**Robin Hickman** examines recent DfT policy papers and finds little change from a predict and provide policy for the road network, and a reliance on clean vehicles to solve the climate change problem

# are we really still just predicting and providing?

Inspired by the last issue of *Town & Country Planning* and some of the critical commentary on the Planning White Paper,[1] I consider in this article the latest government policy papers on transport planning. Here, we have two recent intriguing documents: *Road Investment Strategy 2, 2020-2025* (RIS2)[2] and *Decarbonising Transport*.[3]

We can all see that the UK Government is taking incompetence to new levels across multiple dimensions. A prime example is the Planning White Paper – a vacuous assault on the planning system, driven largely by ignorance of the rationale and potential for urban planning. It involves a simplistic ideological drive to reduce public intervention (see Tim Marshall's article in the September/October issue of *Town & Country Planning*[4]), a favouring of private financial interests over public, and a brazen misunderstanding of the operation of alternative approaches to planning development, such as zoning (see Richard Wakeford's article in the same issue[5]). All of this wrapped up as making the system simpler, faster, and more predictable – 'cutting red tape, not standards' – and giving us more housing.

I would like to consider the transport elements of the Planning White Paper and write a critical riposte – however, transport does not even get a mention, apart from a commitment to revise the *Manual for Streets* (on page 46). It is as if the originators of the Planning White Paper do not realise that urban and transport planning are integrally intertwined. If we have no transport strategy, and do not locate urban development in areas of good public transport accessibility, then even internally well designed development will be car-dependent. I will overlook the wider machinations of Brexit, the response to the Coronavirus epidemic and even the supposed 'Levelling up' agenda, as if these are incidental.

Instead, let's initially consider RIS2. The first words of the Ministerial foreword from Grant Shapps MP and Baroness Vere of Norbiton suggest, promisingly, that 'This Road Investment Strategy is not a blueprint for pouring concrete, laying tarmac or welding steel.' But the strategy then goes on to give details on the expansion of highway capacity to be 'future ready', with a planned £27.4 billion investment in motorways, A-roads, and major local routes. RIS2 is a five-year programme for highway investment, including such luminous projects as the Lower Thames Crossing and multiple route widenings and junction upgrades. Schemes to be developed 'in the pipeline' include a Trans-Pennine Tunnel and the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway. OMG – some of these have been continuously rejected for decades, and others will hopefully remain mere pipe-dreams.

The strategy states that the value of individual journeys on the network:

> *'combine to deliver extensive benefits, without which life in the UK would be fundamentally poorer, for example:*
> - *Facilitating economic growth and international trade …*
> - *Helping people to choose where they want to live and work, in both rural and urban areas, giving […] a greater chance of enjoying a fulfilling life with friends and family.'*

A failing network that lacks capacity will apparently 'limit what people can achieve'. Hence Highways England has really got its act together, making the case for huge investment, associating road capacity with much positive phraseology – with very little evidence for the associations being made. I do not get any of this from my trips on the M25.

The strategy suggests that 'not all the issues facing the [strategic road network] can be solved in any single RIS'. Indeed, RIS2 follows RIS1, which invested £17 billion on highway schemes from 2015 to 2020. Hence there is an ongoing programme planned: receipts from vehicle excise duty are being diverted into a National Roads Fund, and this allows investment to continue over decades. Traffic growth is projected to rise in *Road Traffic Forecasts 2018*,[6] which is seen as 'strong and positive in all scenarios', in which traffic growth on the strategic road network ranges between 29% and 59% by 2050. This is driving (literally) the demand for new road capacity.

The commentary in RIS2 on electric, and even autonomous, vehicles is also carefully crafted. New technologies may change the composition of the

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**The government is pursuing a massive roads investment strategy as a fundamental element of its transport policy**

fleet, but not the increasing demand for vehicles. Hence Highways England is saved – we will need more road capacity as vehicle numbers increase; it's just that the vehicles will be clean. The number of people killed or seriously injured on the strategic road network is reported favourably to have fallen by 6% from 2015 to 2018, and now there are 'only' 2,000 people killed or seriously injured in each year. As we build more road capacity to support increased mobility, the premise is that we will overlook the still horrendous casualty figures and the adverse impact of vehicles on urban areas.

RIS2 is the 'largest ever' roads programme, according to Chancellor Rishi Sunak. I assume that he thinks this is a positive feature – lots of money + roadbuilding = good; and the more the better: if we can spend more than previous generations or other countries, then we really are leading the world. These plans surpass even those set out in *Roads for Prosperity*,[7] the infamous 1989 White Paper from the Thatcher government, billed as the largest roadbuilding programme for the UK since the Romans – with 500 road schemes at a cost of £23 billion. The programme included schemes such as the M25 and M1 widenings, the M3 Twyford Down extension, and the Newbury bypass. Many of these projects were hugely controversial among environmental activists and local communities, but most were still built, even if subject to delays.

Subsequent debates on induced traffic, disappearing traffic and the need for more balanced, integrated transport strategies, including investment in public transport, have been forgotten. Again, the government is pursuing a massive roads strategy. It is aiming for a 'smoother, smarter, sustainable' strategic road network, and few seem to have noticed.

