HOUSE OF COMMONS

Transport Committee

Oral evidence: Work of National Highways, HC 1837

Wednesday 22 April 2026

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ruth Cadbury (Chair); Steff Aquarone; Dr Scott Arthur; Mrs Elsie Blundell; Jacob Collier; Olly Glover; Alex Mayer; Laurence Turner.

Questions 1–123

Witnesses

I: Gareth Rhys Williams, Chair, National Highways; Nick Joyce, interim Chief Executive Officer, National Highways; Elliot Shaw, Chief Customer & Strategy Officer, National Highways; Nicola Bell, Chief Capital Delivery Officer, National Highways; Duncan Smith, Chief Operating Officer, National Highways.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Gareth Rhys Williams, Nick Joyce, Elliot Shaw, Nicola Bell and Duncan Smith.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this morning's evidence session, where we will be looking at the work of National Highways, examining its strategic priorities and performance and discussing the third Road Investment Strategy. We really appreciate that several members of the senior leadership team at National Highways have put time aside to prepare for this and to come today. It is particularly good to welcome you, chair, as I believe this is your first appearance in front of the Committee. Could I ask you all please to introduce yourselves?

Gareth Rhys Williams: Thank you for holding this session; it is an important subject. I had a career in industry running engineering firms before I joined the Cabinet Office in 2016 as Government Chief Commercial Officer. I transitioned out of that to take over as chair of National Highways in April 2024, where I have been for two years.

Nick Joyce: I am the interim chief executive at National Highways.

Nicola Bell: I am the chief capital delivery officer at National Highways.

Duncan Smith: I am chief operating officer.

Elliot Shaw: I am chief customer and strategy officer at National Highways.

Q2 **Chair:** My first question is to Gareth. National Highways is entering the third road investment period with new leadership and an important delivery programme ahead. How are you ensuring continuity across leadership, decision making and strategic priorities?

Gareth Rhys Williams: That is a very good question. Since I joined we have renewed many of the NEDs on the board, so they will continue through; as you see, the executives here have been long-standing. Nick Joyce joined us after a mini competition from the Department for Transport, so he already knows a huge amount about National Highways and its work. We will shortly be starting a fair and open search for a permanent CEO replacement, which will take several months but we have enough time during that for Nick to settle in and contribute.

Q3 **Chair:** What is the timescale for that?

Gareth Rhys Williams: The process itself may take four, five, or six months, but then it depends on who is successful. When Nick won the role we were very lucky that he was available within the public sector, so there was no external notice period. If whoever wins the permanent role comes from the private sector and is currently in employment, then potentially we have to factor in a notice period. That is less the case if an internal candidate is successful. It is a binary issue between one or the other.

Q4 **Steff Aquarone:** Nick, you have recently taken the leadership role on an interim basis. What are your immediate priorities?

Nick Joyce: I have identified two immediate priorities. First, safety has to be top of the list. It is a prime imperative for the organisation to make sure that we continue to be focused on the safety of those who use or work on the network. Secondly, now that we are starting the third road investment period and delivering the Road Investment Strategy, this is a good time to make sure that the foundations are right, that we have the right plans, and that we set out our stall to outperform the metrics that are set out in RIS3.

Steff Aquarone: Before I come into a bit more detail on that, I know, Laurence, that you had a supplementary.

Q5 **Laurence Turner:** I have a question for Gareth. In respect of governance at National Highways, the ORR, Network Rail, Civil Aviation Authority and HS2 Limited all publish minutes of board meetings. Why does National Highways not do the same?

Gareth Rhys Williams: That is not something we have considered. I have inherited the role and it has not been top of my list of things to think about, but it is a good question. Let me write back to you when we have thought about this; it has not come up before.

Q6 **Laurence Turner:** The ICO’s definition document for wholly owned public companies suggests that those documents should be published, and other transport bodies have done so for 20 years. Now, I appreciate that you have not been in post for that time, but if it could be discussed at the board and this Committee updated on the outcome, that would be much appreciated.

Gareth Rhys Williams: Yes.

Q7 **Steff Aquarone:** Nick, back to you. You have these priorities of safety, timing, and getting the foundations right for RIS3. There must be some important decisions that will happen under your tenure as interim chief executive. Are there any that you already know need to happen after the permanent appointment?

Nick Joyce: Do you mean things that I would prefer—

Steff Aquarone: I mean strategic decisions where you think, “I can’t do that yet, we need the permanent appointment in place to do that.”

Nick Joyce: It may help if I explain how I am approaching the role. I am not treating this as an interim role where I am waiting for someone else to take over. I do not think that is the right approach, and it is not the right thing to do for the company. I am approaching it as the chief executive. There will be a smooth handover to a permanent person in due course, but I am not actively thinking about which decisions should be deferred or need to wait.

The road investment period has started, we are now in that five-year period, and we have big decisions to make; we are going to be publishing delivery plans and other action plans in the coming months, and it is really important that we get on and do that. We should not be losing time because of interim impermanence in one particular role.

Q8 **Steff Aquarone:** That is really clear, thank you. The delivery plan is coming up; that is a big strategic moment. What other big strategic decisions are you are facing?

Nick Joyce: Alongside that, there is the safety action plan, the customer delay strategy and other things. We are working with the Office of Rail and Road on how we will outperform targets during the five-year period. Those are huge decisions and will have most of my focus.

Q9 **Steff Aquarone:** Let us move on to the ORR; you are probably expecting questions on this. It has been reasonably critical, particularly on the issue of defining benefits and having a clear understanding of benefits, whether those are about schemes or strategies or overall approaches. How are you planning to address its concerns?

Nick Joyce: The role of the ORR in this system is critical. National Highways is entrusted with spending an awful lot of public money and delivering important economic support to the country and, as we have talked about, ensuring the safety of network users. I do not want to undermine the ORR's role in any way; the transparency that it brings is a key part of the system. We are now working with the ORR on how it will undertake the monitor role during the five-year period, what data it expects to see, what plans it expects to see and when, and those conversations are live as we speak. We cannot wait until year 2.5 to realise that we are adrift from the ORR, we need to get those foundations right this year.

Q10 **Steff Aquarone:** The ORR report made it clear that it is concerned about RIS3. Are there any obvious lessons you have reflected on? I know you were not here at the time, but coming into the role, are there lessons already learned that you think will improve your prospects? Please feel free to defer to your colleagues if you need.

Nick Joyce: Let me give you a first impression, and then I will ask Elliot to come in. One of the areas the ORR highlighted is around data and evidence, particularly around cost estimation and methodologies around productivity in relation to renewals and so on. We will come on to it, but a very significant amount of effort will be spent on renewals in this period; we must make we have agreed with the ORR on the right way to approach that as soon as we can.

Q11 **Steff Aquarone:** I am sure my colleagues will have questions on measurement in particular. If I could ask you to focus on the overall company-wide benefits management process, that would be really helpful at this stage.

Nick Joyce: Can I ask Elliot to come in on that?

Elliot Shaw: I will pick up on the ORR and its view of the deliverability of RIS3 as well as benefits management. The ORR's efficiency review looked at the deliverability and efficiency of our draft strategic business plan, which was our initial plan that went to the Government. The ORR suggested some amendments both to drive greater efficiency and greater deliverability. The Government, in agreeing RIS3, decided to take those on board. For example, the ORR said that some of our renewals plans around technology structures were too ambitious; in agreeing RIS3, we have dialled those back a little to make sure that the plans get that balance right. Our plans are ambitious, but also realistically deliverable. On the benefits management side, I would say that we have had a long engagement with the ORR over this and it has rightly pushed us to go further. We have long-established and strong processes around ensuring value for money in our work; we appraise all our work, first at the RIS level, where the RIS is assessed on whether it is delivering value for money for the taxpayer. RIS3 has come out and it is delivering very high value for money.

Secondly, we have value for money processes that are embedded throughout the organisation where decisions are appraised and evaluated. Again, one of the things that we work on with the ORR is that evaluation approach, making sure that we are checking whether the benefits we were expecting are delivered. We have been working with the ORR to make sure that with this benefits management, that realisation is as strong as it could be across the whole organisation.

Q12 **Steff Aquarone:** You talk about robust measurements and analysis processes being in place, but the ORR said that during the interim period it advised you to improve your process for identifying and measuring realised benefits across its portfolio. Which is right?

Elliot Shaw: I would say it is a bit of both. There are areas in our portfolio where it is quite difficult to measure benefits, and the ORR has rightly challenged us. To take one example, our delay KPI, the ORR has said, "Can you quantify more the impact of your activities to reduce delay?" We do huge amounts of activities to reduce delay; that is most of what Duncan's operations area does, but actually, what the ORR is after is whether we can quantify that so that we can be smart around how we decide where to put our effort. That is a good challenge and it is fair; it is not saying that there are other areas of the organisation where we do not have robust and well-defined quantification.

Q13 **Steff Aquarone:** I understand. Nick, if I can come back to you. I take Elliot's point that delay management is subject, of course, to the challenges of measurement and analysis, but one of the things the ORR particularly pulled out was not so much that you should be measuring this stuff better, it was about the big picture, beyond enhancements and individual project evaluation, and wanting to see a clear and more consistent approach to benefit realisation. How do you see that in your position?

Nick Joyce: I recognise the point. Let us step back; £27 billion in the roads investment period is a huge obligation for us to be entrusted with. Therefore, it is right that we are transparent and clear on those benefits. The ORR holds us to account for that. It is a healthy relationship and if we need to do more, then we will.

Q14 **Steff Aquarone:** I am sorry to push you, but do more on which part? If this is about the big picture, that is a lot of money. We want to make sure that £27 billion is spent in a way that absolutely maximises the benefit to the taxpayer. Has the ORR not understood the detail of how that works, or is it about bringing a number of different approaches to measurement up to the same level?

Nick Joyce: My first impression is that, with the increased investment in renewals, the increased focus on asset health and particularly with larger renewals, we need a stronger evidence framework in that area as opposed to, say, major enhancements on others.

Q15 **Steff Aquarone:** Okay, that is interesting. It helps because that is part of the changing shape of the portfolio.

Nick Joyce: The two go hand-in-hand.

Steff Aquarone: I am sure we will come back on that. Does anybody else want to add to this discussion before we move on? No? Thank you.

Q16 **Olly Glover:** One of the things the ORR was critical of in its efficiency review was the change that you have made from measuring performance against fixed targets to adopting target ranges. How do you respond to that criticism and what is the rationale for the change?

Elliot Shaw: The ranges reflect the inherent uncertainty around some of those KPIs. One of the things we have suggested is moving to ranges in a small number of areas; there are two or three areas where we have moved to ranges. That means it is a little more challenging for the ORR to monitor because there is less of a straight pass or fail number; there is a range of acceptability. We think it is a good approach. We have had discussions with the Department and the ORR and they agree that it is appropriate in a couple of areas. It is a model that is used in other sectors as well. We understand why there are concerns and it is part of where, as Nick said, we are looking to work with the ORR to evolve the oversight model in RIS3 because the nature of the programme is slightly different. It is important we learn and continue to improve.

Q17 **Olly Glover:** Some of the ORR’s comments are pretty damning. It has said that the ranges you have proposed are largely arbitrary. That is very strong language for the ORR, would you not say? Or are you saying that you have now reached a position of harmony and consensus with the ORR on this?

