

Highways sector responds to the Coronavirus challenge

New guidance is allowing the highways sector to maintain worker safety and social distancing, while aiming to operate as close to business as usual, reports Justin Ward.

"How do you mitigate the effects of Coronavirus day to day, and equally how do you build a post Covid-19 future?" asks Suffolk Highways' assistant director, operational highways, Mark Stevens, as he reflects on the challenges – and opportunities – for the roads sector during the crisis.

Mark has been part of a joint public and private sector effort to develop guidance for the highways sector that will allow safe operating procedures for maintenance and improvement operations during the pandemic (see box).

A challenge for many sectors is how they continue to operate when the UK, like many countries, seeks to limit people's contact to reduce the spread of the virus. The transport sector is one of those deemed as critical to the Covid-19 response comprising those who will keep the air, water, road and rail passenger and



↑ Extra signage has been used by Suffolk Highways in recent weeks to keep the public informed



↑ Mark Stevens

freight transport modes operating. So the challenge for the highways sector is how it can continue to operate as close to business as usual.

The Department for Transport has been preparing the sector to deal with Covid-19 for several weeks. Head of highways maintenance Steve Berry outlines that this involves working with all elements of the sector from mineral and aggregate suppliers, to road surveying companies and highway maintenance operations on the ground.

The Department has also introduced a wider range of measures including the recently welcomed bus funding support package that will help key workers get to their places of employment.

The DfT is working across the sector with partners including ADEPT, the Local Government Association and CIHT and with the supply chain.

Part of the work has involved getting a snapshot from local highway authorities about levels of activity going on; and the picture that has emerged is that differences exist. Some areas, for instance, have seen a significant reduction in operations principally due to concerns about workforce safety.

However, with careful planning, the view from specialists in the highways sector is that operations can, and should, continue. With reductions in road traffic, it is an opportune time for maintenance works to be carried out.

As such, the Department and others in the sector are working hard to emphasise that it should be a business as usual approach – subject, of course, to the workforce being kept safe.

An important component of resilience is adopting a 'systems thinking' approach; this is why it is important for DfT to speak to the whole highways sector. The message from the Department is that, subject to careful planning, they should continue to operate as long as safety procedures are followed.

The DfT has been working with the Highways Sector Council that draws together the public and private sector, sub national transport bodies, Highways England and professional institutions including CIHT.

This group had also identified the need for guidance around Covid-19 safe operating procedures for highways maintenance and improvement, which was released in April. See bit.ly/2ShKS33



↑ Social distancing is a priority

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↑ Road renewals and highway surfacing continue during what are quieter times



Ensuring operatives remain safe on site

New guidance produced for the highways sector to follow during the pandemic recognises the importance of safe operations on sites – mobile, semi-static and static – and depots.

This could mean, for example, that more vehicles are driven to sites than normal to adhere to social distancing rules.

“Part of the challenge we have is where parts of the supply chain are unable to operate safe distancing measures,” says Suffolk Highways’ Mark Stevens, who has jointly led with David Ogden of Amey on the new guidance. “Some concrete and asphalt plants have decided to temporarily close down.”

Suffolk is pushing ahead with its surfacing programme to try and keep activity going, he adds. “By virtue of us doing that, it enables us to maintain a source of hot material for reactive maintenance and programmed patching repairs – and for others to do that also.”

The new guidance is keen to ensure the public understands that highway works being carried out at the moment are essential. Therefore, local

highway authorities should be creating and using additional signage, flagging up the importance of the activity taking place during the Covid-19 crisis. It also urges highways maintenance workers to display identification that notes they are key workers.

Every journey begins and ends on the local road network, therefore getting key workers to hospitals, food delivered to shops and medicines distributed mean that the highway sector has to continue to operate effectively. Well managed roads also support people’s visits to hospitals and doctors’ surgeries and allow children to get to school where their parents are key workers.

Councils should also work with their supply chain partners to try and overcome problems that may have halted work, to try and restart activity. Mark says that measures to keep things as close to business as usual are important, “so it won’t be quite so painful when things return to normal”.

He adds that resilience efforts must focus both on dealing with the immediate pandemic, while

also focusing on the recovery efforts including what things should look like post the event.

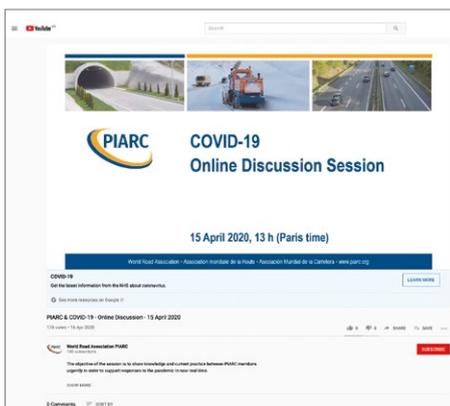
Although Covid-19 is devastating in its impact on many people’s lives, there is perhaps a silver lining to the crisis. “Now is the time to make a huge impact in relation to climate change, travel patterns and build on the potential for sustainable transport,” says Mark.

“This is a massive opportunity for a lot to be done – and more effectively.”



↑ Gully emptying in progress

Global reactions available to view on PIARC channel



↑ Discussions are available to view on YouTube

Good practice from around the globe on how countries are dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic has been shared in a series of online discussions produced by PIARC – the World Road Association – which are available on its YouTube channel.

Over the last couple of months, presentations have been created covering Spain, Italy and Japan (uploaded on 25 March); the United States, Gulf area and China (1 April) and South America (7 April).

Australia, Greece and Italy are covered in a presentation uploaded on 8 April, the UK, Norway and the International Association of Transport Regulators took part in a recording on 15 April,

followed by Africa (17 April); France, Portugal, Italy and Uganda (22 April); and Andorra, Mexico, Spain and Ecuador (23 April).

The UK highway sector’s collaborative response to Covid-19 was described during 15 April’s presentation by David Ogden and Mark Stevens.

They talked about the focus in the UK on retaining jobs and reallocating resources as necessary, the work of those in the roads industry to collaborate to keep the sector moving through troubled times and new guidance produced by the Highways Sector Council.

To view all of the presentations, go online and search ‘YouTube PIARC’.