

Transcript for episode two of National Highways' podcast 'Connecting the country'

A bold new approach to roadworks

Recorded in Birmingham, England.

Host

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Panel

Laura Baker-Lacey, Customer Service Director for Major Projects, National Highways

Nick Fearnhead, Chair of National Highways' Collaboration Board Customer Sub-Group

Henry Shelford, Chairperson and co-founder of ADHD UK

Jo Causon, CEO of The Institute of Customer Service

Introductory statements

00:04

The most fundamental and probably the most important thing is seeing the customer experience the customer element as absolutely germane to your business.

00:14

And it's really through that cultural change that we're seeing that increased collaboration across the supply chain, to explore new innovative methods of planning and delivering our works to really minimise that customer impact.

00:24

The one thing that we've really learned over the past few years is about listening to our customers, and not listening to respond, listening to understand.

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We talk about the phrase "essential for some, good for everyone". The things we talk about that are really, really essential, very important for people with ADHD are actually good for everyone.

Introduction

00:44 - Annette Pass

Hello, and welcome to a series of podcasts that explores the future of England's strategic road network, making them safer, smarter, and more reliable. And we'll be doing this by talking to some of the people who make those possibilities a reality. My name is Annette Pass and I'm Head of Innovation here at National Highways. In this episode of Connecting the Country, we will be exploring the innovative thinking products and technologies that are enabling bolder and more customer focused approaches to roadworks. Together with our delivery partners National Highways is developing a series of measures to improve customer experiences, and reduce the impact of billions of pounds worth of vital work being carried

out on our roads. In this episode, I'm delighted to be joined by Laura Baker-Lacey, Customer Service Director for major projects here at National Highways, Nick Fearnhead, Chair of National Highways Collaboration Board Customer Subgroup, Henry Shelford, Chairperson, and Co-founder of ADHD UK, and Jo Causon, CEO of the Institute of Customer Service. Thank you all for joining me here today as representatives of innovation and customer service. Our relationship with the people who rely on our roads has changed significantly over recent years as we've embraced customer experience. Laura, you've been closely involved through this evolution, first of Head of Customer Experience, and now as Director of Customer Service for our major projects. What changes have you seen? And do you think innovation as part of that

02:07 - Laura Baker-Lacey

The new approach to road investment has made a massive difference, partly because customer service is now one of our top priorities. So whilst asset management and operation of the network is really important, how we do those things, and the service we provide is equally as important. And I think the one thing that we've really learned over the past few years, is about listening to our customers, and not listening to respond, listening to understand. So finding out what it is that they need, what it is that they want. So we use a lot of customer insight, whether it be from us, from external organisations from watchdog transport focus. So we use all of this to outline our requirements that we then put into designing a scheme or operating the network. So that real basis of understanding what the customer wants is where we start for absolutely everything now. And I think that's then gone on to really help us kind of raise standards. So for example, we develop something called Roadworks: a customer view. And that is 20 principles that every single major scheme uses. So those 20 principles help them design their traffic management so that people have a consistent experience and have a better experience through those roadworks. And then of course, we look at how we innovate in that. So for example, high safe speed in roadworks, so lots of people might know that as sixty miles an hour on roadworks and that's very much about making sure that all of our schemes operate at the speed that is safe. But equally, that isn't just automatically 40 or 50 miles an hour, the benefit of that is huge. So we've saved up to so far 8 million vehicle hours. And equally, the real bonus of that, I think is that there's better compliance with the speed limit. Equally, customers tell us that they feel safer. And more importantly, the people who work next to these live lanes of traffic also feel safe, because there's really good driver behaviour and good compliance. And one of the things that we're looking at doing at the moment together with a range of suppliers is looking at total road closures. It means that rather than have say 12-18 months worth of roadworks narrow lanes speed limits and the diversion route through a community, you'd have two weeks. Two weeks where you wouldn't be able to use the road and two weeks that would impact on the community using the diversion routes. However, when we went out and asked our customers what they thought about this, they were very positive about it, they understood the benefits that they would get in the long run, as did the communities. So we've done that once so far on the M42. And we shut the road for two weeks over Christmas. And we're looking at how we can use it on other schemes going forward as well. So it wouldn't work for every scheme. I'm not saying we're just going to shut the entire motorway. But for some schemes, actually the benefit of having short term pain for long term gain is really beneficial. And I think we'll see greater innovation going forward. But that's a few of the things we've been doing at the moment.

