

What would have been different if England had a National Transport Strategy five years ago?

ICE Presidential Roundtable summary

September 2023

Background

Transport is the circulatory system of any economy. It connects people to goods, markets and each other. It can breathe life into local communities and play a huge part in addressing regional inequalities. At the same time, transport is the UK's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions.

If the government is to unlock productivity and improve quality of life across the UK while meeting its net zero objectives, it needs a transport network that's fit for purpose.

At an ICE-hosted presidential roundtable attended by **Iain Stewart MP, chair of the Transport Committee**, attendees discussed why the UK has struggled to deliver on that ambition.

The discussion examined how a national transport strategy could be part of the solution, the risks of developing one and how they could be addressed.

Recap: England is the largest and most populous nation in the UK. But, unlike Scotland and Wales, it doesn't have a national transport strategy. Nor is there an integrated strategy for the whole of the UK. The government has not yet responded to the [Union Connectivity Review](#), which was published in November 2021.

Earlier this year, the ICE ran a consultation asking whether England needed an overarching, strategic vision for transport. In July, the ICE's [policy position statement](#) on a national transport strategy for England made the case for a coherent, consistent vision that clearly outlines the outcomes transport should achieve and the steps needed to get there.

Integrating transport into the wider policy framework

Planning across the UK's infrastructure systems, including transport, settlements, housing, industry and energy, needs to be more joined up. For example, the transition to electric vehicles will require providing

enough electricity grid capacity in the right places. A national transport strategy that exists in isolation and does not support this wider integration would not be effective.

It was suggested that transport is not seen as an essential service. A strategy could help raise its status and ensure desired transport outcomes, such as decarbonisation or reducing road traffic, influence planning in related sectors, as seems to be happening in Scotland.

As the benefits of transport investment often lie in other sectors, the government could be more ambitious about appraising investments beyond a focus on capital cost, giving more weight to the wider environmental, economic and social outcomes of transport investment. A national transport strategy could shed light on the extent to which the existing allocation of resources across the transport network aligns with those wider outcomes.

This change in mindset can shift the conversation about how transport is funded and what it needs to deliver. For example, bus services are expected to be profitable because the wider benefits they provide are poorly communicated and not monetised. It could also help reduce political tensions over where investment goes by highlighting how the beneficiaries of transport investment in one region are often people and businesses in another.

Meeting the needs of all transport users

Transport planning must respond to the needs of users of the network – people and freight. To gain support, a national transport strategy must communicate the benefits of better transport planning from the users' perspective.

It was suggested that giving people choices should be at the core of a strategy. Public behaviour change to more sustainable travel will only be achieved if people have choices about which travel modes to use.

However, transport users cannot be considered just in terms of people. In many cases, unlocking local and regional economies is the key driver behind investment. To drive economic growth, better pan-regional connectivity between the UK's towns and cities is needed. Freight has been too low in importance in the UK.

Reducing uncertainty to drive investment and delivery

Too much political uncertainty is undermining the delivery of major transport infrastructure projects. Investors need confidence that political support for projects will be sustained. Creating more long-term purpose in the structure of government is a crucial challenge for improving delivery.

Major infrastructure projects would benefit from a non-political or bi-partisan approach, but this is difficult to achieve, especially at a national level. Establishing accountability for delivering long-term projects is difficult when they run for much longer timeframes than political cycles. Even so, that many key ministerial positions have operated like revolving doors in recent years has added to the level of uncertainty.

This uncertainty around future major projects is also driving the flight of skills in the construction industry from the UK to other countries or sectors with better pay and job security. Investors and construction companies also need confidence in the commercial arrangements and where the risk sits. However, it was suggested that the UK government is not giving supply-side issues enough attention. A national transport strategy would be pointless without supply-side capacity to deliver it.

Attendees also discussed whether the level of centralisation in the rail industry is too high and whether there is a lack of understanding in HM Treasury (HMT) about investment needs. Strong leadership from the centre of government, plus changes in the appraisal process, could help shift HMT thinking. A national transport strategy could also help challenge that orthodoxy.

Devolution and empowering regional bodies

A national transport strategy would be a means for the government to set out the context and objectives for other agencies and regional bodies to operate with. Only the government can provide leadership and make key decisions in some policy areas, such as banning internal combustion engines and setting the net zero and carbon emissions targets.

However, elected subnational leaders and transport bodies should be able to feed in their priorities to those objectives. One complaint following the publication of the Integrated Rail Plan was the lack of consultation with elected leaders in the impacted regions about the decisions made in the strategy.

More discussion is also needed about where delivery powers should lie and the opportunities for further devolution. Some attendees suggested that England's subnational bodies are best placed to join up the policy framework and deliver transport outcomes that achieve the government's objectives.

Regions could also be more empowered to devise solutions that work for their area. Linked to this, the need for central government to be better at accepting and managing some failures in pursuit of better outcomes was also raised. There is also potential to make it easier to implement local transport solutions that solve challenges on national networks. The possibility of establishing a duty on national bodies to consult with local leaders to formalise what is already happening was discussed.

However, a major challenge for subnational authorities is the large number of funding streams they must deal with. Simplifying the funding system, for instance by providing more longer-term funding settlements, would provide certainty, be more efficient and help maximise delivery.

Developing an effective national transport strategy

Attendees discussed the risks and challenges of developing and implementing a national transport strategy for England.

These included whether the size of England's population would make an overly detailed strategy ineffective and how developing an overly detailed strategy could create a hiatus that adds to uncertainty and delays. The context could have changed so much in that time that the strategy would be irrelevant. It was noted that a strategy developed five years ago would not have included the net zero target or accounted for the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Any strategy would need to allow the flexibility to respond to unexpected events that create challenges but also opportunities to do things differently.

A strategy will also face challenges from political reality. It would only be as ambitious as the government developing it. A long-term strategy is feasible with stable government, but the UK has not had this in recent years, and it is rare. There was concern that a new strategy could lead to more chopping and changing of direction in central government, undermining some of the certainty established by control periods for road and rail.

Some attendees questioned the need for a strategy in the face of those challenges or whether the decision-making process could be strengthened to achieve the same benefits.

One solution could be a strategy in the form of a national framework that provides a basis for developing more detailed strategies lower down. This could be outcome-focused and a lighter touch than a detailed strategy. The Welsh Future Generations Act is one potential model of agreeing on common objectives that are not so high-level as to be meaningless. It was also noted that the National Networks National Policy Statement (NNNPS) is being used as a de facto strategy in the absence of a national transport strategy, even though this is not its purpose.

Questions to take away

- Is an outcomes framework the right approach for developing a national transport strategy that provides strategic direction without adding further delays, uncertainty or centralisation?
- How big a risk are supply-side challenges to the UK's infrastructure pipeline, and what more should the government be doing to address them?

- What more can be done to embed long-term purpose in the structure of government and strengthen accountability for delivering long-term infrastructure projects?

Further reading:

[ICE policy paper: a national transport strategy for England \(2023\)](#)

[National Infrastructure Commission: Interurban transport advice note on road policy \(2023\)](#)

[Union Connectivity Review: Final Report \(2021\)](#)