



NNNPS Parliamentary briefing

March 2024

1. In seeking to push through the National Networks National Policy Statement (NNNPS) minutes before Easter recess, ministers are trying to avoid MPs' scrutiny. This is understandable because the revised NNNPS, a document even experts struggle to plough through, will subvert the will of Parliament set out in flagship legislation, including on climate, levelling up and the natural environment.
2. As this briefing explains, this is not about pitching the environment versus growth. With the worst traffic delays since 2015 and missed safety targets, the current roads programme is failing to deliver on its promises, let alone connecting up with wider government commitments. Real change to the NNNPS is long overdue.
3. Transport Action Network (TAN) first wrote to the Secretary of State for Transport asking for a review of the NNNPS in March 2020 and gave oral evidence to the Transport Committee's inquiry last year. The government has rejected most of the Transport Committee's recommendations and even gone backwards on climate policy. This is a first since the Planning Act 2008 became law and merits a full debate, not one squeezed into the end of a session, when most Members are not present. In contrast, the energy NPSs were withdrawn in February 2022 for further review, in light of the BEIS committee calling for stronger emphasis on net zero¹.

What is the NNNPS?

4. The NNNPS sets out government policy on transport and specifically for deciding applications for development consent of Strategic Road Network (SRN - motorways and trunk roads), rail, and rail freight interchanges in England. TAN and others have long argued for broadening its scope to include urban transport schemes, interurban cycleways, coach interchanges and charging and driver facilities. Putting the horse after the coach, the DfT has finally launched a separate consultation on the NNNPS's scope, too late to influence its contents².
5. Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) are assessed against NPSs. The NNNPS summarises wider policy (chapters 1&2), sets out a non-spatial statement of need (chapter 3), then policies for scheme level decisions (chapters 4&5). Six weeks after designation, NPSs have a quasi-legal character and cannot be questioned in planning decisions or courts. The statement of need is especially important as it can establish a strong presumption in favour of development, against which other NPS policies can be overruled.

¹ [Business Committee says Government should 'be explicit on net zero target' in its approval process for major energy infrastructure](#), Hansard (2022)

² [Review of transport infrastructure legislation: definitions for highway and railway Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects in the Planning Act 2008](#), DfT (2024)

A mockery rather than a model of clarity

6. The government's action plan said that in order to 'reduce the policy ambiguity faced by individual projects [it] is vital that the policy position in NPSs is clear and up-to-date in order to set the strategic direction'³.
7. Stakeholders disagree this has been delivered. Professor Stephen Glaister, formerly chair of the Office of Rail and Road and director of the RAC Foundation, told MPs: 'I do not see clarity in that draft myself. It is an enormously long document, with chapters about this, that and the other thing, but you do not get clarity in it. I hope that Parliament, in processing it, will do what it can to make the document much more single-minded...and much clearer in resolving the issues.'⁴
8. After years of missing targets, it is clear that incremental change is no longer an option. In its most recent assessment of the DfT, the National Audit Office (NAO) gave a black (worst possible) rating to the likelihood and impact of the risk that 'DfT does not deliver sufficient action in the transport sector to provide carbon savings, meet air quality and biodiversity targets, and adapt to climate change, as required by law'⁵.
9. A major problem is how to deal with old schemes drawn up before current environmental laws. Paragraphs 4.20 - 4.22 (of the NNNPS) seek a head in the sand approach by saying that any scheme in an investment strategy (e.g. RIS2) should not have alternatives scrutinised, unless there are exceptional circumstances. Avoiding the issues will not resolve them, but will lead to ever more opposition and legal challenge.

