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**Response to Highways England Strategic Road Network Initial Report**

**Introduction**

The Cheshire & Warrington economy is currently worth some £21bn per annum. GVA per head is 30% higher than any other economy in the North of England and there are ambitions to double the size of the sub-regional economy by 2040. To achieve this the sub-region is seeking to grow the economy significantly, creating up to 112,000 new jobs, building 139,000 additional homes and increasing GVA per head to 120% of the national average.

Work undertaken by Jacobs on behalf of the Cheshire and Warrington LEP examined the case for future investment in the strategic network to enable this ambition to be realised. This work noted that there are long established linkages to Merseyside, Manchester and to North Wales taking advantage of the strategic road and rail networks. However, it is also recognised that current capacity limits, resilience and journey times connecting to the motorway network (M56, M6 , M62) are poor and will need sustained investment during both the RIS2 period and beyond to avoid congestion constraining growth.

**General Comments**

There is concern about the decision to suspend the proposals to upgrade parts of the M53 running through Ellesmere Port to Smart Motorway as part of the RIS 1 investment programme. Alternatives need to be made clear as a matter of priority. Equivalent work for the M56 through north Cheshire, (particularly between junctions 11 to 15) is a high priority for the LEP and its partners for the RIS2 period. We are particularly keen to seek assurances that this will be delivered in the early years of the RIS2 investment programme to tackle the commonplace accidents, congestion, and maintain journey time reliability and connectivity to the Manchester city region and Manchester Airport. It will also be critical to address anticipated increases in traffic associated with the opening of the Mersey Gateway that will further improve access to and from the Merseyside city region and Liverpool Airport.

We welcome the undertaking of the Manchester North West Quadrant Strategic Study and the inclusion of the M62 between Junctions 9 -11 in Warrington within the study area. We will to continue to play an active role as a key stakeholder with both TfN and Highways England. It will be vital for this study to examine options to complement the M62 Junction 10-12 Smart Motorway scheme to address the severe congestion experienced on the M62 between Warrington and Manchester and we would wish to see consideration of improvements at M62 Junction 9 which suffers from high levels of congestion. There should also be careful consideration of options to build on the current improvements underway at M62 Junction 8.

We would also stress the importance of continuing dialogue between Highways England and Welsh Government to ensure effective cross-boundary connectivity.

Categorisation of Roads

* With four distinct categories of road, Highways England should be able to ensure a consistent standard of roads across the SRN, each one suited to the traffic demand of its location. It is disappointing to note that the maps show only a small number of newly prioritised / categorised roads in the North. Highways England should work with TfN to develop clear proposals for the categorisation of the road network across the North that aligns with the work TfN are doing on their Strategic Development Corridors. TfN should provide support and guidance on which roads would benefit most from upgrades.
* We would stress the current weakness of East-West connectivity in the sub-region, the improvement of which will be fundamental to the delivery of growth. The Strategic Road Network does not serve North Wales and West Cheshire well. Highways England’s approach to road / corridor categorisation needs to reflect this existing weakness.

Local Priorities Fund

* The Local Opportunities Fund is an opportunity to support local authorities to work with TfN and Highways England to provide much-needed congestion relief and enable a seamless transport network that is not constrained by boundary issues.

Future Studies

* Free-flow connections at key junctions would be beneficial to the whole network as it would reduce congestion and increase reliability but the improvements also need to be delivered to LRN to ensure free flow of traffic after it leaves the SRN. This is particularly true of Junctions 16 and 17 on the M6 which both require upgrades.
* The integration hubs are essential, and hence we would like to see consideration of how the SRN could better serve the new HS2 Hub Station at Crewe and the hub stations at Chester and Warrington.
* The final mile is critical to the customer whole journey experience and hence we would support the assessment of priorities for investment and ownership to create improved end-to end journeys to/from key economic destinations.
* The sub-region is working with TfN to carrying out an assessment of key routes via their West and Wales Strategic Development Corridor Study, which is receiving valuable input from Highways England as well as other transport providers.
* We would encourage Highways England to continue work with the Cheshire and Warrington Cheshire sub-region and TfN on this work to prioritise the investment proposals.
* As stated above we recommend a study into future capacity and reliability improvements into the M6, including consideration of the link to the A55 via the A51 corridor.

Designated Funds

* The intention of these funds is supported, but further clarity is required on the criteria and application of these funds.

