



INVESTIGATION BY **LEE WOODCOCK**

All change on the roads

On 1st April, the Highways Agency was no more, as Highways England took its place.

But apart from a different name and a new logo, what does it mean for its users, the drivers and passengers on the strategic road network in England?

I asked the Chief Executive of Highways England, Graham Dalton to give his views, and then asked a former



politician's view, by talking to the ex-Labour Transport Minister and current Smart Highways columnist Dr Stephen Ladyman. And another organisation has a new name, as the Office of Rail Regulation becomes the Office of Rail and Road. So I questioned Peter Antolik, the Highways Director, to see how he'll be involved.

I then spoke to my colleague Lesley Waud, who has recently been appointed Market Director, Strategic

Highways at Atkins who is responsible for work with HE, Welsh Government, Transport Scotland and Transport NI.

Graham Dalton The changes to the way England's major roads are managed reflect the need for certainty for everyone in our sector. Infrastructure needs long term planning to be effective and government needs certainty that investment plans for infrastructure can be delivered. This means having people, equipment and materials in place. For this to happen our suppliers need long term certainty to invest in their capacity and capability and we need the certainty to ensure we can deliver efficiently. We now have that certainty in a five year plan and we've set out how we'll make it happen in our Delivery Plan.

Lee Woodcock Peter, what is your role in this?

Peter Antolik Because the government is now providing Highways England with greater decision-making powers and increased, longer-term funding, it requires independent assurance about the levels of performance and efficiency that Highways England is delivering. The Office of Rail and Road's (ORR) independent monitoring and enforcement will provide that.

Lee And what will be your benchmarks?

Peter Antolik Last December the UK government announced a £15bn roads investment plan for England's strategic roads network until 2021. A specific rationale for the change was to move roads spending away from short-term decisions to a longer-term funding outlook reflecting the timeframes of major infrastructure investment. This longer-term security of funding should allow Highways England to realise efficiencies, alongside delivery of a five year performance specification and investment plan, which includes outcomes on:

- Making the network safer
- Minimising disruption from road works and incidents
- Delivering better environmental outcomes



ABOUT THE ATKINS INVESTIGATION

ATKINS

ATKINS IS A COMPANY which will always work for its clients to understand the issues involved and provides expertise, answers and ideas in ITS, and now more recently in Smart Cities and Intelligent Mobility. Delivering an appropriate and sustainable transportation network for the 21st century is an exciting challenge. Atkins is committed to planning, designing and enabling our clients' transportation programmes.

Atkins has a proven track record of successfully planning, designing and enabling urban transport and environmental improvements across all scales of developments. Successful transport strategies examine the journeys that people need to make in all aspects of their lives and provide realistic travel options. The services provided to clients range from strategic policy advice and performance management, through all aspects of demand forecasting, behavioural analysis, to accessibility, transport for land development, streetscapes and traffic engineering design.

Atkins supports the Atkins Investigation in Smart Highways because the investigation, like Atkins, gets to the heart of an issue in order to understand it, and then utilise the knowledge and understanding to help its clients translate and navigate difficult issues in order for them make the right decisions safe in the knowledge they have the facts.

programme. We've moved away from the annualised budgets, which have always caused challenges so we now have a better opportunity to plan for the future and make sure we have the right resources in place to support the changes that will be necessary to deliver the programme, particularly with respect to technology changes. Having personally spent a few months on secondment to what was the HA, I can appreciate the challenges they've faced and the fact that they were constantly asked to justify their actions and decisions and my perception is that they now have a greater level of freedom. So while they'll still have to justify decisions, they'll hopefully be able to take a different approach.

Lee What was your experience of the old Highways Agency when it was in your portfolio as minister?

Dr Stephen Ladyman I always

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found them responsive and helpful. Some government agencies can be a little defensive but the HA always responded constructively to my suggestions and ideas and when they faced challenges we dealt with them together and efficiently. Of course, a Minister would expect no less but you don't always get that response when the chips are down. Shortly after my taking up the job, two HA workers were killed by a driver speeding through road works in bad weather. I asked the HA for a focus on road worker safety and they responded with improvements including the wide roll out of average speed cameras and I'm very proud to say we didn't lose another worker during my time in office.

Lee Peter - how can a group of rail experts regulate roads?

Peter Antolik ORR was chosen as there is a natural fit between road monitoring and rail regulation, with a similar skillset required. ORR has experience of regulating a complex transport network (Britain's railways) operated by a large single infrastructure company (Network Rail). We intend to extend our joined-up approach to our new role as Highways Monitor, and will look to forge synergies between our rail and roads functions. We will share experience between the two roles and will set up a process for sharing best practice, for example on monitoring enhancement schemes, supply chain management, asset management and cost analysis.

Lee So, Graham, what is Highways England concentrating its budget on?

