



Audio transcript

The Rail and Road Pod – Episode 4: Monitoring England’s roads

In this episode of the Rail and Road Pod, we find out more about how Highways England are monitored and how that delivers benefits to road users. We're joined by Feras Alshaker, Deputy Director for Roads and Stephen Bussell, Senior Highways Economist from ORR to explain more.

We're also joined by Guy Dangerfield, Head of Strategy at Transport Focus, who delves into how it gathers insights from road users to help Highways England deliver improvements.

Kenny Walker, Host

Hello folks my name is Kenny Walker, and you're listening to the Rail and Road Podcast. On this episode, we'll be discussing the ORR's role on roads, what exactly it does and how it monitors Highways England's performance and efficiency.

Our guests today, who will hopefully shed some light on this are Stephen Bussell, senior highways economist at ORR and Feras Alshaker, deputy director for Highways from ORR also. We're also joined by Guy Dangerfield, who's head of strategy from Transport Focus. England's roads are used by millions of travellers each year and when most of us only ever think about the journey we are on and reaching a destination safely and on time, there's actually a lot of work going on behind the scenes to ensure road users interests are protected. To do this, Highways England, the sole strategic Highways Authority, needs to be monitored accordingly.

Recently, I published an annual benchmarking report on Highways England's regional performance and efficiency against comparable organisations, including in other countries and on other sectors also, this is a critical part of ensuring that ORR can assess Highways England's performance and efficiency, highlighting both good and bad areas of performance and identifying where efforts will be best focussed to improve outcomes for road users. What did this report find? Let's go to Stephen first, the senior highways economist with ORR, who can tell us a bit more.

Stephen Bussell, Senior Highways Economist, ORR

Yeah, so this is one of a number of ways in which we monitor Highways England's performance and efficiency. So we make an annual assessment of Highways England's performance at a national level, and then we use benchmarking to provide us with a sort of richer picture of performance and how that compares both within the organisation and externally. This is a report that we published in each year since 2016. This year, the report marks the end of the first five year road period. So we're able to summarise performance over that five year period.

Kenny Walker, Host

So what did the report focus on report?

Stephen Bussell, Senior Highways Economist, ORR

We've looked at two things. We've looked at regional performance. So we've compared Highways England's regional delivery units in terms of their performance and their costs. And we've also included some international comparisons. So this year we've looked at the safety performance of motorways, and previous years we've looked at various different themes related to performance and compared Highways England's experience with road authorities in other parts of the UK or elsewhere.

Kenny Walker, Host

Thanks, Stephen. Can you explain a little bit more about the regional benchmarking?

Stephen Bussell, Senior Highways Economist, ORR

So firstly, in terms of the regional benchmarking, we use a number of performance indicators to monitor Highways England's performance, and we do that at a national level and that's one of the ways in which we hold Highways England to account. But

we've also done that at a regional level to see how performance varies across the regions. And as I say in this year's report, we've looked at performance and progress over that five year road period. And what we've seen is some different things.

So one of the really positive things we've seen in the indicators over the past five years is we've seen improvements in performance in particular areas such as the condition of the network and indicators related to the speed with which Highways England deals with traffic incidents. But that's not true across the board. So there were other areas where we can continue to see divergences in performance. So, for example, user satisfaction is one area where we haven't seen a kind of any overall trend at a regional level of improvement or of a narrowing of the gap between the best and the worst performing regions.

Similarly, the delays that people experience on the network, our indicator doesn't show any improvement, in fact overall, slight decline with some regions showing improvement, some regions showing a worsening of delays. And I think the other thing to say is that we think that we and Highways England can do more to explain what is going on at a regional level. One of the things that we've looked at is the costs that regions face and the amount they spent on maintenance and renewals - and there were some differences there. And we really would like to explore those differences in more detail and gain some useful insights around Highways England's efficiency and the degree to which their efficiency is consistent across the regions.

Kenny Walker, Host

And what about comparisons with other countries?