Elliot Shaw: It is strong language, and we recognise that we would want a stronger ability to project some of those KPIs. We are continuing to work on how we can project delay, but it is very difficult to model. What that has meant is that in those initial discussions, the ORR has challenged us and asked how robust the evidence base is. We do not have a perfect delay model; I would not claim that. So that has been part of the debate, and as we have looked at work through RIS3 with the ORR and the DFT, that has all been factored into the consideration on where the DFT has come out on the final RIS.

Q18 **Laurence Turner:** A number of capital schemes were cancelled in 2024. In the National Highways annual report the recorded accounts were down in value by just under half a billion pounds with no assets delivered. Was there any value to the public that can be carried forward from the work that was done on these schemes prior to cancellation?

Nicola Bell: A number of schemes were cancelled. We work very closely with the Department for Transport to close those projects effectively once the decision is made. But our role is to operate, maintain and improve the network within the funding that we are given, and that requires careful financial management. We do all we can to deliver value for money and we make the utmost effort to close projects down at the safest and most cost-effective stage, but the decision to cancel projects is one for the Department for Transport.

Q19 **Laurence Turner:** In terms of the value that can be taken from the experience, does the work that was undertaken on those particular schemes provide any future benefit to National Highways or, indeed, the public?

Nicola Bell: As I say, the schemes are closed down as cost-effectively as possible; we remain committed to the safety and maintenance of the network while providing value for money for the taxpayer.

Q20 **Laurence Turner:** We might be tempted to conclude that perhaps there is no value that can be taken from the experience.

Nicola Bell: Costs can be incurred for a range of reasons: whether we have had to do exploratory work to understand the project, or whether we have made commercial commitments or carried out preparatory works. There might be costs linked to land. But ultimately, when the decision is taken to cancel the project, our role is to close it down as effectively as we can.

Q21 **Laurence Turner:** During that process of development costs being incurred, I understand that some factors may have been overlooked at an early stage of maturity. There might be construction cost inflation or other factors beyond your control. At what point in that process do the red lights start flashing and you determine that something is potentially going wrong with these projects, outwith the usual cost variance?

Nicola Bell: We have a very strong governance process in place, particularly for larger projects. For example, if a project is over £500 million, we are responsible for reporting to the Department for Transport; we remain close with it throughout the course of the projects, letting it know how things are going on schedule cost and risk. Those would be the classic cases that would flash red with regard to where the project is heading. But ultimately, we have to make sure that what we are delivering is within the rules and that it offers value for money.

Q22 **Laurence Turner:** In its efficiency review, the ORR said that there had been a substantial escalation in some project costs during RP2. What was the response of the Department during the last road period?

Nicola Bell: If I take the whole enhancement portfolio in Roads Period 2, it was not easy to deliver because we faced several challenges. There was the pandemic to deal with, high inflation, various planning challenges and, indeed, the cancellations you have just mentioned. Despite that, we opened 30 enhancements across the country, benefiting communities and, as our work does, unlocking economic growth. We acknowledge that costs rose largely due to those factors outwith our control, such as inflation, but there were also things within our control—for example with asset conditions—where we have sought to learn lessons. When we are building a large enhancement, we may come across something in terms of asset condition, for example drainage, where we realise it is in a worse condition than we expected, and it is only right and proper that we fix that asset while we are there. It is those lessons that we are embedding into RIS3 going forward.

It is also worth while to note that we were set quite challenging post-efficient budgets. Our company achieved over £2 billion-worth of efficiencies, but those efficiencies did not match the cost increases. To give the Committee some assurance, we have assessed those challenges and learned from them. For example, we have re-baselined some costs to be more resilient to those inflationary-type pressures, and reviewed how other sectors do this, taking those lessons on board so that we have more realistic budgets. As part of that, we are looking at new commercial models that might be able to support us because managing the supply chain is also a large part of our work, given that they deliver for us.

Q23 **Laurence Turner:** You have described changes that have been made within National Highways. Has the DFT changed the way that it solicits information, or otherwise exercises cost monitoring and control?

Nicola Bell: A change has recently been made to the governance structure within the Department for Transport to make sure that it is particularly monitoring those projects that are spending large amounts of money and making sure that the health of those projects is right. That is all about learning from, as I say, things such as Roads Period 2 and setting such projects up for success going forward.

Q24 **Laurence Turner:** What are the changes that the DFT has made in terms of this?

Nicola Bell: As one example, we used to go along to one investment committee. That has now been split into a couple of committees, one of which focuses on delivery. Once a project is through its approval process, it will then go to the delivery committee, leaving the investment committee to make those initial investment decisions.

Q25 **Laurence Turner:** Finally, we have talked about the relationship between National Highways and the DFT, but what is the Treasury's role in this? Do you talk to the Treasury directly? I understand that it may be about to take a wider interest in infrastructure costs across the board. Are you engaging with that?

Nicola Bell: Elliot, do you want to pick that one up?

Elliot Shaw: We talk to the Treasury, both with the Department and directly, in a range of different forms. Obviously, a lot of conversations with the Treasury recently have been around RIS3, which is a big funding decision for the Treasury and Government as a whole. But similarly, we also have a lot of ongoing work with NISTA, which sits within the Treasury, and the growth elements within the Treasury, in thinking for example about potential future growth opportunities. So it is absolutely at the table when a lot of these decisions are made.

Q26 **Laurence Turner:** Please forgive the question, but why would the Treasury wish to meet and have discussions directly without the DFT in the room?

Elliot Shaw: It can be more efficient. Sometimes it is interested in particular schemes and particular opportunities. Generally, we have discussions with the DFT in the room, and to be honest it is often just a practical thing to do with diaries and availability more than anything else. But I would say that there is an open relationship between all three parties.

Chair: We will go over to Elsie now on corporate targets and metrics.

Q27 **Mrs Blundell:** The Strategic Road User Survey findings have shown an increase in average delay, traffic growth and incident numbers. I have a very broad question, some elements of which we have touched on already: what would you say has been going wrong, and what steps are National Highways taking to raise user satisfaction rates? Gareth, may I start with you?

Gareth Rhys Williams: I might invite one of my colleagues in on this. A number of these factors are interrelated. When I joined, I thought—perhaps naïvely—that it would be possible to predict what the mathematical change would be in the other factors, if one of the factors that you talked about moved. We could then discuss whether we were doing better or worse than that adjusted change. I was educated on that.

It is quite complicated. Let us say, for instance, that congestion in London around the M25 gets very bad; you would expect delays to get worse there. On the other hand, congestion around London would not apply to Exeter or anywhere else. This is partly why Elliot was talking about ranges earlier; you have to do micro-level measurements around the country to be able to compare and contrast and find out whether you are doing better or worse.

Elliot Shaw: I will pick up on the targets. Obviously I recognise that in RIS2, we did not meet our SRUS target, but we have actually had a very positive story over the last year. In RIS2, we had an SRUS target of, I think, 71%, and our end of RIS2 target was just below 68.6%. We believe there were a number of reasons, as you say, that we missed that; delay increased on the network more than we anticipated, and we saw an increased number of incidents. At the end of—

Q28 **Mrs Blundell:** I am sorry to interrupt, but why? What would you say are the broad reasons for that?

Elliot Shaw: They are interrelated. It is very difficult; we are looking into the increased number of incidents. We think some could be due to the ageing vehicle fleet and people potentially not maintaining their vehicles. Again, Duncan can talk more about what is being seen out on the network, but during the last couple of years the increased number of incidents, breakdowns, and so on has been stark, and that has had a knock-on impact. We also had a significant amount of roadworks on the network at the end of RIS2. We had the NEAR—the National Emergency Area Retrofit—programme across some of the busiest stretches of the network, the M1, the M25, and so on, and we think that had a disproportionate impact on satisfaction rates.

The positive news is that over the last year we have seen increases in satisfaction; currently our rate is 71.4%, which is an almost 3% increase. We set a 1% target this year, so that has been exceeded. That increase is partly because delays have dropped due to reduced roadworks on the network and reduced restrictions. But we are also seeing increasing satisfaction in the management of roadworks. We are putting a huge amount of effort into raising standards and consistency in how we roll out roadworks across the network, and that may be coming through. One of the biggest drivers of the increase has been satisfaction with road surface; that is due partly to what we are doing, but the weather can also play a role. We have had periods of unseasonably good weather, and that can help in terms of satisfaction rates.

Q29 **Mrs Blundell:** It is good to hear some positives; I am sorry to dwell on the negatives. I am keen to hear from the others, maybe Duncan, Nick and Nicola, or anyone who wants to come in, on the factors that are making it difficult for you to meet performance targets. Obviously, we have heard about ageing vehicle fleets, roadworks, and the weather. Is there anything else that anybody wants to mention in terms of why things are challenging?

Duncan Smith: You mentioned incidents and their increasing nature; as Elliot said, that is due to a range of factors. Actually, as Gareth described, incidents do not always drive dissatisfaction. If you are involved in an accident on the motorway, our traffic officers are there to assist you, and those that are surveyed after having had that assistance are actually delighted that someone has come to help on what was probably their worst day of the month or even the year. Clearly, there is an impact on traffic that is held behind, which is why we are very proud that we have been achieving the highest ever incident clearance performance in the 11 years since we became an arm's length body. We are also achieving our highest ever attendance at incidents on smart motorways. As Gareth described, it is a complex ecosystem with many different measures that are driving incident numbers and having a knock-on effect on customer satisfaction.

Nick Joyce: Can I add something about my first impressions in the past few weeks? We can talk about the metrics, but I have been very impressed in talking to National Highways staff about their focus on network users and customers. Whether they are traffic officers or working in the contact centres and operation centres, you will frequently hear the phrase, "I just want to get these people moving again." I have been very impressed with the approach that people within the organisation take.

Q30 **Mrs Blundell:** Moving on to a different target, National Highways is forecast to slightly miss its corporate carbon target for this year. I would be really interested to understand why this has proved challenging and whether you are still committed to reaching net zero for your own operations by 2030.

Elliot Shaw: Shall I start off? I am sure my colleagues will fill in. As context, I would say that we have some very stretching corporate carbon targets, so the aim to get to corporate carbon net zero by 2030 is very stretching—

Q31 **Mrs Blundell:** I am sorry to interrupt; it is an aim rather than a target.

Elliot Shaw: It is a target.

Mrs Blundell: Okay.

Elliot Shaw: It is not part of our RIS3 targets, but it is something that we have said we are looking to achieve; it is within our environmental strategy, so we are going to need to work out how and whether we can meet that target over the coming years.

In terms of that target, we have made some really impressive strides. Over RIS2, we recognised that we did not meet the target; we had a 56% reduction versus, I think, a 17% or 18% baseline, and we got to 51%. Similarly, we envisage that we are just going to miss the interim year target. It is a slightly different measure; it is a 75% reduction versus a different baseline, and we are getting to 73%. So there has been a lot of progress, driven by decarbonisation across the fleet, the estate, our travel and so on, but some things have made it difficult. For instance, we have seen higher traffic officer mileage than we originally envisaged; that again goes back to increased incidents. At the moment, a lot of traffic officer vehicles tend to be plug in hybrids; they are not full electric vehicles, so if traffic officers are having to do more mileage, that adds more carbon. In RIS2, particularly, we saw a slower uptake of electric vehicles from vehicle hire firms; it was more difficult to get people to use an electric vehicle when travelling to work, and some people were in a traditional ICE vehicle. One issue at the end of RIS2 is that we have been understanding our assets better; we found some more lighting on the network, and that shifted the baseline as well. A variety of things factor into this, but those are probably the biggest factors. I would say that fleet transition is probably the most challenging issue, particularly for our traffic officer vehicle fleet, which plays a safety critical role; the mileage in that is obviously driven by what happens on the network.

