

Reviewing the standard of Highways England's responses to road user contacts and complaints

December 2016



1. Introduction and summary

Transport Focus was invited by Highways England to review the standard of the company's responses to road user contacts and complaints. We undertook this work with the aim of helping Highways England improve the quality of its communication with road users who contact the company. We also wanted to understand how Highways England uses feedback from road users to drive improvements to the service it provides.

Transport Focus has a great deal of experience of best practice in complaint handling and has previously conducted similar reviews of train companies' contacts and complaints. This review gave us a valuable opportunity to learn more about how Highways England responds to road users and to apply our experience of customer service across transport modes.

Correspondence with road users who contact Highways England should aim to build customer's confidence in the company. Transport Focus understands that Highways England is working to improve communication with its customers and we welcome the company's openness in sharing contacts and complaints for us to review. This transparency demonstrates a commitment to improvement, as does the inclusion of a customer survey link in some of the responses reviewed. However, the quality of responses was variable and the review identified four areas which we recommend Highways England prioritises for improvement.

- **Demonstrating a 'customer focused' approach**
Responses should demonstrate empathy and show road users that their experience is important to Highways England. When something has gone wrong responses should take responsibility, explain what happened and apologise sincerely.
- **Providing detailed and helpful information**
Responses should be useful, ensuring that all issues are addressed with sufficient, bespoke detail focused on the specific points raised.
- **Using clear and easy-to-understand written responses**
Care should be taken to ensure responses are free from industry jargon and simple spelling, grammar and punctuation errors.
- **Acting on feedback from road users**
Responses should go beyond simply confirming that a reported problem has been fixed, to explain how similar problems will be prevented in future. Responses must recognise Highways England's responsibilities for improving road user satisfaction and safety, and ensure that feedback from road users is used consistently to drive improvements.

Transport Focus invited Highways England to respond to the findings in this report and set out how it will improve customer service for road users who contact the company. Their initial response is included in this report. Transport Focus will monitor Highways England's action plan, while a further review could provide an opportunity to assess the company's progress.

Guy Dangerfield
Head of Transport User Strategy
Transport Focus



Highways England response to Transport Focus's findings

The Company welcomes the expertise and transparency that Transport Focus bring in their review. Customer service is one of our three key imperatives and providing focused and helpful responses to road users is fundamental to this. I will ensure that we build the learning points raised into our continuous improvement process when responding to our customers.

We recognised that we needed to improve our processes for handling and responding correspondence and we carried out a comprehensive review of our processes during 2015. As a result of the findings of the review and consulting with Transport Focus we are introducing new and improved processes and initiatives. These are helping to improve the way we respond to complaints, suggestions and questions from customers. These measures include:

- From October this year we are checking a random sample of responses from Highways England on a monthly basis using a quality scorecard. This will help to ensure that responses follow a consistent style and tone, that all points are answered in an empathetic and clear manner and where appropriate apologetic.
- We have developed training for answering correspondence based on the quality scorecard. The training is being rolled out across the business over the next twelve months.
- A simplified complaints process was introduced in July. This includes a clear definition of a complaint and provides a transparent process for our customers.

The four areas of improvement suggested by Transport Focus are being taken into account and we will be developing an action plan to further improve the standard of our responses in consultation with Transport Focus which will be regularly reviewed.

Mel Clarke
Customer Services Director, Operations Directorate
Highways England

2. Methodology

This review was primarily concerned with the quality of written correspondence. We have used selected examples to highlight how Highways England can improve the customer service experience for road users who contact the company.

We reviewed a total of 42 contacts and complaints, covering a variety of enquiry and complaint types. The correspondence and supporting information was supplied by Highways England and all concerned the midlands region. The sample included responses to road users from various sources, including the Major Projects Directorate and the maintenance contractors or managing agents, responding on behalf of Highways England in Areas 7 (East Midlands) and 9 (West Midlands).

The sample of 42 contacts and complaints is small, therefore the review is not intended to be representative of contact and complaint handling across Highways England. We also recognise there may be differences in the way that contacts and complaints are handled between regions, but we expect the findings will still be useful and could help to support improvements across the company.

3. Key findings and analysis

This review identifies four areas which we recommend Highways England prioritises for improvement:

- demonstrating a 'customer focused' approach
- providing detailed and helpful information
- using clear and easy-to-understand written responses
- acting on feedback from road users

3.1 Demonstrating a 'customer focused' approach

One of the key features that Transport Focus was seeking in responses to road users was evidence of 'customer focus'. This can be loosely defined as responses and outcomes that demonstrate empathy and show that the experience of Highways England's customers is important to the company. This review identified some examples of good practice.

Contact 13

A road user asked why the A14 Junctions 7 - 9 had been 'gridlocked' from 1pm that day and reported that it had caused major traffic issues around Kettering.

The response answered the question clearly and concisely. It explained in detail that a problem with a new surface laid the previous night meant lanes remained closed until the evening, when a full closure of the road enabled the problem to be resolved. The response apologised twice for the delays and inconvenience caused, and explained that the company has taken steps to

understand what went wrong with the resurfacing work so it can be avoided in future.

