

# **Future-proofing of the Strategic Road Network**

**A Guide for Promoters of Third Party Projects  
and Plans**

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## Summary

This note provides advice on future-proofing of the Strategic Road Network (SRN). It is written for promoters of third party projects that impact on the SRN, and for Local Authorities in respect of the preparation of local plans.

The guidance provides the legal context, setting out the statutory position of National Highways and the policy framework with regard to this topic, including the wording contained within the Department for Transport (DfT) Circular 01/22<sup>1</sup> and the National Highways Licence<sup>2</sup>.

This note is intended for **external** use, to provide guidance on National Highways' Future-Proofing Policy when developing proposals that may impose a constraint on the future development of the SRN through a physical interface or adjacency to the highway boundary.

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic road network and the delivery of sustainable development - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))

<sup>2</sup> Highways England: licence ([publishing.service.gov.uk](http://publishing.service.gov.uk))

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## Key Headlines

- Future-proofing is the requirement to ensure that the physical infrastructure associated with a third party project or plan does not impose unreasonable constraints on National Highways' ability to maintain and operate a safe and efficient network in the foreseeable future.
- DfT Circular 01/2022 and National Highways' operating licence require future-proofing to be considered on third party projects and in local plans.
- Scheme promoters should also have due regard to National Highways' strategy documents such as the Environmental Sustainability Strategy.
- Consideration should be given to all aspects of the highway including safe operation, asset management, additional capacity, change of use and technology.
- The focus should be on designing new infrastructure to avoid constraining the future development of the SRN.
- Future-proofing must be funded by the scheme promoter.
- Early engagement with National Highways is key to designing future-proofing into a project and minimising costs.
- If future-proofing is not adequately accounted for in proposals this may lead to National Highways being unable to accept proposals and/or maintain objection at DCO stage.
- National Highways is keen to work with promoters to help work through this in a collaborative way.

# 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Future-proofing is one of the key issues which must be considered by promoters of projects that may have an impact on the Strategic Road Network (SRN).
- 1.2 Future-proofing is the requirement to ensure that the physical infrastructure associated with a third party project or plan does not impose unreasonable constraints on National Highways' ability to maintain and operate a safe and efficient network, in the foreseeable future. This is set out in a National Highways Future-proofing policy<sup>3</sup>.
- 1.3 This Guidance Document is intended for use by promoters of third party projects and for Local Authorities when developing local plans. The document is divided into the following sections:
  - Section 2 explains the scope of National Highways' policy regarding future-proofing;
  - Section 3 sets out the policy and legal framework that underpins National Highways' future-proofing requirements; and
  - Section 4 provides some context for the application of the Future-Proofing Policy in practice.

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<sup>3</sup> Future-Proofing Policy v0.8 FINAL.docx

## 2. Scope of the Policy

- 2.1 This guidance is relevant to any infrastructure project, development or local plan which has the potential to constrain the future development of the SRN and is promoted by an organisation other than National Highways (i.e. a “third party project”).
- 2.2 The intent of the document is to help the promoters of third party projects and Local Authorities engaged in the preparation of local plans to consider future-proofing at an early stage, to safeguard the future needs of the SRN and avoid costly design rework, objections to the application for consents or operational disruption and high costs associated with a future intervention. This guidance applies to promoters of third party projects and applies irrespective of the consenting route (Town and Country Planning Act, Development Consent Orders, Transport and Works Act Orders or hybrid Bills). This guidance also applies to the process of local plan making undertaken by Local Planning Authorities.
- 2.3 Future-proofing should be considered when an infrastructure project or development is proposed which could physically restrict future changes being made to the SRN including associated infrastructure, property and land. This could include projects involving direct alterations to SRN assets, new crossings over or underneath the SRN and development in close proximity to the highway boundary.
- 2.4 The purpose of future-proofing is to preserve the ability to make changes to the SRN in the future without needing to incur significant additional costs and/or network disruption. Given the cost of making changes to infrastructure, purchasing land and the disruption it can cause, it is essential to consider the potential impact of the proposed third party project or plan on the ability of the SRN to adapt to an uncertain future, for example, emerging technologies, climate change resilience or longer-term changes in demand patterns and customer requirements which may require a change of use. It is important that promoters of third party projects meet National Highways’ requirements in relation to future-proofing so that National Highways can support their application. This requirement also provides confidence to the promoter that National Highways wouldn’t need to disrupt their work and or operation in future.
- 2.5 Due to lengthy project development lead times and design programme durations and costs it is preferable to consider future-proofing at the earliest practicable stage of the project development lifecycle. Through early engagement with National Highways agreement can be reached on what future-proofing is required at a time when projects and plans have greater flexibility in their design and delivery.
- 2.6 Third party projects vary in size from a modest housing development to a major infrastructure project. Therefore, when assessing the requirements on each specific project National Highways will consider factors such as the size and cost of the development, the scale of the likely impact and the status of the road in order to ensure a proportionate requirement is set.

