



Audio transcript

The Rail and Road Pod

Episode 11: Improving performance on England's road network

In this episode, we hold conversations with the Chief Executive of ORR, those that lead the company's Highways Monitor and also with the Chief Executive of National Highways and Transport Focus to find out about some of the steps ORR has taken to increase the transparency of performance, safety on England's roads and how the management of roads will look in the next five years.

For more information on ORR's role in holding National Highways to account visit www.orr.gov.uk.

Kenny Walker: Hello, and welcome to another episode of the Rail and Road Pod.

I'm Kenny Walker. On this episode, we're taking a look at roads. As many listeners may know, the Office of Rail and Road is responsible for monitoring and enforcing the performance and efficiency of National Highways, who maintains, renews, operates, and aims to improve the strategic road network, these are the motorways and main A roads in England.

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Kenny Walker: For some background, ORR's monitoring role was established under legislation in 2015 as part of the government's road reform package.

ORR scrutinise National Highways and hold them to account for its management of the strategic road network, including delivery of performance and efficiency.

ORR recently published its latest Benchmarking National Highways report, which outlines the regional differences in performances across national highways' motorways and major A roads in England.

ORR has ensured steps have been taken by the government-owned company to increase the transparency of its performance at a regional level. This follows ORR driving the need for greater transparency and data to be published.

National Highways has increased the number of performance indicators the company makes public at a regional level from just five in 2019/20 to 22 in 2020/2021.

Sneha Patel, Deputy Director of Highways at ORR, tells us more about the findings from the report.

Sneha Patel: As part of our role as independent monitor of National Highways' performance and efficiency, every year we publish a benchmarking report. It covers a range of different areas, including analysis of how National Highways' performance varies across its regions. This increases transparency around the company's performance and incentivizes the regions to improve. Over several years, we've encouraged National Highways to make more performance and cost data available at a regional level. National Highways acted on this by publishing an expanded set of regional performance data for 2020/21. Our report analyzes performance data for the first year of the second road period.

One of the new indicators in this year's report is for the timeliness and accuracy of roadworks information. As we said in our last annual assessment, National Highways has a long way to go to reach its target of 90% accuracy by 2025. That is by the end of road period two, 90% of overnight road closures must be accurately notified seven days in advance. In this report, we found not only that all regions were well below that 2025 target, but there are also big differences in performance right now. The Southeast, the region in which users experience the greatest delays due to

roadworks, was the lowest rank region for this measure. This is a new target and we've already seen evidence of improvement.

Applying lessons learned about what works well in one region to other parts of the country is one way in which we expect National Highways to improve further and ensure it meets its national-level target.

Kenny: Recently, the Transport Select Committee set out in its all lane running smart motorways inquiry that ORR's role on roads should be expanded.

Since then, the Department for Transport announced that the smart motorway rollout will be paused as the government accepted all of the recommendations from the Transport Select Committee's inquiry into all lane running smart motorways.

We recently visited the Highways UK event shortly after the report's publication to speak to a number of people from ORR, National Highways, Transport Focus, and Midlands Connect to hear their views, not just on the report, but their plans for the near future.

The first person we caught up with was ORR's chief executive John Larkinson, who gave his verdict on some of the recommendations that were set out.

John: There's three recommendations where they're basically saying the Office of Rail and Road should do more. They're good questions, they're good challenges, and we now need to go away, we need to talk to the Department of Transport, and we need to just work out what would be involved in doing those extra roles. How could we actually do it if it was decided that we should? So I think there's some work for us to do there but it's important, we need to quickly. We have a sense of urgency about this because there is a real public concern.

One of the things we've got to keep constantly planning for the future because RIS3 comes around very quickly, and it's a very big program of work to get ahead on that and to look at the options, meanwhile, we've got to get on with our day job which is to monitor National Highways' performance and tackle that performance where there might be any problems. There'll be a couple of areas where we're going to be increasing our focus, one of them is perhaps not surprising, it's around smart motorways around all lane running motorways where there's just a lot more to do.