Q32 **Mrs Blundell:** Duncan, it would be helpful to hear from you whether there are plans to change that by investing in the fleet; but first, do you think the net zero target for National Highways is still achievable by 2030?

Duncan Smith: We have over 1,000 dedicated traffic officers whose job is to make sure that people get on their journeys as safely and efficiently as possible. As Elliot says, they are attending more incidents than ever, and we need to equip those colleagues with vehicles that are capable of doing the job. As you can imagine, it is not just about getting to the scene; in some cases, they have to remove vehicles from the highway, which can involve dragging overturned vehicles and righting them, or pulling immobilised cars on to the hard shoulder, so they need a vehicle that is suitable for the job. So far the most commercially available vehicle is a plug-in hybrid. We are doing extensive trialling with other fully electric vehicles, but they need a 24/7 capability, because when colleagues come in at the end of their shift another colleague immediately relieves them and goes back out in the same vehicle. Then there is the challenge of fast chargers at our motorway depots. As you can imagine, most of our depots are in quite remote places, in between stretches of motorway junctions to ensure that incidents can be reached as quickly as possible, and the power grid is just not sufficient in those areas to supply high-capacity chargers. So we are having to balance carefully between hybrids, which have a greener credential than a full petrol or diesel vehicle, against increasing the amount of fleet so that when one vehicle is being charged at the depot, another one is out on the road doing the job. It is a balance.

Apart from the traffic officer vehicles, 100% of our vehicles are full EV: our inspectors and our pool cars are all fully electric. As I have said, we have a number of fully electric traffic officer vehicles on trial and are working very closely with motor manufacturers to bring a replacement vehicle to market. We are committed to the Government target of decarbonising the fleet, but it is a balance between what is commercially available and achieving those targets.

Q33 **Chair:** Can I come in on this question of targets and performance? You are working within the context of a forecast mileage rise of 12% on the SRN and a national rise of 10% over all types of roads. I accept that you are given that forecast; your target for drivers is to keep the flow of traffic moving. How do you address that challenge given that we have long since moved away from predict and provide?

Elliot Shaw: Our RIS3 target is to make sure that delays on the network are no worse than at the end of RIS2; as you say, that cannot be achieved just by increasing capacity. It goes back to the operational measures that we have mentioned. Incident clearance is absolutely critical and, as Duncan said, that is at the highest ever rate. We need to understand where the delay hotspots are on the network. Nicola is leading a number of significant programmes, and we are shifting to smaller schemes, many of which will target congestion pinch points. We are also looking at behaviour change; for instance, the TRIP campaign is about making sure that people check their vehicles to avoid breaking down and creating delay on the network. There are a number of things that we can do, but it is going to be a very challenging target to meet.

Duncan Smith: One of the reasons why we are delighted that we have been given the renewals settlement for RIS3—as well as the operational elements that Elliot has described—is because it ensures that the roads we operate remain fully usable, that there are no restrictions on our structures and that our roads are always available for our customers to use. If traffic volume is increasing, the one thing we definitely do not want is to see our assets deteriorating to a point where they are an impediment to smooth journeys. So that increase from around £4.5 billion in RIS2 to £8.5 billion in RIS3 is a tremendous support.

Gareth Rhys Williams: One of the things that really struck me when I joined the business—which you think of as being about motorways and major roads—is the amount of tech and effort that goes into maximising flow. As you say, Chair, the days of just building more roads have long gone, but at the same time demand continues to grow. Joining from the outside, I was surprised by the active management of the network to maximise flow, maximise capacity, reduce delays, and increase average speed. I have a statistic on this. We went on a visit to South Mimms, the operating centre for the south-east. The colleague who runs the operation centre said, “In the last month,” I cannot remember which month it was, “We have automatically set 2 million signals in order to maximise flow.” I thought that was a startling number, but it shows the degree of productivity of the highways team in order to get the flow that you are talking about.

Q34 **Mrs Blundell:** Turning to funding, the Minister for the Future of Roads noted that it is this Government’s intention to set a multi-year funding settlement; for now, however, you are left with a one-year interim funding settlement. What impact did receiving that settlement, rather than a multi-year settlement, have for 2025-26? What impact did it have on your planning and delivery for RIS3? Elliot, do you want to start off?

Elliot Shaw: Yes, I can, although Nick may have some views on the interim year. We are obviously very conscious that we have had two RIS settlements, but with a new Government coming in and the prospect of a period of financial reviews including a spending review, it would not have been ideal to agree a multi-year settlement that potentially might be unpicked a matter of months later. The interim year was a pragmatic approach, and it enabled us to align with broader Government timescales in agreeing the five-year settlement that we now have with RIS3. I would say I speak for everyone in saying that it is fantastic to have RIS3 in place and to get back to the five-year settlement. It makes a huge difference to us, to our supply chain and to the industry as a whole; it enables everyone to plan, and that is what drives efficiency, certainty and capability development. While the interim year has not necessarily been easy or ideal, it was pragmatic and the right thing to do at the time, and it has enabled us to get to where we are.

Q35 **Mrs Blundell:** I will come to Nick in a moment, but just quickly, do you think that the one-year settlement has had more of an impact on road user experience and safety than a multi-year one?

Elliot Shaw: No, I do not think it has had an impact on safety. Performance has been very strong over the interim year. We agreed 23 targets with the Government and we have met 19 of them, so if you look across the range, we have delivered a lot.

Getting back to the five years will help us plan and deliver in a better way; I will not say there has been no impact but, working closely with the DFT, we have managed our way through it very well.

Q36 **Mrs Blundell:** You mentioned that it will have an impact on things being planned better in the future. Could you speak a little more about that in terms of the lessons you have taken from the interim period? How could things be better planned and developed, and maybe better sequenced, in the future?

Elliot Shaw: When you have a five-year plan, it enables you to work backwards. For example, delivering the scale of the infrastructure that we are talking about takes multiple years. Not only do we need to start the formal planning process, but internally, we need to plan; potentially we need to plan our capability and the supply chain capability. If we are having conversations with the supply chain, and they know what is coming three or four years down the line, they can shape themselves to meet our needs. It is about that clarity. There has probably been a broad sense of where we were going; we knew that the pivot towards renewals was coming. But if it is there in black and white, as it is with the RIS, everyone across the wider industry has that certainty to plan ahead.

Q37 **Mrs Blundell:** Nick, do you have comments on the funding? I will then open it up to others.

Nick Joyce: In terms of the interim year, I would echo the point that Elliot made; if we were doing one year, and another one year, one year, and another one year, that would clearly be deeply inefficient. The organisation has had the benefit of doing one year while knowing we are about to embark on five. A lot of the planning for that one year was on the basis that it was year one in a five-year period, so as Elliot said it was looked at in the context of long-term planning, focussing on renewals and so on. While it would have been nice to have the five years automatically, as Elliot said, you need to have confidence in that arrangement and it needs to match the spending review cycle. I have not observed a massive hangover from the one-year settlement.

Nicola Bell: I would add that during that year, we kept progressing the important works that were going on around the network. In the area I look after, we are measured on whether we have started our works on time or opened them on time. These are projects that can last for three, four, or five years. During that interim period, we opened the two that we were meant to and we started on the two that we were meant to. So it allowed us to continue, and as Elliot said, it is really important to keep the sector going for our supply chain.

Chair: Jacob will now move on to the third Road Investment Strategy.

Q38 **Jacob Collier:** RIS3 represents a significant shift away from new roads to renewals over the next five years. Nick, how prepared are you as an organisation to deliver it successfully?

Nick Joyce: RIS3 is hugely important for us. As our chair referenced earlier, there are a number of factors at play; demand is forecast to increase by 12% by 2035, and we have an ageing set of assets that need careful attention. There is also the impact of climate change on both network performance and our assets, which creates a challenging environment. We are comfortable that the RIS3 set out by the Government gives us the ability to address those challenges. It also gives us a tough performance framework within which we must strike the balance between different things. Duncan talked earlier about the £8.5 billion now being spent on renewals, which is a significant increase. That is something newer for the organisation, and our increased focus on structures—we have 15 renewal schemes that will cost above £50 million each—is of a very different nature in renewing the network. Duncan, do you want to talk about how we are approaching renewals in particular?

Duncan Smith: We have been increasing our work on renewals year on year since late 2019 and 2020. If I go back to the beginning of RIS2, we were probably investing around £700 million a year, and that has increased every year since then. It has been year on year growth along a very steady glide path from £4.5 billion in RIS2 to £8.5 billion in RIS3, rather than a big step change. We have prepared by increasing our own internal capability while also signalling to our supply chain so that they are ready. As part of the efficiency review that Elliot mentioned, the ORR commissioned an independent survey of our supply chain to assess their readiness. It concluded that they were ready and prepared to deliver on our targets. That is not to say it is without challenge; competition for skills in the construction sector globally is a key risk. But the five-year settlement that we have described allows our supply chain to invest in early talent, training programmes, plant and equipment to ensure that we can deliver those targets. This is a vital investment to ensure that our strategic roads remain open. Much of our network was built in the '60s and '70s, at a time when traffic volume was much lower and when vehicles were on average half the weight they are today. The assets have performed very well over their life, but they now need that increased renewal focus, and that will persist into RIS4 and even RIS5.

Q39 **Jacob Collier:** At the moment there are contracts on assets within the private sector that are going to be coming over to yourselves within the first period of RIS3. What are you doing to prepare for that transition? There could be a situation where these assets are not returned to you in the condition that you would expect. How are you planning for that possibility?

Duncan Smith: We have a number of what are called design, build, finance, operate, or DBFO, contracts that were let 20 or so years ago under a Government initiative to ensure that the cost of building these roads was not automatically recognised in Government accounts. Obviously we have seen this coming for some time and have worked very hard to ensure that we understand the condition of the assets and that contractors or private sector organisations are held to their contractual obligations. We have carried out a series of asset inspections and surveys to ensure that the asset life that is returned to National Highways is as per the contract intended, which is normally that an appropriate serviceable life is left. In the run-up to several of those coming back, we held retention funds in case those last renewals were not done. At the beginning of this month we received four of those routes back into our ownership, and I am delighted to say that the asset condition was exactly as dictated by the contractual obligations. We have been assessed by other Government bodies and the Treasury as an exemplar in the hand-back and hand-over process, and we are working with other colleagues across Government to share our experience and learning.

Q40 **Steff Aquarone:** I brought up the ORR's critique of the need for a company-wide standard of benefits management approach earlier. It is easy to think that that applies to new big schemes and having standardised those, but renewals are a little tricky because the benefit arguably could be the road does not fail. Are we on track for having an organisation-wide standard benefits management framework-y thing, whatever that is, before or as we enter into the start of RIS3?

