

Strategic road network

House of Commons Transport Select Committee

Response to a call for evidence in advance of the committee's inquiry

October 2013



This submission is in response to a call for evidence on an inquiry into the strategic road network. The Royal Academy has chosen to respond only to one area of the multiple questions raised by the committee: "How should the Highways Agency be reformed to make it 'the world's leading highway operator'? What roles should Government and the private sector play to ensure better management of the strategic road network?"

The points below reflect discussions among members of the Royal Academy of Engineering's Transport Community of Practice, concerning the importance of independent technical advice and in-house technical knowledge and skills within both the Highways Agency and Department for Transport.

1. The Highways Agency (HA) previously funded a significant amount of basic research into highways issues. This has been largely replaced by framework contracts with consortia consisting mainly of consulting organisations which generate short-term consulting projects on very specific issues. This type of work is unsuitable for universities because of its short-term and highly applied nature meaning that the universities sector has become less engaged with the HA and the amount of basic research into highway issues has reduced.
2. The Transport Research Laboratory was privatised in the 1990s and is now a contract research organisation, competing with other consultancies. It is therefore no longer able to act as a dedicated source of independent technical advice for the HA and Department for Transport (DfT). The HA has also downsized its own technical staff, leading to a reduction in the capacity to provide in-house technical advice.
3. The HA does have a recruitment and training scheme for engineering graduates. However, the scheme is somewhat broad, and greater technical content would help HA engineers to deal with the challenging policy issues that they will face.
4. Much of the HA's infrastructure for the strategic road network is safety critical – e.g. bridges. It is therefore crucially important that the DfT and HA retain the technical skills needed to make policy, procure cost-effective capital infrastructure works and minimize risks in the strategic road network. This will allow the HA to be intelligent clients of private sector contractors which is crucial given the model of partnering with the private sector.

For further information please contact:

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