



Association of Directors of
Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport

An interview with Nick Harris

Nick Harris joined National Highways as Executive Director of Operations in September 2016 after nearly 20 years in the water utility industry in the United Kingdom and overseas. National Highways is the government company that manages, maintains and improves England's strategic road network (SRN) of motorways and major A-roads.

Prior to joining the company Nick was Chief Executive Officer at UKDN Waterflow based in the United Kingdom and was at Thames Water before that in operational director roles. Nick's background in operations is a continuous point of reference as he develops new health, safety and wellbeing strategies.

Since joining National Highways Nick has developed the Operational Excellence programme to enable Operations to meet the financial and performance challenges of the government's second Road Investment Strategy (2020-2025), and to create new capabilities to meet challenges beyond that.

Nick was appointed Chief Executive in August 2021 and is responsible for delivering on the priorities and commitments specified in the government's Road Investment Strategy (RIS). He is accountable for the day-to-day operational management of National Highways maintaining capacity and capability to deliver, embracing technological innovations and driving efficiency.

Q. What does National Highways see as its role in delivering the Government's housing agenda?

As the government company charged with operating, maintaining and improving England's strategic road network, National Highways has two critical roles in supporting housing delivery:

- **Responding to enable:** As a statutory planning consultee, we are consulted on any new homes which Local Planning Authorities believe impact the strategic road network. In 2020, we were consulted on the equivalent of one in every two homes granted planning permission in England. Our analysis suggests that in the next Road Investment Strategy (2025-2030) and beyond, to deliver the government's 300,000 new homes constructed each year target, as many as one in five new homes built in England will have an impact on the SRN.
- **Providing to enable:** Larger strategic sites can often require investment in transport schemes to enable them to be brought forward new housing. As we have a key role to play in delivering a safe SRN, it is often the case that improvements, sometime involving large schemes, are needed to enable the largest strategic sites to come forward and the government's housing targets to be met. Due to the scale and complexity of the SRN,



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improvements these largest schemes need our support and are often delivered by us. So there is a pressing need to plan ahead and design the appropriate mitigation on the SRN now, to facilitate the new homes programme.

Q. What are the challenges of aligning the RIS process to Local Plan development and delivery, particularly where SRN infrastructure will be key to unlocking significant local growth?

The Road Investment Strategy is the government's long-term strategy for the management and improvement of the SRN. While RIS has facilitated some new housing, the strategy is not for new housing explicitly; rather, new housing should be planned to meet need as set out within up-to-date local plans led by the relevant Local Planning Authority. National Highways has seen impact achieved through other funding mechanisms and government programmes, including the Housing Infrastructure Fund and some City Deals.

Looking ahead, and due to the level of impact, it is vital that National Highways is involved at the earliest stages of Local Plan preparation. This is done to support the allocation of the right land for the right uses, and to ensure that associated movement of people and goods can be achieved in a way that delivers growth and meets climate change targets.

Later this year we will publish our route strategies. Route strategies set out our ambitions for the SRN across the country, setting out issues, challenges and opportunities around the network. They provide a baseline as to the role of the SRN across the country and, alongside direct engagement with our regional planning teams, a means by which we can work with local authorities to support unlocking of local growth. As we work together to meet our net zero commitments it is essential that new development is planned in such a way that reduces car dependency and plans the location and design of new housing in such a way that it supports this objective.

Q. Thoughts about how a large national organisation, smaller local highway authorities and in some cases even smaller local planning authorities can work more effectively to join up to deliver growth.

National Highways has a key role to play in delivering the government's housing targets and net zero through the planning process during the next RIS (2025-2030). Building from our route strategies and local authorities' Local Plans, we can positively influence the transport planning for these sites and accelerate their delivery by proactively working with Local Authorities and developers. We will identify the SRN improvements needed and encourage integrated sustainable transport solutions and decarbonization at the place level, in a nationally coordinated and consistent way.



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Q. How do we share skills/money/innovation to deliver better place-based outcomes?

We are committed to supporting places to grow but also to ensuring that growth, including of our network, is done in way that meets carbon and net zero ambitions. As pressures for resources increase it becomes ever more important that we work together with local authorities, developers and with the wider transport sector to ensure that new development is well located, planned and delivered. This includes supporting the development of robust local plans and infrastructure plans that are clear in the strategy for funding and delivery. Our route strategies provide a focus for this, as does our strategic planning work with partners, including Homes England.