Duncan Smith: We are working with colleagues in the ORR, and Treasury in fact, as the measure is around productivity rather than a traditional value for money. As you rightly say, you can measure the benefit of an enhancement project that Nicola's team may deliver by economic growth, reduced delay, and increased safety: you had a bridge one night then a series of nights later you have a new bridge, but there is no betterment other than the fact that it has 20 or 50 years life left in it, whereas before it did not. The way that we are working up that value for money is more around productivity benchmarking and demonstrating that, as we continue through the roads period, we get ever more efficient in the delivery of those schemes because they are highly repetitive. We are doing 5,000 miles of road surface replacements across the five years, so a unit cost measure of how we are getting more effective at delivering that is a great surrogate for value for money.

Elliot Shaw: Just to clarify, we have an organisation-wide value for money framework and an organisation-wide benefits management approach. What ORR is challenging is that it is the application of that in this very diverse set of activities. Some of that is easier in big projects, for example, that a lot of those sorts of techniques have grown out of and, as Duncan says, we are trying to apply them in the different circumstances. I would not want to give the impression that there is not anything there and it is a free-for-all, there absolutely is, but it is about the application of that, given the changing nature and evolution of us maturing as an organisation and the changing nature of what we do.

Q41 **Steff Aquarone:** Then it is the productivity of the undertaking, not the asset or the pound invested; the productivity of the works, the programme, even the contractor, or what are you measuring the productivity on?

Duncan Smith: It is a unit cost—so, viscerally, how many pounds per kilometre of tarmac you lay, for example. Surface replacement is easier because it is a big number and it is relatively homogenous. Trying to get a productivity measure for structures replacement is harder because the structures were all built at different times and under different standards; therefore one waterproof scheme is not directly comparable. But when you take a big dataset, those differences start to level out and we can derive useful data. It is not precise, but it will show trends.

Q42 **Steff Aquarone:** That makes sense, but you could still be doing something in a very efficient way that does not stack up in terms of benefits. Are you confident that this layers up to having a way of looking across the whole organisation and saying, "Yes, we are maximising the benefit potential across all the work that we do"?

Duncan Smith: That is where it comes to Elliot's point, where the work we do in renewals is feeding into that overall. You are right, there is an element of counterfactual that needs to be considered; so it is the negative benefits that you are negating, as opposed to the ones that you are adding.

Nicola Bell: Unplanned closures were mentioned earlier: how you then put the value on if the bridge failed and you no longer have the motorway. It is counting that to then say that actually we must replace this to give the level of service that communities expect.

Steff Aquarone: There is lots of nodding; you seem confident.

Elliot Shaw: Yes, and when you put it at that organisation-wide and take it back to that RIS level—that five-year plan—there is a huge amount of analysis done around that. All that economic analysis assesses whether that overall investment is delivering value for money, and what the different elements of it deliver as well. So yes, at that organisation-wide and overall plan level, there is a lot there.

Q43 **Chair:** Asking completely parochially, the M4 elevated section over the A4, do those productivity elements also factor in delays and productivity issues for other stakeholders?

Elliot Shaw: Absolutely. In our value for money analysis, for example when we are looking at a scheme and assessing it, we look at the wider impact. So we look at the delay to customers, potential knock-on impacts on communities, and so on. As ever, the challenge is quantifying some of that. We do not just blindly use a BCR number; there is a judgment that goes in, and then there is also obviously that recognition at a scheme level.

You are talking about knock-on impacts and so on, and one of the things that we have been spending a lot of time on recently, going back to those big renewals, is looking at how we assess more systematically the knock-on impacts on the customer, and community impacts of those schemes. So we have been developing effectively new processes to really make sure that we rigorously assess that as that profile of work changes, and I am sure Nicola can talk about that.

Chair: To be fair, you and your contractors have learned a lot about how to do that project, which will be ongoing quicker and with less disruption. I accept that there will never be no disruption.

Nicola Bell: It is also about the careful planning of the works, for example the methods of construction that you might use. Take the recent works that we have done on the M25 Junction 10, where we have actually used a lot of materials that have been built off-site; it is a very tight, constrained area there. You have to keep the M25 open but actually bringing in components and not constructing them on-site is a far more efficient way of doing things. So you are absolutely right, we are learning all the time to improve the way that we do things.

Q44 **Olly Glover:** Are there any risks to delivering RIS3 with the funding that you have been allocated?

Nick Joyce: I will give you an overview. There are plenty of risks over a five-year period and we talked earlier about some of the risks that crystallised in the second roads period, whether that was inflation or other things. But the funding allowance recognises that there is a risk, and there is a risk allocation in there to manage risks. That is not infinite, but the judgment of ourselves, the ORR and the Department is that that is proportionate to manage the risks. We will have to keep watching that as we go through. Elliot, do you want to give a bit more detail on that?

Elliot Shaw: There are clearly a lot of risks as you go forward, both in the nature of the programme that is being delivered, but also events around us. Obviously, we saw inflation in RIS2 that potentially could be further inflation coming over future years. We look to build both the RIS and the RIS system in a way that can manage with some of those shocks. As Nick says, there is a risk allocation within there so we can deal with some changes within the RIS to some extent. If those changes and those challenges get beyond that, we have mechanisms to work with the Department and ORR to change control of the RIS, and actually look at how we make sure that we stay within our budget, or potentially alter the budget if needed. Again, we did that quite effectively in RIS2 to manage changes there so I would hope we can manage our way through it, come what may.

Q45 **Olly Glover:** Are you already thinking about the impact of inflation on construction costs, and the potential impact it might have on RIS3?

Elliot Shaw: I would say it is early days, but absolutely. We had our executive meeting last week and if you look at global events, you can see that there is the potential for further inflation to come. It is early days, so I cannot say we have factored any of that in or we are necessarily seeing that yet, but of course we think about it.

Q46 **Olly Glover:** When you received the RIS3 funding settlement, was there anything that caused you to have to defer planned works or scale back some of the ambition? If that was something that you had to do, where has that had the greatest impact?

Elliot Shaw: When you are setting a RIS there are always trade-offs. Twenty-seven billion pounds is a fantastic investment and we are very pleased to see it. There are obviously areas across our entire programme where, if we had had more money, we could have done more, whether that is on the renewal side or on certain investments, and so on. We have had to make choices everywhere but it is still a very good settlement, so it is part of the nature of coming to an agreement.

Q47 **Alex Mayer:** Your strategy talks about a shift towards renewals. To what extent does that mean that you have to change your ways of working, and do you have the right staff in place with the right skills for the future?

Duncan Smith: It is a rebalance, not a paradigm shift. As I said earlier, we have been delivering over £1 billion-worth of renewals every year for the last few years. It is seeing an increase because the asset needs it, and we have had to grow some of our own teams in order to address that increase. We have also signalled that to our supply chain so they can grow.

The renewals programme, if you like, is made up of probably about 1,000 schemes every year, many of which are very small. I imagine of five nights of resurfacing, many customers will not even notice because it will be done through overnight works, so it is a high volume of lower value schemes but put as a package.

The thing that really distinguishes RIS2 from RIS3 is not the fact that we are doing a renewals programme, it is that there is much more of it and there are an increased number of larger renewals: significant structures that need much greater intervention rather than short duration works. I will perhaps hand over to Nicola, who can talk about one of those.

Nicola Bell: That is a great question about the best use of the skills that we actually have in the company. If you think about the experience you have had both in Roads Period 1 and Roads Period 2, you had quite a lot of the enhancements there. They were complex for many reasons, not just from an engineering perspective, but you have had to go through a planning process with a complex stakeholder environment and engage with the community when you are going to be in their patch for what can sometimes be five or more years.

Duncan and I are really making sure that when we have those large-scale renewals, our teams are engaging early and we are actually taking some of those projects and delivering them on behalf of our colleagues in operations. That is really making sure of the best use of skills because you have people who have been doing some of that and it is best to use them in this way. An example that we have been working on recently is the replacement of seven of the bridges up the M6. You know that is a long project, you are going to be there for something like four years trying to deliver that in an efficient way and, touching on Elliot's earlier point, we are really making sure that we understand what the impact is on communities, and developing an impact assessment so that we can design those works in the most careful way: what is the impact on diversion routes? What is the impact when, perhaps for safety reasons, you have to do overnight closures? So just really making the best use of the skills that we have for the workload that is now in front of us.

Q48 **Alex Mayer:** Thank you. In terms of economic growth, the strategy mentions the Oxford-Cambridge corridor and Brabazon, for example, where there is going to be a new town in the west, and that is important for economic growth. Do you see it as your role in a sense to be there to get everything in place to allow these new towns and areas to develop, or do you see your role as making sure that once they are there, people will be able to get to and from them in a convenient way? Is it about now or is it about the future?

Elliot Shaw: We see our role as an enabler of growth and housing. Roads and transport only exist for a broader purpose, and one of those is to create a well-functioning society that needs economic growth and housing. We are working very closely with the Department for Transport and MHCLG on those in particular in the new towns programme because we want to try to enable those new towns that Government have planned. We are trying to understand what the actual transport needs are, both from ourselves and the likes of Network Rail, and what would be needed to unlock those sites. So it has to come early in the planning, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Q49 **Alex Mayer:** What contributions do you think a renewals heavy programme can make for additional capacity?

Duncan Smith: By their nature renewals do not increase the capacity of the road, they reduce the future propensity to restrict usage. As I said earlier, much of the renewals programme is delivered at night so that the impact on customers is lessened, but its nature is to ensure that the road remains usable in the future as opposed to increasing capacity. It is an essential part of a future decarbonising of the road network that we have surfaced roads, so as we get prepared for a fully electric fleet we need good quality roads for those vehicles to drive over. But maybe I am not understanding the question?

Q50 **Alex Mayer:** Are all of your renewals like for like?

Duncan Smith: Yes, absolutely.

Q51 **Alex Mayer:** Is there nothing different about the way you might, I don't know, put back a road where something had gone a bit wrong?

Duncan Smith: I see. We constantly evolve our standards and a good example might be climate adaptation. If we are replacing a drain that may have been built in the '70s, we will now build it to a new design standard that has climate adaptation as part of it to ensure that the network is able to drain effectively, given the changes in weather conditions. We have seen changes in our safety standards and parapets on bridges will be built differently to the ones that they replace. In terms of capacity for road users there is no change, but in terms of longevity and quality they will be better than the roads that they have replaced.

Q52 **Chair:** We have some active travel questions coming later, but while we are on this subject, where you are renewing infrastructure, what capacity is there to enhance the road network for other road users? That may be local communities needing to cross a road by car or active travel along the highway and across junctions. Has that priority and expectation changed, and what scope is there to do that within renewals?

Duncan Smith: We will always look at those opportunities and it will mean a hybrid scheme. The renewals case is based on a like for like replacement but there are other funding options available within the RIS.

Q53 **Chair:** Does the funding have to come from elsewhere if there is an expectation for that?

Duncan Smith: Yes. There is a great example up in Nottingham, on the A52 between Queen's Medical Centre and the Priory roundabout. That was a road, street lighting and drainage that all needed renewing because they were end of life, but as part of that scheme we have used designated funds to replace the road with the addition of a cycleway. That blended model allows the increased use of active travel while not taking away from the funding that is there for the pure asset replacement.

Q54 **Chair:** Is there ever any scope for doing that within the envelope of that particular scheme, such as—I don't know, dare I say it—turning some verge, which obviously has to be maintained anyway, into a space for walking and cycling?

