

**STATEMENT FROM SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT TO
THE HOUSE OF COMMONS – FRIDAY 20 JUNE 2003**

**MANAGEMENT OF THE STRATEGIC ROAD NETWORK IN
ENGLAND**

The strategic road network managed by the Highways Agency is part of the backbone of this country, carrying about third of all road traffic in England, and two thirds of all freight traffic. Many people and businesses depend on it.

This strategic road network is amongst the safest in Europe. But there is a need to strengthen the way those roads are managed, to maintain traffic flow and maximise use of the available road space, to deal with unplanned incidents such as vehicle accidents, breakdowns and spillages and to provide better information to motorists about traffic conditions.

Under the present arrangements, this will place an increasing burden on the police. The Government does not believe that is sustainable. Network management is a core responsibility of the Highways Agency, but it is not a police function, and asking the police service to do more in this area can only detract from their core tasks of security, tackling crime and ensuring public safety and public order

For that reason, the Government has charged the Highways Agency to develop its role as a network operator for the strategic road network. To support that, the Agency has undertaken, in partnership with the Association of Chief Police Officers, a review of both organisations' roles and responsibilities for management and operation of the strategic road network.

I am today publishing the report of that review. I am arranging for copies to be placed in the Library of the House.

The review concluded that responsibility for a number of tasks associated with the management of the strategic road network should be transferred from the police to the Highways Agency. These include a range of supporting and ancillary tasks associated with effective road management and keeping traffic flowing, such as abnormal load route planning, setting message signs and signals, answering emergency roadside telephones and dealing with the traffic consequences of an incident. The intention is to increase the total level of resources being applied, and to enable the Agency and the police to focus their efforts in support of their core roles.

The Government has endorsed this report and has instructed the Highways Agency to increase the priority they give to network management and to develop measures to deliver progressive and demonstrable benefits over the next two years. The Association of Chief Police Officers has also strongly endorsed the report.

The Government attaches a high priority to seeing the conclusions of this review implemented quickly and effectively. A joint Agency and police implementation team has already been established and an implementation programme developed. The Agency will also work closely with key motorists' organisations such as the AA and RAC, and the freight haulage and vehicle recovery organisations. The Highways Agency will:

- Establish a network of regional control centres, operated jointly by the Agency and the police, to monitor the motorway network and co-ordinate action when an incident occurs. These are currently being developed and the first, covering the motorways around Birmingham, is expected to come on-

stream in Spring 2004. This will streamline and simplify current arrangements where each police force in England has its own control centre, with varying degrees of joint working with the Highways Agency and local authorities.

- Recruit, train and deploy a uniformed motorway patrol service, operating round the clock, with powers to take action and a focus on taking whatever steps are necessary – as soon as possible – to get traffic flowing. The Agency's traffic officers will work in close cooperation with the police, roadside assistance and recovery organisations, the Agency's maintenance contractors and other organisations to ensure that equipment to carry out essential repairs and remove damaged vehicles is summoned quickly, that local diversion routes are opened up quickly and that timely and accurate information is relayed to motorists about the situation. The police will remain in overall control of dealing with the management and investigation of accidents, and they will continue to be responsible for enforcement of road traffic offences.

The Agency estimates that it will be able in the first two years to reduce the delays caused by incidents on motorways by up to 5%. This initiative represents an addition to the Highways Agency's Business Plan for 2003-04, which the Agency will fund from within agreed spending plans.

Although much of this work can be developed within the existing legislative framework, there is a need to provide the Agency with traffic management powers to enable them to fully develop their role. There is an existing model for this – the powers granted to the operator of the Dartford River crossing that have operated successfully for many years. I have instructed the Agency to prepare the necessary legislation, which I intend to introduce when Parliamentary time permits.

I believe that this initiative will improve the service provided to motorists and will make an important contribution alongside other initiatives to tackling congestion on the strategic road network.