

Widening motorways will worsen, rather than solve, congestion

The Government is about to launch plans for a series of corridor studies, which will decide the future of our major road network.

But even spending billions widening roads and introducing hard shoulder running will not stop traffic speeds from falling – and will just increase traffic and congestion.

It's time for a new approach.

Last year the Government spent over £1 billion widening our motorways and trunk roads and the Government plans to spend another £6 billion over the coming years. This month the Department for Transport is expected to launch 14 'corridor studies' which could result in even more road schemes. Even with the most ambitious programmes of motorway widening and hard-shoulder running, traffic will be going slower in 2025 than in 2003.

We cannot build our way out of congestion - but there are plenty of things we can do about it. We're proposing a new way of thinking about transport¹ which would tackle congestion once and for all; helping people get where they need to go without always getting stuck in traffic jams.

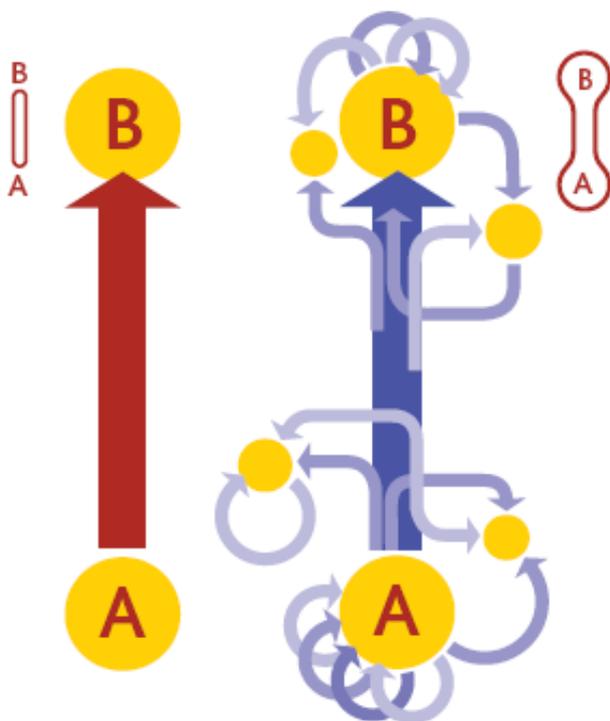
¹ *The Strategic Road Network needs Strategic Policy Appraisal* has been prepared by Professor Phil Goodwin. This briefing draws on his research. The full research is available from Campaign for Better Transport.

Congestion levels keep rising, and current policies won't change that

Our transport policies are in a mess. We're spending more and more to widen motorways and trunk roads, but congestion keeps getting worse. The Department for Transport predicts that traffic speeds in 2025 will be worse than in 2003 – despite billions being spent adding more capacity on which we can drive¹.

The Government is fixated with tackling congestion on our strategic roads – the motorways and 'A' roads – but it's missing the bigger picture. As almost 90% of congestion is in towns and cities², making the motorways and A roads wider just moves traffic into already-congested urban areas just that little bit faster. Studies show that people are far more annoyed by urban traffic than by hold-ups on the motorways³, but the Government still hasn't recognised the impact that urban areas have on motorway and trunk road congestion.

Transport planning has to take account of shorter trips and urban areas



It all comes down to how we think about transport. At the moment our transport planners appear to act as though traffic disappears once it turns off the motorway. But that's not what happens at all: journeys have to start and finish somewhere and almost all of them start and finish on minor, not major, roads.

Look at these two images. The one on the left shows how the Government's transport planners tend to assume people travel: lots of strategic trips between major cities using motorways and trunk roads. But the image on the right is more accurate: there are some strategic trips but plenty of shorter journeys which only use motorways and trunk roads for a short portion of their journey.

There are practical – and affordable – solutions out there

If we only take account of long-distance traffic, the solutions to congestion appear very limited; transport plans which did so tend to recommend extensive road building programmes, which just generate traffic and create more congestion. But if we widen the net to include all those shorter trips and the cities at either end, then a very different pattern appears.

