



A traffic officer patrol in an emergency refuge area on the M6

Maintaining the road network



David Brewer, the Highways Agency's director of asset delivery, joined in July 2013. He speaks to *Highways Magazine* about the task of managing and maintaining the strategic road network which is a crucial part of the national transport system

| Alec Peachey: | David Brewer: |
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| What significance does longer term funding and increased investment, to the tune of £15.1 billion by 2021, mean for the Agency and its supply chain? | The scale and certainty of funding are closely linked. Having a high quality road network linking major economic centres is recognised as essential – which is why the government has committed extra funding. This investment will transform our roads with £6bn of re-surfacing work, investment to deal with 'pinch points' on the network and major projects to provide additional capacity on key routes. Gearing up will require investment in skills, plant and material supplies and we knew we could only expect our suppliers to make this type of commitment if the investment pipeline was secure. |
| How do you see the transition from being a government agency to being a government company changing the way you go about the business of maintaining and improving the asset? | I've heard the change in our status, combined with the increased investment, referred to as a 'once in a generation opportunity' – and I don't think this is overstating the significance. A critical aspect of the change is that it provides, through primary legislation, a transparent framework to fix our performance goals and funding. We are being trusted with secure long term funding and more discretion about how we go about delivering much greater levels of performance from our strategic roads. |
| How do you go about doing all this additional work without causing more disruption to drivers while the work is carried out? | The longer planning horizon means that we can package our improvement and renewal work in a way which minimises disruption and we are building our programme management capability to improve predictability and communication of our work. Some disruption when we are investing to improve is inevitable so we need to convince road users that the benefits of a high quality, high performing network are worth it. |
| It must be a challenging role – what keeps you up at night? | We've got lots to do but we have a strong team and committed suppliers. We do have some challenging technology projects underway which are complex but very high return. Technology enables increased throughput rates, better utilisation and reduced disruption from incidents. I also spend a lot of time thinking about the safety of the people who work for us and who use our roads. Our roads are among the safest in the world and road safety has improved dramatically in recent years – but I take my safety responsibilities very personally. I will be looking for ways to make our work and our roads safer. |
| What steps were taken to keep the strategic road network up and running during the recent period of severe rain? | Overall I was really pleased with the way our major roads and motorways performed throughout the difficult weather. We did have days with heavy rain, gales and snow across different parts of the country which certainly had our teams working long hours. There were a few isolated incidents but these were dealt with effectively and with a couple of exceptions we avoided any full road closures. We also provided plenty of support to other organisations and lifted roadworks and deployed extra resources on routes which were in use for rail replacement bus services. It does reinforce how important it is to build resilient assets in the first place and to sustain a proper level of ongoing preventative maintenance – which is exactly what we have done. |
| What do you see as the key to being a successful asset management organisation? | A simple, easily understood approach which is underpinned by really deep understanding of the condition and performance of the assets is essential. We have great technical expertise and good knowledge of our pavements and structures so the building blocks are there. Planning for the long term is also critical and that is one of the reasons for the change to our status. |
| Any closing remarks? | The changes have sparked a renewed burst of energy, ambition and confidence at the Highways Agency – we are committed to taking hold of the reins and being a demanding but fair and open organisation to work with. I'm glad I joined when I did. |