Graham Dalton We'll be delivering £11 billion of investment over the next five years. The majority of this, almost £8 billion, will be focused on delivering major improvements including a spine of smart motorways across the country and the A14 Cambridge to Huntingdon. These improvements will provide new capacity, reduce congestion and help to underpin economic growth.

We will also be ensuring that our network is well maintained. In our first year we will be laying 1,200 lanes miles of new, smoother road surface and upgrading technology alongside our roads in 375 locations.

■ Increasing the capacity of the network

Our focus is on putting in place a monitoring regime to track Highways England's performance against the Roads Investment Strategy and the delivery of clear benefits for all strategic roads network users. We are currently consulting on our proposed approach for the new monitoring regime to track Highways England's performance. This sets out ORR's strategic objective on securing improved performance and value for money from the strategic road network, and explains how ORR will hold Highways England to account.

Lee Graham, how's the transition been going?

Graham Dalton Highways England is a different type of organisation, better equipped to support the journeys of today, while investing in those of tomorrow. As well as longer-term funding, Highways England has more flexibility than the Highways Agency while still remaining accountable to government. This means we can be better at modernising, maintaining and operating England's motorways and major A roads. Our transition has gone well and our people are focused on delivering over the next five years.

Lee But Stephen Ladyman isn't so sure it's necessary...

Dr Stephen Ladyman Frankly, I don't know what they can do now as a 'Government Company' that they couldn't do before as an Agency. Clearly having a fixed five year budget is a step forward but there was nothing stopping the Government giving them that certainty when they were an Agency. And don't kid yourself that they are now free from 'political control' - road spending, and in particular, which roads will get built or improved are matters over which Ministers will always want control.

Lee Lesley has opinions on the changes.

Lesley Waud One of the major changes for me is that, as suppliers, we'll have opportunities to plan further ahead with visibility of the forward





As well as modernising and maintaining the road network we also have a duty to keep traffic moving. Our Traffic Officers dealt with over 437,000 incidents in the last year helping to minimise disruption to our customers and the nation's economy. We're committed to improving this service by working with the emergency services to open the road or lanes more quickly after incidents and using new technology to remove stranded and overturned vehicles.

Lee Stephen, I'm interested in the fact that there's a lot about serving the customer, but I'm not sure who the customer is. Who would you think of?

Dr Stephen Ladyman I suppose the HA would say their key customers are the motorists, logistics companies and commuters that use the roads. Call me a cynic though, I think the reality is that their key customer is still the same as it has always been, it's the Government. The Government pays the bills, and those motorists and commuters are all voters and expect Ministers and MPs to take responsibility for road building, congestion and road pollution. It's been a trend of Government's in recent years to create 'arms length' bodies to manage services but whilst they might try and devolve the blame for tough decisions to these bodies the public simply don't buy it and whether its roads or the NHS the public expect the Buck to stop with the Government.

Lee Graham says there is going to be a slight change of approach.

Graham Dalton We know a lot about how satisfied our customers are about their experience of using our roads but we're now doing a lot more now to understand the different priorities of our customers.

As well as engaging with our customers directly, we will work closely with Transport Focus to ensure that we are meeting the needs of those that use our network.

Our £120m Innovation Fund will support the modernisation of the network by developing services to support expressways and smart motorways: information provision and data collection; and safe, efficient and sustainable travel. This includes supporting the testing and introduction of connected vehicles on the network; off-road trials of wireless power transfer technologies, detection systems at the Hindhead tunnel and wi-fi technology in the South East.

Our Innovation, Technology and Research Strategy will be published next spring and will set out our long term plans for driving innovation and delivering a smarter network.

Lee Lesley, who do you think the customer is?

Lesley Waud I think we do know who the customer is but maybe don't realise that we do, because most of us drive on the strategic road network and have family and friends who do so. We also know businesses rely on the network to transport goods and deliver services. And emergency services use it to transport patients and things like blood. The end recipient, who may be waiting for a delivery, they're a customer as well.

I think that one of the things we need to do differently is to consider how those customers might feel about the journeys they undertake and the experience they're about to have or have had. We need to think about what we're asking them to do.

There are different users from the professional drivers to the infrequent driver who may be intimidated by the network and I'm not sure we do think about that.

There's an excellent opportunity with Transport Focus to understand customers better and I believe there's

already engagement with the RHA and FTA but do we do enough with the organisation representing disabled drivers, for example?

Lee Dr Ladyman says money should be spent where there is a clear business case.

Dr Stephen Ladyman In the five year roads programme that was announced before the election there were a lot of road improvements that were only in the list to appeal to voters in marginal seats. For example, there is no question that there is a need to improve the efficiency of the routes to the South West but a £1bn plus tunnel under Stonehenge won't be the answer. There will always be road schemes elsewhere, even in the South West, which offer a better cost-benefit ratio than spending £1bn on a 1 mile tunnel.