Congestion

10. Rejecting criticism of the NNNPS, the DfT stated it is 'determined to maintain a top-quality strategic road network'. Yet the day after publishing the revised version, the DfT slipped out figures showing the worst traffic delays in recent history, with a 10.5% increase since 2019 alone⁶. But far worse is yet to come, with some of the DfT's National Road Traffic Projections core scenario showing congestion increasing by as much as 150% on motorways between 2025 and 2060⁷.
11. Responding to an earlier Transport Committee recommendation to model scenarios where current traffic levels are maintained or reduced, the government said its 'approach to decarbonisation is not to stop people travelling, it is about enabling people to do the same things differently and more sustainably'⁸. Yet the combination of record congestion and cuts to public transport services are reducing choice and leaving many stranded. Meanwhile credible alternatives are being sidelined.
12. For instance, the Transport Decarbonisation Plan (TDP) policy to increase vehicle occupancy was cancelled in September 2023, after being denigrated by the Prime Minister as 'compulsory car sharing'. By contrast, French concessionary autoroutes

³ [Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects \(NSIP\) reforms: action plan](#), DLUHC (2023)

⁴ Q50 in [Transport Committee Oral evidence: Strategic transport objectives, HC 84](#) (2023)

⁵ [Department for Transport 2022-23 - NAO departmental overview](#), NAO (2023)

⁶ [Travel time measures for the Strategic Road Network: January to December 2023 report](#), DfT (2024)

⁷ [National road traffic projections](#), DfT (2022)

⁸ [Strategic road investment: Government response to the Committee's sixth report](#), (2023)

have created a network of 200 car sharing hubs nationwide⁹, addressing cost of living, carbon and congestion pressures. Scotland and Northern Ireland have created bus lanes on motorways, improving and increasing bus and coach services. The NNNPS would be the place to include policies to enable choice by enabling higher occupancy and modal shift to public transport, before costly, disruptive and ultimately futile additions in road capacity. But this is ignored due to dogma.

Climate

13. The review of the NNNPS announced in July 2021 was justified by the current (2014) NNNPS predating net zero and 'new, more ambitious policies outlined in the transport decarbonisation plan'. The Climate Change Committee's (CCC's) 2023 Progress Report to Parliament stressed the importance of 'a systematic review of all current and proposed road schemes', with only those that 'meaningfully support cost-effective delivery of Net Zero and climate adaptation' taken forward¹⁰. Yet DfT flatly rejected undertaking any assessment and the revised NNNPS now reverts to the current pre net-zero carbon test. It undermines the TDP's first 'strategic priority' of modal shift alongside the wider cancelling of key TDP policies.
14. So as climate breakdown accelerates, this key sector is going into reverse. About 10% of UK's CO2 emissions come from driving on the SRN, while according to the NAO, 'transport-related emissions reduced by just 11%, the lowest of any sector' between 1990 and 2022. According to the Green Alliance's Net Zero tracker, 70% of the shortfall to meet the UK's 2030 climate target is transport¹¹, while Transport & Environment found that nearly half of European emissions in 2030 are expected to come from this 'problem child'¹².
15. The DfT seeks to argue that recent court decisions have 'approved' its approach to current carbon emissions. That misunderstands judicial review, which simply considers facts at the time of decision under challenge. With progress in other sectors also falling further behind, it is ever clearer roads policy imperils targets. Specifically paragraph 5.42 says carbon increases are allowable unless a scheme would in itself breach the UK's carbon budgets. According to the Greener Transport Council, 'Fundamentally, the NNNPS is being written to permit an increase in emissions when we are already not on-track to meet our future carbon budgets. The scale of this gap is not trivial and a programme of investment the size of RIS3 is not evidently compatible with our current carbon budget position.'¹³
16. National Highways touts its Net Zero Highways plan as ensuring its roads meet climate tests. Yet it has no separate target to cut road user emissions, despite these making the vast majority of emissions, while it has had to dial back claims about net zero materials for road-building¹⁴.

