

A major step to a better network?

A new concept of a major road network is needed to fill the gap at the heart of transport strategy in England, claim **David Quarmby** and **Phil Carey**

The roads reform agenda is transforming investment in and accountability for, the 4,400 miles of England's roads that form the Strategic Road Network (SRN) managed by Highways England; there's now a five-year rising funding commitment and firm specification of outputs monitored by a quasi-regulator. But it has exacerbated the gulf between the SRN and the great bulk of the country's roads, managed by 154 local highway authorities (LHAs) – they are significantly less well-funded on most counts than the SRN, still mainly subject to annual budget-setting, and lack a comprehensive performance regime. It doesn't help that there has been little logical basis for determining what roads comprise the SRN; and the distinction is in any case largely invisible to road users.

This gulf matters because of the crucial role that major roads – both SRN and local authority – play in supporting national and regional economies. As we believe the SRN is not of itself sufficient to represent the most economically important roads, particularly at the regional level, and because its coverage varies between different parts of the country and between conurbations, we have set out to define a major road network (MRN) on more objective criteria. Taking account of traffic levels, the presence of commercial transport (HGVs and light vans), the need for some resilience, and connectivity for towns of over 50,000 people, we have identified a further 3,600 miles of the more 'strategic' local authority roads. When added to the SRN, together they constitute an integrated and more balanced MRN capable of supporting and connecting regional economies across England.

The 8,000 mile long MRN shown here, 80% longer than the SRN, can only be indicative: there is no substitute for local knowledge in validating the relative importance of particular routes. But we have tested this out with four different groups of Local Enterprise Partnerships, counties and combined authorities and it seems to make sense for them.

Setting out a network on the map does not mean this is just about infrastructure: our MRN concept is based on the function the road should be performing, not its physical status. Our focus must be on the service that the MRN needs to provide to the user, and on how it impacts communities and the environment.

The service standard will necessarily be differentiated according to the road's context. We envisage four separate tiers within this network, each performing a distinct function:

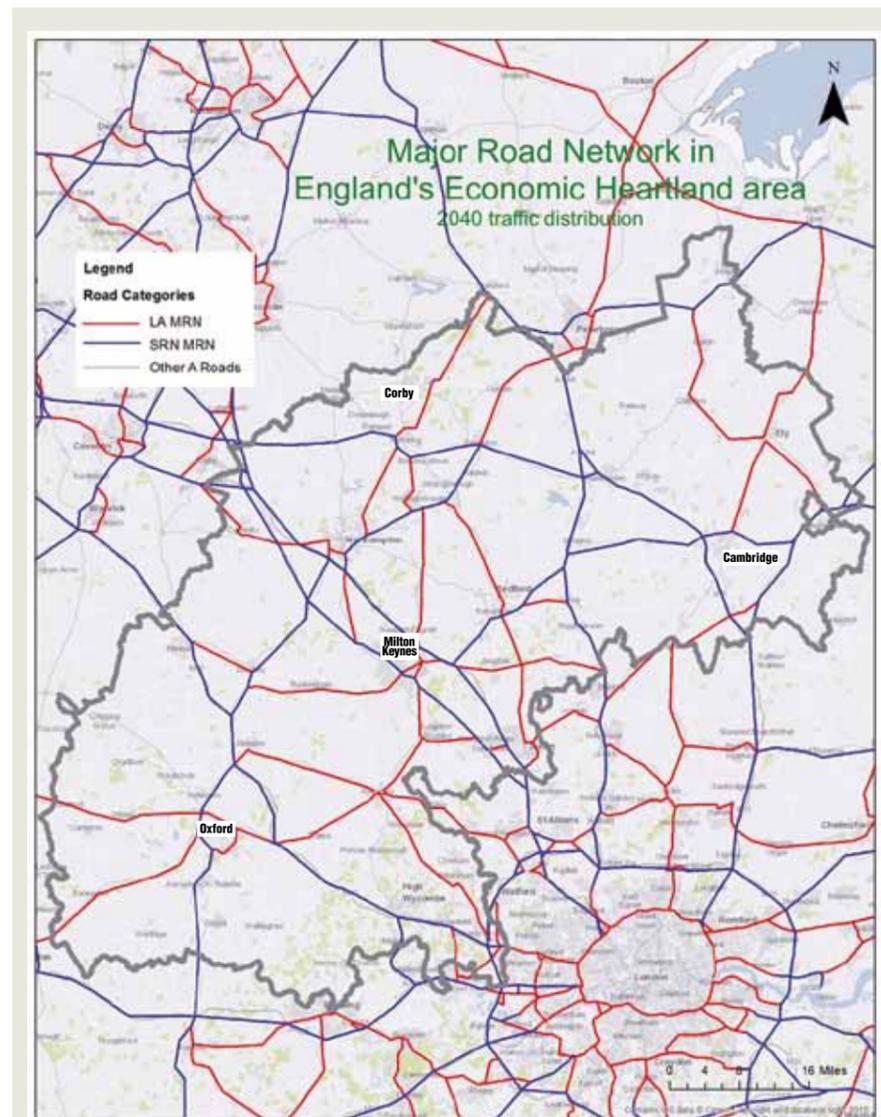
- **Tier 1** – limited-access roads largely devoted to 'movement', not just motorways; but with a subset of these (Tier 1A) in conurbations, where frequent junctions and very heavy traffic flow mean they will be particularly subject to the wider transport policy framework and traffic management strategies set by the city or regional authority;

- **Tier 2** – mainly all-purpose rural A roads that also sometimes serve the 'place' needs of communities they run through; and

- **Tier 3** – roads in urban areas often with the greatest mix of user types, and where significant 'place' functions will need to be met. As with Tier 1A, these urban roads will be particularly subject to locally determined cross-modal transport policies, and prioritisation of some user types.

