionality with their existing highways maintenance funding. As a consequence the ability of the MRN to support the economy will ultimately suffer.

In the worst cases LAs may be tempted to leave parts of the MRN to deteriorate until a major renewal is necessitated, and as such might be funded via MRN investment programmes. Similarly, some authorities may be discouraged from bidding for funds due to the affordability of match funding.

The business case for investment in maintenance can be reliably expressed in terms of economic benefit and should be considered alongside those schemes that improve the functionality of the asset.

Careful consideration should be paid to the cost thresholds outlined in the MRN proposals. The threshold should be lowered to enable the good lifecycle planning that will ultimately deliver a MRN that serves its purpose well. Perhaps a lower threshold of £5 Million? This so realistic major structural renewals can be included in a deliverable way.

The eligibility criteria outlined in the proposal can work. This provided that lifecycle planning and the impairment in the asset (for example following Flood damage) is properly considered alongside sensible cost thresholds. Further, area wide packages that will enable the overall improvement of the MRN should also be eligible, particularly if they support good lifecycle planning and reduce the whole life cost of the MRN.

Evaluation criteria should focus on users and their travel needs via interconnecting networks such as rail. The SRN can support the resilience of the MRN, the Local Road Network and Rail. Ultimately Value for Money should be a criteria against which any investment in the MRN should be evaluated. Whole life cost should be understood when evaluating value and cost minimised though good lifecycle planning. This if the way the MRN is funded is to discourage poor investment choices.





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User Experience Across Local Authority Boundaries?

Once identified and promoted as such, users of the MRN will reasonably expect to experience an appropriately consistent level of service as they move around the network. The character of the routes that will form the MRN will, most likely, be more variable than that of the SRN and it is LAs who are best placed to understand local context. Consideration, should however be paid to how LAs will develop a suitably consistent approach to the routine maintenance of the MRN when that function is not funded via the MRN programme.

The consistent deployment of sound asset management and lifecycle planning is key to a consistent user experience across LA boundaries. It is here that groups such as MSIG have a definite role to play. MSIG has been at the forefront of developing, recognising and disseminating best practice in highway asset management. In 2005 MSIG developed a consistent approach to asset management plans. The MSIG valuation sub-group was set up in 2005 to create a method for valuing the local highway network. In 2006, DfT commissioned CIPFA to evaluate the issues associated with an asset management plan based approach to accounting, managing and financing LA transport infrastructure assets. HAMFIG, chaired by the MSIG valuation sub-group chair was formed and the Transport Infrastructure Code was published in March 2010. MSIG was involved throughout the process and has benefitted as a consequence.

Users of the MRN will also expect an appropriately consistent response to highway defects, such as potholes. It is best practice to adopt a risk based approach for all aspects of highway maintenance, including setting levels of service, inspections and response. The latest code of practice recognises that it is increasingly difficult for LAs to align their performance with historic standards for highway safety inspection and repair. This largely due the escalation in demand as a consequence of a degrading national road network. This will become increasingly unaffordable unless authorities can properly adopt asset management techniques and can confidently continue to invest highway funds in preventative repair techniques. The same will be true for the MRN if the funding levels available for its maintenance remain unchanged.

For many authorities the existing response times to defects do not reflect the preventative maintenance strategy described in asset management plans. Users of the MRN will understandably expect a 'right first time fix' of potholes rather than a temporary repairs. MSIG has developed a methodology and philosophy that can be adopted by highway authorities, as a starting point for their risk based approach and as a result of such work LAs can deploy a suitably consistent approach to the routine maintenance of the MRN.





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Conclusions

The Government are consulting on the proposal to create a MRN. This network is to be supported by a specific new funding stream which will be dedicated to investing in this network and raising the performance standards which motorists experience on it. This, it is proposed, will ensure that improvement will bring the most value to the economy.

The consultation seeks views on the plans for defining the major road network, investment planning and the criteria for eligibility and assessment.

If the creation of an MRN is to succeed in maximising its potential to support growth then it must be created as a component of a highway network that must work well as part of a whole system.

The investment in network capacity is important in the creation of this whole highway system that will serve its purpose well. The missing component in the MRN proposals is its maintenance. Without investment in the maintenance of the MRN it will not operate well as part of a whole system.

The MRN should be a coherent network. To achieve this further consideration might be paid to: all industries; to regional, national and international connectivity; any routes importance to the economy and resilience of the region, not all de-trunked routes have retained such importance.

To operate well it is vital that the lifecycle of the MRN asset is properly understood. This so that asset is managed well, with least whole life cost, representing good value for money for the nation.

Careful consideration should be paid to the cost thresholds and eligibility criteria outlined in the MRN proposals. This particularly if the way the MRN is funded is to discourage poor investment choices.

Users of the MRN will reasonably expect to experience an appropriately consistent level of service as they move around the network. LAs are best placed to understand local context, but a suitably consistent approach is required to asset management and defect response across the MRN if the user is not to experience inappropriate inconsistencies across LA boundaries. It is here that groups such as MSIG do have a role to play in the development and deployment of best practice across regions.

Finally, I thank the All Party Parliamentary Group on Highways personally, on behalf of Herefordshire Council and The Midlands Service Improvement Group for this opportunity to address you today. I hope you have found the views expressed of interest and valuable in your consideration of this proposal to a Major Road Network for England.