⁹ [Lift sharing sites on concessionary motorways](#), AFSA (2024)

¹⁰ R2023-148 in [2023 Progress Report to Parliament](#), CCC (2023)

¹¹ [Net zero policy tracker: March 2024 update](#), Green Alliance (2024)

¹² [Europe's transport sector set to make up almost half of the emissions in 2030](#), T&E (2024)

¹³ Joint letter dated 25 March 2024, to become available shortly on [Greener Transport Council](#)

¹⁴ [Net zero highways](#) and updates, National Highways (2021-2023)

17. Despite the record-breaking weather this winter, the adaptation policy is especially weak. The revised NNNPS relies upon the Third National Adaptation Programme, lambasted days later by the CCC for ‘fall[ing] far short of what is required’¹⁵. As a starting point, the second National Infrastructure Assessment called for 20 per cent of transport investment to be earmarked for adaptation¹⁶. But rail and local roads, which access to the SRN depends upon, are at particularly great risk due to being significantly older. Yet this adaptation will have significant carbon impacts too, allowance for which urgently needs to be made in carbon as well as investment strategy budgets.

Environment Act 2021: air quality & nature recovery targets

18. Following the Environment Act 2021 a wide range of new targets have been set, with interim targets set to apply as soon as 2028. These will be far more complex to interpret than climate targets, which have already caused a swathe of legal challenges. A few of these new targets are namechecked, many are ignored. However, what is utterly missing from the revised NNNPS is what these mean at the strategic (statement of need) or at the scheme (decision-taking) levels.

19. In urban areas traffic needs to be rapidly reduced and new sustainable travel infrastructure delivered to meet particulate targets. In many rural areas traffic will also need to be reduced, and new planting and structures around major roads delivered to reduce severance, fragmentation and roadkill, in order to meet species targets¹⁷. This should be reflected in the statement of need. At the scheme level, guidance is required on how to assess cumulative impacts, given many of the targets are population level based, whether for humans breathing dirty air, or red list species threatened with extinction. The NNNPS simply tells decision-makers to have due regard to some of the targets, which is utterly inadequate. National Highways’ Environment and Sustainability Strategy does not even mention them.

20. Despite the majority of road particulates now coming from brake, tyre and road wear, not exhausts, the DfT’s traffic projections ignore these sources. A Defra internal briefing noted with surprise that the ‘DfT have expressed concern about the abatement measures assumed for road transport’, specifically the need to reduce urban motor traffic by about a fifth to meet particulate targets. This was despite modal shift having ‘been stated as an objective in the DfT’s own plans’¹⁸. As ever, difficult facts are ignored.

Levelling up and devolution

21. Although it name checks Levelling Up, the NNNPS completely ignores the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, in particular its statutory statement of missions¹⁹. These set out what geographical disparities are to be reduced and how.

¹⁵ [Independent Assessment of the Third National Adaptation Programme](#), Climate Change Committee (2024)

¹⁶ [Second National Infrastructure Assessment](#), NIC (2024)

¹⁷ [Traffication](#), Paul Donald (2023)

¹⁸ Note on road traffic abatement measures, obtained by Client Earth via an information request.

¹⁹ [Statement of Levelling Up Missions](#), DLUHC (2024)

22. The most obvious contradiction is how road-building decreases public transport modal share, by using up scarce public funding as well as making driving more convenient. Modal shift enabled by investment shift is vital, with the Resolution Foundation highlighting urban public transport investment as critical to increase productivity²⁰. Major public transport schemes like the Leeds Trolley Bus failed to gain planning approval due to a lack of supportive national policy, which the NNNPS should be providing but fails to engage at all with²¹. By contrast the DfT's own research acknowledges 'a particular evidence gap relating to long-distance road investments'²², nonetheless the government asserts a strong need to deliver these.
23. Road investment and the car-dependent development it unlocks detracts from other missions such as health and pride of place. The Living with Beauty report found that '[e]very sector of the industry has told us, and our specialist working group and wider research has confirmed, that overly car-dominated places tend to be less attractive or popular places in which to spend time'²³.
24. Devolved nations, and most city regions, sub-national transport bodies and local authorities have set more ambitious climate targets than the UK as well as traffic reduction targets. While the NNNPS allows local transport models to be produced, these will always be 'swimming against the tide' of the national forecasts, none of which assume levelling up public transport or active travel will happen. That in turn minimises the network effects local sustainable transport schemes can generate to justify their investment. Paragraph 4.9 instructs inspectors to ignore national models and their assumptions.
25. DfT undertook to publish new guidance on local transport plans, including on securing quantifiable carbon reductions, a key proposal in the TDP, by 2022. This has been delayed before Parliament was told there was no longer a need to publish it²⁴. The legal challenge to Carbon Budget Delivery Plan revealed last month that the true reason the guidance has been stuck on a ministerial shelf was fear that it would lead to legal challenges of (road) infrastructure projects²⁵. Rather than there being strategic thinking and ambitious delivery to meet stretching targets, we are seeing evidence hidden to try to save the roads programme.
26. A change in the revised NNNPS limits the final two paragraphs 5.290 and 5.291 on adverse impacts on local transport infrastructure to relate to rail freight interchanges only. That means adverse impacts from road schemes on bus routes or cycle facilities can be skated over: another backwards step.