Stephen Bussell, ORR

So we've compared the number of fatalities experienced on different motorway networks around Europe, and that's a useful indicator for us. There's various ways of measuring safety, but if we narrow the picture down to motorways and fatalities, then we overcome issues related to comparability of networks and data. And what we've seen is some striking consistencies in the experience of European countries, so what we found is in the first decade since the year 2000, most countries experienced significant decline in the number of fatalities on the motorway networks. So really large, large declines, and that was certainly something that we saw in England. But then over the last 10 years, just as has been the case on the motorway network in England, the number of deaths is basically flattened out so there's been no further significant, obvious trend of improvement. Again, that is really the experience of most, if not all of the countries that we've looked at. I think that suggests that some of those sort of external factors, like the vehicle technology have been driving some of

those reductions in fatalities. And clearly some of those factors have not been present in the last few years and hence a plateauing of safety of accident rates.

Kenny Walker, Host

Thanks, Stephen. Sounds all very interesting and particularly on how the regions vary on the safety comparisons with the other European countries. So if I could bring in Feras. Feras, could you tell us why ORR monitor all of this and what exactly is your role?

Feras Alshaker, Deputy Director, Roads ORR

Hi, Kenny. So we do three things broadly as an office as part of the road reform agenda. So first thing we do, Highways England have to deliver the government's road investment strategy or in shorthand, the 'RIS'. What we do is monitor that delivery so we provide transparency over it, we make sure that Highways England is doing what its committed to deliver and report on that to Parliament and to the public and to government. And we also try and form a view on the risk of future delivery.

The other thing that we do is we look at Highways England's licence obligations. So it has a licence with government to operate the Strategic Road Network, which is, the motorways and the major roads in England. And it has some wider obligations, for example, maintaining the asset in the public interest in the longer term. So we monitor its compliance with those licence conditions.

And the third thing we do, is promote efficiency. And so what does that mean? So really, efficiency is about will do you, can you deliver more for the same amount of money or can you deliver the same thing for less money? And in reality, the amount of money changes with every five year road period but really what we're looking to do is see that the taxpayer, the government and road users get more bang for their buck now and will do in the future than they did in the past. And and this sort of benchmarking activity really supports some of the things we do in that are. It helps us understand what is Highways England's current performance and where do we think the frontier is, because, as Steve explained, it's very difficult to benchmark Highways England because we can't find other companies that are exactly like Highways England, elsewhere.

You know, if you're in the water industry, for example, in the UK, you'd have lots and lots of water companies that you could benchmark against each other. There's only one Highways England and there's only one strategic road network in England, and it doesn't necessarily correspond exactly with other international road networks. So being able to look at how Highways England is performing against its own regions is

really helpful for us to understand what could Highways England achieve in the future?

Kenny Walker, Host

Thanks Feras. So why is the independent assurance about the levels of performance and efficiency that Highways England is delivering so important?

Feras Alshaker, Deputy Director, Roads ORR

Why is the independence important? Well, someone needs to form a view on how Highways England is performing, and someone needs to give assurance to the public, taxpayers, parliament that things are being delivered, that they are expected to be delivered with public money. The independent assurance, of course, is important because we don't have any skin in the game. You know, we are an evidence-based organisation, so we form views based on evidence collected. We don't go on hearsay. We don't go on opinion. And with a complex environment that Highways England has to deliver in, you get a myriad of stakeholder views and experiences. So it's really important that someone can step back from that, look at the evidence and then form a judgement to give people assurance that either the right things are being done or the right steps are being taken to improve things in the future.

Kenny Walker, Host

And what examples can you give to highlight some of the work that people may not know about?

Feras Alshaker, Deputy Director, Roads ORR

So in the first road period, we took steps to ask Highways England to improve the way that it deals with the road condition. So it had a key performance indicator around road condition. It wasn't meeting that key performance indicator. We asked it to look to look into that. And actually by the end of the road period, it had hit its target. Another example of that would be - and when we go to Transport Focus, I'm sure Guy will talk to this - Highway England wasn't achieving its user satisfaction scores. It was below the target in the road period. We asked it to refocus, to come up with some plans for delivering improved user satisfaction. And you can see from the report that we've been talking about, the user satisfaction had a big uptick towards

the end of the road period. So they're just a few areas where we've asked Highways England to take measures to improve.

