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Duncan Smith
Executive Director, Operations

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Dear Duncan,

Smart Motorways Stocktake Action Plan – faster traffic officer response times

I am writing to you to follow up on ORR's letter of 13 January 2022 and your response of 19 January 2022, regarding the delivery of action 3 in the Smart Motorways Action Plan - faster attendance by traffic officer patrols.

Background to ORR's monitoring of the Smart Motorways Action Plan

In October 2019, the Secretary of State (SoS) asked the Department for Transport (DfT) to carry out an evidence stocktake on the safety of Smart Motorways. This review led to a [report](#) with 18 recommendations to improve the safety and effectiveness of Smart Motorways and National Highways (Highways England at the time) was asked by DfT to deliver these actions. Within this action plan National Highways also set itself a series of internal milestones and delivery dates for each action.

As part of ORR's role as the Monitor of National Highways, the SoS asked us to monitor National Highways' delivery of this 18-point plan. In 2021, we commissioned consultants CEPA, to undertake a review and make recommendations for how ORR should monitor National Highways' delivery of the action plan, focusing on five of the 18 actions which were seen as critical to improving the safety of Smart Motorways. [CEPA's report](#) was published in July 2021.

In response to CEPA's report, in particular the issues and future risks identified, and National Highways' failure to achieve its internal milestone of July 2021 for action 3 in the plan – a 10-minute average response time by traffic officers to incidents - we wrote to National Highways on 13 August 2021, requesting additional disaggregated regional data on the following areas:

- the staffing levels required to meet the 10-minute response time and an assessment of how existing levels compared;
- traffic officer recruitment, absence and attrition rates; and
- performance against the 10-minute response time.

This data was received in September 2021 and we have been using this information, alongside our regular engagement, to closely monitor National Highways' performance and delivery.

Following growing concerns about National Highways' ability to achieve the 10-minute response time and the company's failure to provide a new internal target date to achieve this action, we wrote to National Highways on 13 January 2022 outlining further steps we required from the company.

Our letter set out that we required greater assurance, through increased engagement and evidence, to demonstrate that National Highways is making sufficient progress towards achieving the action. National Highways responded on 19 January 2022 and provided a follow up response on 04 February 2022 with the additional information we requested. This letter sets out our assessment of the information received and regional engagement to date.

Information received to date and regional engagement

In response to the requests made in our 13 January 2022 letter, National Highways provided the following:

- A new target date of September 2022 to achieve the action;
- A list of "levers" that are/will be deployed for each region together with their likely impact, based on a high, medium, low assessment;
- How the success of levers will be assessed at weekly and monthly review meetings both regionally and nationally;
- Recognition that the labour market was challenging with difficulty in recruitment in certain regions;
- Identifying that the two largest risks to achieving the target time will be the acceptance of single crewing and the delivery of additional traffic officer vehicles; and
- A detailed programme for the rollout of stopped vehicle detection (SVD) and the system designed to set signs and signals to control traffic (CHARM). Although CHARM itself is a software system it supports National Highways' control rooms to automatically detect and set signs and signals.

Alongside this information, and as per our 13 January 2022 letter, we increased our engagement with the regions:

- ORR attended National Highways' Heads of Service Delivery Managers meeting on 15 February 2022. Across the regions we were updated on the

use of levers, and success of those levers being used, together with initiatives to monitor more closely each section of smart motorway using dashboards and more granular regional data;

- We had a meeting with the CHARM project team on 19 January 2022, where the advantages to operations staff, the specific elements of the system and the programme risks were outlined; and
- We visited two Regional Operations Centres (West Midlands and Yorkshire & North-East) to better understand at a more detailed working level, how the target is being addressed, including any risks and opportunities.

Current position

National Highways' regions are using a range of activities and levers to achieve the 10-minute response time and this is reflected in the month-on-month improvement in response times from 12 minutes 40 seconds in July 2021 to 10 minutes 21 seconds in February 2022.

We recognise the challenge for National Highways in assessing the quantitative impact of each lever since they are being used together and not on an individual basis. However, as a starting point, National Highways has given a very simple qualitative assessment of each lever (high, medium, low) at a national level and discussions with National Highways on both a national and regional basis have given us improved confidence that they are having an impact.

Our analysis of the traffic officer resourcing data shows a steadily improving picture of staffing, but challenges within a more competitive job market compared to last year and the retention of staff remain. Staffing alone does not appear to us to be the dominant factor in a step change in the improvements in the response time.

Our visits to three Regional Operations Centres (East, West Midlands and Yorkshire & North-East) since January 2022, and discussions with the staff directly affected by the target, has improved our confidence at a regional level that the levers described at a national level are being deployed, together with sets of regionally specific measures.

From our regional visits we have seen that traffic data, incident locations and response times are being used to target traffic officer deployment. Although the "single view of the network" tool, which uses traffic and incident pattern data to predict where the 10-minute response time could be at risk, is still in development, we saw early indicators of it being used to proactively locate resources.

Our visits have demonstrated that a high level of single crewing is in operation across the regions and this appears to be facilitating delivery of faster response times. Across the regions, extra vehicles are also being brought in as programmed to support these 'additional' patrols. National Highways needs to ensure this approach to crewing and vehicle deployment continues to help deliver and sustain the 10-minute response time.

Furthermore, in the three regions we have visited to date, we note response time performance is disproportionately affected by the location of outstations. We



recognise National Highways is working to improve this, and that new or relocated outstations are unlikely to be in place by the revised 10-minute target date (September 2022).

Next steps

As set out above, National Highways has a new target date of September 2022 to achieve the 10-minute average response time.

We are seeing improvements in the response time and recruitment levels and our regional engagement has given us a better understanding of the levers and work in the Regional Operations Centres. However, some significant risks still remain and National Highways needs to continue to focus to achieve and sustain performance going forward. Based on our assessment, we have developed the following requirements:

- ORR has seen evidence of good progress and our engagement to date has given us greater assurance of the focus to achieve the target. However, we will be continuing our close monitoring and reviewing of the data until the target is met, and then for a minimum of a further three months to ensure sustained achievement of the target;
- Recognising the value of, and information received from the regional engagement, we will continue this and visit the remaining Regional Operations Centres in April 2022;
- We will continue attending the National Highways' Heads of Service Delivery meetings until September 2022;
- Commencing from April 2022 until September 2022, we will hold monthly meetings with National Highways focusing on the assessment of the risks to achieving the target and updates on existing and new regional levers;
- From April 2022 until September 2022, we will engage with National Highways on a monthly basis on the updated CHARM roll-out programme, assessing the quantitative benefits of CHARM on the 10-minute response time and the formal impact assessment of the programme delay; and
- We want National Highways to keep reporting the response time to us for at least three months post-achievement of the target, so that we can be assured that it has secured sustained achievement of the target. We will be in contact in early April 2022 to discuss this further.

Based on the evidence we have seen to date, National Highways appears to be on track to achieve the revised target date (September 2022). However, this trend is based upon several quick to deliver actions and there is a risk that this trend may plateau. If progress slows and/or we still require further confidence of National Highways' ability to deliver and sustain the target, then we may still consider further escalation. Additionally, should National Highways identify any new or future risks to achieving the 10-minute response time by the new target date, we expect the company to notify and engage with ORR at the earliest opportunity.



A copy of this letter will be published on our website.

Yours sincerely

Sneha Patel