Lee Graham, What does the emergence of intelligent mobility mean to the role of Highways England?

Graham Dalton Intelligent mobility is the big challenge. We have to develop long term infrastructure in an environment where social needs and travel patterns are changing rapidly. The only thing we really know is that nobody knows how transport in general and roads in particular will be used in another 30 years.

Lee Stephen agrees it will be a challenge...

Dr Stephen Ladyman But also an opportunity. HE have a leadership position in the roads sector and local authorities will look to them for ideas and inspiration. I find a lot of local authorities want to harness the benefits of intelligent mobility but they don't have the confidence to make things happen and they are too focussed on their core tasks to innovate but perhaps HE can show them the way.

Lee And ITS is very important?

Graham Dalton Our network depends on modern and older technology which helps us to manage traffic and underpins the operation of smart motorways. However we increasingly recognise the need to go further and we need ITS to step forward.



We are living through an information revolution: a time where information is all-powerful and connectivity to data has the potential to make a real difference to our lives. On our roads we can see vehicles that are far more connected than ever before. This means that over time drivers will increasingly demand much quicker access to real time information about their journeys. As the body response for the road network, we need systems that enable us to manage traffic better and provide that link to drivers.

Dr Stephen Ladyman ITS is key to the whole role of Highways England. I suppose the most obvious example of that is what we now call Managed Motorways. The benefits of what was then called Active Traffic Management were obvious even while the trial on the M42 was still underway and it was clear that we could use it to reduce congestion on a wide range of roads at a much cheaper price than road widening schemes. Pushing ahead with more schemes was politically unpopular as people assumed hard shoulder running would be dangerous and I even found myself appearing before a select committee to defend the policy. Time and experience have proved it was the right decision.

Lee And, Peter, technology will provide the information you need to see if they're doing the job properly?

Peter Antolik By the summer, Highways England will have developed a data improvement plan, making more information available on the company's performance, and providing ORR with the evidence needed to provide robust advice to the Secretary of State on future performance requirements. ORR has the power to carry out enforcement action where Highways England has contravened or is contravening compliance with the Roads Investment Strategy or compliance with its licence. We are currently developing a draft intervention and enforcement policy which sets out how we will carry out our enforcement role and will consult on this shortly. This will reflect guidance issued by the Secretary of State and HM

Treasury as to the circumstances in which payment of a fine should be required.

Lee What are your priorities, Graham?

Graham Dalton The first priority for Highways England is safety. That's improving safety for drivers as well as for our workforce who can be working near to traffic or responding to incidents. We're committed to reducing the number of people killed or seriously injured by at least 40% by the end of 2020. Our five year plan for safety, Driving Forward Safety, will be published this autumn and will set out how we will, with our partners, achieve this goal.

Second, we're faced with the challenge of delivering three times as much investment but at a much lower unit cost and with a lower impact on drivers and road users. This means we will need to work with our suppliers to develop better ways of working, driving efficiencies and boosting productivity.

Third, we need to deliver great customer service. This will require us to change the culture of the business so that it is thinking of its customers first. This includes those who use, rely on or live near our road network.

Lee Stephen and Lesley, if you were head of Highways England, what would your priorities be?

Dr Stephen Ladyman Congestion is the biggest challenge we face on the roads and needs to be the top priority. The answer is not always road building and ITS can often be more effective than laying concrete and will usually be cheaper. Information gathering and making that information available to motorists should be the second priority. If we have to live with congestion at least make sure that drivers have the information they need, at the time they need it, so that we can try to avoid it or if that isn't possible plan our lives around it.

Thirdly, encourage innovation. Don't always look to the 'big boys' for ideas, especially in relation to ITS, as smaller companies often have the leading edge ideas. It's often difficult



DR STEPHEN LADYMAN was Transport Minister in Tony Blair's Government between 2005 and 2007 with responsibility for the Highways Agency.



GRAHAM DALTON is Chief Executive of Highways England. He took on that role in the Highways Agency in 2008.



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for SMEs to elbow their way into projects so look for ways to make life easier for them. Also sometimes they may need help getting type approval for new kit with great potential so the HE shouldn't be afraid to help.

Lesley Waud I've seen a lot more integration across the Highways England team and its directorates across the organisation and this should continue. It needs to continue the ambition to work collaboratively with the supply chain because that's the only way we'll be able to make a step change and deliver the Plan going forward. And the last one is to encourage and challenge everyone to be innovative and adventurous and act as an enabler to that.

LEE'S SUMMARY

A fascinating discussion! It is clear colleagues see the move to Highways England an opportunity but not without its challenges, the upside of the forward programme is a key enabler to delivery and will no doubt help Highways England and its supply chain achieve the five strategic outcomes. However, this issue of really understanding the customer won't go away, technology and data will help but are only a means to an end, so the role of Intelligent Mobility and Highways England could be a game changer!

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