

# ICE response to the Department for Transport consultation on the Key Route Network – Powers and responsibilities for locally important roads

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## Introduction

Established in 1818 and with over 95,000 members worldwide, the Institution of Civil Engineers exists to deliver insights on infrastructure for societal benefit, using the professional engineering knowledge of our global membership.

This response focuses on the consultation's overarching question – whether metro mayors should be given more powers to manage Key Route Networks (KRN).

In particular, it focuses on:

- the role of metro mayors in meeting the key long-term national objectives of achieving net-zero and levelling up;
- current barriers impeding effective action by metro mayors; and
- the opportunities for road management and wider infrastructure planning and investment arising from the further devolution of powers.

For more information, please contact:

David Hawkes, Lead Policy Manager: [policy@ice.org.uk](mailto:policy@ice.org.uk)

## Should mayors hold highway authority powers for managing Key Route Networks?

The vast majority of journeys in England are made by road<sup>1</sup> and any inefficiencies in the road network, in the form of congestion, negatively affect productivity, the environment and quality of life. At the same time the UK faces a series of long-term challenges, including population growth, achieving net-zero by 2050 and levelling-up, each with implications for how we use, maintain and develop our roads.

These challenges cannot be addressed without the participation of subnational leaders. In our State of the Nation 2020: Infrastructure and the 2050 Net-Zero Target report, ICE recommended that:

<sup>1</sup> Department for Transport (2019) [Transport Statistics Great Britain 2019](#)

“Power and responsibilities for infrastructure policy and service delivery should continue to be devolved to ensure the economic opportunities of the net-zero transition are distributed throughout the UK, to support the ‘levelling up’ agenda.”<sup>2</sup>

ICE believes local stakeholders are best placed to plan and deliver local infrastructure and to understand the unique regional circumstances, requirements and opportunities.

ICE’s recent insight paper on subnational climate action examined how metro mayors can contribute to delivering national net-zero by 2050 using their existing powers.<sup>3</sup> For instance, metro mayors can utilise the planning system to ensure infrastructure demand is met and environmental impacts mitigated.

Beyond their formal powers, metro mayors wield substantial soft power to influence and mobilise key stakeholders and drive change through infrastructure, for example supporting behavioural change by encouraging modal shift to public transport and active travel.

However, the powers currently available to metro mayors vary by region, adding to the complexity and fragmentation of the governance landscape. Across all combined authorities there are questions about whether subnational leaders have the powers, funding and governance arrangements to make the necessary contributions to key national objectives.

Indeed, granting metro mayors powers over KRN would go some way to addressing one of the policy gaps outstanding from the last National Infrastructure Assessment (NIA). In its response to the NIA, the government did not fully endorse the National Infrastructure Committee’s recommendation to devolve further powers to local government to enable more ambitious, locally led planning and investment in infrastructure.<sup>4</sup>

The Climate Change Committee has argued that effective climate action means “transforming whole places towards net-zero”.<sup>5</sup> Metro mayors must lead this transformation in their regions. Granting them further powers to manage KRN would go some way to enabling them to be place-shapers for net-zero and levelling-up.

For any additional powers granted to metro mayors to be used most effectively, the right strategic frameworks need to be in place. Subnational infrastructure planning can be further strengthened by evolving subnational transport bodies to become subnational infrastructure bodies, tasked with creating regional infrastructure strategies, backed up by spatial strategies. These could be developed within the overarching framework provided by the National Infrastructure Strategy and would have the further benefit of ensuring effective integration of infrastructure planning at multiple geographic scales.

Devolution should be conditional on a region’s readiness (in terms of expertise, capacity and capability) to take on additional powers and responsibilities. However, where these conditions are met, giving metro mayors additional powers to manage their KRN would be a positive step for unlocking the above benefits.

## Ensuring sustainable road funding in England

A further opportunity arising from granting metro mayors more powers over KRN, could lie in addressing the need to ensure sustainable revenue for road maintenance and upgrade, which is crucial for the UK’s future economic and social wellbeing.

The current Government policy for the sale of all new cars and vans to be effectively zero emission by 2035 will render fuel duty an increasingly diminishing revenue source. Vehicle Excise Duty (VED) revenues are also a concern given the exemptions and discounts for electric and lower emission vehicles.

<sup>2</sup> ICE (2020) [State of the Nation: Infrastructure and the 2050 Net-Zero Target](#)

<sup>3</sup> ICE (2021) [The Role of Subnational Leadership in Achieving Net-Zero](#)

<sup>4</sup> National Infrastructure Commission (2021) Annual Monitoring Report

<sup>5</sup> Climate Change Committee (2020) [Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget](#)

Taxation of roads will need to be future-proofed. In our State of the Nation 2018: Infrastructure Investment report, ICE set out the need for a robust policy debate on the future funding of England's busiest roads. The report recommended that:

"The Government should give serious consideration to replacing the existing generation of road taxes with a pay as you go model for the busiest roads in England."<sup>6</sup>

While that report focused on Strategic Road Network (SRN) funding, we noted the need for a fresh examination of funding models for local roads in light of the impact of devolution on the governance and ownership models associated with these networks.

Giving metro mayors more powers over the KRN could also empower them to develop sustainable revenue-generating schemes as part of comprehensive local transport plans. These might include more congestion or emissions charging zones or even Pay As You Go models.

ICE has identified some of the potential wider benefits of Pay As You Go roads, which could also apply to local communities and economies,<sup>7</sup> including reduced congestion, a more equitable system of taxation, and more incentives for people to consider modal shift.

Metro mayors could also help overcome some of the challenges of implementing new road pricing models, for example providing the opportunity to trial schemes at local level before a national roll-out and helping to communicate the system to motorists highly familiar with the current system.

Metro mayors would also have a role in ensuring that any national road pricing scheme is integrated with local schemes and benefits local communities, for instance helping to redistribute surplus revenue to support local road improvement.

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<sup>6</sup> ICE (2018) [State of the Nation 2018: Infrastructure Investment](#)

<sup>7</sup> ICE (2019) [Pay As You Go – Achieving Sustainable Roads Funding in England](#)