Duncan Smith: We will consider the needs or the specifics of a location, clearly—

Q55 **Chair:** Who defines the need? Is it just you or do you do it in conjunction with the local authorities?

Duncan Smith: We work very closely with local stakeholders and, as I say, in RIS2 we had a very extensive user and community fund where, through working with those local bodies, we understood those needs. The case I described in Nottingham was as a result of local authority and local user groups feeding in.

Chair: That was additional funding.

Duncan Smith: It is important to recognise that this is a high-speed road network and, where there is a degree of separation allowed for pedestrians and non-motorised users, we will look at the verges and hard shoulders. It is not always available because the vast majority of the renewals programme will be on motorways, for example.

Chair: Yes, obviously I accept motorways are different. I am thinking of A roads that come within your responsibility, that are often the only route for many road users within communities from one junction to the next and for active travel. There may be no alternative than to take part of that journey along or even across the SRN.

Nicola Bell: Taking the lessons learned from RIS2, in RIS3 we actually have what I would call a balanced pipeline of projects that we will also work up in RIS2 ready for delivery in RIS4. Now why do I say that they are different? Because of taking those lessons from RIS2 that these are not necessarily big projects anymore, recognising fiscal constraints in the country, but they are those small junction improvements unlocking those bottlenecks.

It is during those kinds of projects that we will obviously take the opportunity to provide for walking, cycling and horse riding as we need to. Indeed, sometimes when the options have come through for of the some of the bigger enhancements, for example the A27 down in the east of Lewes, you have actually delivered an entire cycleway beside the A road, which is exactly to your point, and more and more people are now using that for their journeys to work.

Q56 **Chair:** We will come to active travel later, but I have also sat in on adjournment debates with colleagues who are concerned about the slip roads particularly joining and sometimes also leaving A roads. As I say, many local people need to use an A road to do a local journey, and this priority for high speed—you used the word, Duncan—does not make it feel or be safe for those people driving within that community who need to use the major A road for part of their journey.

Elliot Shaw: One of the shifts that we are trying to make in RIS3 is to pick that up, and I will come back, because our active travel schemes can come around via a variety of means. One of the new ones in RIS3 is we have created a pipeline and fund for route safety treatment. These are not specifically designed but will overwhelmingly look at A roads, as A roads are generally the least safe bits of the network. It is trying to improve the end-to-end safety on some significant stretches of our roads, and that would absolutely include looking at active travel: pedestrian, cyclist, walking and so on.

Chair: I specifically mentioned car drivers, local car drivers doing local journeys, concerned about the design of the on-off slip roads that are a part of their daily local journey.

Elliott Shaw: Again, the route safety treatment is an opportunity to look at that. We also have some smaller schemes, but again it is where we would try to pick that up through local engagement.

Q57 **Jacob Collier:** I am just coming back to roadworks, which is the bane of mine and my constituents' lives. I know, Elliot, you mentioned that obviously this was one of the reasons why user satisfaction was down, I am just wondering how you have refined your approach to sequencing of roadwork so that it minimises disruption to people using the network?

Elliot Shaw: I am happy to pick that up and then I am sure my colleagues can talk about it. We are very conscious of that; there are periods of programmes that have a big roadworks impact. Our emergency area retrofit programme a couple of years ago fixed that, and we tried to do that in the most efficient way possible, but we recognised that that did have a broader impact.

One of the things that we have done is really look at the roadwork standards across the organisation, so we have effectively written a document called "Roadworks: A customer view", which is really trying to look at how we do roadworks and actually whether we do them in the most customer-friendly way possible. We will apply that to schemes and then effectively audit and check those schemes and check that they are effectively applying the roadworks in the most customer-friendly way. One of the things that we have been working to do is really roll that out across the organisation. That piece of work grew up in Nicola's area because it is easier to look at that on big enhancement schemes. We are increasingly looking at how we apply that in a proportionate way to everything that we do as well.

Duncan Smith: For a number of reasons, not least customer service, we are also very conscious that getting as much work done as possible during any intervention is absolutely paramount, whether that is maintenance work or renewals work. About 30% to 40% of the cost of most of my schemes is on traffic management, or cones and signs, so we have developed some quite sophisticated tools to ensure that what we do not do is clean the gullies one month and go back the next month and cut the vegetation back. We plan to do that all at once so that customers see one interruption and one set of roadworks rather than multiple ones for multiple different purposes.

Q58 **Jacob Collier:** I think it was Elliot that said earlier some of the slippage that we have seen in RIS2 has contributed to some congestion as well. How are you going to make sure that maintenance work and renewal work that you are doing does not slip into this period to reduce the congestion?

Duncan Smith: Yes. Maintenance and renewals is an ongoing programme. I am not sure if we have mis-explained the point: we have not slipped our maintenance programme, we have not slipped our renewals programmes; we delivered more renewals last year than we have ever done in any previous years, and our maintenance programme achieves all its outcomes every year. The slippage or delays we have talked about have been on some of our bigger schemes because of some planning issues, but there has been no slippage for maintenance and renewals.

Q59 **Dr Arthur:** I am quite keen to understand how you approach safety on the network, and I am really thinking about motorists. Do you take the view that all deaths on the network are preventable?

Nick Joyce: First, as I said earlier, safety is the key priority for the organisation. In 2024, 1,931 people were killed or seriously injured on the road network, and each one of those is a difficult, tragic story. In my first few weeks in the organisation it was very sobering that each day you get information about what has happened and what is happening on the network, including the impacts, and that is a very sobering thing. The Government have published the Road Safety strategy earlier this year that has clear targets for the road network as a whole, and within that National Highways has a target to reduce the people killed and seriously injured by a further 7.5% by 2031.

There are a lot of causal factors behind this. What is powerful in the road safety strategy is the recognition that it is all those things working together that will help us reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured on the network. We have an ambition to have nobody killed or seriously injured on the network; the question is how, and how quickly we can get there. There are lots of activities and lots of things to do. I am really keen that National Highways recognises its role in the system to work with others in the transport sector, both the Department for Transport and other partner organisations, and what we can do collectively to help improve road safety on actually the whole road network, not just the strategic road network.

Q60 **Dr Arthur:** Did you meet your target for those killed and seriously injured for any of the years within the RIS2 period?

Nick Joyce: At the end of the period, the number of people killed and seriously injured had reduced by 38%.

Q61 **Dr Arthur:** Did you meet your target for any of those years?

Nick Joyce: Sorry, I have to defer to Elliot on whether we met it for the years; I do not think we did.

Elliot Shaw: I do not think so, no.

Q62 **Dr Arthur:** Overall, we know around the world that deaths and serious injuries are coming down, and that is great, but you had a target to reduce these year on year. That has happened, but you have not met your overall target, have you?

Elliot Shaw: The target for RIS2 was set and we knew it was aspirational, so at the time we did not have clear—

Q63 **Dr Arthur:** Did you not believe you could meet that target when it was set?

Elliot Shaw: We did not have a clearly defined plan as it was reliant on broader factors. As we have said before, road safety relies on a range of factors, so things such as the very significant increase in incidents on the network has a significant impact on road safety. We thought it was the right thing to do—

Q64 **Dr Arthur:** You are saying you had a plan to reduce deaths and serious injuries but you do not feel you were in control of being able to deliver that plan because you had all these external factors you are talking about?

Elliot Shaw: Absolutely we could deliver our plan, and we have delivered our plans.

Q65 **Dr Arthur:** But you did not. You not did not meet your targets?

Elliot Shaw: It is the link between our plans and the target, so the likes of road safety and delay are going to be impacted by what we do but, because it is an open network, it will also be very heavily impacted by external factors. As I say, the significant rise in incidents in particular has had a significant impact on the numbers of KSIs on the network. So it has been important that we have delivered our plan and, as Nick says, we work with others in the delivery of it.

Q66 **Dr Arthur:** What then are the factors? Who is to blame for you not meeting your target if it is not you? You have set a target, you have not met the target, so who is to blame for you not meeting the target?

Elliot Shaw: I would not necessarily say it is a blame situation. We set a stretching target that we have not met. As Nick said, we have still reduced the number of deaths and seriously injured on the network by a significant amount.

Q67 **Dr Arthur:** But that is happening around the world because vehicles are getting safer and so on. How do you compare to other regions?

Elliot Shaw: We compare well, and actually if you compare to this country as well, the rate of deaths and seriously injured on the strategic road network have reduced by 7.3% since 2019, compared with a 0.2% reduction on the rest of England's roads.

Q68 **Dr Arthur:** You are comparing apples and oranges when you talk about the strategic road network and inside cities, so how do you compare to other comparable networks, say in Europe?

Elliot Shaw: I am saying that there is a greater pace of progress on the strategic road network than there has been on the broader road network.

Q69 **Dr Arthur:** How do we compare to other countries?

Elliot Shaw: Compared to other countries we are—I think—the fourth safest in the world, behind Norway, Sweden and Malta. Apart from that, our roads are safer than any other. So we are very ambitious and, as Nick said, safety is our No. 1 priority. We believe it is right to be stretching, but it is a target that we cannot be totally in control of.

Q70 **Chair:** Can I go back a stage because Scott's questions are really pertinent? What are the main causes for types of incidents that create the statistic on KSIs, and which road users are most likely to be killed or seriously injured on the SRN?

Duncan Smith: It is my team that is often first at scene in these tragic circumstances. We have done an awful lot of work to ensure that our assets are not a contributory factor. There is still more work to do, and as Elliot has described there is investment in RIS3 particularly for our A roads. But the highest causational factors are speed, occasionally it is lack of attention by drivers, and it is sometimes vehicle standards. When Elliot talks about the system, things such as vehicle standards, police enforcement, impairment by drink and drugs, are all things that we see.

Yesterday I met the widow of a colleague road worker who was tragically killed on one of our roads several years ago. Kevin Jarvis was doing his job when a criminal driving at high speed and under the influence of drugs crashed into his car, which was parked behind barriers in some roadworks. That is the nature of some incidents that we see on our roads. We are clearly working very hard to do our bit to ensure that our assets are the safest they can be and that our response is the safest but, as Elliot said, it is part of a wider system of enforcement of vehicle standards. We talked about technology in vehicles and that is going to be a huge step forward, but people often switch it off.

Q71 **Chair:** Thank you. Obviously there are tragic incidents that are very difficult to prevent, and it has been suggested to us by one of your predecessors, when we visited Quinton, that was on tyre tread.

Duncan Smith: Yes.

Q72 **Chair:** It would be useful to have a breakdown. Is there a distinction between the motorway network and the major A roads in terms of the pattern of KSIs?

Duncan Smith: Absolutely, yes. A roads perform more poorly than the motorways, mostly.

Q73 **Chair:** Is there a pattern of the types of incidents?

Duncan Smith: The types of incidents are often the same: excessive speed, driver behaviour and decision-making.

Q74 **Chair:** Who are the victims?

Duncan Smith: Young males.

Q75 **Chair:** What kind of road users are they?

Duncan Smith: Car drivers or passengers in cars.

Q76 **Chair:** It has been suggested that there is a disproportionate number of cyclists and pedestrians on A roads. That might be all rural roads, not necessarily yours, so it may not be useful, but particularly the number of quite fast A roads with nowhere for a cyclist to cycle along except the main carriageway. Is that a risk factor or showing up in any statistics, and are there any measures in RIS3 to fund that, if that is a factor in the statistics?