This is an example of a simple, empathetic and effective response. It demonstrates that Highways England is concerned about the experience of its customers by explaining what happened, taking responsibility for what went wrong and apologising. Not all contacts received responses that demonstrated this.

Contact 11

Road user contact on 11 June pointed out that traffic lights on the roundabout at M40 Junction 10 were causing traffic to back up. They asked if this had been noticed and whether a solution would be provided.

The response on 26 June stated that with a 'scheme of this magnitude we are placed under huge pressure to get things completed as soon as practicably possible' and accepted that fixed timings on the traffic lights were causing 'various queuing issues'. It went on to say the company was 'continuing to pressurise our contractor to deal with this as urgently as possible', but that 'hopefully' it would be completed by the end of July.

This response didn't strike the right tone, appearing to shift blame to a contractor. It indirectly acknowledged that the traffic lights at the junction were not currently fit for purpose, but didn't apologise for delays caused or give the impression that any urgent action would be taken resolve the problem.

This example illustrates the finding that the content and 'tone of voice' used in responses wasn't always appropriate. In some responses there appeared to be a reluctance to identify the contact as a complaint, responding instead in a neutral tone as if responding to a 'fault report'.

Contact 30

Road user telephoned to complain about the length of grass on a small, triangular piece of land adjacent to the A5. They believed it was a hazard because it obscured the view of drivers joining the road. They advised they would raise the issue with their MP if Highways England did not accept responsibility for cutting the grass.

The response was very brief. Except for the standard sentence explaining it was responding as the 'managing agent working on behalf of Highways England', it just states: "Thank you for your enquiry regarding the grass at A5 Burbage. Our crew have now cut this back. If you want to discuss this any further please don't hesitate to contact us."

This is the outcome the road user was seeking, but the response didn't match the tone of the complaint, referring to it as an enquiry, and didn't offer an apology that they had had to raise the issue, or any commitment that the company would schedule further work to stop the problem recurring.

This is an example where the response lacked evidence of a 'human touch'. Where road users were complaining and seeking action, the review found that while the 'work on the ground' was completed, often the response was simply too brief and lacking in detail to meet the expected standard and demonstrate customer focus.

3.2 Providing detailed and helpful information

When reviewing the contacts and complaints we were looking for helpful responses including sufficient detail, and accurate information, tailored to the specific questions asked. The review found a considerable range of response quality against this criteria, with some excellent responses.

Contact 18

A road user wrote about their experience of using a new pedestrian crossing near a roundabout on the A43/A5. They reported that vehicles were travelling at high speed on this wide road and they were concerned for their safety because the 'green man' changed before they had finished crossing. They requested that it should be investigated before there was a serious accident.

A very good response was provided, which included detailed information about the operation of this specific pedestrian crossing and the co-ordination with the traffic lights on the roundabout. It provided key information that the 'green man' is an 'invitation to cross', that there are separate sensors to detect pedestrians, and that traffic isn't shown a green light until two seconds after the crossing is detected to be clear.

The clarity and detail of the explanation showed the respondent had the knowledge required to provide the necessary reassurance that the crossing is safe to use.

This example demonstrates how effective a response can be when useful information about the specifics of the individual question or complaint is communicated clearly. On the whole, most responses were sufficiently bespoke, with little evidence of 'copy and paste'. However, some responses didn't get to grips with the specifics of the questions asked and were too general to be helpful.

Contact 15

Road user contact about new signage installed on the M1. They observed that, when travelling south, Chesterfield is signed at Junction 30 but not at Junction 29 - which they believe is the most direct route.

They noted that at Junction 29 only Mansfield and Matlock are signed which they said are reached by driving through Chesterfield itself. They asked whether it would be better to sign 'Chesterfield (North)' at Junction 30 and 'Chesterfield (Centre)' at Junction 29 to direct heavy traffic away from residential areas.

The response was very general and didn't demonstrate any local knowledge or expertise in relation to these signs. The tone could be interpreted as condescending, stating signing is 'always a complex issue' and assuring: "the designers of the new signage on the M1 will have spoken to the local Highways authority and will have used traffic counts data..."

The response could be applied to any signage enquiry elsewhere and would have been improved if it responded to the specific suggestions, and explained the signage with supporting data or evidence if possible.

It seems that in this example the person responding didn't have the necessary detailed information available to them to answer the enquiry. More concerning is the defensive and dismissive tone. We believe that stating that an issue is complicated is not sufficient, and could imply that Highways England doesn't think road users need to be informed and understand its decisions.

In the majority of the contacts and complaints reviewed road users only raised one key issue, but where contacts are more complex it is important to ensure responses address all the points raised.

Contact 7

Road user asked for an explanation for the six-month extension of roadworks. They also asked: "...why is it there appears to be minimal attendance on site. What are the hours? Why is there no contact information on the approach in order that enquiries can be made?"

The response recognised the inconvenience the extended works would cause to road users and explained the additional work planned. However, the response missed the other questions and the note of frustration, so it didn't strike the correct tone and is unlikely to be seen as a bespoke, satisfactory response.

This example demonstrates that to succeed in rebuilding trust when work doesn't go as planned, a response must be comprehensive and cannot overlook or avoid responding to key points.

