OPINION

Roads on trial: time to scrap £27.4 billion roads programme and reinvest in low carbon infrastructure

Road building plans face a 'perfect storm' of challenges on at least four fronts. It's time to consider whether the money would be better spent elsewhere, says **Lisa Hopkinson**

If Treasury officials were looking for ways to save the odd £27.4 billion while still creating jobs and helping to level up the economy, they need look no further than the Road Investment Strategy (RIS2).

The Government's road building plans are facing a perfect storm – a legal challenge, a massive carbon policy gap, the profound impacts of Covid-19 on travel and a ballooning Government deficit.

In its annual report to Parliament the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) urged ministers to "seize the opportunity" from Covid to tackle accelerating climate change. They also warned that "all policy and infrastructure decisions will need to be checked against their consistency with the UK's Net Zero target."

In a climate emergency wouldn't this be the perfect opportunity to rethink the £27.4bn funding for RIS2 while locking in some of the positive travel behaviour changes resulting from lockdown and reducing air pollution?

Pushing ahead with road building in the current post-Covid and climate emergency is looking increasingly anachronistic as well as a legal liability.

The Department for Transport (DfT) faced a historic defeat in February, when the Court of Appeal blocked the expansion of Heathrow Airport on climate grounds.

This should have led to a rethink of its roads policy. Instead, the Government pressed on and in the March Budget announced its 'largest ever' roads programme, RIS2.

In response, the small non-governmental organisation Transport Action Network (TAN) has launched a legal challenge to RIS2 and is crowdfunding to pay for the legal costs. TAN's grounds for judicial review include the fact that climate change, including the Paris Climate Agreement, was not properly taken into account before publishing RIS2.

Although TAN's legal case is on the process rather than on the merits of the roads programme, let's just examine the latter.

So here's the problem. Transport is a rogue sector when it comes to carbon: the single biggest source of carbon in the UK and the only sector to increase emissions since 1990.

Because the impacts of carbon are cumulative, the next 10 years are critical in terms of reducing carbon. A tonne of carbon reduced today is more effective than a tonne of carbon reduced tomorrow.

And, based on the CCC's trajectory to net zero, we estimate that transport could be facing a 60 million tonnes carbon policy gap by 2032 for domestic transport alone (and an even bigger gap when international aviation is included). This is the gap between DfT's current policy projections and what is required under a net zero budget.

Even bringing forward the date of the phase out of new petrol and diesel cars (to 2035 or earlier), while essential, will not be sufficient to plug that gap. This is because the majority (around 65%) of cars on the road in 2030 will still be petrol or diesel. In 2030, we estimate it will reduce UK car emissions by less than five million tonnes of carbon compared with a 2040 ban. The only smart way to get domestic transport carbon emissions down over the next decade is to cut road traffic significantly, by between 20% and 60%.

DfT is in a big hole, but it keeps on digging. A report by Lynn Sloman and myself for Transport for Quality of Life has estimated that RIS2 will increase carbon by a total of 20 million tonnes between now and 2032.

About a third of the emissions will come from construction (including energy required to manufacture steel, concrete and asphalt); a third from increases in vehicle speeds on wider, faster roads; and the balance from extra traffic generated by bigger roads stimulating more car-dependent housing, retail parks and business parks.

And the extra emissions as a result of more road capacity will negate about 80% of the benefit arising from the switch to electric vehicles using the Strategic Road Network. So, at a time when we need to cut emissions from roads, RIS2 will increase them. This is like throwing petrol on a burning house.

The Government's and Highways England's response to any criticism that RIS will increase carbon is to point to the forthcoming Decarbonising Transport Plan. To take the burning house analogy further, this is like the Fire Service telling the person dialling 999 that they will publish a strategy on how to save a burning house in a few months' time.

TAN has now launched a second legal challenge against DfT that highlights the ludicrous way in which the carbon impacts of large road schemes are, effectively, ignored. Their challenge is to the 2014 National Policy Statement on National Networks, the guidance that governs significant projects such as large road schemes.

This guidance, published before the Paris Climate Agreement, states that roads should not be rejected on grounds of increased carbon emissions unless the increase is "so significant that it would have a material impact on the ability of Government to meet its carbon reduction targets".

This dangerous and misguided policy has led to the carbon impacts from individual road schemes effectively being ignored because they are unfairly compared with carbon budgets for the whole economy.

A single scheme such as the controversial A303 to Stonehenge is estimated to produce an additional two million tonnes of carbon over its lifetime. But, according to the Environmental Statement, emissions "represent less than 0.03% of total emissions in any five year carbon budget during which they arise". According to the 'guidance' this would not have a material impact on the Government meeting its carbon reduction targets. With Sir Humphrey-esque sleight of hand the significant carbon impacts from road schemes are thus, effectively, ignored. If the same logic applied to measuring the economic benefits of individual infrastructure projects in terms of national gross domestic product, nothing would ever be built.

The Government is keen to create jobs through infrastructure spending. Fair enough. But a recent TUC report suggests that, if you want to provide the most jobs, build cycle lanes not roads. And remember that scrapping RIS2 will only stop carbon increasing further, but we still need to cut traffic significantly. Investing in broadband, remote working hubs, public transport and cycle infra-structure can all help with that.

So cancelling the funding for RIS2 and reinvesting in infrastructure that reduces carbon emissions is a way for the Government to decarbonise transport, reduce air pollution, save £27.4bn and avoid two expensive legal battles. As the economist John Maynard Keynes famously said "when the facts change, I change my mind" and the facts have certainly changed for road building.

When even The AA is suggesting that road building funding could be better spent on broadband, you wonder what is holding the Secretary of State for Transport back?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Hopkinson is an environmental researcher with more than 30 years' experience in Hong Kong and the UK in the charitable, educational and private sectors. She has variously worked as a consultant, campaigner, political aide and researcher. She has worked on numerous sustainable transport projects, most recently a series of reports on carbon and urban transport (with acknowledgement to the tireless work of Professor Donald Shoup, Professor of urban planning at UCLA).