Duncan Smith: We can write to the Committee with the exact numbers.

Chair: That would be helpful.

Duncan Smith: But as Nick described in part of his introduction to the business, we get a very sad text message every time there is an incident. Sadly there are a number of people who choose to end their lives on our roads, but setting those aside, the number of incidents involving genuine pedestrians and cyclists is a very rare statistic within those casualties on our roads.

Q77 **Dr Arthur:** What about the age demographic in terms of young versus old who are involved?

Duncan Smith: It is mixed; I do not recall the exact split. We sometimes see a peak in older drivers not necessarily for their fault, but if they are involved in incidents, they are less able to survive injury.

Dr Arthur: Yes, they are less resilient.

Gareth Rhys Williams: If it is helpful, Chair, there are some very interesting statistics in the Annual Safety Statistics, which we published a month or so ago that looks at trends over—I think—10 years. That talks exactly to your point, Dr Arthur, of age, demographic, and comparison of different road types. To frame that, as Nick mentioned, joining the business from outside you cannot help but be struck by the focus of everybody on getting home safe. It is pervasive in a very good way. The key stat that I have in my mind is the KSI rated SRN 1.99 per million vehicle miles, so it is a slightly complicated measure, but it harmonises. On other non-SRN roads it is 12.69, so broadly six times higher.

Q78 **Chair:** We accept that in the UK we had a very good record at cutting KSIs. That has generally plateaued, notwithstanding some improvements, but these are quite small improvements in a general plateauing out. I believe that RIS3 pushed back the zero harm target, which we all want to work towards, from 2040 to 2050. That suggests a relaxation on the acceleration of addressing those trends.

Dr Arthur: The chair mentioned RIS3. Can we be confident that you are going to meet your RIS3 targets, given you have not met your RIS2 targets?

Elliot Shaw: In terms of the safety target?

Chair: KSIs, yes.

Elliot Shaw: We feel confident going into RIS3; but there is no guarantee. We have a number of targets in RIS3, so it is a blend of targets. Some of those are more directly within our control and some, particularly delay on the network, safety, and customer satisfaction, ultimately get influenced to a greater or lesser extent by external factors.

We have a plan that will get us to about halfway towards the overall RIS3 target. We are going to be reliant on broader factors that will improve network safety that will get the other half. You can see that through the road safety strategy, for example, and we hope that that road safety strategy will be working with Government to take that forward. Those measures would further improve road safety and that would enable us to meet our target. But equally, I cannot sit here and say it is a cast-iron guarantee because it is a stretch.

Q79 **Dr Arthur:** Duncan, when you say speed is a factor, are these people who are breaking the speed limit or just driving too fast for the conditions, or it is just generally? Obviously one of the things you are measured on is the average speed in your network, and just generally traffic is just moving too fast. Should we be reducing speed limits in the network?

Duncan Smith: In the case of these tragic instances it is often speed for the conditions. As has been said before, there are 4 million journeys every day on our road network and a tiny proportion of those result in incidents.

Q80 **Dr Arthur:** That is still unacceptable though, of course.

Duncan Smith: Of course, yes: as I say, each one is a tragedy. We will provide the statistics in writing, as I said earlier, but it is often speed for the conditions, so driving excessively fast in wet conditions can often be that factor.

Q81 **Laurence Turner:** Duncan, just returning to something you said a few moments ago about worker fatalities—I should probably also draw attention to fact that I am a member of Unite the Union—am I right in saying that the group of workers that have seen the most notable increase in fatalities is among third party contractors? I would just be interested to hear what analysis has been done about the reasons for that increase among contractors, and what steps National Highways takes to assure itself that any contractors are prioritising safety?

Duncan Smith: We have a number of very stringent performance targets that we set ourselves and set them in partnership with our supply chain. We measure our accident frequency rate and we hold our contractors to account on that. Our supply chain safety statistics are part of our monitored targets range in RIS3, so we have a very keen interest in that. There are mechanisms within our allocation of work that, should we see contractors whose performance is deteriorating, we can take action so that they do not get future work.

Q82 **Laurence Turner:** Has that been done for any contractors, say within the last five years?

Duncan Smith: We are very proud that we have a very good safety record among our own construction staff and indeed our own staff. We achieved our best ever performance for our own staff in safety measurements last year of any year we have ever had.

Q83 **Laurence Turner:** Forgive me, the question was, have any third party contractors been disbarred from future work on safety grounds within the last five years?

Duncan Smith: Not permanently because we procure through a very stringent set of guidelines to ensure that the people we are doing business with have the appropriate systems, training, supervision, tools and equipment to do the job. We are working with those companies who can assure us that they are competent and in control of the safety of their staff.

Q84 **Laurence Turner:** Why have third party fatalities risen, when that has not happened for the directly employed workforce?

Duncan Smith: We have had one third party fatality in as long as I can remember, and that was the incident with the criminal driving under the influence of speed being pursued by police. We have had no workplace fatalities and, in fact, the number of RIDDOR injuries—those reportable serious injuries—is very low for our teams and our supply chain.

Q85 **Laurence Turner:** I also want to ask about suicide prevention, which of course is a very important area. I understand that recording information about suicides on the strategic road network is a challenging area. Available statistics suggest that there has perhaps been an increase, which has now reached a certain level year on year. I have two questions: first, some really good work was published last year about design standards—I think—for enhancements. I would be interested to hear how that can be mapped on to renewals and how National Highways proposes to adapt the existing infrastructure to reduce suicides. Secondly, in RIS2 there was some positive partnership work with the Samaritans; I would just be interested to hear about whether that is going to continue into RIS3?

Duncan Smith: Tragically we see around 50 people choosing to end their lives on our network each year, and a much larger number of people who get to a crisis point but do not come to harm. We work very closely with other agencies, police and support services such as the Samaritans to understand the causes and to try to reduce those risks. We understand the research shows that if you are able to put assets in place so that it is more difficult, but you do not push them to choose another location, it is enough to make them stop and think.

During RIS2 we delivered a number of schemes, things such as raising parapets on bridges and removing lay-bys, as people often wanted to come and park their car before going on to one of our structures. Removing those facilitating factors has seen a decrease in those areas, but sadly we are seeing an overall upward trend in numbers of people who are choosing to harm themselves in this way.

Q86 **Laurence Turner:** Just to be absolutely clear, is that partnership with the Samaritans continuing into RIS3?

Elliot Shaw: As part of the safety-designated fund, we have funding to continue work on safety, though I must admit we would need to come back to you on that. I assume so, as we have been working with it for a prolonged period of time, but we can check with the teams.

Q87 **Laurence Turner:** Very quickly, how does the funding for adaptive measures in suicide prevention work compare from RIS2 to RIS3? If that is something you wish to write to us with, please do.

Elliot Shaw: It is again part of a safety-designated fund so we have funding for it, but we probably need to come back to you on the detail of exactly how it compares between the two periods.

Q88 **Alex Mayer:** RIS3 says that National Highways will support industry to accelerate the rollout of EV charging infrastructure. Can you talk us through what that is going to look like in practice?

Elliot Shaw: This is absolutely an area where we need to put work in partnership with industry. For example, in motorway service areas the EV charging is theirs and on their sites, but actually we want to enable the market to deliver and so we work very closely with OZEV—the DFT’s office for zero emission vehicles—and we are effectively its delivery partner for trying to get more electric vehicle charging on the strategic road network. The thing I will say is there has been some really good progress on that, so we are now at the point where all motorway service areas have some open access charging, which is great. We have seen about 150% growth in the number of chargers on the SRN in the past two years, so there has been a lot of positive progress.

We want to continue that into RIS3, and we are working with areas that we think are particularly challenging. Where there are cold spots on the strategic road network, we are running surgeries effectively to look at what the barriers are and what Government or ourselves can do to unblock that. We are looking at things such as signage as well: how we can help sign facilities that are out there to encourage people into EV charging. There is potentially some funding because we are conscious there may be issues with the grid provision in some areas; obviously certain facilities on the SRN have the same challenge that we have internally with some depots, so there may be some areas where Government potentially intervenes more directly to help upgrade the grid. That is a much smaller number of areas than was potentially envisaged a few years ago, but we are going to work with those to identify if there are any of those areas and see if Government need to step in and support that.

Q89 **Alex Mayer:** Why are there no targets, even if it was a target with a range?

Elliot Shaw: This is ultimately where we play a supporting role to Government, and again Government are stepping into a broader industry position. Government have set out some aspirations around the rollout of EV charging, and effectively we support Government in their ambition to make sure EV charging provision is sufficient.

Q90 **Alex Mayer:** On a motorway at the moment there is a target, isn’t there, that every 30 minutes you should have a motorway service station, which up until now has meant that you can refuel your vehicle because one would expect that there would be petrol and diesel there? But as we have heard in other inquiries, while it has clearly increased there is not necessarily the infrastructure to deal with every car, HGV or coach that arrives at any time. Do the Government need to have a target for the amount of EV charging available at motorway service stations?

Elliot Shaw: I would reflect that the pace of progress on this, and the pace of change in it as well, is so rapid that the challenge with potentially setting a target is that the world changes in a couple of years. Even if you look at last year alone, the ultra-rapid charging provision on motorways has increased by 40% and it is up 150% across the broader SRN in two years as well. If we had set a target when we looked at this three or four years ago we would not have expected to see that level of market-driven growth, to be frank. The approach of actually working with the sector and with Government trying to unblock the problem areas feels as if it is driving some significant change and uptick in provision at the moment. Obviously we need to keep on checking that that is meeting the demand and ambition the Government have.

Q91 **Alex Mayer:** Do you have any sense at all, with numbers attached to it, of what good might look like at the end of this period?

Elliot Shaw: It would be that you would want there to be sufficient provision for the demand and, as you say, that people coming off the network do so safely and with confidence that they can get the charge they need. From our perspective it is really important that effective EV charging provision is about safety: we do not want people running out of charge on the network. So what good would look like for us is effectively that network still running safely, and hopefully with reasonably satisfied consumers as well.

Q92 **Alex Mayer:** Are you forecasting that demand in any way?

Elliot Shaw: I probably need to write to you. We work with the Department to put together forecasts and we have previously forecast demand for electric vehicle provision, also increasingly thinking about HGV uptake and the needs of freight in this. I am sorry, I do not have the exact figures to hand but we can write you with the detail of that.

Q93 **Alex Mayer:** Finally, Transport Focus has said that there are currently no verified accessible charge points anywhere on England's strategic road network. Why do you think that is, and how can it be addressed?

Elliot Shaw: I understand a lot of this comes down to the actual charger itself and making that more accessible. We have been working with our Roads for All Forum, which is our accessibility inclusion advisory forum. It includes a whole range of groups focused on accessibility, trying to bring insight as to effectively what some of those barriers are.

We are looking to develop access guides for EV charging points, trying to survey a whole range of facilities out there and provide guidance on which ones are accessible. We have actually done something very similar with motorway service areas where, as part of our accessibility and inclusion plan, we provide a whole range of information around the accessibility of motorway service areas, and now we are homing in to focus on charging.

Q94 **Olly Glover:** Let us chat Lower Thames Crossing. How is the design and planning going?

Nicola Bell: It is a big question, so can I set that in some context first, which I think it would be wise to do?

Olly Glover: Please feel free.