This is because the range of options is far greater when we consider the full range of journeys. You wouldn't walk from London to Manchester, but there are plenty of trips which use sections of the M1 and M6 for which

alternatives are – or could be – available. Government studies over the past few years have repeatedly found that it is possible to reduce congestion on the motorways by managing demand in urban areas⁴.

It's not just the biggest cities which need attention: there are plenty of smaller hot spots where targeted programmes could reduce congestion without the need for costly, and ultimately futile, road building. Improving public transport or providing workplace or school travel plans in areas surrounding heavily congested junctions can have a dramatic impact on journey times – and cost far less than building roads.

But we need to fund these solutions, not costly and destructive road building

These small-scale measures are very effective, but it can be hard for them to get funding. Local politicians are happy to support big projects but are less vocal about smaller schemes, even though the overall impact of lots of small schemes will be greater than that of several big ones. The Government knows that small measures can have big results: it has just released the findings of its successful Sustainable Travel Demonstration Towns programme, which showed that sustained decreases in car use and improved walking, cycling and bus use can be achieved by giving people the right information and a few gentle nudges. Importantly, these 'smarter choices' packages can be rolled out far and wide for less than the cost of one major road scheme.

But it's still much easier to find money to build big road schemes than to support walking, cycling and public transport projects, even if they would help us meet our greenhouse gas emissions targets. This is because the Treasury splits projects into 'capital' – those projects where most of the money is spent on infrastructure – and 'revenue' – where most of the money is spent employing people. 'Smarter choices' and behavioural change projects are classed as revenue, for which significantly less money is available. Revenue costs are also ongoing, whereas capital costs are one-off payments, so local authorities need to know that their funding is secure for several years before embarking on a revenue project.

To make matters worse, some local authorities are trying to reduce their spending on local transport, road safety and 'smarter choices' projects to fund road schemes, which is just storing up congestion for the future.

The Government needs to make some changes if it wants to beat congestion

Our report recommends that the Government:

- Takes account of shorter trips and cities and their impact on the major road network when carrying out its transport corridor studies
- Produces wide-ranging packages of solutions, including projects to manage demand for road space in towns and cities, and encourage local authorities to implement them
- Earmark a proportion of transport spending for revenue programmes which would reduce the need for to build additional infrastructure

Additionally the Government should introduce measures to tackle motorway congestion recommended in official studies, including:

- Rolling out 'smarter choices' programmes in the surrounding towns and cities, such as travel planning, information, marketing and advice, so that people can make informed decisions about how they travel
- Improving infrastructure and support for public transport, walking and cycling
- Adjusting the cost of different modes of transport to encourage people to walk, cycle or take public transport
- Reallocating road space to give priority to the most efficient, productive or socially needy road users
- Rolling out real-time information and control systems including dynamic traffic control (e.g. 'green wave' systems and intelligent traffic lights)
- Improving land-use planning so that essential services are closer to where people live and work, eliminating the need for long journeys on already busy roads
- Increasing support for advanced telecommunications systems, to help people work from home, shop online, meet via video-conferencing and improve the way councils manage transport systems

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¹ *Road Transport Forecasts 2008*. Department for Transport, London, December.

² Eddington, R. (2006) *The Eddington Transport Study*, page 79. Department for Transport, London, December.

³ Lyons, G., Goodwin, P., Hanly, M., Dudley, G., Chatterjee, K., Anable, J., Wiltshire, P. and Susilo, Y. (2008). *Public attitudes to transport: Knowledge review of existing evidence*. Department for Transport, London, July.

⁴ These reports include the MIDMAN Multi-Modal Study (2002), the South-East Manchester Multi-Modal Study (2001) and *Tackling Congestion, Delivering Growth*, commissioned for the Leaders of West Midlands Metropolitan Councils and Chairman of WMPTE (2008).