

# Delivery time

Jim O'Sullivan has been chief executive of Highways England since July 2015.

In an exclusive interview with *Highways Magazine* editor Alec Peachey he outlines what the Government owned company is doing to ensure it meets objectives around safety, innovation and delivery of the Roads Investment Strategy (RIS)



***"I think being a Government owned company as opposed to being the Highways Agency has been a huge learning curve for us. I wouldn't say that we're the finished article, but we have made huge changes in the last 12 or 18 months that are helping us to deliver the work programme both now and going forward."***

This is an honest assessment from the man who is in charge of making sure that Highways England deliver the Government's £15 billion Roads Investment Strategy between now and 2020.

Despite some concerns from the supply chain about a lack of work coming through the Highways England pipeline, O'Sullivan is quick to defend his organisation's record. ***"So far all the work has been delivered on time,"*** he remarks. ***"Our activity this year has stepped up from last year so we're pleased about that too. Years four and five are the two biggest years in the RIS and we're currently gearing up to deliver those. They're bigger than any road programme so I understand there's some anxiety about them being delivered. But given the performance we put in last year and the current performance I'm quite confident that we can get there."***

The former managing director of Heathrow Airport Holdings revealed that plans for Roads Investment Strategy 2 are continuing to gather pace.

***"In the first quarter of next year we will be starting to produce our route strategies. There are 18 of them that cover all of the strategic roads in England. We will be consulting next year with different stakeholders – whether it's transport authorities such as Transport for the North or Midlands Connect, local communities, or economic nodes such as ports and***

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***airports – as to what they expect from the network with a view to settling on the funding through 2018 and 2019."***

Route strategies are one of the key steps of research required for developing the Department for Transport's RIS2, covering the period from 2020–2025. They will be the foundation for much of the thinking about where major new investments should be after 2020.

Ministers will use route strategies to identify where problems are most severe, and where the need for action is greatest.

O'Sullivan continued: ***"We've been carrying out informal consultation for some time, but formal documents will be produced in March. Route strategies will be published in March with more formal discussions taking place across the summer of next year."***

## Putting safety first

The chief executive said Highways England remains 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, and outlined some of the things the organisation is doing to achieve this.

***"I think the first part of it is infrastructure. We're revisiting our smart motorway programme to help people feel safer on our smart motorways. Part of that will involve re-marking the refuge areas, putting sign posts up and distance markers that tell you how far it is until the next refuge area. We're also going to have a clampdown on people parking in them for the wrong purpose. So there are a number of things we're doing to improve the user friendliness of our smart motorway network."***

***"We've had a dramatic reduction in the number of highway crossings as a result of our Aiming for Zero initiative. Simple things like putting bigger signs at the side of a dual carriageway so that you no longer need a sign in the centre of the road, means that nobody has to cross that dual carriageway to put that sign out. Remarkably simple things can be done to reduce carriageway crossings."***

With the Highways Term Maintenance Association (HTMA) recently calling on the highways sector to collate and report all incidents of road worker abuse, O'Sullivan outlined Highways England's stance on the issue.

***"We won't tolerate road worker abuse full stop. We report all incidents to the police and where we have video footage either captured from cameras on the work site or from cameras in vehicles, we provide that to them. It is entirely unacceptable that road workers should be subjected to abuse while carrying out their day jobs."***



## Strategic and regional roads

A new independent study for the Rees Jeffreys Road Fund has identified the need for a Major Road Network in England.

The report calls for the recognition of an 8,000-mile Major Road Network (MRN) that includes the 4,200 miles of the strategic road network (SRN) of motorways and trunk roads run by Highways England, and a further 3,800 miles of strategic local authority-controlled A-roads.

It states that both the MRN and SRN should get equal recognition, despite the Government already committing to a £15 billion five-year plan of investment in the SRN. So what are O'Sullivan's thoughts on the report?

*"All roads are important," he states. "There is a difference between the strategic road network and local roads. I think all roads need more investment. But the economic returns of investing in the SRN are much higher. My anxiety would be that one might consider taking money from the SRN in order to address some of the problems on the regional road network. Whereas in fact the answer is more spending on the regional road network in its own right."*

Although the local road network falls under the remit of local authorities, O'Sullivan is keen to work closely with councils to ensure that the needs of road users are met.



