

# Monitoring England's roads

The Office of Rail and Road (ORR) is the independent safety and economic regulator for Britain's railways and monitor of Highways England. As highways monitor the ORR is responsible for monitoring Highways England's management of the strategic road network. Alec Peachey speaks to highways director Peter Antolik

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**Peter Antolik joined ORR in March 2015 and was given the remit of advising on the design and implementation of the new regime for monitoring the performance and efficiency of Highways England.**

So how has he found his first year in the job and are Highways England performing up to the required standards?

*"It's a fantastic sector to be part of,"* Antolik tells *Highways Magazine*. *"To come in at a time when the reform programme was being rolled out makes it a great time to come in and see if we can figure out a way of working with Highways England (HE), the Department for Transport (DfT) and other stakeholders to create a robust and high performing sector."*

*"My initial observations are that the sector has delivered reasonably well over the past few years, but it has been constrained by the annual budgeting process of the DfT and also a little bit by the austerity cycle and then the 'lets invest quickly' cycle. It is genuinely exciting to be part of creating a better future for investment in highways."*

Highways England took over the running of England's motorways and A-roads from the Highways Agency in April last year. It is at the core of delivering the government's £15 billion Road Investment Strategy which is being delivered over five years.

Antolik comments: *"I think it has been a good year for Highways England generally. They've embraced the changes and recognise that they need to build more of an understanding of user perspectives in what they do. They also recognise that they need to be more mindful of what it's like to be on the network. They're particularly focused on road user and road worker safety. We're very pleased that they're two of the highest priorities for Jim O'Sullivan (Highways England chief executive) and his team."*

*"Broadly they are heading in the right direction. Clearly, our role is to comment on how effectively they deliver the programme and how efficiently. Also, whether they meet a whole set of challenges that were agreed between HE and DfT. We focus our efforts on looking at their performance against those metrics. In the first six months of the year the performance was there or thereabouts on all of them. As we come to the end of the year we'll make our final views known, but the signs are that they've had a reasonably successful year." →*



## ☛ The customer experience

One of the key shifts at Highways England has been around making road users' experience of using the strategic network a better one.

*So how is the ORR helping HE to gauge the opinions of its customers?*

*"By making sure that the user perspectives are more clearly taken into account from the very earliest stages of their planning," notes Antolik. "We're doing some work at the moment with Transport Focus (TF) to think about how we might bring a clearer user voice into the specification of the second Road Investment Strategy. We've been working with TF, DfT and HE to try and layout a programme of engagement with road users so that their voice is much more clearly heard. That'll come down to considerations of how roadworks will be managed over time and whether their current approach really hits the mark with people that use the road. Customer satisfaction surveys suggest that's an area where HE can do better. They are already thinking about that and we want to make sure that is taken into account when they do their planning.*

*"There are a number of stakeholder groups in the highways sector. As long as they're reaching out proactively and with a lot of thought given to how they'll reach different segments and the end user, then they will get useful feedback."*

## Supply chain concerns

Antolik believes that the certainty of funding offered by the Road Investment Strategy has been a key factor in

helping Highways England to deliver improvements across the network.

*"It's a crucial underpin of the reform programme," he remarked. "We were very pleased that DfT and government were able to confirm and reconfirm the level of funding in the recent Spending Review. We remain neutral on matters of government policy, as to whether road building is the right solution, but what we are keen to support is the fact that once a policy is laid out and there's a long-term strategy that HE deliver it as affectively and efficiently as they can. Having certainty of funding is crucial for getting the belief back into the supply chain so that they can invest ahead of the work being made available to them."*

There have been complaints from the highways sector about a lack of work coming through the Highways England pipeline, something which the ORR has acknowledged in a report into the company's supply chain capability.

ORR commissioned Credo Business Consulting LLP to undertake a fieldwork study with representatives of HE's supply chain, capturing input from across all tiers of supplier and a range of specialisms.

*"That comment came back from a number of players within the industry," states Antolik, who is a former executive director at JP Morgan Asset Management. "We recognise that as being a legitimate concern. The overall message has to be that the company needs to give consistent advice and plans to the supply chain, and then stick to those. It is something that I know Jim is very keen to achieve. In*

*a sense we need to make sure that no one is tempted to tinker with the plan. We would support the view that the change processes around the overall programme need to be very strong and robust. By doing that – once you have the certainty of the funds, the list of the schemes and an emerging capital programme which HE are refining to say 'this is when we'll be doing the work' – once that all becomes public then the supply chain should be in a stronger position to provide services more efficiently."*

## Performance powers

*So what powers does the ORR have to ensure that Highways England is held to account if they're not performing?*

Antolik explained that the regulator has an enforcement policy that is published on its website.