- 2.7 Whilst each third party project will be assessed by National Highways on a case-by-case basis this guidance is provided to support scheme Promoters and Local Plan Developers in understanding the policy, its implications and applicability. Table 1 in Section 4 of this documents aims to provide an indication of the areas to which the Future-Proofing Policy may need to be applied although it should not be treated as exhaustive.



## 3. Policy and Legal Context

3.1 National Highways' Future-Proofing Policy describes the National Highways' legislative framework and the legal and policy sources that form the basis for its position on future-proofing. The principal legal document is National Highways' Licence, whilst the Department for Transport (DfT) Circular 01/2022, "*Strategic Road Network and the Delivery of Sustainable Development*")<sup>4</sup> provides clear direction in respect of the requirement to future-proof the SRN. In addition, National Highways' long-term strategic plan for the SRN, "Connecting the Country"<sup>5</sup> and its Environmental Sustainability Strategy, set out clear requirements for future-proofing. The connection between these sources and the requirement to future-proof is summarised below.

### 3.2 Legal and Government Policy Framework

3.2.1 The Secretary of State for Transport appointed National Highways (formerly Highways England) as a strategic highways company under section 1 of the Infrastructure Act 2015<sup>6</sup>. This appointment gave National Highways as the Licence holder, the legislative functions of a strategic highways company with regard to the areas and highways in respect of which it is appointed. As a result, as the Licence holder National Highways is the highway authority, traffic authority and street authority for the SRN.

3.2.2 The National Highways Licence includes both statutory directions and statutory guidance issued by the Secretary of State to the Licence holder, as provided for in section 6 of the Infrastructure Act 2015. These directions must be complied with by National Highways as the Licence holder. As described in the Future-Proofing Policy one of these statutory directions – section 4.2(c) and Part 6 – establishes a requirement to future-proof the SRN in planning the long-term development and improvement of the network.

3.2.3 Furthermore, the National Planning Policy Framework<sup>7</sup> (NPPF) sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how these should be applied. The NPPF gives particular importance to sustainable development, which it defines as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Therefore, future-proofing the network aligns development on the SRN with this sustainable development objective.

3.2.4 The Circular 01/2022 explains how National Highways engages in plan-making and decision-taking to support the delivery of sustainable

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-road-network-and-the-delivery-of-sustainable-development/strategic-road-network-and-the-delivery-of-sustainable-development>

<sup>5</sup> <https://nationalhighways.co.uk/our-roads/future-roads/connecting-the-country/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/7/contents/enacted>

<sup>7</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65a11af7e8f5ec000f1f8c46/NPPF\\_December\\_2023.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65a11af7e8f5ec000f1f8c46/NPPF_December_2023.pdf)

development and as the Future-Proofing Policy sets out includes references to future-proofing in sections 51 and 52.

- 3.2.5 The Circular 01/2022 sets out a transparent and consistent approach to considering and implementing future-proofing to comply with National Highways' Licence obligations and Future-Proofing Policy. This document should be considered in respect of all third party projects and plans impacting the SRN to ensure a long-term sustainable and resilient network that can meet or be adaptable to accommodate, foreseeable future challenges and demands.
- 3.2.6 The Circular (01/2022) states that new development should facilitate a reduction in the need to travel by private car and should be focused on locations that are or can be made sustainable. In circumstances, where road improvements are required, National Highways will work with promoters to facilitate economic growth. Although this is one of our objectives it is important to note that the continued safe and efficient operation of the SRN will remain National Highways' primary consideration.

### **3.3 Environmental Sustainability Strategy**

- 3.3.1 National Highways published its Environmental Sustainability Strategy<sup>8</sup> in 2023. The Strategy provides a roadmap for how National Highways will manage the SRN in a sustainable manner. It establishes National Highways' vision for environmental sustainability and describes the Environmental Sustainability Framework, including strategic outcomes for nature, carbon and communities and priority areas which set out what National Highways wants to achieve and by when. The Strategy also explains how the company will implement the strategy.
- 3.3.2 Although the Strategy describes strategic outcomes that may not be achieved for many years it is an important document for National Highways and signposts a direction of travel for the construction, operation and maintenance of the SRN. It is therefore critically important that the Strategy is taken into account when considering future-proofing in the context of third party projects and that efforts are made to avoid constraining the achievement of the strategic outcomes in the future through the design of infrastructure.