The problem is that, at the same time, we have a climate crisis – and transport is the one sector not contributing to a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions. The government recognises this, of course, and is preparing a 'Transport Decarbonisation Plan', due to be published sometime in the remainder of 2020. This was preceded by the publication of *Decarbonising Transport: Setting the Challenge*,[3] which consulted on the context and challenges being faced. In his foreword to this document, Transport Secretary Grant Shapps says that 'public transport and active travel will be the natural first choice for our daily activities. We will use our cars less …'. Most tellingly, he says that 'from motorcycles to HGVs, all road vehicles will be zero emission' – and 'we will lead the development of sustainable biofuels, hybrid and electric aircraft to lessen and remove the impact of aviation [and shipping] on the environment by 2050'.

There are six strategic priorities, which are largely as you might imagine. They cover mode shift, decarbonising freight, decarbonising road vehicles, place-based solutions, technology, and international air and shipping. But, really, the strategy is reliant on cleaning the vehicle fleet, while doing little to change travel behaviours. Again, the government is saying that we can maintain our mobility patterns, as long as we travel in cleaner ways – this will solve the climate problem.

The planned investment in public transport, walking and cycling and urban planning is much too unambitious – some new zero-emission buses, £350 million for cycling, and little else. The UK is put forward as a global leader in low-emission vehicles, with more than 750,000 electric or hybrid vehicles.[8] But the document fails to mention that there are over 40 million vehicles in Great Britain, including over 20 million petrol-fuelled cars.[9] The rate of take-up of low-emission vehicles is much too slow, and the number in use is, as yet, fairly insignificant. Carbon dioxide emissions from vehicular travel are actually rising as people are buying larger vehicles.

Much of the document is therefore (ironically) little more than hot air, and certainly inconsistent with very significant road-building plans. There is a tendency


**Global case studies in sustainable urban mobility – what can we learn from them?**

to adopt the rhetoric of sustainable mobility, but then simply invest in highway infrastructure and overlook the other modes. The responsibility for reducing carbon dioxide emissions is pushed towards individual behaviours and supposed choice – ignoring the more fundamental role that governments can play. There are societal structures in place that mean people cannot yet choose to use public transport, walking or cycling in most locations across the UK. There is no effective rail or light rail in most urban areas, and even less so in the surrounding regions; the bus system has been consistently eroded over decades through privatisation; there are few high-quality, segregated cycle networks; and urban development is dispersed to locations where public transport accessibility is poor.

The public are not involved in the decision-making process, and indeed often are not prepared to support sustainable travel options and restrictions on traffic, such is the lack of awareness and debate. There is a huge task here if we are to achieve sustainable travel behaviours, and we are not even near starting on it. The Transport Decarbonisation Plan is unlikely to offer the range of public transport, walking and cycling infrastructure and traffic demand management measures required – and the Planning White Paper will not help in shaping a compact, polycentric built environment.

Grant Shapps gloats that the UK is the first major global economy to adopt 'net-zero' greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. But there is no plan to achieve this aim. The government is showing a heady mixture of ideology and ignorance – a sophomoric strategy that will not help to achieve sustainable urban mobility.

To take a very different approach, beyond the jingoism, we have been preparing an online course on sustainable urban mobility, developed by UCL (University College London) and the Transformative Urban Mobility Initiative at Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technischer Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). This examines global, progressive good practice in sustainable urban mobility, in an attempt to learn from the implementation of sustainable transport projects and think through a better decision-making process for transport planning. Our intended audience is transport practitioners and wider interested actors in the Global South, so that knowledge can be disseminated and learnt from elsewhere more easily. We explore many innovative urban transport projects (in locations shown in the map above).

There is much to be learnt from this fascinating practice abroad – ranging from cycling and urban development in Utrecht and Freiburg, through traffic demand management in Rio de Janeiro, bus rapid transit in Bogotá and Guangzhou, electric buses in Shenzhen and Medellín, to participatory planning in Madrid. All offer lessons for more progressive practice in the UK – many of these cities are taking away road capacity and investing massively in public

transport, walking, and cycling. In comparison, the UK's transport systems are woefully inadequate – it takes years to build even average projects. We do not usually allow effective participation in developing projects. If we do, the public struggle to engage as they are not aware of the public policy challenges that we face, or at least they do not relate these to their own lives.

We should be developing a process for participatory and deliberative transport planning, alongside a strengthened urban planning regime – this is what we learn from the progressive transport planning under way internationally.

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**Notes**

1 *Planning for the Future*. White Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future

2 *Road Investment Strategy 2: 2020-2025*. Policy Paper. Department for Transport, Mar. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/publications/road-investment-strategy-2-ris2-2020-to-2025

3 *Decarbonising Transport: Setting the Challenge*. Department for Transport, Mar. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/publications/creating-the-transport-decarbonisation-plan

4 T Marshall: 'The White Paper's ideological core'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2020, Vol. 89, Sept./Oct., 304-06

5 R Wakeford: 'To zone, or not to zone; is that the question?'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2020, Vol. 89, Sept./Oct., 320-23

6 *Road Traffic Forecasts 2018*. Department for Transport, Sept. 2018. www.gov.uk/government/publications/road-traffic-forecasts-2018

7 *Roads for Prosperity*. Cm 693. White Paper. Department of Transport, May 1989

8 'Vehicle ownership in the UK surpasses 40 million, with many still on the roads supporting nationwide coronavirus response'. *SMMT News*, 21 Apr. 2020. www.smmt.co.uk/2020/04/vehicle-ownership-in-the-uk-surpasses-40-million-with-many-still-on-the-roads-supporting-nationwide-coronavirus-response/

9 T Shale-Hester: 'UK vehicle ownership passes 40 million mark'. *Auto Express*, 21 Apr. 2020. www.autoexpress.co.uk/news/352086/uk-vehicle-ownership-passes-40-million-mark