The other area is on the major projects and risks with major projects because we've already seen in the spending review that there's a lot of money that simply can't be spent at the moment because major projects are not getting planning consents.

Kenny: The National Highways chief executive Nick Harris gave a keynote speech at Highways UK, he also spoke to the Rail and Road Pod on the recommendations and also looking ahead to their plans on how these focus on safety and managing the environment.

Nick: I absolutely welcome the report being published. A lot of work has gone into it and of course, earlier in the year I gave evidence to the committee we supplied and beyond my appearance at the committee, we supplied them with a lot of evidence.

Nick: My priorities at the moment are, one hand, of course, we're building the foundations for the future around some of the topics I mentioned like the environment, digital roads, but right now, it is focusing on making sure we're absolutely on top of the basics. We're looking after the reliability of all the equipment we deploy along the roads, our maintenance, our customer service, and making our performance as transparent as we can be. We are providing the service for the travelling public, they need to know how we're doing. Then as I look forward into Ris3, we've got some pretty ambitious targets around carbon neutrality if we move from no net loss on biodiversity to net positive gain.

The work on that starts now, and I think also RIS3 is going to be characterised by the maintenance of much of the existing assets, particularly when you look at a lot of our structures were built in the '60s and '70s, they're ageing, they're coming towards the end of their life, there are some big challenges to that.

Nick: We've got plans, those plans need to be translated into execution, execution with targets, things that we measure and fail to account for, and the ORR provides that role. Without, that we would lose the structure and focus I think to do the good job that we do together.

Kenny: We heard there from National Highways' chief executive Nick Harris about the next road investment strategy.

This is one that ORR has been consulting on, the proposed approach to the development of road investment strategy three, and how it will assess its efficiency and deliverability.

These will be published shortly to help ORR strengthen its assessments and approach to evaluating the challenge and deliverability of the next road investment strategy, ensuring ORR's oversight and scrutiny leads to better outcomes for road users, the environment, and taxpayers.

At Highway's UK, the Pod also spoke to Feras Alshaker, he's the director of planning and performance at ORR.

We asked for his verdict on ORR's approach.

Feras: There remain challenges in delivering the portfolio. What we're going to be looking at this year in the second half of this year really is National Highways' plans around biodiversity. That's a really important area for us to look at. We do have some concerns about the plans that are in place to deliver some of the remaining actions from the smart motorway action plan. We set out what we expect from National Highways in terms of additional reporting they need to give us so that we can make those assessments on deliverability, and we set that out. That's all on our website.

There have been lots of successes, in particular, we're seeing a continued upward trend in the provision of roadworks information, for example, that KPI continues to improve. There are some successes, but there remain some significant challenges for the rest of the road period.

We want to change our approach a little bit. We want to do we add a more portfolio top-down approach and we want to marry some bottom-up assessments of individual projects a bit more going into the third road period, and learn some of the lessons. I think we need to challenge ourselves given the challenges that have been experienced during the second road period on how do we change? How do we recognize that potentially things could have been done differently?

We need to reflect on that. I think also we need to look at, actually, interestingly, Nick Harris said in his keynote speech, some of those asset management things, which are around the longer-term sustainability of the asset. Particularly around weather resilience and climate change and are National Highways doing the right treatments to the right asset at the right time. Absolutely crucial for us to bake in long-term efficiency and that asset management capability.

Kenny: As part of its monitoring function, ORR works with a number of partners to help in its scrutiny and monitoring of National Highways. One such partner is Transport Focus. We spoke to its chief executive Anthony Smith at Highways UK about some of the work it has done for road users.

Anthony: I think it's really important that something like National Highways focus on the user. They're a monopoly after all. They run most of the big roads. What our surveys show is that in terms of day-to-day satisfaction, what drivers really want is reliability. They want the journey to take the amount of time that Google or their brain has told them it should take. Reliability. They don't want roadworks. They don't want accidents to slow things up. It's really key but broadly, quite high levels of satisfaction. We then move on to what do people want investment targeted on in the future? It's very much around road surface quality.

