

Improving roadworks for road users: A66 Eden Valley

In 2016 Transport Focus published a report, *Incidents and roadworks – A road user perspective*¹, looking at road users' experience of incidents and planned roadworks on England's motorways and major 'A' roads. This research identified road users' needs when planning roadworks to ensure that their interests are fully considered. Transport Focus then identified the A66 as a project where it could work with Highways England to pursue a better approach. The results of this collaboration offer a way for every road improvement project – however large or small – to be managed for the benefit of road users.

Background

What became the single A66 Eden Valley scheme started life as seven separate resurfacing projects. Although small in a national context, it was a large scheme for the north west region of Highways England's operations directorate. Over seven weekends in September and October 2018, this important trans-Pennine route was closed to traffic to allow work to take place.

Transport Focus set two key challenges for Highways England:

- to understand who will be affected; where the traffic comes from and how to identify users' specific needs
- to work out the best way to communicate with A66 users so they know what is closed when, and what to do instead.

Using findings from its research, Transport Focus suggested Highways England should consider:

- developing its strategy for the project with road users in mind
- working 24/7 wherever possible
- involving freight companies in the planning – given the full weekend closures and long diversion routes
- improving the accuracy and clarity of roadworks information
- improving communication with road users at the roadside.

Initially, the project team was apprehensive, perhaps foreseeing issues about how far Highways England's traditional communications policy would permit a new approach and any additional costs that they may incur. In reply, Transport Focus emphasised that road users want to see things done in a new way, so the team had an opportunity to really think about road users and become exemplars to the rest of Highways England. The additional costs would also be offset by a number of benefits, such as reduced complaint handling by the team and would help



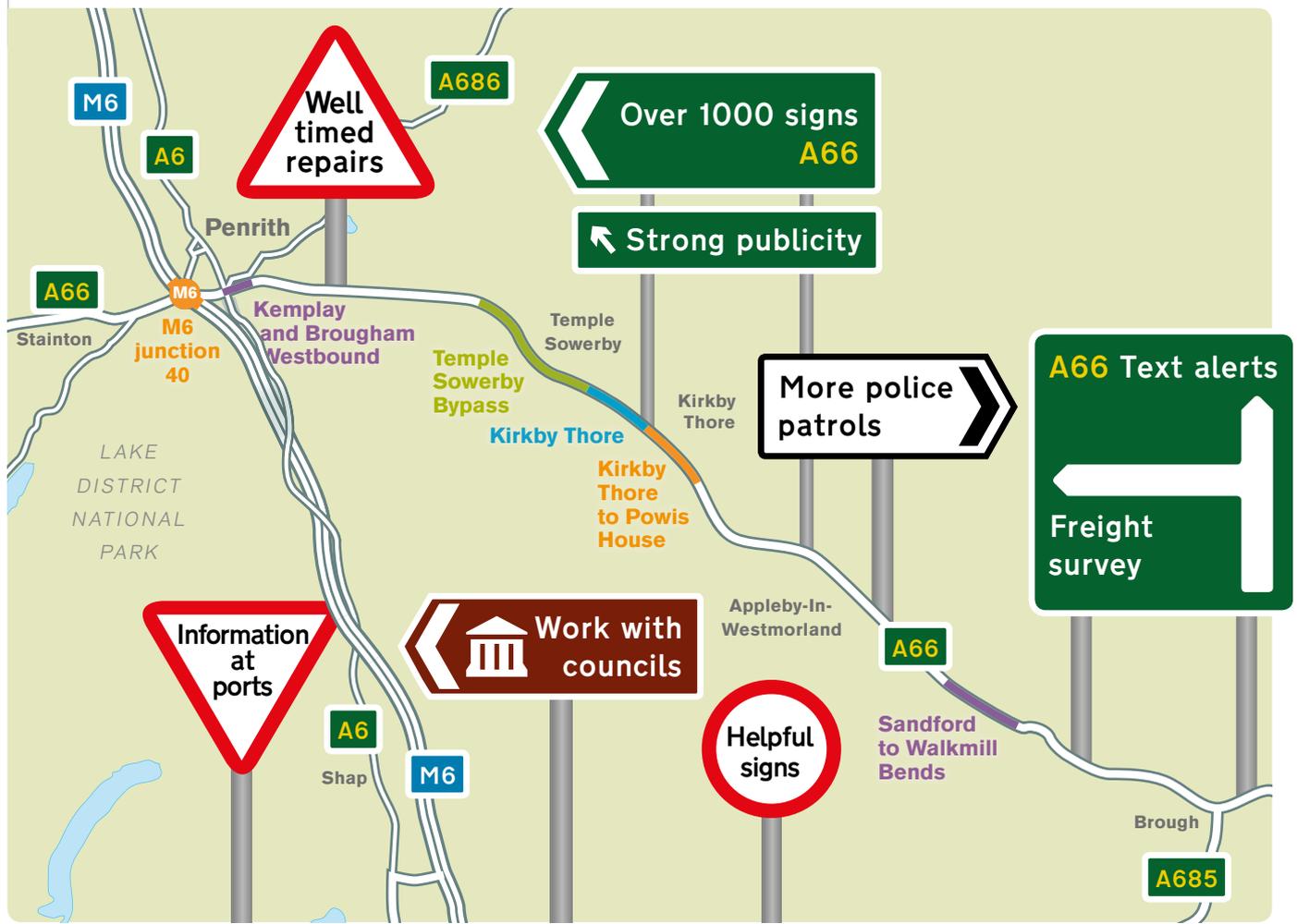
freight organisations and other businesses to boost journey reliability during the closures, with an overall benefit to the UK economy. Using its research, Transport Focus helped the team develop various solutions that departed from the 'usual way' to manage such projects.

