

# Missing £800m threatens upgrades to busiest roads

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Upgrades to England's busiest motorways could be scrapped or postponed because of an £800 million hole in the government's road-building programme.

A review is being carried out of all 112 projects contained in the strategy amid warnings that some pose a "high risk" to the public purse.

The Office of Rail and Road (ORR), the official regulator, said that some poor-value schemes may be dropped while others are likely to be downgraded or postponed beyond the existing start date of March 2020.

It places a question mark over some of the 60 schemes due to start towards the end of the period (2015-2020) covered by the plan.

These include a proposed tunnel under Stonehenge, plans to turn 13 miles of the A1 north of Newcastle into dual carriageway, a major upgrade to the busiest stretch of the M25, a new approach road to the Port of Liverpool and improvements to the A27 on the south coast.

In a further conclusion, the ORR said that England's remaining motorways and major A-roads were below standard because of deterioration in their skid resistance.

It said that almost 8 per cent of the highway network was in a poor state — above the floor target of 5 per cent — with the regulator warning that it posed a possible safety risk to drivers.

The conclusions represent a blow to the Department for Transport and Highways England, the taxpayer-funded company that has been tasked with delivering the most ambitious road-building scheme in a generation. Andy

## Under review

- A 1.8-mile tunnel under Stonehenge as part of upgrade of the A303
- Upgrade of A27 west of Brighton, including a dual carriageway bypass at Arundel
- New dual carriageway for 13 miles of the A1 north of Newcastle
- Major improvements to the M25 junctions 10-16, the busiest part of the orbital motorway, including extra lanes
- Upgrade of M62 junctions 20-25 over Pennines, turning it into smart motorway with variable speed limits and use of hard shoulder
- Upgrade of A1(M) junctions 6-8 around Stevenage to turn it into a smart motorway
- Revamp of A5036 Princess Way, the access to the Port of Liverpool, to improve link to motorways

McDonald, the shadow transport secretary, said: "The Tories have been over-promising and under-delivering on investment in England's roads and this report lays bare their failure. The road investment strategy is beginning to look like a wish list."

The £15 billion strategy was announced in late 2014, with work due to start on 112 schemes between 2015 and 2020. This included adding 1,300 miles of extra lanes to motorways and A-roads, redesigning problem junctions and tackling pinch points.

A Highways England assessment of the programme a year ago admitted

that a £1.7 billion hole in its funding had been identified. Costs for 31 major schemes were more than 50 per cent over budget. An updated assessment of the project, published by the ORR last week, said that the funding gap had been more than halved over the past year to £800,000.

Sixty out of 112 schemes are not due to start until the very end of the five-year period in 2019-20, but the ORR said there was "limited evidence that this was deliverable".

It said a review of all schemes was due to be completed by the summer. Although this process is likely to cut the budget shortfall further, the report admitted that the "proposals will result in a number of changes" to the overall programme.

The ORR said this included "removal of a number of schemes specified in the [strategy] where these are no longer assessed to be value for money". It is also likely to mean "deferring a number of schemes" beyond 2020, the report added.

Jim O'Sullivan, Highways England chief executive, said: "We are confident we will deliver this large programme without overspending our budget."

● The three bodies responsible for Stonehenge and its surrounds — the National Trust, English Heritage and Historic England — have lent their support in principle to plans for a road tunnel under the monument but would like changes to the final scheme. The tunnel is intended to ease a bottleneck on the A303 in Wiltshire but other groups have called for an alternative to save any undiscovered ancient sites. Senior figures from the organisations are due to meet Highways England today to discuss their concerns.