The MRN provides the framework on which to plan long-term strategic investment, but will

only fulfil its potential as an integrated network and meet user needs if the planning, funding and day-to-day operation is carried out on a consistent and coordinated basis. That is clearly a challenge when more than half of this network is owned and managed by Highways England and the rest by LHAs – but we are not advising any changes in who should be responsible. Instead, two key changes already underway in the governance regime for roads will, we believe, make the MRN concept attractive and achievable.



The total 8,000 mile major road network is developed from the subset of all A roads in England that, using 2014 traffic count data, have average annual daily flow greater than 20,000 vehicles, or greater than 10,000 vehicles as long as the proportion of HGV traffic is at least 5%, or of LGV traffic at least 15%. The 2014 data has been modified by type of road and region to take account of the varying rates of traffic growth to 2040 predicted in the 2015 National Road Traffic Forecast (Scenario 2).



First, we envisage the MRN becoming an essential tool for the new sub-national transport bodies (STBs), which provide a timely opportunity to embed the necessary consistency across much of the MRN. It would make sense for the emerging STBs to use their new powers to designate the MRN in their area as the 'natural' regional road network, providing greater connectivity to, from and within their area than the SRN alone can. The STBs and Highways England would then collaborate on the strategic planning and development of this network, working with the LHAs.

Exactly this is planned by one grouping of local authorities and LEPs – England's Economic Heartland Strategic Alliance – which has resolved to apply for an STB and are in the process of adopting the MRN as their strategic network. Even where STBs are not created, the MRN as defined provides a focus for collaboration between the relevant local authorities and LEPs, and Highways England, to ensure road users in those areas do not miss out.

Transport for the North is an interesting version of an STB, since it encompasses five conurbations, each with its own Combined Authority (CA). Greater Manchester has pioneered the concept of the Key Route Network (KRN), being that subset of the local network within the conurbation to be planned and managed alongside the SRN – and taking as its starting point the green-signed Primary Routes. Our MRN is less granular – about half as dense as the KRN – but does include the SRN. We expect that the KRN concept will be adopted in other CA areas, but the MRN remains the right strategic network for the super-region as a whole – connecting the conurbations with each other, with other key towns in the North, and with logistics

centres and ports.

The second new development, the creation of the National Road Fund 'for strategic roads', based on hypothecated vehicle excise duty from 2020, is an opportunity to consider how far local authority major roads may also be funded in this way. The MRN provides an objective basis, consistent across England, for such possible extension beyond the fund's core purpose of financing the SRN.

The MRN has to be a concept fit for the longer term, to 2040. Our full report will review the impacts on demand for road use from economic trends, new technologies and demographics. It will consider how the MRN needs to be kept safe for its users and communities; how environmental impacts should be mitigated, and how the MRN – alongside the rest of the road network – can remain

an indispensable national asset

But fundamentally the MRN needs to be 'fit for purpose'. This is not just about the condition of the asset and the way the network is managed; that will be the primary responsibility of the network operator, whether that be an LHA, CA or Highways England. Fitness for purpose also means setting target service levels that reasonably reflect user expectations; putting in place effective strategic planning and funding; and ensuring integration with other networks. These may best fall to the higher-level client body for the road network – Department for Transport or, in future, the STBs. A key task in implementing the MRN would be to apply much of the regime now defining and monitoring the effectiveness of Highways England to the local authority parts of the MRN too.

Our proposition is still under development – but we believe the core concept is valuable right now. There is more work to do around the likely evolution of powers of particular STBs, and around how responsibilities for the components of fitness for purpose of the MRN might be assured. We are continuing to engage with the key stakeholders in Government and beyond as we work up a full report by this autumn. But we would very much also welcome a wider dialogue about the value of this MRN in giving England a more effective, more robust framework for major roads for future decades.

- **David Quarmby** is former chairman of the RAC Foundation and a past member of the London Mayor's Roads Task Force. **Phil Carey** is the road user policy advisor to Transport Focus and vice-chair of the Transport Associates' Network



The Rees Jeffreys Road Fund

The Rees Jeffreys Road Fund is a charity which supports education and research in transport. In autumn 2014, the fund commissioned a two-year Study on Major Roads for the Future, to be carried out by David Quarmby and Phil Carey. The objective has been to develop a long-term vision through to 2040 for England's major road network, for its users, the communities it passes through and for the role it plays both nationally and in the regions. The study is due to report in October. For further information and for contact details please visit the study website www.futureroadsengland.org