### **3.4 Necessity of Future-proofing**

- 3.4.1 National Highways' Future-Proofing policy establishes the need for future-proofing to be considered for any third party project or plan that may impose a physical constraint on the SRN now or in the future. Ensuring the SRN's long-term safety and operational performance can be maintained is enshrined in National Highways Licence and the Circular 01/22. Future-proofing is necessary to support a functioning economy by enabling National Highways to meet the challenges of climate change and adapt to changes in technology and stakeholder expectations regarding capacity and operation. The Future-Proofing Policy is clear that National Highways'

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<sup>8</sup> nh-environmental-sustainability-strategy\_final\_020523.pdf (nationalhighways.co.uk)

approach is for the minimum possible additional works to be provided to avoid constraining the future resilience and adaptability of the SRN. Sometimes, referred to as “passive provision”, this may simply involve designing the new project or development to retain space provision adjacent to the SRN to preserve flexibility.

- 3.4.2 The Government’s shift towards Vision Led Planning for transport (as opposed to the traditional “Predict and Provide” approach) increases the risk that future-proofing will not be provided for eventualities that are not considered likely but then materialise during monitoring. There is therefore a greater need to future-proof the SRN to avoid constraining the network in the future.

### **3.5 Funding**

- 3.5.1 Any costs associated with ensuring a third party project meets National Highways’ future-proofing requirements must be funded by the third party Promoter. However, early engagement in the design process with National Highways may result in minimal (or even no) additional cost to design the project in such a way as to retain space adjacent the SRN. Early engagement will help to keep costs to a minimum.

## 4. Policy Implications – Future-Proofing in Practice

### 4.1 Future-proofing in Practice

- 4.1.1 The Future-Proofing Policy is explicit in directing third party projects proposals and plans to include future-proofing requirements within their designs. Furthermore, should future-proofing not be considered adequately by scheme promoters and not provided where required and reasonable National Highways may determine that it is unable to support the project or plan through the consents process.
- 4.1.2 It is standard practice for all projects involving changes to National Highways infrastructure to be designed to the standards set out in the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB). These standards are updated on a periodic basis and already reflect changing forecasts in relation to climate change. For example, highway drainage will be designed to accommodate increased levels of rainfall to enable it to mitigate expected incidences of flooding. Similarly, traffic demand forecasts against which new infrastructure is designed will use Department for Transport forecasts to ensure that trends in transport and economic growth are included.
- 4.1.3 Infrastructure designs will therefore provide sufficient functionality to enable future operation. However, this will be based on forecast changes that are generally well understood and are expected over a foreseeable timescale depending on the asset type and issue being considered. For example, drainage asset standards may accommodate forecast rainfall for several decades in line with DMRB standards, whilst provisions to avoid constraining an uncommitted major enhancement scheme that could be implemented in 15 years' time may need to be built into the design. Future-proofing in the context of the Future Proofing Policy as described in this guidance is a requirement to consider whether the design of new third party projects or plan locations provides sufficient flexibility for changes to be made in the future should that become a requirement.
- 4.1.4 Promoters will need to demonstrate that their proposals do not constrain National Highways' ability to make changes to the SRN in the future. By not including future-proofing requirements this carries risk to the promoter as National Highways may need to disrupt / alter the third party project's assets or operation in future to remove the constraint. Examples may include a new development adjacent to the SRN which may prevent National Highways from widening a road, expanding a junction, implementing new technology, install new drainage infrastructure or a new public transport facility. Similarly, the piers from a new structure traversing the SRN may present similar constraints. Designing the new project in such a way as to provide additional space to enable sufficient flexibility in the future is likely to be more straightforward and less costly to achieve by engaging at an early stage.

## **4.2 Future-proofing Requirements**

4.2.1 Future-proofing requirements associated with a third party project are a key part of the early consideration of the project's impacts on the SRN. Early engagement between National Highways and the third party promoter will enable an understanding of its future-proofing requirements and what evidence National Highways would need to see in relation to future-proofing to support a third party project application. The requirements will vary from project to project and new considerations may materialise in the future. To satisfy future-proofing requirements, the Promoter of a third party project will need to:

- Identify elements of their project which may have an impact on the SRN;
- Provide information to National Highways to enable us to define requirements in relation to future-proofing;
- Work through implications of the future-proofing requirement into the scheme and with National Highways.

4.2.2 National Highways is keen to support economic growth and welcome opportunities to collaborate with third party projects to discuss and agree requirements. Future-proofing requirements are critical to enable a design to progress. National Highways has a wealth of experience relating to future-proofing and in discussion with the third party projects can agree solutions to satisfy both National Highways and the Promoter of the third party project.

4.2.3 Table 1 below provides some examples of situations when future-proofing should be considered. The table describes some of the factors to be considered in assessing the impact and the mitigation that could be proposed.