Achievements

At a workshop for contractors and key stakeholders held in November 2018, participants recognised that their engagement with road users, stakeholders and residents was their biggest achievement. The involvement of Transport Focus was also seen as a catalyst for finding new ways to consider, involve and communicate with road users.

Transport Focus will use this project to drive conversations with other Highways England teams so the company can ensure every scheme can adopt the kind of user-focussed thinking pursued by the A66 project, becoming a routine part of good working practice.

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The achievements included:

- Surveys to establish which freight operators regularly use the route followed up with letters to 415 hauliers with information about the roadworks, when the closures would happen and the most appropriate diversion routes.
- Understanding how important the A66 is for east-west and north-south lorries (including to and from Scotland) going to and from 88 of the United Kingdom's 90 plus ports, so drivers could be given scheme information and suitable diversion routes.
- Placing more than 1000 signs (black writing on a yellow background) on Highways England's roads around the country including the M6 and M25 so that drivers could make earlier decisions about the best route to take.
- Identified foreign drivers to be a major user of this route. When searching for a solution to communicate with them, the Highways England team discovered technology that can recognise foreign number plates and post messages in a foreign language on roadside displays. While this could not be deployed on this project, it is something that could be explored further for future schemes and could also be adapted to improve 'wrong way' vehicle detection and warnings, a risk that Transport Focus argues must be tackled more vigorously.
- Discussion with 31 parish councils, district councils and Cumbria County Council and identified that many local users didn't use social media or websites and would prefer a text alert service. This was established and advertised across social media, in the press and on road signs. Over 1000 subscribers signed up for regular messages from the team about when the road was closed; what work was underway; and when the route had reopened. User feedback was very positive (over 98 per cent satisfaction) to this new method of communication.
- Securing several things usually reserved for larger-scale works including: signs at the beginning and end of the roadworks; leaflets to 20,000 homes, businesses and traffic generators in the area; a dedicated information page on the Highways England website; use of Twitter and regular press work before and during the closures.
- Close working with local councils and police to manage the long diversion routes (up to 120 miles), providing additional funds for Cumbria Police to patrol. 436 speeding offences were recorded; 75 lorries were turned around to use more suitable routes; and 65 lorry drivers were prosecuted for various offences.
- A failing water main on the A66 was in need of replacement. The local water company was unable to bring forward its planned works to coincide with the resurfacing works, so Highways England provided funding to make this possible, to improve safety and road surface quality, while also sparing road users a double period of inconvenience.