05:00 - Annette Pass

That's excellent. And it's really interesting actually to think about going out there and getting the customers insights into this. And perhaps that they might tell you some surprising things, for example, that actually they feel safer, travelling faster through roadworks than slower. So Nick, you work in an organisation that works for national highways and delivering our major schemes. So have you seen this shift to focus on customer experience reflected in our relationship with our suppliers, and has this driven any innovation or made any changes in the way that roadworks are delivered?

05:32 - Nick Fearnhead

So as Laura said, really, we've been on a journey since 2015, since customer became one of National Highways' imperatives. And that's a real cultural shift, really, as you elevate customer service to the same level of safety and delivery. Because clearly, up until then, our focus has been on getting people home safe and well and delivering the roads on time and to budget was now we've seen a shift towards everyone acknowledging needs to be seen to be delivering that return on investment and value to customers and improving the customer experience. And that change of mindset has really filtered its way through the supply chain since 2015. We've seen that at the highest level through the Supply Chain Safety Leadership Group and the Collaboration Board Customer Subgroup developing the Roadworks Common Intent document, which is really a hierarchy of controls set out to aid the implementation of roadworks and really our starting position is to avoid the need to build roadworks all together, and therefore eliminate the customer impact altogether. We could do that in a number of ways by thinking earlier in the design process and embedding customer in that early stage of the project to make customer focus decisions and embed that in the design. We're seeing innovative approaches such as human centred design to help us think in a different way. And help us really consider the solutions that we're building and also approaches things like method lead construction, where we think about how we're going to build the solutions we deliver and what the customer impact is going to be. And the choice of methodology, and amend that accordingly. And all this is founded on customer insight and about gathering as much rich information as we can early on and factoring that into decisions we make. More into the delivery end of roadworks and some of the innovations we've seen there over the years, particularly around the electronic billboards, and live journey time information being provided to customers at the roadside things like the automated cone Lane machine, the emphasis in traffic management barrier in terms of improving safety, we're seeing real innovation coming through the supply chain. And it's really through that cultural change that we're seeing that increased collaboration across the supply chain, to explore new innovative methods of planning and delivering our works to really minimise that customer impact.

07:31 - Annette Pass

Again, that's fascinating, because I think that, you know, sometimes these insights, this move to have customer insights, and really listened to the people who were using our roads give us quite surprising feedback in terms of doing things that you might think are counterintuitive. But actually it's a lot more, it's a lot more helpful to people and that experience. And so I think that's a really great example of how we're bringing the traditional engineering skills in with that insight of customer service. I'd like to bring Henry in at this

point, because, you know, we've spoken a lot about the importance of customer insights as a foundation for improving customer service. But what difference do you really think this can make? And so how do we cater for a really diverse society with different needs?

08:17 - Henry Shelford

I think it's a really interesting question. And I think it's really great that you're asking it, because instead of thinking about sort of one customer appreciating that there are lots of different people with very different experiences and concerns and issues on the road. I think that's really valuable that you're that you're doing that. I understand that highways has for a long time very much focused on simplicity to the motorways and lack of distractions. And that's obviously very helpful for people with ADHD. Often when we talk about ADHD, one of our challenges is describing it to people. And that's because people are familiar with the traits. So they're familiar with issues around timeliness around the need to focus around procrastination. And they can end up thinking what they need to do is what we need to do. And obviously, we're in wildly different place to the three sort of core traits of ADHD. So inattention: that's attention jumping around making it hard to hold thoughts long enough to consider them properly. And one of the things that highways done such a focus job on is that ensuring that there's the least distractions possible on a majority of our roads. And so reducing those opportunities for electability. There's a characteristic of impulsivity that and that's fast decisions to do something without fully thinking through the consequences. That has the potential to have impacts on driving and everything and I think the majority of people with ADHD know this and obviously very focused on driving well. The third characteristic is hyperactivity. And that's an internal energy that must be used. So being stationary can actually feel quite painful. And that that can make slow traffic can feel very, very much more difficult for someone with ADHD. And if I go back to that original point, like, all of those things you can kind of see in your everyday drivers. It's just very much exaggerated for someone with ADHD. And the things that we talked about to improve those situations are then we talk about the phrase "essential for some, good for everyone". And the things we talk about that are really, really essential, very important for people with ADHD are actually good for everyone.