3.3 Using clear and easy-to-understand written responses

Most responses were clear and easy to understand, using simple language and structuring information effectively to aid understanding. However, the review did identify some use of jargon which could cause confusion and should be avoided.

Contact 27

Referred to 'area 9' without explaining that this means the West Midlands.

Contact 21

The response began: "I have been asked to respond to your HAIL enquiry." The term 'HAIL' is unlikely to be understood, and is of course out of date anyway as it stands for Highways Agency Information Line.

Contact 34

A response concerning a renewal of white lines referred to a 'high friction surface material' that is 'coloured buff', and use of a 'higher specification aggregate'.

Similarly, most responses were free of significant errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling, but there were too many sloppy mistakes.

Contact 2

Referred to 'Highways Englang'.

Contact 9

Referred to 'A5 Drians'.

Contact 15

One sentence assured the recipient that Highways England 'will have used and traffic counts', and refers to 'startegic signing'.

Consistent use of a spell check function should eliminate these kind of basic errors. It is important because careless mistakes can mean responses appear unprofessional. Road users may wonder if a similar lack of care is taken in other work to maintain and operate the roads.

3.4 Acting on feedback from road users

The review found a number of good examples where feedback from road users was thoroughly investigated.

In particular, comments about 'defects', for example potholes or road markings, seemed to reach the right people so that practical action could be taken to fix the problem and pass on this outcome to the road user. However, these responses often lacked the necessary 'customer service' tone.

Contact 6

A road user reported an error on a sign on the M54 which showed the 'A5523' when this road is in fact the 'A5223'. They included a Google Maps link showing the sign.

The substantive response was: "Thank you for bringing this to our attention. We agree there is an issue with the signage and are now investigating how best to address the matter. We will then programme works to address the issue as soon as reasonably practicable."

This response didn't show a 'human touch'. Describing what would be done and when, or updating the road user when the sign had been fixed or replaced, would have demonstrated strong customer service.

Responses like these would be greatly enhanced if more information was provided, for example how the company will ensure faults are prevented or identified more quickly in future. While most responses did demonstrate that some form of investigation had been carried out, there was still evidence of inconsistency.

Contact 3

A road user requested that grass was cut on a verge on the A49. They said many people walk along this stretch of road and it is unpleasant if the grass is wet to then have to walk in wet trousers.

No action had been taken to solve the problem reported by the road user and the response was unnecessarily complicated, including references to 'soft estate'. The response doesn't indicate when the grass will next be cut, referring only to factors such as weather, 'traffic management' and prioritisation on a 'risk basis'.

In contrast, there were other responses where feedback from road users was investigated, but it didn't appear the 'bigger picture' was considered. It wasn't clear from these responses that feedback was consistently being used to inform improvements.

Contact 24

A road user reported that vegetation in the centre of a roundabout on the A5 obstructed the view of drivers entering the roundabout, preventing them seeing traffic already on the roundabout. They reported 'numerous' near misses and said that they felt it was 'only a matter of time' until a serious accident occurred.

The response stated that there was no issue with visibility and that the vegetation was left at a certain height as a safety measure to slow approaching vehicles and prevent collisions. It provided photos as evidence that an inspector had been to the site, and offered the opportunity to get in touch if the road user wanted to discuss.

The response would have been much improved if it showed more interest in safety at this location rather than only a narrow focus on the height of vegetation. The road user clearly had concerns; could other measures have been investigated to improve safety at this roundabout?

Where road users raise concerns about safety, this is feedback they would expect Highways England to be most alert and receptive to in order to address concerns and improve the safety of road users. There were also other responses where it didn't seem there was sufficient willingness or curiosity to investigate, or make more complex interventions.

Contact 14

A road user reported that drivers on the M1 were cutting through a motorway service area in an attempt to save time by avoiding a temporary speed limit. They explained that they drove this route twice a day and reported that this behaviour was resulting in delays caused by these vehicle merging back onto the motorway. They expressed frustration and asked whether Highways England was aware.

The response stated: "We believe that the issue with congestion is not related to the speed restrictions in place, but it is for the fact that motorists are leaving the road and using the services as a cut through."

This seemed defensive; the road user wasn't blaming congestion on the speed limit. It also appeared to misunderstand the enquiry as this is precisely the concern they were raising.

The response continued: "Unfortunately we have no control over the behaviour of other motorists and we are sympathetic to your concerns." This

does not feel like an acceptable reply on behalf of Highways England. Road users would expect the company to be concerned about the congestion and safety impacts and to investigate measures to address the problem.

It is important that responses recognise Highways England's broad responsibilities, including improving road user satisfaction and safety. Where a road user reports a simple defect, such as a pothole, a response from a contractor may be satisfactory. However, when a response raises more complex questions, especially concerning safety, can another organisation adequately respond to Highways England's own customers on its behalf?

4. Areas to prioritise for improvement

Responses to road users who have taken the trouble to contact Highways England require care and attention to ensure they build customer's confidence in the company. The variable quality of response identified in this small sample indicates there is considerable scope to do better. The review identified four areas which we recommend Highways England prioritises for improvement.

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