Nicola Bell: I think you know that the Dartford Crossing is one of the least reliable parts of our network. You are all nodding. Some 19 out of

20 journeys that use the crossing are delayed. The Lower Thames Crossing will provide that alternative, more reliable route for exporters, particularly from the north and the Midlands to the channel ports, and take 20% off of Dartford. We will be employing something like 10,000 people during the scheme construction and 45% of the construction workers will come from within 20 miles of the route. It is fair to say that this project provides a great blueprint for sustainable construction going forward. It is 14.3 miles, and that will double the capacity across the Thames to the east of London, with three lanes in each direction.

A lot of the lengthening of the tunnel, actually making it the longest road tunnel in the UK at 2.6 miles, was done after the substantive consultation during the development consent order process. That is a really complex process, particularly for nationally significant infrastructure projects, which of course this is. The project was consented—that is, received its development consent order—in March 2025, and construction actually started in March this year. We expect the main tunnelling phase to begin in 2028, and that therefore means the road will be open for traffic in early to mid-2030s.

That sets it in a bit of context; you asked particularly about design?

Olly Glover: Yes, and planning, though you have partly covered that with DCO and all that joy.

Nicola Bell: Yes, that joy. What I would say is that the scope of this project is very stable. It actually has not changed since 2020. That means that 80% of the design work has already been completed, the remaining 20% is on lower risk activities. So because of that level of consultation that you do as part of the development consent order, because of the length of time of the examination process, all of the statutory consultees, everybody being able to have their say, there is a clarity about what is being provided. Most recently we have held some stakeholder events so that, for example, in the preparatory works that we are doing now, such as setting up the site compound, doing major utility diversions, stripping back soil, and so on, people are completely aware of what is happening around them within their community.

Q95 **Olly Glover:** Let us talk about funding then, because the Government have made it pretty clear that they will be looking to private sector funding for a lot of this, and yet they have committed £1.6 billion of public funding up front, before the full business case has been approved and ahead of the planned transfer to the private sector in 2028. What risks do you see from that, and what is that funding going to be spent on?

Nicola Bell: As part of the autumn Budget in 2025, the Government will have invested £3.1 billion in the Lower Thames Crossing. That funding is critical to unlock the private finance to set one of the UK's largest infrastructure projects up for success. The money that is being set aside just now is for doing all of those preparatory works, as I have just talked about. Why do you do those preparatory works? That is us learning lessons, particularly from things such as the recent Stewart Review of HS2, to make sure that all those critical activities have been done up front, so that by the time you do your main construction you have effectively de-risked the project.

I would also go back to that 80% of design surety, which is a great place to be for a project of this scale and size. The way in which the project is funded is obviously a matter for the Government; we have been supporting them with that. You particularly mentioned the business case; following the classic five-stage business case that we would have for any project of this scale and size; that will, of course, develop as more detail becomes clear. It is normal, standard practice to update the business case as you go, and of course, the final version of that business case will be complete once the private investment deal has been done.

Q96 **Olly Glover:** Given the big cost of this scheme and the fact that it is creating a new Thames crossing, do you feel opportunities have been missed in terms of using it for other forms of transport? No cycle crossing or scheduled bus service is proposed; I understand there are proposals to rely on a shuttle for cyclists. Active Travel England has perhaps pushed you a bit further on this, talking about an express bus service. Do you feel enough is being done to make the most of it in terms of active travel and public transport? Are you taking enough responsibility for the impact of the new road on existing communities and active travel routes across it?

Nicola Bell: As part of that consultation process that I just talked about through the development consent order, you would be consulting on all of those things. As a result of that there are walking, cycling and riding routes being provided around the local community. On top of that there are green spaces being prepared for the local community as well, so the opportunity for taking all those things on board is obviously, as I say, through the development consent order process.

Q97 **Olly Glover:** I am just going to push you a bit further on the whole cycle crossing thing. People are fed up with me wanging on about the Netherlands and these things, but it built a motorway effectively connecting one part of the country to another—an above sea one as part of land reclamation—that has a cycle path that goes all the way along it. Why are we not doing that?

Nicola Bell: Perhaps I will write to the Committee about particular reasons why that has not been included in this particular stage.

Q98 **Olly Glover:** It is probably because we are a country that hates cycling but I am sure you will not put that in your letter. I have one last question on this section and then one about Lower Thames Crossing. You have mentioned that it is one of the biggest civil engineering projects in the country. How are you going to make sure this is not an HS2-type shambles?

Nicola Bell: As I mentioned earlier, the Stewart Review into HS2 provided some important lessons, in particular—I am just going to press that point again—on things such as design certainty and doing activities upfront, which is exactly what we are doing. The DCO that we have provides that certainty and fixes what it is we are going to do. It is very unusual for a project of this scale and size not to have its scope changed since 2020 so that has really helped with regard to how we will then de-risk the project.

As you would imagine for a project of this scale and size, there is strong governance working very closely with the Department for Transport and NISTA, which is fully embedded within that governance. Key points for escalation are on things such as scheduled cost risk, as I spoke about earlier. There is a strong set of governance principles set up for the scale and size of this project.

Q99 **Olly Glover:** May your optimism be justified. We took some evidence earlier this year and the back end of last year about HGV driver facilities. A concern that we have had is that HGV driver facilities and parking were not included in the Lower Thames Crossing application following consultation. Would you agree with that and if so why? Is that an omission?

Elliot Shaw: Again we can write specifically on Lower Thames Crossing. It was all part of the consultation process. Broadly what I would say is freight and parking facilities tend to be private sector provided so we look to enable that and support that wherever we can. We have a freight fund in particular that we are using to upgrade and support the improvement of freight facilities.

We have set aside £15 million that we have provided in grants over the last two years, which has been matched by a similar amount from freight facility operators with about £30 million of improvements. That has enabled 500 new lorry spaces and upgrades to the likes of security at sites but also facilities such as showers and so on at around 135 sites around the country. We are stepping in and trying to support those sites even though obviously they are all private sector provided, but we recognise the importance of freight to our network.

Gareth Rhys Williams: I just wanted to build on what Nicola was saying about lessons from HS2. James Stewart—who wrote that excellent report—has been to the LTC Programme Board, which Nicola and I both sit on and meets monthly, and gave the entire programme board a thorough debrief on what he had learned and his conclusions. That board has people from the Lower Thames Crossing team, National Highways, DFT, Treasury and NISTA, so it is a pretty potent group.

We also asked James to come to the National Highways board to give the rest of the board who do not go on the programme board that insight. We have made an effort to learn the lessons, particularly about the governance mechanisms and how to resolve issues quickly. To go back to

Nicola, the key point is that we have design certainty with the DCO complex process, which has some huge advantages over the hybrid bill approach.

Q100 **Olly Glover:** National Highways has previously given evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee about pollution from road runoff across your network, which was in September last year. How would you assess the current scale of the problem and what steps are you putting in place to address it?

Duncan Smith: We look after something in the region of 15,000 outfalls and a further just under 7,000 soakaways. These are drainage assets that take the water from the carriageway into local watercourses or the ground in the case of soakaways. We are very aware of the responsibility that we have to ensure that those receiving watercourses are protected and remain pollutant-free.

We recently published our 2030 Water Quality Plan, which sets out our science-based approach to ensuring that we are looking after those outfalls in the most diligent and prudent way. Over recent years we have gone through a process of surveying all these assets and prioritising them. We are very pleased to say that we have been given funding in RIS3 to mitigate those locations where they have the highest potential risk to the environment. It is not saying they are polluting but based on the receiving watercourse and some topography and dynamics of the road that they are supporting, that is the highest priority for us to invest in.

By 2030, we think we will have improved around 250 of those locations to ensure that the receiving watercourses are protected. Clearly the issues are not just the outfalls themselves but where the pollution is coming from in the first place. We are working very closely with the Environment Agency on issues such as microplastics and PFASs, which are the forever chemicals that come from water-resistant treatments. We are developing the work with the Environment Agency to say what those future mitigations would be to ensure that those pollutants do not get into the watercourses as well.

Q101 **Olly Glover:** You have covered water runoff. What about air quality? How do you prioritise interventions across your network where air quality is poorest? There can be some very challenging locations for that where you have very busy roads running very close to houses. For example I know that Botley and North Hinksey in Oxfordshire has been a real problem in the past.

Duncan Smith: Again we work closely with the Environment Agency to understand our obligations and the impact of our roads on local residents from an air quality perspective and take a very rigorous, evidence-based approach. What we have seen as the road fleet converts to hybrid and fully electrics is that those levels of nitrogen dioxide are coming down without the need for other interventions. Previous thinking was that reducing speed limits might reduce those air pollution levels. A recent trial has concluded that that actually does not have a significant impact and a far greater impact is actually the makeup and composition of the road fleet. Areas that were out of compliance are now in compliance as a result of that change.

Q102 **Olly Glover:** I understand that, but of course, in terms of further progress, you are very much reliant on wider government and industry policies succeeding, which is uncertain. Is that right?

Duncan Smith: Yes and we work closely with the automotive industry to ensure that its contribution is a priority but we balance this against other priorities of running a strategic road network to get people on their journeys.

Chair: I am just conscious of the time and we still have a couple more issues to pick up on. Alex?

Q103 **Alex Mayer:** How do you expect that climate adaptation is going to change your decision making across the strategic road network particularly on how you prioritise investment and design of schemes?

Elliot Shaw: Climate resilience and adaptation is absolutely a key factor in our thinking. To be frank it has been one reason for the change and shift in focus in RIS3, obviously making sure that our assets are resilient and particularly resilient given the new expectations on them. Duncan has already talked about heavier vehicles, in particular increased wet weather and the importance of drainage.

Duncan Smith: Just to build on that, the increased funding for renewals is a good example of where those drainage assets are coming to the end of life. They are being designed and constructed to new standards to adapt to the fact that weather patterns are changing. It is not just wet weather; we see some roads of concrete construction that were built particularly in the ’70s and perform very poorly under extreme weather.

Particularly in hot weather, we see concrete roads deteriorating very quickly. Unlike a tarmacked surface, where you get a small breakup of the surface, when a concrete road starts to fail you get quite large pieces of the road breaking away, and in some cases we need to close lanes. We are very pleased with the fact that Government are continuing to fund our replacement of those concrete roads with more flexible road surfaces so that we do not see that issue if we see more extreme hot weather in the future as well as those wet weather events.

Q104 **Alex Mayer:** I have two other questions; this is just going back to the question I asked before about whether you do things differently. When the A421 near Bedfordshire was flooded for quite a long time and you had to pump out swimming pools-worth of water, when you put everything back did you do it differently?

Duncan Smith: In that specific case it is built in a dip and water settling in that area was not understood to be an issue, which was why the pumping station was there. The problem that we saw was that the intensity of the rainfall event was far greater than the pumping station was designed to deliver. We have replaced the pumping station, which is now above ground and resilient to that flooding situation so it will not get overwhelmed. The pumps have also been increased in size so we should not see a recurrence.

Q105 **Alex Mayer:** Very briefly on trees if I can, in your document it says that you are committed to supporting government tree planting targets. Do you just mean planting them or do you mean making sure they survive as well?

Duncan Smith: Yes, we mean both.

Q106 **Chair:** Is watering now factored in?

Duncan Smith: It is.

Q107 **Chair:** There was a major problem there on one particular stretch of road.