10:37 - Annette Pass

So that's a fascinating insight. I find into you know, the experience that people with ADHD could have driving through roadworks because I know that I've certainly found driving through roadworks, one of the as well as potential for delays, it can actually feel a kind of quite a monotonous kind of experience to be stuck in long stretches of traffic management, whether a road works, is this something that you consider now as part of planning roadworks?

11:03 - Nick Fearnhead

Yeah, absolutely. And that's really interesting to hear from Henry isn't actually that too much information can always be a negative. And it's really hard, isn't it to get that balance between getting the right information to the right people at the right time, but also not overwhelming people. You know, one thing that National Highways have introduced is the customer audit. So we get mystery shoppers, effectively driving through our schemes each month. And they provide feedback on the roadworks and against a number of criteria. And that's really helpful just going to see live information and regular feedback each month,

feedback from real customers based on you know, I couldn't see a sign because the vegetation was blocking it, I wasn't provided with enough information in advance, or I found the lanes weren't marked clearly enough. So there are some real kind of tangible things that we can then go out and change to improve that customer experience based on that insight.

11:52 - Annette Pass

So this is something I can really feel is coming through quite strongly actually is a theme that we are, I'm sure that we have a lot of work to do. But there we are, as National Highways moving quite well along that path of really understanding what the experience is, as opposed to what we think it is that people want and then just doing what we think they need. So I'll bring Jo in here. And so Jo, one of the ways we build experience in customer service is by working closely with people like yourself, this is really helping us to understand how we can make a difference as we've just been discussing. So what stood out to you is a real positive change about how we approach roadworks and what more could we do?

12:29 - Jo Causon

Well, firstly, can I say it's absolutely great to be with you today. And really fascinating, fascinating to hear that conversation, I think there's a couple of things which really had resonance with me, I think Laura was talking about, in listening to learn, rather than just to confirm, and I think this whole piece around insight, and really thinking very clearly through and stepping through the eyes of the customer, you know, stepping through the whole customer journey. Those are really, really important in terms of the layout, as you're saying of the roadworks what that means for different groups of people how we respond. And I think that is really, really positive to hear from both Nick and Laura, and indeed Henry, on that. I also think the most fundamental, and probably the most important thing is seeing the customer experience the customer element, as absolutely germane to your business, it's not something that we do. As an afterthought. It's not something that we tack on to the end of something, and the more that you are doing that, absolutely putting that in the heart of your governance and of how you run your business, I think will stand out even further as you go forward. So for me some really important pieces. Customer service is about setting standards, upholding those standards. You talked about that earlier. I think secondly, around using insight to inform, you know, we gathered lots of information as organisations but really using that insight to make a difference is critical. Thinking about it through the eyes of your customers, and that range of customers that you are dealing with, which makes it quite complex. And as I said, probably most fundamentally, the fact that you are putting in this at the heart of your business strategy, not just your service strategy. And that will stand you in good stead as you go forward.

14:20 - Annette Pass

Thanks, Joe. That's really fascinating. And it's great to see that you've noticed the difference that National Highways is making as a road user and as an expert in customer service. So Laura, coming back to you. I'm super excited that National Highways is about to launch an open innovation competition seeking new ideas, products and technologies that have the potential to improve customer experiences in roadworks even further. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