Kenny Walker, Host

Thanks Feras. So we've heard ORR's benchmark and report showed user satisfaction and average traffic delays across the six regions in England varied significantly. So we've got Guy with us today from Transport Focus, who gathers data from thousands of road users each year to gain detailed insight. Thanks for joining us Guy, could you maybe start by giving our listeners some insight into how Transport Focus go about gathering this information for road users?

Guy Dangerfield, Head of Strategy, Transport Focus

Yes, of course. Transport Focus is a consumer organisation. Our job is to stand up for the users of Britain's railways, passengers on buses, coaches and trams in England and all users of Highways England's roads, whether they be in cars, lorries, buses, riding a motorbike, on a bicycle or a horse or indeed on foot on the A roads. And it's a simple model, really. We ask road users about their views through research, both quantitative and qualitative research, to understand the level of satisfaction making journeys on Highways England's roads, but also to understand what road users want to see improved. So almost never mind the level of satisfaction now, what are the priorities to make it better?

And we do that really through three surveys which are set out in the Road Investment Strategy. And the principle one is the Strategic Road User Survey, SRUS as it is abbreviated to, which talks to around 8,000 drivers each year, and that will be restarting in April. But we also have a survey called the Logistics and Coach Survey, which is a survey of some of the businesses that are running lorries or coaches on the Highways England's roads.

So where the SRUS measuring driver satisfaction, the logistics and coach survey is measuring satisfaction amongst the businesses. How well is Highways England meeting their needs as a business and then we're also piloting and will continue to develop during 2021/2022 our cyclists, pedestrians and equestrian survey and that is looking at the issues for those who are travelling along Highways England's roads, obviously where permitted, not on the motorways, but also crossing Highways England's roads.

So those are the three areas which under the RIS, we are charged with measuring satisfaction. But we also do other research, for instance, to provide a sense of road user priorities for the next RIS. So at the moment, we are conducting some

qualitative research and are about to do some quant as well to help the Department (for Transport), to help Highways England, to help ORR really understand what road users want out of the third strategy, applying from 2025 to 2030.

Kenny Walker, Host

Thanks very much Guy. So we've from ORR on benchmarking and its role in monitoring Highways England and also from Transport Focus on how they gather insight from road users. So can some final thoughts on how all this benefits the road user.

Guy Dangerfield, Head of Strategy, Transport Focus

I mean, I think at the end of the day, Transport Focus's role is partly about keeping on reminding people whether they work for Highways England, they work for the Department (for Transport), they work for ORR, that ultimately this road network is provided for humans and goods to move around and that their experience and their satisfaction with that product really, really matters.

Feras Alshaker, Deputy Director, Roads ORR

I agree with that. I think the important role that we play in this is, is making sure all the work the Highways England is funded to deliver is done. You know, be the enormous, complex projects to deliver congestion relief or link economic centres in England. I think one of the, continuing good management of the Strategic Road Network, which is really important for the flows of goods and people around the country, it's you know, it's one of the striking things as a pandemic is that the strategic network has been absolutely vital in moving key workers around and goods. Freight movements have been up on normal levels through the whole of the last 12 months, which is, you know, just shows the importance of this network and access to economic prosperity of this country.

Kenny Walker, Host

Thanks Feras. And final thoughts from you, Stephen?

Stephen Bussell, Senior Highways Economist, ORR

On indicators specifically, these indicators can seem a little bit abstract, but what sits behind that is the experience and the safety of the user. And so it's important that we track the improvements that Highways England is delivering to make sure that they

are being delivered and using this data, increasing transparency is one of the key ways in which we can encourage Highways England to deliver improvements in performance. And we think that although we're talking about a high level set of indicators, ultimately that will be reflected in people's experience on the ground.

Kenny Walker, Host

Thanks, Stephen, and thanks again Feras and Guy. That's all we have time for today, folks and hope that's giving you an idea of ORR's role in monitoring Highways England, and should you want more information on the benchmarking report, please visit orr.gov.uk and you'll find it there. Thanks for listening.



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