Duncan Smith: We have changed our standards and our contracts as a result.

Chair: Our last group of questions on active travel and integrated transport is from Elsie.

Q108 **Mrs Blundell:** I am just going to preface this very quickly by saying I never find it helpful to think of this as motorists versus cyclists and people walking. Obviously we all use those modes at different points, so highways need to be suitable for all road users. How are you measuring performance on supporting active travel across the strategic road network? Elliot, would you like to start with that one?

Elliot Shaw: First, I would just say we entirely agree: roads are not just for car users and no one is just generally a car user; everyone uses multiple modes. We care deeply about active travel and making the SRN more accessible for active travel. There are several ways that we do that.

First, we work closely in partnership with Active Travel England. We have a strategic collaboration and have signed an MOU that commits us to effectively making sure that active travel is really considered throughout any road schemes we do. We have standards, particularly if there is any enhancement and so on and we look to build active travel in. We are also looking to share data, standards and so on with Active Travel England.

What we then have done is invested about £80 million in about 38 different cycling and walking schemes and upgrades through RIS2. As we were discussing earlier, that is a range of different ways and for a range of different partners so that could come up through a renewal scheme such as the A52 one in Nottingham. For example, we work closely with the Walk Wheel Cycle Trust, which runs the national cycle network. We look effectively where there are conflicts in our road network, the strategic road network and the national cycle network together and how we can invest to unblock some conflicts and enable more active travel.

We have also done some great work with Living Streets, looking at how we can actually enable more kids to walk to school and that sort of thing. Similarly, the National Trust is actually investing in different improved cycleways and cycle parking spaces.

Q109 **Mrs Blundell:** So you do not have specific metrics yourselves as National Highways when it comes to active travel?

Elliot Shaw: We do not have a KPI, for example, that talks about active travel. We have a range of work and a range of commitments but there is no specific target.

Q110 **Mrs Blundell:** You said you are looking to share data with Active Travel England. Is that something where some data has been shared so far or is it a plan for the future?

Elliot Shaw: Yes, we have shared a lot. To be honest there has been a lot of collaboration. What we are trying to do is make sure that effectively any investment that we make in active travel in the future aligns with Active Travel England's thinking on where the priorities should be. Something that we are trying to get to is making sure that we are increasingly strategic around our active travel investment and again that we are investing in the right places. We have shared a bunch of analyses with Active Travel England and have used that to prioritise the potential investments going forward.

Q111 **Mrs Blundell:** Just a very quick strategy-related question from me, if there is such a thing. How are you aligning with local and sub-regional transport strategies? For example, in my area we have the Greater Manchester Active Travel Strategy. Is that something that you are doing? How does that work? Would it be a good thing from your perspective if there were a statutory duty on you to align with those local and regional transport strategies?

Elliot Shaw: Again, one of the Government's aims for planning reform was to effectively make sure everyone had a local plan and a local transport plan as part of that. That is super helpful for us because generally we know we are only part of the transport system so the more we can put our plans next to other people's plans, the more helpful it is. The challenge will always be actually meeting the ambitions in those plans; there will not always be enough money to do everything that everyone wants but the more that we can see those plans and put them together, the more we can work together.

Q112 **Mrs Blundell:** Just one final question from me, if I may, and I will direct this one at Nick. In 2023, in response to a written question to our Chair, DFT advised that National Highways would conduct an assessment of active travel integration along its network, in part to address major severance issues but also to join up with cycling schemes. Some 20 months after that there was a request from a journalist called Laura Laker. She asked how much of that assessment had been completed and she did not receive a response. Could you advise the Committee today about where that assessment is up to and when a full assessment will be published?

Nick Joyce: That is not something I am familiar with, but I am very happy to look into that for you.

Q113 **Mrs Blundell:** Will you write to the Committee afterwards?

Nick Joyce: Yes.

Chair: I cannot remember if it was a written or oral question in a session, but I asked the question. It may have been in the previous Committee session.

Nick Joyce: We will come back to you on that.

Chair: That would be very helpful; we would like answers on those.

Q114 **Alex Mayer:** The Government have recently published "Better Connected: A Strategy for Integrated Transport". What do you see National Highways' role as in terms of building a more integrated transport system?

Nick Joyce: Can I offer a general reflection and Elliot will go into a bit more detail? A key reflection that I have joining the organisation and looking at the road investment strategies is making sure National Highways sees itself as part of that system. Yes, we have very clear and defined accountabilities, a licence from Parliament and key performance indicators about the network. Recognising that journeys do not start and end on the strategic road network, being a good partner as an organisation, whether that is with local authorities and helping them achieve what they need, and some things that Elliot has talked about with Active Travel England and others are key priorities for me in making sure that is what we are doing in this period and will therefore help us support that strategy. Elliot, are there particular things that you would draw out from the strategy?

Elliot Shaw: Yes. We have obviously been discussing the strategy with DFT for some time. As Nick said, we recognise we are part of a broader transport system, so I would just reflect that the principles of people, places and partnership are absolutely principles that resonate with us.

Q115 **Chair:** That is very general. What does that mean in practice?

Elliot Shaw: In practice, I would say it is thinking about some things that are in there that we will contribute to. Again it talks about the need to create a more accessible transport network that is effectively better for people with disabilities.

Q116 **Chair:** Like what?

Elliot Shaw: Again I would go for the guidance. The things that we focused on are the guidance around motorway service areas. We have looked at how we treat disabled people in a breakdown situation. If we have a disabled customer who calls us and says that they are broken down on the network, how do we respond to that in an appropriate way, recognising that they are facing particular challenges?

Similarly, there is a lot in the integrated transport strategy about promoting active travel. We have talked about cycling, walking and so on but to be honest we do stuff around buses. We have just chosen to invest in improving a bunch of bus stops on our network, trying to make sure that people can get to those bus stops so that they can use them.

Q117 **Chair:** Is that lay-bys, access to the bus stops and the bus stop structure itself, which we know is very important to people's perception of buses?

Elliot Shaw: I believe it is the bus stop structure. Again I am happy to write with details on the investment, but it is absolutely time to enable that. We play a role through the technology side as well. Again something that was in the integrated transport strategy was thinking about data and whether there are ways that data and technology can help people experience that. Again we are speaking with DFT around whether there is more that we can do to provide a bit of a data platform that local authorities could also use. I am very keen that we look at some more innovative ways, recognising our scale so we can help some local authorities on that side as well.

Chair: It is a bugbear from my past history on this Committee, but Laurence has a question on the historic real estate.

Q118 **Laurence Turner:** If I may I want to ask a very quick supplementary on integration. On the problem of responsibility being disputed between National Highways and local highways authorities at times, I would be interested in hearing about how those disputes are resolved. We had a case recently where the lights were not working for months on the Rubery flyover for the A38 and it took a long time to establish which body was responsible. It proved not to be National Highways in the end, but from a local perspective it took longer than anyone would have liked for the responsible party to be identified.

Duncan Smith: Asset data is an area where we are working very hard to improve the accuracy and use of that data. Lighting, particularly on those interface points between our roads and the local roads, is often a case where we see some confusion and I apologise for the delays in rectifying that particular situation that you talk about.

Laurence Turner: For the record, it was Birmingham City Council that was at fault not yourselves.

Duncan Smith: In the case of street lighting, we recognise that there is often a driver and a community desire for it; or sometimes not, depending on if there are residential properties nearby. We have to strike a careful balance between trying to reduce our carbon consumption for those lights that need energy to support them and the ongoing maintenance of those lights as well. We have a very clear policy that sets out where and in what circumstances lighting is provided, and if those assets come to the end of their life that assessment is then applied as to whether they are replaced or indeed retired.

Q119 **Laurence Turner:** Just on that database work that you mentioned, this is a project that has started. Are you able to give any indication of when that might be going live?

Duncan Smith: Generally on lighting we surveyed 100% of our network in order to understand that from a carbon reporting point of view as we touched on earlier. We now have very up-to-date records of the lights we have, how old they are, whether they are more traditional filament lights or LED lights, and we have our ongoing programme to have 75% of all our streetlights to be LED lights by next year.

Q120 **Laurence Turner:** Moving on to the historic real estate, which was transferred to, or inherited by, National Highways in 2013. The ORR has drawn attention to the fact that capital funding for this budget line has been reduced to zero for RIS3 and revenue funding has been reduced between the draft and the final version from £20 million to £5 million. If urgent works are required how will they be funded and authorised and are there any risks associated with that reduction in revenue support?

Duncan Smith: As you rightly say, the management of those assets remains the ownership of the Department for Transport; we merely manage them on their behalf. By their very nature this is an asset base of very old structures that are in a poor state in many cases. Over the last 10 years we have used targeted funding to ensure that we are continuing to maintain, inspect and understand if there is deterioration of those.

As a responsible manager of those assets, funding will not get in the way of us ensuring that they are safe. Often they carry local authority roads over the top of them or public access—whether it is footpaths or cycleways—either over or under them. As Nick started by saying, safety is absolutely the core of what we do so we will not allow funding to get in the way of public safety.

Q121 **Laurence Turner:** If a major deficiency is identified or an asset deteriorates quickly, where will the money come from to make the structure safe?

Duncan Smith: We will fund it out of our annual budget allocations and have a conversation at the end of the year as to how that is recognised in the accounts. My team that looks after the historic real estate is very clear that we are a business that has a huge amount of public money each year that we are bestowed with the responsibility of looking after. We will allow small interventions to ensure the public is kept safe and will not let funding get in the way of doing the right thing.

Q122 **Laurence Turner:** Essentially it comes down to wider contingency.

Duncan Smith: Yes.

Q123 **Chair:** I just want to ask one question for Gareth and/or Nick. When you next appear before the Committee, what would early success in RIS3 look like and how can we judge whether you are on track? Obviously it may not be you personally, but the organisation.

Nick Joyce: Indeed. We have talked a lot today about the plans we are putting in place for RIS3, so being judged on actually how well those plans have been agreed and the views of the ORR on those plans. My point from earlier is that I do not want to wait until the end of the period for the ORR to say how we have got on. Let us just say we are in a year's time and actually ORR is saying, "Yes, the foundations are well set, yes, we have the data that we now need to manage the productivity on the renewals"—as we talked about earlier—"and the early metrics are on track for delivering with RIS3." As I said we have to make sure we deliver the five-year strategy through the whole of the five years, not just at the end.

Gareth Rhys Williams: It slightly depends on how soon you summon us. At one level, in a sense I would hope that we have the permanent CEO in place, established and the team strong and continuing to deliver. If it is three years, which it might be, obviously by then we will be well into planning for RIS4. We talked about the inevitable but well-managed issues that came up with having the one-year settlement.

I would just really close by perhaps saying that our supply chain supports the UK economy in many other ways apart from road building. Construction is a key industry in the country. The more horizon we can give our supply chain the better. It allows them to invest in people, training, equipment and method, and that drives efficiency and growth. I would hope we could come to you with a good story about how we were developing our medium-term strategy such that the UK-based supply chain was getting stronger and more able to deliver for us.

Chair: That is a useful answer to a question we did not ask but a valid one plus another one on skills and resilience and so on. Please feel free to write to us with anything you have not been able to cover today. At several points you said, "We will write to you," so we look forward to those. Actually we have more than used our time and there may be other questions that we want to put to you as well. That concludes today's one-off session on National Highways.