14:45 - Laura Baker-Lacey

Absolutely. So we know that a poor experience and delays through roadworks can have a really big impact on people's day to day lives on the economy. And as Henry was telling us beforehand, you know, it affects people in different ways. So one of the things that we're looking at is how can we find whatever the product is or the service is that can improve the experience that people have of roadworks. So we really wanted to work with kind of small, medium enterprises. Because we know that people have got some incredible ideas out there. So things that we haven't thought of things that perhaps our traditional supply chain might not have thought of. So really trying to engage with people in a different way. So what we're looking for is to trial any innovations that people may have. We need them to have a positive impact on how people experience roadwork. So it's quite a wide brief because we didn't want to constrain people. We wanted people to be as creative as they possibly can be. And what we're looking at as well is how can we make the difference? So whether it be the experience of using roadworks, whether it be the communities who are impacted by the roadworks or the diversion routes, and we really want to hear from people. So if people have bright ideas, if people have a product, or service that they think actually this can make a really positive impact. We want to know about it. So we're launching in September. So what we'd really like people to do is register their interest. We have a website, which is cp.catapult.org.uk/roadworks. And this means that you receive all the important updates, dates, information, everything you need to know about the competition. And I think partly why I'm really pleased about this is the fact that it gives an opportunity to work with different types of people, it gives a really open field, an opportunity to come and work with us at National Highways, and improving customer experience.

16:47 - Annette Pass

Excellent. And I'm always excited to hear about an innovation competition. And we've certainly had great experiences in the past of working with innovative SMEs and start-ups and really kind of pushing the boundaries of our thinking. Nick, do you think you have a role in working with SMEs and kind of new organisations?

17:05 - Nick Fearnhead

Yeah, absolutely, we often find that some of the best innovations and brightest and best ideas come from the frontline, and from all the areas of our supply chain. So I think really, it's about how do we attract new innovative ideas to our supply chain and work with them to develop and support them, which is obviously our role as a tier one in the supply chain. Yeah, we're really looking forward to seeing some of the ideas and innovations that come through this competition, because we've got so much to learn and transfer from other industries. And it'd be really exciting to see what technology and ideas come through.

17:34 - Annette Pass

Absolutely. Do you have any experiences, Laura, about innovations that you've seen in other sectors in customer experience that you think may have lessons for National Highways?

17:44 - Laura Baker-Lacey

I think so. I think traditionally, we normally look at other regulated bodies, like water, for example, or energy. But we've had some really great experiences talking to people from Sky and First Direct. So they are kind of market leaders in terms of customer service. And for them, it's very much about how they use customer contact to really understand their

customers. So that's a positive thing for us that we could do in the future, but actually looking at on road, it's about how do we really get information into people's cars? How do we really move forward with the connected vehicle approach, getting our network ready for autonomous vehicles in the future? So really thinking about what are the things that our customers need? And how can we help them get there? National Highways isn't a journey planning organisation, but we do have a lot of great data. So it's how we can use that data effectively, to provide information, real time information to people to make decisions.

18:45 - Annette Pass

And that's certainly my experience of the traveller, whether it's on roads, or trains or planes or anything, really, it's all about having that information and knowing you know where to look. Henry, could I ask you a question about maybe some organisations that you've worked with where ADHD, they've given a really good focus to people with ADHD and adapted their customer service.

19:08 - Henry Shelford

Certainly the data, real time information, I would personally like to see much, much more of I use a Sat Nav system Waze, which is supposed to update as quickly as possible. And it is, you see this sort of, let's say your speed limit changing on the highway, and it's not reflected in in Waze, or in my, in my car, and I'd love I'd love that to be the case because I use my car. It has a speed limiter, so it knows what speed I'm going and it beeps very firmly and aggressively at me, should I get that wrong. And I value that and then I found myself in height in areas of restricted areas going too fast inadvertently. And because that link hasn't happened, I haven't got the alerts I otherwise use to help me be a safer driver as I can to get that kind of data would be would be wonderful. You asked about companies we've worked with recently been working with Monzo bank, you mentioned First Direct bank. Monzo, one of the new banks, they've recently done a big set of research and work on their ADHD customers. And that came out of discussions with their customers, the same thing that you're doing here where they discovered that they had a number of ADHD customers and the things that they were doing for them, ADHD is really valuing. And that those were things to go back to that phrase I talked about earlier "essential for some, good for everyone". So people with ADHD can have real trouble with finances. And the Monzo research showed that there are additional costs for people with ADHD, for through various things around 1600 pounds per year per person with ADHD. So this is sort of financial cost to having ADHD. And they found that some of their tools like being able to create buckets for putting money in as your salary comes in and can drop straight into buckets, visibility on your payments. So three days before direct debits going out, it gives you an alert. For some with ADHD find managing those kinds of things particularly challenging. It's very, very valuable. But it is essential for some good for everyone. Everyone's thinks this is a great aspect of the service. And they really wanted to show that how they were their product is really helpful for people with ADHD with this neurodiversity, but also use it to show like, these are really great things that people generally really value.