He said: *"That outlines what our processes would be in the event that we see performance deteriorating or moving away from targets. Broadly we have a number of ways of escalating an issue – from requesting or requiring more data and information – through to insisting on particular project or programme plans being drawn up to address issues. We can make these issues visible to HE's board and we have a process in place by which we make sure they're aware of our concerns as they develop. In extreme circumstances we have the ability to penalise HE financially, but we recognise that it is a last resort. We'd only consider doing that if we felt there was an almost conscious set of actions by HE to miss its targets. We like to encourage them in other ways before we go anywhere near penalties."*



## Safety is key

Going forward ORR wants Highways England to remain focused on achieving its target of a 40 per cent reduction in the number of people killed or seriously injured on the strategic road network by 2020.

ORR's six-month progress report into the performance of HE found the agency had made a good start, although safety concerns took some of the shine off the achievement.

*"There are a number of different things that they have the ability to influence or directly manage," highlights Antolik. "It's not to say that they're underperforming at the moment, as I think that they'll be somewhere around their glide path to the target in 2020. The real challenge is with increasing levels of traffic on the network, first of all you have to keep it steady and then you have to reduce it. It is a very challenging target so what we were trying to flag is that this could be at risk in four or five years time. We want to make sure there is a lot of focus on this both within HE and from the rest of the industry to help them deliver on some of the challenges they need to."*

## Adapting to changes

Chancellor George Osborne recently reaffirmed his commitment to the

Northern Powerhouse in the Spring Budget and confirmed that the government will find the money to create a four-lane M62 and develop the case for a road tunnel from Manchester to Sheffield.

*Could these recent big announcements impact on Highways England's performance? Antolik doesn't think so: "We would expect these ideas, and ultimately the projects, to come through for approval through the change and control process. That's approval between HE and DfT. What we've said to HE is that as these changes come through they need to assess the impact on the rest of their programme. If focusing on those schemes was to the detriment of any other schemes or indicators, then they need to identify that before the change is approved."*

Given that the ORR is also the independent safety and economic regulator for Britain's railways, Antolik is keen to point out that this a sector that Highways England can learn from.

*"Two big infrastructure sectors must have commonalities which we can help shed a light on. Whether it's approaches to asset management or what good looks like in terms of project and portfolio management, we're trying to make those connections internally here."*

*"That's something which is a big credit to my colleagues on the rail side. They have helped us develop our expertise in a short space of time."*

*"There are always going to be ways in which both companies (Network Rail and Highways England) can learn from each other."*

Going forward, ORR has recently set out plans for how Highways England's performance will be benchmarked.

In the short-term, ORR will focus more on comparing Highways England's regional performance to identify areas of best practice or where efficiency could be further improved.

Longer-term, Highways England's performance will also be considered in light of comparable strategic or national road networks in the UK and other countries.

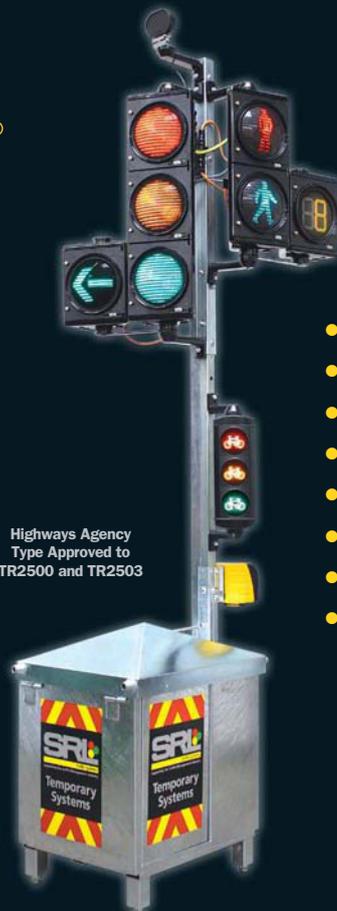
In July, ORR's first annual assessment of HE's performance will be published and the regulator will be keeping a close eye on the company's relationship with its supply chain.

*"I think the work we've done on the supply chain perspectives will help inform our view that that's an area that HE needs to continue to work on to provide greater clarity of its plans for the next four years," concludes Antolik. ☺*

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