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Dear Guy

Signs on the National Highways network

Thank you for your recent letter and please accept my apologies for the delay in issuing this formal response to it.

As you know from previous correspondence that we have had on the subject of signage, I fully understand the important part that signs play during customers journey's, from both safety and information perspectives.

Turning specifically to the questions you have raised.

Length of time between damage and repair

Fix Now remains an important part of the Highways Inspectors roles but some of the changes introduced during Covid, particularly the move to single crewing of Inspector vehicles, have reduced the opportunities to address some faults.

That said, our performance to the end of Q2 remains strong in the road markings and road stud defect category but I will keep a keen eye on the other 2 categories.

Activity	Type	Q2		
		Total No of 24 Hour Priority Defects	Total Completed 24 Hour Priority Defects to required Timescale	% Completed 24 Hour Priority Defects within the required timescale
Defects	Traffic signs/Road markings/Road studs defects	576	508	88.2%
Activity	Type	Q2		
		Total No of 24 Hour Priority Defects	Total Completed 24 Hour Priority Defects to required Timescale	% Completed 24 Hour Priority Defects within the required timescale
Breakdown of 24 Hour Traffic Signs/Road Markings/Road Studs defects	Road Markings and Road Studs defects	110	99	90.0%
	Sign defects	388	344	88.7%
	Other	78	65	83.3%

For your information, the 'other' category consists of soft estate, lighting and fence/barrier damage.

Regional performance is shown in the table below.

Region	Type	Total	Completed	% in 24 hours
East	Markings/Studs	8	8	100%
	Sign Defects	24	24	100%
	Other	None reported		
Midlands	Markings/Studs	56	50	89.3%
	Sign Defects	167	136	81.4%
	Other	26	21	80.8%
North West	Markings/Studs	None reported		
	Sign Defects	7	7	100%
	Other	1	1	100%
South East	Markings/Studs	12	10	83.3%
	Sign Defects	105	97	92.4%
	Other	19	16	84.2%
South West	Markings/Studs	None reported		
	Sign Defects	21	21	100%
	Other	14	14	100%
YNE	Markings/Studs	34	31	91.2%
	Sign Defects	64	59	92.2%
	Other	18	13	72.2%

I am sure you will note that there are some interesting variances between regions and I will ask my Performance Team to monitor this. The simple explanation might be that, for example, there are more signs in the Midlands than in the South West and therefore there is more chance of a defect occurring.

I am conscious though, that how long it takes to clear defects not in the 24 hour category was the primary thrust of your letter. Resource pressures on my central performance team have prevented me providing a similar table for defects in those categories, however I can commit to make this information available as soon as I receive it.

The reporting requirements laid down in the Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) contracts are all slightly different. For example:

- In the North East, concessions report performance against Category 1 (7 days) and Category 2 (28 day) defects, some in absolute terms, some by exception
- The A417/A419 concession collates the data but aren't required to report it. Interestingly Category 1 defects under this contract need to be completed within 28 days and Category 2 defects within 6 months
- The M40 concession has no requirement to report at all

These contracts were “inherited” by National Highways and to change them at this point is likely to result in significant compensation claims. As a consequence, I am not able to provide you with details of DBFO performance in fixing these defects but if these contracts were being let now, I would certainly ensure that the reporting requirements mirror those in place in the regions.

Awareness of missing signs

I read your feedback from one region about the maintenance community focusing on assets that are there rather than those that should be with interest. I can certainly understand how that might happen, a new inspector perhaps not knowing where a sign used to be located and that knowledge not being routinely passed on by a previous postholder. However, I would also expect our inspector community to have an enquiring mind and seek out where there isn't a sign but either a standard dictates there ought to be or where a sign would benefit road users.

I have ensured that this is addressed directly within the Highways Inspector e-learning package, as well as taking the liberty of using the images you appended to your letter as examples, but I will go further and ask that the Tier 2 forum attended by Inspector Team Managers focuses specifically on this.

Turning to the use of LIDAR surveys to identify where assets have “disappeared”, unfortunately, due to contractual reasons, there has been a delay in being able to upload the survey data onto our Spatial Portal platform but it remains our intention to do this as soon as is practically possible. Colleagues from Digital Services have indicated that this could be delivered at some point in Q2 24/25.

This, combined with a renewed and refreshed focus from our Inspectors, should improve our awareness of missing assets.

Vegetation obscuring signs

Our cyclical maintenance regime certainly includes the identification of locations where vegetation might obscure signs, with the prism concept being applied to understand the extent of what clearance might be needed. However, given you have been able to point to examples where signs have been obscured, there is clearly more we can do.

I recognise that this is a subject that Transport Focus are raising regularly and I will therefore make a commitment to better understand the gap between what the cyclical programmes are delivering and what they need to deliver to achieve the minimum requirement of the relevant standard.

On a practical level, you will not be surprised to read that the photo you provided has again been incorporated into the e-learning package, to further emphasise what we need inspectors to be looking out for. We are also asking our own people to be the customers “eyes and ears” when using the network.

Cleaning sign faces

The frequency of cleaning sign faces is determined by our Planning and Development teams to meet the required Standard, but using customer insight and feedback from inspectors to help them.

The factors they take into account are the obvious ones:

- are the signs in a highly trafficked or lightly trafficked area
- what is the signs proximity to industrial facilities
- are the signs in an urban or rural location
- are the signs close to vegetation

The frequency of cleaning signs is recorded in the annual Regional Maintenance Requirement Plans, produced by Performance and Development Teams. Any variances from the laid down standard are reviewed by colleagues in our Safety, Engineering and Standards division.

We don't currently collect any information on the number of signs cleaned but I think it is important to explain how we use Confirm as our workflow management system. Within Confirm, the cyclical maintenance plans agreed by the Performance and Development teams are scheduled in and subsequently recorded as completed thereby creating a record of network interventions.

Whilst we don't demand photographs to evidence cyclical cleaning of signs, our Service Delivery Managers check Confirm for works that have and importantly haven't been completed, discussing the latter at routine contract management meetings. Inspectors are made aware of the cyclical maintenance programmes and undertake drive through checks to validate that works are taking or have taken place.

With regards to your closing paragraph, I echo your comments that we need to ensure signs are both present and visible. The opex and inflation challenges are significant but, as you say, anything we can do to minimise reactive spend and have a truly effective cyclical programme is our aim.

Thank you again for taking the time to write to me with your concerns.

Yours sincerely



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