**Table 1 – Examples of Future-proofing Requirements**

Category	Cause	SRN Considerations	Actions that Promoters may have to take
<b>Safe operation</b>	Amended SRN design e.g. as part of third party project mitigation.	There may be a requirement to demonstrate that any design amendments do not preclude future SRN improvements to ensure safe operation. For example, the design may be sensitive from a safety perspective to an increase in demand above current demand forecasts.	Design may need to incorporate sufficient flexibility and/or sufficient space to enable a change to the infrastructure in the future to maintain safe operation.
<b>Asset Management</b>	Access to new asset (provided by third party project) for maintenance, requiring traffic management on the SRN (e.g. central piers on a structure crossing a motorway) and associated disruption to customers.	<p>For projects proposing infrastructure which will impact the SRN (e.g., structure crossing the SRN), there is already a requirement to design for maintenance and to consider SRN user impact.</p> <p>However, depending on the proposal there may be benefit in considering the following as part of any future-proofing assessment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The adoption of a modular approach supporting future extension or replacement.</li> <li>• The delivery of structures/foundations designed with sufficient space adjacent to the carriageway to allow for the provision of future additional capacity if likely to be required.</li> <li>• Designing structures which minimise extensive traffic management e.g. making overbridges longer to allow abutment construction without SRN traffic</li> </ul>	Consideration of constructability, maintainability, and future structural flexibility (e.g. ability for structure to be widened) during design development.

Category	Cause	SRN Considerations	Actions that Promoters may have to take
		management, avoiding bridge piers in the SRN central reserve etc.	
<b>Sustainability</b>	Project places constraints on the ability to provide additional sustainability features which might be required in the future.	The Environmental Sustainability Strategy provides a roadmap towards long-term sustainability outcomes for the SRN. The design of new or amended SRN assets should consider the Strategy and ensure that likely future sustainability requirements are not constrained.	Consider the provision of space for future planting. Consider additional mitigation (or retaining the ability to provide additional mitigation in the future) where the environmental impact assessment demonstrates that outcomes are only just acceptable in case standards become more stringent over time.
<b>Additional Capacity</b>	Project places constraints on the ability to enhance the SRN in the future.	For third party projects and plans (at both the Plan Making stage and for individual developments) that are adjacent to, or traverse, the SRN, future-proofing assessment may be required to demonstrate that future SRN development (e.g. widening or junction enhancement) is not precluded. This may include assessment against relevant plans and strategies (e.g. Route Strategies).	Consider provision of space adjacent to the SRN carriageway to maintain reasonable flexibility and avoid constraining future enhancement or provision without making costly interventions.
<b>Change of Use</b>	Project places constraints on the ability to change the operation of the SRN in the future.	For third party projects and plans that are adjacent to or traverse the SRN, future-proofing assessment may be required to demonstrate that changes to the operation of the SRN in the future (e.g., conversion of the hard shoulder to rapid transit operation or provision of sustainable transport facilities adjacent to the carriageway) are not precluded. This may include assessment against relevant plans and strategies (e.g. Route Strategies).	Consider provision of space adjacent to the SRN carriageway to maintain reasonable flexibility and avoid constraining future operational changes.



Category	Cause	SRN Considerations	Actions that Promoters may have to take
<b>Drainage</b>	Circular 01/2022 contains directions on the provision of suitable drainage on the SRN in respect of third party projects and developments. Paragraph 59 states that no new drainage connections into existing systems will be accepted. Project may also place constraints on the construction of new attenuation features in the future.	When designing new drainage, DMRB (document CG501) outlines National Highways' approach to climate change and LA113 refers the reader to the Environment Agency's latest allowances. However, the standards do not provide for the potential future surface outfall requirements in the context of climate change resilience.	Consider designing new infrastructure or developments adjacent to the SRN to avoid constraining the construction of new above or below ground surface water attenuation features (for example balancing ponds and underground tanks etc) or to provide maintenance access to these features in the future.
<b>Technology</b>	Project places constraints on the ability to implement technological change on the SRN in the future.	For third party projects and plans that are adjacent to or traverse the SRN, future-proofing assessment may be required to demonstrate that technological changes to SRN in the future (e.g., new facilities to enable Connected and Automated Vehicles) are not precluded.	Consider provision of space adjacent to the SRN carriageway to maintain reasonable flexibility and avoid constraining future technological changes as knowledge of future technology requirements emerges.



## 5. Summary

- 5.1. This guidance document explains the need for third party promoters to consider future-proofing requirements in relation to the SRN, from the earliest stages of their project. It also describes the reasons for and sources of this requirement and provides some examples of where future-proofing may be appropriate.
- 5.2. By collaborating with National Highways early to agree future-proofing requirements promoters of third party projects will minimise the risk of challenge to their application on the basis of future-proofing and also satisfy their obligations as a promoter to evidence to National Highways regarding requirements.