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Dear Martin

Traffic disruption in Peterborough, week commencing 19 June 2017

Thank you for providing documents regarding the A1(M) roadworks which caused so much disruption in June, not only to Highways England's customers but to users of the wider road network in and around Peterborough. I hope the observations below and our recommendations will help ensure that problems such as these are avoided in future, both in East Anglia and across the Highways England network.

Significance of the slip road closures being 24/7

At the heart of what happened week commencing 19 June was, it appears, the fact that alarm bells did not ring when it was proposed to have 24/7 closure of access onto the A1(M) at junction 17. This is despite it being the principle southbound access to the Strategic Road Network from a city of 180,000 people. In the internal and external communication documents we have seen, the slip road closures often appear *after* mention of the overnight closures and lane/speed restrictions on the A1(M) itself. Perhaps the fact that it was 'just a slip road' lulled people into a false sense of security? If so, we suggest this was a result of thinking about the impact on the road *infrastructure* not on the road *users*. Whatever the reason, external communications did not adequately highlight the 24/7 nature of this closure and its implications for road users.

It appears that the seeds of what happened on 19 June were sown at the meeting on 24 January. Highways England, your A1(M) design, build, finance and operate (DBFO) provider Road Management Services, Peterborough City Council and Cambridgeshire County Council were all present. The minutes of that meeting state:

"The closure of the Junction 17 entry slip road was discussed and the general consensus [was] that it would not be a problem."

This suggests a 'gut instinct' view of those present, rather than one arrived at with the benefit of traffic flow data. There does not appear to have been consideration of what the displaced traffic would do or of the implications of drivers finding other routes.



It does not appear from the minutes that it was intended to subsequently commission analysis to test that the consensus was accurate, whether using hard data or floating the proposition more widely with stakeholders. It does not appear that there was any intention to explore road users' views.

Also, it does not appear that information given at the January meeting (by Peterborough City Council) about planned road works on the A15 diversionary route via Yaxley was recognized by Highways England as being a risk. As a result, no mitigations appear to have been considered.

Communications

The language. As well as focusing on the infrastructure and not the users, the communications did not express things in the way the majority of road users would think about them. At points they lapsed into industry terminology. For example, it said "full slip road closures during the stipulated dates... Jct 17 southbound on-slip, full closure from 15/06/17 to 30/06/17." Whereas it could have said "you can't get onto the A1(M) southbound at junction 17 (Peterborough Services) 24/7 for two weeks starting 15th June 2017." And in describing the diversion routes, it said "take the A1139 towards Peterborough, take the A1260 southbound, take the A15 towards Norman Cross." Whereas it could have said "you will have to join the A1(M) southbound at Normans Cross, so go on The Serpentine (A1260) past Tesco's and through Yaxley (A15)." That would have meant so much more to people in the Peterborough area, while still making sense to those from further afield.

Ambiguity. A key (the only?) Highways England press notice issued the week before works started was ambiguous. It said, "There will be overnight lane closures and the entry slip roads will be closed [sic] at junction 17 and junction 16." By referring to the slip road closures in the same sentence as the overnight closures, the impression was given that the slip road work was overnight only. For the media to communicate your message effectively and encourage road users to take a different route, we feel it needed to be much clearer – again, something like, "you can't get onto the A1(M) southbound at junction 17 [Peterborough Services] 24/7, for two weeks starting 15th June 2017." Even with only a few days to go, that might have caused partners at Peterborough City Council and Cambridgeshire County Council, as well as road users, to fully appreciate the implications of your plans.

The communication plan. It appears that the plan did not distinguish between road users and wider stakeholders. The two seem to have been muddled up to the detriment of effective communication with either. Also, the action plan seems insufficiently detailed. For example, it does not refer to Amazon and DHL in the Stanground area directly impacted by not being able to get on to the A1(M) at Junction 17. It did not mention the local bus operator Stagecoach; Highways England has acknowledged that there was no engagement with them despite implications for bus services using the diversionary route. It does not mention the Peterborough Telegraph, BBC Radio Cambridgeshire and BBC Look East as key partners in getting your message out.

Communications once work had started. It appears that Highways England was slow to acknowledge that, for whatever reason, something had gone badly wrong, that you were sorry



and you were sorting it out. In this sort of situation users and stakeholders have far more respect for organisations which simply hold up their hands and acknowledge that things have not gone well. The level of vitriol from the media, politicians, stakeholders and members of the public is likely to have been much reduced had Highways England immediately said something like “this clearly isn’t working, we are very sorry and are working to sort out the problem as quickly as we can”. It is telling that on 19 June the most coherent explanation in the media for what had caused the problems came from the Managing Director of Stagecoach East, Andy Campbell, and not from Highways England.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations having reviewed the documents are:

1. That any proposal for a 24/7 full closure of any part of the Strategic Road Network, including slip roads, should be subject to rigorous scrutiny. They should be approved only having considered data regarding the impacts on road users and after agreeing appropriate mitigations.
2. That communications should seek to explain in language that resonates with the majority of road users the impacts on them and what they will need to do differently, rather than be dominated by what is happening to the road infrastructure.
3. That ‘road scheme communication plans’ should ensure that the needs of road users and stakeholders are considered separately. Also, that organisations which will be (or may be) impacted by the works, or which are critical to communicating your message, are listed explicitly for specific engagement.
4. That when something has evidently not worked as intended, Highways England should act quickly to acknowledge the impacts on road users, apologise and be clear that you are working to sort out the problem.

We also suggest that you consider whether the fact that maintenance and renewal of the A1(M) is carried out by a DBFO, with little day-to-day involvement from Highways England, may have contributed to this situation.

I hope this is helpful to you in ensuring there is no repetition in your Region or elsewhere on the SRN. I look forward to receiving your response in due course.

Yours sincerely

Guy Dangerfield
Head of Strategy