He adds: *"I think it's important that people recognise that these roads are shared. If you look around the Birmingham area where we have what is called the Birmingham Box - the M42 and M6 - they form a ring road around Birmingham. But they're also the main arterial roads between the south east and the north west or the south west and the north east. Therefore, you can't treat them just as national roads and you can't treat them just as regional roads either. You have to reconcile those two needs in that road network. We're keen to work with, and are working with, the likes of Transport*

*for the North and Midlands Connect, to try and reconcile the national and regional needs.*

*"Very often we own the road underneath a junction and the roads on top of a junction are not part of our network at all. So we do have to work in close collaboration. If I think about the M6 and the M5, the junctions where we're doing life extension on the elevated sections, the impact of trying to repair those supports is having a significant impact on the local road network, so we're working very closely with local councils to minimise that."*

## Smart motorways

According to MPs on the Transport Select Committee motorway hard shoulders should not be used as permanent driving lanes. O'Sullivan defended the rollout of smart motorways, but admitted more needs to be done to educate drivers about the use of them.

*"Firstly, the statistics that we have so far don't show any difference between a smart motorway and a conventional motorway," he stated. "They are equally safe. Smart motorways and ordinary motorways are interspersed with no discernible difference. That's what the data we've got so far is telling us. We do recognise that people don't feel safe on our motorways and some people are uncomfortable about them. Therefore, we have some work to do in making people feel more comfortable and providing them with more information. For instance, making the refuge areas more visible and easier to access. Also, a public education campaign which we're launching over the next three months will explain what smart motorways mean, how to use them and how to get the best from them. We think all of that will help."*

On the subject of technology, O'Sullivan added: *"All sectors of the transport industry are seeing that technology will play a huge role in the future. For us better information gives a better experience for our customers, but it also increases the capacity of the road network. If we can manage traffic flows*

*better and get people to make more informed choices then we will get more vehicles making quicker and faster journeys on our network. We see vision of information not just for private motorists, but also commercial organisations, as being one of our prime objectives in the coming years."*



## Attracting new talent

With an ambitious Government target of attracting 30,000 apprentices into road and rail by 2020, the Highways England chief executive believes the industry must do more to attract younger professionals.

*"I think the opportunities are huge. I think the growth we're seeing with people who are early on in their career joining the sector, they're going to find themselves with big jobs and lots of responsibility quite early because of the growth in workloads. From my own personal experience when I came into the roads sector I can tell you that it's far more exciting from the inside than it ever looked from the outside. Therefore, one wonders how do you make it look more exciting to people who are thinking of joining it?"*

Speaking to me at Highways SIB (Seeing is Believing) – Europe's only event for indoor showcasing of highway products as well as outdoor demonstrations in all lighting conditions – O'Sullivan continued: *"How do you get that enthusiasm and excitement into people who think a road is always there and don't appreciate that it ever had to be designed, created or indeed maintained. How do we get the people that think that being a dentist, a lawyer or an accountant is more exciting?"*



This year's Highways SIB event saw the introduction of an Apprenticeship/skills zone offering local students the chance to come along and find out about all the exciting opportunities that the sector has to offer. More than 100 civil

engineering students from Liverpool John Moores and Wolverhampton Universities attended the show.

*"To bring youngsters in and get them to see all of this stuff is an incredible thing to do,"* commented O'Sullivan.

## Assisting asset delivery

During his keynote presentation at the event, O'Sullivan revealed that traffic officers might be asked to carry out drive by inspections as part of their duties.

Expanding on this further, he told *Highways Magazine*: *"We're working on it. We need the technology, the agreement of our unions and the sign up of our current maintenance contractors. We have just taken on asset management in the East Midlands region. Everyone is talking about asset delivery and we're piloting it. We've got a lot of work to do."*

Officers would be asked to look out for problems with things such as vegetation, lighting, sign posts, junction markings, etc – and then report them.

*"They'd have a GPS enabled device with the asset on it in front of them, they could click on the asset and write overgrown vegetation. The contractor*



*would then send out a surveyor who works out what needs doing. They will go out, size the job and work out the potential cost of doing the job. They'll then inform the asset team back at Highways England and they'll allocate the job to a contractor."*

Another thing that Highways England are looking at closely is the possible introduction of a skills passport, which would clearly highlight the skills and qualifications of anyone who is working on the strategic road network.

O'Sullivan said: *"We're looking at it very closely. There are upsides. For example, you only have to do one general safety induction and then you can work on all sites. The downside is that it can become a barrier to entry. For example, if you haven't got a passport you can't work and this can then increase costs."*

*"We're looking at it and believe it would enhance safety, but we don't want it to become a barrier to entry. Therefore, it's still a work in progress and is likely to remain so for at least the rest of this year. We won't roll it out until we've resolved the issue of how do you stop it becoming a barrier to entry."*