21:38 - Annette Pass

Yeah, and I think there is some really interesting parallels that aren't there between the experience of banking actually, and experience of driving through roadworks. So it's all about, you know, giving some certainty, making sure the information's there, that you know what to expect, when you're making decisions about your journey, that you have that information and guidance to hands and you're not left wondering what you should do in uncertainty. Jo, innovation is really important to us at National Highways, as we've just been discussing, because we're committed to improving the way we work and services we offer. So this can mean using innovation to tackle problems, exploit new opportunities, and also helping us to think a bit differently. So what are the latest innovations you've seen in the field of customer service that might apply to sectors such as transport.

22:29 - Jo Causon

So Annette I think it's a really important conversation about what we mean around innovation. Because I think there's two forms here. There's, for me, large scale, which can be you know, heavy tech innovation, you know, some of the things that you've implemented in terms of communication and updating us as drivers through those roadworks are great examples of that. But also, for me, innovation is about incremental, that there's just looking at every single part of that process to significantly improve the overall customer experience. And you know, in a post COVID, world, a lot has actually changed. And each of your, you know, Laura and Nick and Henry have touched on this, actually, in our conversations, but there's a definitely a greater need for reassurance, a greater need for clarity around communication, and a greater need to be able to provide choice in terms of the different channels that we might interact with. So when I look at what good things have been, or what good organisations are doing, you've mentioned some of those, some of those are in the top of the UK Customer Satisfaction Index people like First Direct. And what they've really done is they've thought through every part of that customer journey. They've thought through each of those pain points, if you like. And they've thought through, is that better dealt with in a human context? Or is that better dealt with through a technological? Yeah, the future is all going to be about personalisation, the ability to give me information and data and knowledge in a way of my choosing. So the more that we can think about that the different customer groups, and there's a whole range of that the better in terms of improving that. You know, in our latest research, where we looked at, you know, the consumer, the customer in a post COVID world, there were three types of customers that were coming out. One was really all around what we've called the ESG agenda. So that's about people that really care about the environment, about sustainability, but also about how well governed organisations are. So doing the right thing is really critical. And I think there's more that can be learned by many organisations about that. And that's about putting the customer experience in terms of the innovation at the heart of the organisation. Most of the things we've talked about this morning. Then there's a whole area around a connected customer. And I think that's quite interesting and Laura, I think you were talking about this around, you know, connecting in terms of good communication, being front of foot, trying to think through and anticipate, but not assuming what the customer might want. So there's a key piece for me in terms of innovations around that, really seeking to understand. And then the other area of those of us that are probably more price orientated. Now, that's less of an issue in this situation. But all of that environment is having an impact on how we feel as customers and consumers. We're more stressed, we're more worried. And as we're facing into a pretty challenging landscape, making my life easier. And whether

that's from getting from A to B, is going to be even more important. So the more that you can do in terms of I suppose, distressing, helping advance warning, and trying to support us as consumers and customers so that we can get on with our lives and get on with our work, the better. So innovation, for me can be technological, but actually, it's also some there's small incremental improvements. And actually the best innovation is really listening. And then improving bit by bit. You mentioned Sky and the Sky Team in terms of sports team, I will never forget when they were at their high day that you know, the top of their game. They always talked about incremental improvements. And I think there's a lot of a lot to be said about that.

26:30 - Annette Pass

Thank you, Joe. And with that thought resonating in all our minds. I'd like to thank our guests, Laura Baker-Lacey, Nick Fearnhead, Henry Shelford and Jo Causon. And thank you too for listening to this episode. If you enjoyed this podcast, please make sure to subscribe and share it until next time, goodbye.

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