Road safety and vulnerable road users

27. National Highways is not set to meet its target to halve the number of people Killed or Seriously Injured on its network by 2025²⁶, as a milestone to reaching vision zero

²⁰ [Ending stagnation - The Inquiry](#), Resolution Foundation (2023)

²¹ [Leeds trolley vehicle system: Transport and Works Act order](#), DfT (2016)

²² P102 in [Exploring the economic benefits of strategic roads](#), DfT (2017)

²³ [Living with beauty: report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission](#), MHCLG (2020)

²⁴ [Local Transport Plans UIN 8495, tabled on 8 January 2024](#), Hansard

²⁵ CB1/545 in [Risk tables](#), DESNZ (2022), disclosed in legal proceedings in February 2024

²⁶ [Update on National Highways' safety KPI](#), Office of Rail and Road (2023)

Rather than commit this ambition into policy and what a goal of no deaths means in practice, such as designing out road danger by default, paragraph 4.59 simply requires a vague "due regard" to "contributing to an overall reduction" in the numbers killed or seriously injured.

28. As ORR highlights, 'the number of road casualties is heavily influenced by the amount of traffic using the roads': the problem is that the current approach of large schemes is not only expensive but it generates more traffic. Most of the forecast savings on the A66 scheme are cancelled out by additional collisions on other sections of road, for instance. This is another reason why traffic reduction rather than growth is required.
29. Regarding cycling, wheeling and walking, the 2024 revision removes any reference to active travel growth targets, replacing them with a reference to a policy that explicitly runs out in March 2025. There has never been any reference to the world class active travel network that the government committed to delivering by 2040. This impacts equestrians negatively too.
30. Although there are new references to active travel and plans for it, these are heavily caveated, with phrases like 'having appropriate regard...where appropriate' (paragraph 5.271), in case the ambivalence was not clear enough the first time around, and 'unless it is unsafe or unviable to do so'. The lack of modal shift targets or presumptions in favour of active travel infrastructure (unlike those that exist for road-building) make it easy for National Highways, etc, to continue to argue against high quality active travel facilities as being not viable given the expense or disruption, as it has done in recent schemes like the A47 and A428.

Next steps

31. The Parliamentary requirements of Part 2 of the Planning Act 2008²⁷ were not a model of clarity, even before they were amended. Nonetheless it is clear that the NNNPS cannot be designated until after the 'relevant period', which ends on 23 April, so long as the House of Lords does not pass a resolution against.
32. Like most stakeholders, TAN believes that the revised NNNPS is unfit for purpose, reducing clarity rather than delivering it. The devolution means the concept of national networks requires a refresh, while the setting of stretching environmental targets necessitate far greater up-front assessment of impacts and different ways of meeting need. An overarching transport NPS with regional transport NPSs, co-produced by DfT and sub-national bodies, would deliver better outcomes. In the interim, a slimmed down radically improved NNNPS is urgently needed.

Further information

Transport Action Network website: www.transportactionnetwork.org.uk

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²⁷ [Planning Act 2008](#)