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By email

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Dear Duncan and Mike

## **Signs on the National Highways network**

As you know, Transport Focus believes that clear road signs mean easier, safer journeys. In short, we think if it's not clear it's not safe. We see clear signs as fundamental to drivers making timely, stress-free decisions that allow confident, safe manoeuvres. Safety and customer experience in one – two of National Highways' three imperatives.

Transport Focus has consistently encouraged the organisation to improve the outcomes it achieves in this area, particularly regarding permanent signs. We can see from research, including SRUS (see Appendix B), how important signs are to drivers. And we know that they remain important despite in-car technology: many road users rely on conventional signs to confirm digital information.

In 2020 we launched Sort My Sign to give drivers a platform to raise issues needing attention. We welcome your ongoing support for this work, along with your own introduction of Fix My Street to make it easier for road users to get in touch. Earlier this month, to accompany a new phase of Sort My Sign, we published a progress report – attached for your information. Thank you for the actions taken by your teams to address three in five of the reports.

I am writing today because we think more action is needed to increase the customer focus in this area, in terms of both safety and journey experience. Compared with delivering complex enhancements or even routine surface renewals, this should be one of the easier things to do well. It is also an area where we think National Highways could visibly demonstrate quality, enhancing its reputation alongside the safety and experience of its customers.


The four principal areas where we would like to see improvement, discussed in greater detail in Appendix A, are:

1. In ensuring that drivers can see signs properly. Is it acceptable that drivers must take their eyes off the road at 70 mph to peer around bushes to read signs?
2. In the pace with which damaged signs are repaired or replaced. Is it acceptable that key safety and customer experience features take so long to reinstate?
3. In renewing signs when they are life expired. Is it acceptable to have signs in place with missing letters and numbers?
4. In making incremental improvements to existing provision. Is there a culture of continuous improvement that matches road users' reasonable expectations?

Transport Focus is keen to help National Highways deliver fundamental, lasting improvement for road users when it comes to permanent signs. We would welcome your support for this becoming a key plank of the organisation's 2022/23 customer service plan.

I look forward to hearing from you and very happy to discuss.

Yours sincerely



**Guy Dangerfield**  
**Head of Strategy**

cc Nick Harris, Chief Executive

Areas where Transport Focus wishes to see improvement on behalf of road users.

**1. Improvement in ensuring that drivers can see signs properly**

Drivers being able to see signs properly is a fundamental requirement and is often not met, with resulting journey experience (including stress) and safety implications. The main issues are vegetation management and cleaning.

**Vegetation obscuring signs**

Is it acceptable that road users cannot see signs properly because trees and shrubbery are obstructing their line of sight? Is it acceptable that drivers must take their eyes off the road at 70 mph to peer around bushes to see signs? These are the sorts of things road users experience daily on National Highways roads, whether motorways or ‘A’ roads.



Is cyclical maintenance for vegetation achieving the outcomes road users need? Are the cycles frequent enough, or each one vigorous enough, to ensure that signs are always visible?

**Signs where dirt hinders visibility**

Is it acceptable that road users experience this sort of thing? Is this what National Highways aspires to achieve?



Existing National Highways documents set out the frequency with which the face of signs should be cleaned, although it is not clear if it should be every two years or every three (GM701 and CM125 appear to say different things). Whichever it is, is National Highways confident that it is happening as specified across the network? Who is responsible for ensuring the standard is adhered to?

## 2. Improvement in the pace with which damaged signs are repaired or replaced

Apart from those on gantries, road signs are inevitably vulnerable to being knocked, and worse, by traffic. Despite the safety and customer experience implications for hundreds of drivers daily, there are many examples where years have elapsed between the damage occurring and repair taking place.

One of numerous examples is at a critical junction on the London-Dover route, at the end of the M2 east of Faversham. The sign below was demolished sometime between June 2017 and August 2018. When we asked about progress in June 2021 Highways England was only then carrying out a safety assessment to determine the size and type of posts that the new sign needs to be installed on.



Is it acceptable that key safety and customer experience features take so long to repair or replace? How does the organisation measure its performance in this area? Is it clear what is preventing new signs being ordered within a few days of demolition?



### 3. Improvement in renewing signs when they are life expired

The presence on the network of signs with missing letters, lost reflectiveness, faded backgrounds etc. suggests that there is not a systematic approach to renewal of life expired sign faces. And it isn't just faces: sometimes signs fall over (or have to be taken down) because the posts have rusted through. Here are some examples of the sorts of things road users experience.



Is this the quality of service National Highways is seeking to provide for road users? Is it acceptable from either a safety or customer experience perspective? Does the rate of renewal at least match the rate of deterioration?

#### 4. Improvement in making incremental improvements to existing provision

From time to time, both through Sort My Sign and our own observations, it emerges that improvements are needed – or at the very least are desirable – to the signage currently in place. This can include repositioning an existing sign, provision of an additional sign, rationalising what is there now or changes to what is on a sign to improve its usefulness. However, it feels almost impossible to make progress unless piggybacking on an enhancement project that will be renewing signs anyway. The default position is generally “it’s safe, no action required”; rarely is the response a thoughtful look at how changes could improve safety or the road user experience. Is it appropriate that incremental improvements, including the correction of clear deficiencies, are so difficult to achieve on England’s motorways and major ‘A’ roads?

An example is on the A417 approaching Gloucester travelling east to west. It was pointed out by a Sort My Sign user that drivers get only 100 yards’ notice that Lane 1 is for the M5 southbound/Gloucester Business Park only and not Gloucester itself or the M5 northbound. Clearly unusual, clearly unhelpful from a customer perspective, almost certainly not as safe as it might be. Nevertheless it is deemed acceptable.



## APPENDIX B

Selection of verbatim comments from Strategic Roads User Survey (SRUS) respondents since the survey restarted in April 2021.

- “And that missing junction sign at J25 southbound still has not been replaced after years - and several requests. The only explanation to this fairly unique - and dangerous - absence was that "we are developing a signage strategy"! After 5 + years this will need to be a pretty impressive bit of work when it appears. Suggestion for strategy: - "just replace all missing 1-mile signs". There – done.” (M5 user)
- “The road surface is very poorly maintained, also the trees & bushes are overgrown in places on the single carriageway that some signs are obscured” (A47 user)
- “Signposts weren’t visible at first until your closer to them, there were a few times I missed my turning. I found it intimidating as I was not familiar with the area” (A421 user)
- “The road signage directing you from the roundabout near Sudbury going west onto the A50 is missing from the exit. There is a pole there but no sign indicating this is the exit off the roundabout to join the A50.” (A50 user)
- “Got lost on the A14 the signage is dreadful. Wanted me to take the A1 Peterborough, so I stayed on the A14 Kettering, but if I took the A1 Peterborough there would have been another sign on the bridge, needs clearer signage in this area.” (A14 user)