We speak to thousands of users, all sorts of different users, commuters, leisure, truckers, et cetera. Road surface quality comes out really loud and clear. That doesn't mean potholes in the motorways, it means the quality of the surface. People hate concrete. They want the barriers to be neat and tidy and look like they're going to work. They want the lighting good, the signs to be clear.

Anthony: What we're trying to do is to be useful, is to help National Highways and the government focus its investment on the things that will make the most difference to the most drivers. The research is really, really clear. Our priorities for improvement are around road surface quality, are around the management of roadworks, and around helping drivers drive safely. It's very, very important. Of course, above all else, safety is key. We heard a lot of focus on that in regards to smart motorways recently, that's not going to go away, but the message from users is very clear, is focus on the day-to-day network as well as thinking about the bigger stuff for the future.

Kenny: Another one of those at ORR has worked closely with has been the Road Safety Foundation. The Road Safety Foundation is a UK charity advocating road safety reduction through simultaneous action on all three components of the safe road system. We spoke to Dr Suzy Charman to tell us more.

Dr Suzy Charman: We track performance over time and look at the different levels of performance of different networks that we have here in Great Britain. We identify high-risk roads and roads that have improved and try and understand what's improved. We're also very much involved as IRAP license holder for the star rating program here in the UK. We work with National Highways, support them in their IRAP star rating program. We also work with local authorities as well, including some work we did with Department for Transport with their Safer Roads Fund. In addition to that, we do bits of policy research, so looking at the funding and capacity of local authorities to deal with road safety issues.

Suzy: We've done some work looking at how National Highways prioritizes its safety investment. That piece of work I think was really important in terms of looking at how that ambition for zero harm can be delivered and how we can accelerate towards the delivery of that ambition because it's a really, really big ask and a really big promise, and actually, to head towards that trajectory of zero road death by 2040, we're going to have to see a real step change in delivery and performance. That's a really important piece of work. Of course, you can't actually manage what you don't measure.

I think part of the beauty of what ORR does is make sure that there are sensible metrics for measuring performance, and one of those metrics that's been in place

lately is the IRAP star rating. There's a commitment for 90% of travel to be on three-star or better roads by 2020 and I think that's a fantastic initiative. It's stuff that relates to the objective safety provision of roads, so stuff that arguably is within the gift of the road authority to deliver.

I think that's really important to be setting those sort of benchmarks, those milestones along the way to that zero harm ambition and to make sure that we can track performance towards it and to drive decision making and to drive investment levels to support that. Absolutely, I think that's really important.

Suzy: For me, ORR is absolutely essential in terms of setting that performance level that's required and keeping an independent eye on that and to provide that motivation for the road authority to keep going really because it's a hard slog road safety and it's a hard path to take when you've got to balance off a whole bunch of different priorities. I think it's really important that road safety is elevated to that level of priority and that ORR is overseeing that. I think that's absolutely essential.

And I might add actually that, for me, the next layer of network is of real interest, so the major road network that's governed by local authorities, that's the premier roads within the local authority if you like, those roads where we know we've got our greatest concentration of death and serious injury, where we know that the crash risk per mile driven is the highest, and for me, that's the place that we need to focus on next. It's absolutely brilliant ORR is overseeing the work of the strategic road network. Actually, we need to do the same for the major road network as well.

[music]

Kenny: And that brings to a close another episode of the Rail and Road Pod.

If you want any further details on ORR's annual Benchmarking National Highways report - which assesses National Highways' performance and efficiency in its regions, highlights both good and bad areas of performance; and identifies where efforts would be best focused to improve outcomes for road users – then visit ORR's website www.orr.gov.uk.

We'll be back in March with a special episode and a guest host to discuss women in transport

That's all for now - thanks for listening and goodbye.



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