Future needs

* We wish Highways England to work closely with Cheshire & Warrington sub-region to develop operating strategies and schemes which enable the SRN to underpin our growth aspirations whilst reducing congestion and improving journey time reliability.
* Consideration of the case for the dualling of the A550 to improve connectivity between the M53 and North Wales. This is of particular importance when taking into account the Welsh Government proposals for improvements to the A55 / A494 / A548 corridor which is anticipated to be confirmed shortly. This would maintain good access to and from the wider sub-region with access to Merseyside, its port and airport likely to be transformed when the Mersey gateway opens next year. Likewise access to Manchester, airport city and the wider Northern Powerhouse also needs to be enhanced not just to and from West Cheshire but also to the whole of North Wales and Ireland, via Holyhead.
* Consideration of the case for the further dualling of stretches of the A483 / A5 south of Ruabon and approaching Shrewsbury. This route is growing in importance for both general traffic and road freight movements from West Cheshire / North East Wales to mid Wales and the West Midlands via the M54 which is being used as an alternative to the congested M56 / M6 route.
* A Winsford Transport Strategy has recently been completed and this strongly recommends the need for improved access to the M6 from the town to junction 18 by bypassing Middlewich. Further feasibility work has now identified a potential route and further assessment work will take place during 2018 which is also linked to the impact of HS2 on the local highway network.
* Whilst the RIS1 investment in three Smart Motorway schemes in Cheshire and Warrington is welcomed (M6 Junctions 16-19, M62 Junction 10 to 12 and M6 Junction 21A to 26), we would like to see a study to be commissioned into the section of the M6 between junction 19 and 21A which is not included in the Smart Motorway programme and in particular to identify potential improvements to the M6/M56 interchange at Lymm which suffers from significant congestion and could act as a constraint to continued economic growth in Cheshire and Warrington.
* We would be interested to see some evidence on the impact Smart motorways are having on safety and resilience of the network where they have been implemented already. The M6 J16 to 19 Smart motorway scheme will create a permanent additional running lane by using the existing hard shoulder, with short safety refuges spaced along its length. We have some concerns about the impact this arrangement will have on safety and resilience in the event of incidents on the M6 through the borough, and so it will be important to consider these aspects carefully prior to the implementation of similar arrangements on the network.

**Specific Responses**

**Q - Do you think Highways England's proposals will deliver what users of the SRN want?**

* The initial report gives a high-level understanding of Highways England’s ambitions, which reflect the SRN user’s nine priorities according to Transport Focus. However, there is no information about what proportion of funding would go towards each aspiration, what proportion may go to expressway and smart motorway upgrades, or what may go towards finishing the commitments that were not met in RIS1.
* The broad aspirations of the initial report appear to align with the requirement to transform the North’s economy. Improving the capacity and capabilities of connections across the North will stimulate benefits across all economic centres of the North, not just the major cities.
* Transformational improvements to transport connectivity are critical. By providing the much-needed investment in the North’s SRN, Highways England could deliver a sustainable infrastructure that supports economic growth and meets the demands of road users. Customer journeys don’t start and end on the SRN, the “Final mile” can have a critical impact on the customers perception of the whole journey, so there needs to be a focus on the potential for multi-modal and cross network improvements, and how they will be delivered, which would be extremely beneficial for customers and transport providers.
* The Strategic Road Network is just 2% of the road network. The interaction between the SRN and local authorities’ roads is a key concern. These connections can make all the difference to the customers’ overall journey satisfaction.
* There needs to be consideration given in RIS2 to how the SRN serves customers wishing to access North Wales from the South. The current SRN route from M6 Junction 16 to the A55 North Wales Expressway is the M6 to J20, the M56 and the M53 – a journey of 44 miles. The direct route using the local road network (A500/A51) is 29 miles. The local road network serves an important function in providing an alternative direct route to North Wales and thus preserves capacity on the SRN between M6 junctions 16 and 20. However, since the de-trunking of the A500/A51 route, the route has not benefited from significant investment and is not of adequate standard for the purpose it serves in a number of areas. Investigation into investment in this corridor is required in RIS2 to enable the M6 between J16 and J20 to continue to operate effectively and support growth through potentially released capacity.

**Q - Do you think Highways England's proposals will deliver what businesses want?**

* Investing in the proposals set out in the Initial Report could make a tangible difference to the running of businesses, improving their efficiency and productivity. Easy access to reliable information will be vital for freight haulers, enabling them to reduce their journey times and meet more tight deadlines. As such, Highways England’s proposals to create a reliable and seamless SRN will be in line with what businesses want. The issue will be the whether the level of funding available will be able to deliver the desired aim.
* A review of current diversionary routes will be essential for businesses. This will be successful if RIS 2 includes work on establishing the most suitable diversion routes and pro-actively advertising these routes and investing in them where required. The importance of this will increase as the need for roadworks increases and it will be central to ensuring overall customer journey satisfaction.
* The Strategic Road Network is just 2% of the road network. The interaction between the SRN and local authorities’ roads is a key issue. These connections can make all the difference for business movements. For this reason it is essential that the improvements to both M6 Junction 16 and Junction 17 are included in the investment proposals for RIS2 as well as studies to consider the work needed to address M6 reliability and capacity issues beyond the current smart motorway scheme.
* The upgrades of key motorways to smart motorways, and All Purpose Trunk Roads to Expressways, should also have a positive impact on businesses in the North. There have, however, there have been severe impacts on the road user during construction, for example on the M6 between Junction 16 and 19 during the current Smart Motorway project where users and businesses who have seen little visible progress and delays in completion, compounded by poor communication. The increased impacts of incidents on this section and subsequent severe impacts on local roads and communities is a factor which needs to be taken into account in a review of both formal and informal diversionary routes.

**Q - Do you think Highways England's proposals meet the needs of people affected by the presence of the Strategic Road Network?**

* There are positive proposals to improve environment and wellbeing of communities, notably with the improvement of air and noise quality, biodiversity and visual landscape. The local priorities fund should improve access to the SRN
* Better integration with the local road network and to rail and other public transport will open access in the North for both business and leisure time.
* There should be a commitment to enhancing the environment rather than minimising the negatives impacts caused by the SRN, and also enhancing the visual landscape for local and strategic road users alike, whilst also stimulating local growth by investing in local skills.
* As referred to above there is a need to review current formal and informal SRN diversionary routes. RIS 2 needs to include work on establishing the most suitable diversion routes, pro-actively advertising these routes and investing in them where required to minimise the impact on communities affected by planned diversions or where traffic is diverted due to incidents on the SRN.