

Duncan Smith
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By email

4 September 2023

Dear Duncan

Signs on the National Highways network

I am following up our earlier correspondence to express concern about the slow pace of improvement in this area. This is unfortunate given the safety and customer experience role that signs play in people making journeys on National Highways' roads. The key issues, all raised before, are as follows.

1. Length of time between damage and repair

We welcome the efforts of your teams to resolve simple issues through the 'Fix Now' initiative. However, things that can't be resolved that way seem to take unacceptably long – especially if a designer is involved. Please would you let me know what the target is for how quickly non-Fix Now repairs should be complete and also how well each region and each DBFO provider is doing against it?

2. Awareness of missing signs

We continue to advise your teams of examples where signs have disappeared both in the recent past and some years before which, seemingly, National Highways is not aware of – sometimes despite tell-tale posts remaining. Please see images A and B below. It isn't clear to us whether inspectors are not noticing, or they are but something goes wrong later in the process. Might there be truth in an explanation floated by one region that the maintenance community tends to focus on the safety of assets that *are* there, rather than think about those that *ought* to be there? We welcome the potential to use LIDAR images to highlight signs that were in place but no longer are, but it is not clear whether this is now being used in earnest to plug gaps. Please would you look to develop a robust, network-wide strategy for identifying where signs should be provided for safety and customer experience reasons but are currently not.

3. Vegetation obscuring signs

We continue to let your teams know of examples where drivers cannot see signs properly because vegetation is obscuring line of sight to them. We are aware that action has been taken in places, but we are not confident that road user focused outcomes are being consistently achieved across the network. Given the number of examples we see where a driver's view of important signs is significantly impaired, we are doubtful that the minimum standard is being routinely achieved. It also appears that the distance stipulated in the relevant standard tends to be regarded as the maximum to be achieved, rather than the minimum as set out in the standard. Please would you investigate whether each Region and each DBFO provider has accurately defined the 'prism' in front of each of its signs that must be clear for the standard to be met? And please would you also investigate whether those prisms are in practice being cleared effectively by each Region and each DBFO through cyclical maintenance regimes. A recent 'ride out' with your Midlands colleagues highlighted the importance of it being a prism, with vegetation cleared vertically and not just at ground level so branches do not obstruct a driver's line of sight to a sign. Please see image C below.

4. Cleaning sign faces

You explained in your letter of 17 November 2022 that the underlying standard is for every sign face to be cleaned every three years, but with flexibility for some to receive attention every two years and some every four. It would be helpful to understand what is taken into account in determining the frequency. Given that we continue to let your teams know of signs which require cleaning to ensure legibility, particularly at night, please would you investigate whether each Region and each DBFO provider has accurately assessed which frequency category each of their signs should be in? Also, please would you investigate whether in the 2022/23 financial year, all Regions and all DBFOs achieved the volume of cleaning required to meet the standard?

In summary, we acknowledge the challenges you face of flat opex budgets despite inflationary pressures. But we believe that ensuring signs are present and visible to road users is a core part of National Highways role in facilitating safe, hassle-free journeys. If it's not clear, it's not safe. Signs is an area almost wholly within the organisation's control, and I am confident that by focusing on the four issues highlighted you will achieve much-needed improvement for your customers. Perhaps the answer to affordable delivery for road users is truly effective cyclical programmes – particularly around vegetation obstruction and sign face cleaning – to near-eliminate reactive spend?

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

Yours sincerely



Guy Dangerfield
Head of Strategy

Images A and B

Example of a missing sign that had seemingly slipped off National Highways' radar despite one of its posts remaining, A43 near Silverstone.



Image C

Example of where drivers' line of sight to a key sign is obscured by vegetation, highlighting the need for a 'prism' to be thoroughly cleared in front of each sign. A14, near Thrapston.

