

Supporting economic growth

One of Highways England's new strategic outcomes is supporting economic growth by modernising and improving the strategic road network to relieve congestion and reduce delays, and to open up new areas for development helping businesses to flourish and encouraging investment. Highways England has produced a new planning guide and is developing a £100m growth and housing fund as part of a suite of new initiatives to support economic growth. We've been talking to Mahmood Azam, head of strategy, growth and economic development to find out more



Highways England became a government company on 1 April. What impact did that have for the organisation when it comes to planning?

The change we are committed to is not superficial. It is a fundamental shift in our focus and we are committed to working with and listening to stakeholders as we evolve and develop our approach.

It is important that we continually adapt to ensure we are responding to feedback and local priorities, whilst maintaining a safe and resilient strategic road network. One of the fundamental changes is our role in the planning system as statutory consultee. This has changed due to our change of status and our responses to planning consultations no longer constitute a 'direction' but instead are formal advice and recommendations to the local planning authority.

One of the first things we are keen to do is to refresh and further strengthen our approach to the way we engage with the planning system. We need to be able to provide a level of support that allows the development of strong plans and proposals that will make the most of growth opportunities around the strategic road network.

We recently held a growth event to launch a new planning guide: *The Strategic Road Network: planning for the future - a guide to working with Highways England on planning matters*, which is aimed at building on our engagement with businesses, developers, local enterprise partnerships and local planning authorities - and which sets out our aspirations in this area. A copy of this guide can be accessed at www.gov.uk/guidance/planning-and-the-major-road-network-in-england

Highways England and the planning process

- We are consulted on around **3,500** planning applications each year
- Last year, we responded to **99.88** per cent within 21 days
- Approximately **15 per cent** of planning applications that come to us are significant enough to require traffic assessment
- Approximately **six per cent** are major applications involving more than 100 jobs and/or homes
- The major applications on which we responded last year were for developments that were collectively forecast to deliver over **45,000** new jobs and over **110,000** new homes.

Key facts about England's motorways and major A roads

- **85 billion miles** of journeys undertaken on the SRN every year
- **Four million** customers use the network every day
- **98 per cent** of manufacturers in the UK say roads are critical to the success of their businesses
- **One billion tonnes** of freight transported each year.

Factors considered for allocation of Highways England's new Growth and Housing Fund

We anticipate considering the following factors:

- Match funding
- Scheme readiness
- Early delivery of jobs and homes
- Benefits
- Value for money.

Highways schemes need not be on the strategic road network itself - we are open to investing in off-network if there are benefits to our overall operations.

What advice do you have for developers wishing to expand alongside or near the strategic road network?

We have a strong track record in supporting economic growth and we want to go further so our message to companies wishing to develop on or alongside England's motorways and major A roads is simple - early engagement is key.

We are experts in the strategic road network and by engaging with us early, developers will be able to put themselves in the best possible position to ensure that issues that may take time to analyse and resolve are identified as soon as possible.

What are the next steps?

We're also developing our approach to allocating the new £100 million Growth and Housing Fund, which was established through the government's Roads Investment Strategy.

This capital fund will contribute to improvements on or connected to the strategic road network, unlocking land for new employment and housing, improving connections and journey times, and providing better support for business performance and growth.

We are also working with partners and stakeholders to develop our Strategic Economic Growth Plan which will set out how we will support growth and development in key locations across the country, and will feed into our future investment decisions.

We will work collaboratively with planning authorities, LEP's and other key stakeholders to shape the plan, which we intend to finalise by the end of 2016. ➤

