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The Highways Agency: managing the highways of England using National Occupational Standards to ensure best practice

Roadworks, construction and traffic management remain some of the highest risk occupational environments in the UK and, with an ambitious target of eliminating any harm suffered by the people working on its network, the Highways Agency was quick to spot the benefits of applying National Occupational Standards (NOS) across its workforce.

Since its inception around 13 years ago, the Highways Agency's remit has evolved. Today it is a network operator, responsible for the operation, management and improvement of England's motorways and major A roads. In addition to the 1500 Traffic Officers directly employed to keep traffic moving, the Highways Agency indirectly manages a workforce of tens of thousands in its complex supply chain, maintaining and improving the strategic road network.

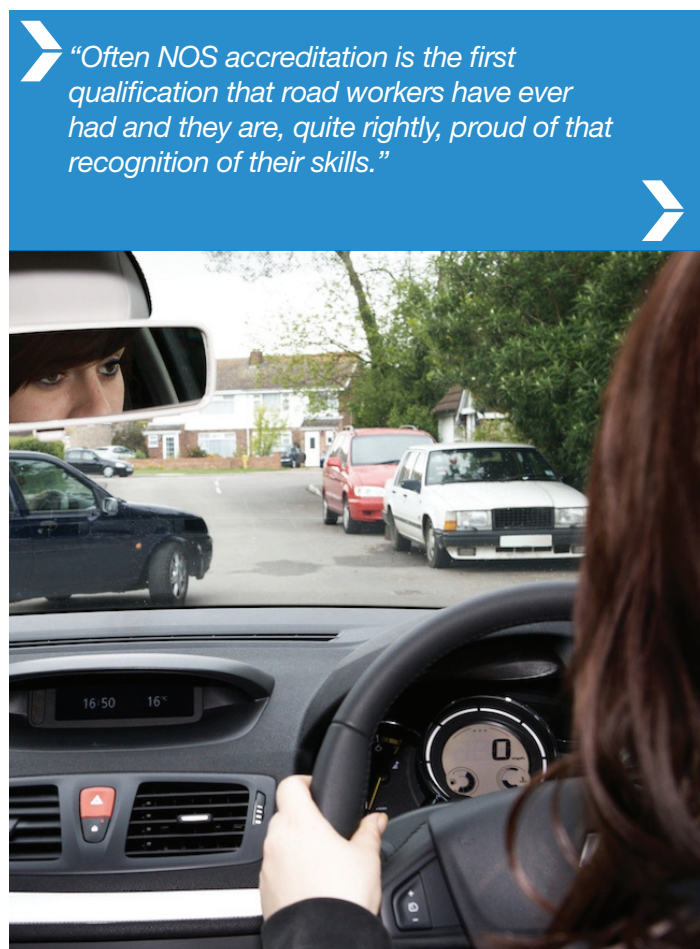
Highways Agency Traffic Officers were introduced to the network in 2004, and bespoke NOS were developed for them, including assessment criteria. This has been successfully achieved with the help of Skills for Justice and the officers are now qualified personnel.

NOS provide the basis for the Highways Agency Aiming for Zero health and safety strategy.

Using NOS for suppliers and trade associations

While Traffic Officers are employed by the Highways Agency and their procedures are set directly by them, the Agency's maintenance and improvement activities are entirely contracted to private firms. Establishing NOS across this workforce require collaboration with a range of stakeholders. The Highways Agency has long acknowledged that as a leading construction industry client they needed to ensure their workforce was adequately skilled. Lance Williams, the Agency's Quality Manager for National Highways Sector Schemes was tasked to put in place requirements needed to establish NOS in the workforce. As Lance stated at the introduction:

"The Highways Agency works alongside players in the construction industry, in addition to 25 trade associations whose membership includes a range of smaller companies contracted by the suppliers.



Intelligence > Investment > Impact

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills is a Non-Departmental Public Body providing strategic leadership on skills and employment issues in the four nations of the UK. Together, our Commissioners comprise a social partnership that includes CEOs of large and small employers across a wide range of sectors; trade unions and representatives from the Devolved Administrations. Our mission is to work with and through our partners to secure a greater commitment to invest in the skills of people to drive, enterprise, jobs and growth.

It is with these trade associations that I have to develop best practice and standards, by using NOS, to ensure that they offer best competency standards."

Taking pride in NOS

The introduction and continued use of NOS within the Highways Agency and its supply chain has proved positive as it has increased the awareness of good practice in, for example, health and safety. Such is the high regard for NOS, that it is used as a benchmark for all such standards. The transferable nature of NOS has also ensured that the Agency has the ability to recognise the value of the qualification either for recruitment purposes for Traffic Officers or for use when evaluating suppliers. Initially staff at the Agency were encouraged to develop their skills to Levels 2, 3 and 4, and management can now work to Level 5. Each level of qualification is matched by appropriate NOS. If NOS are not in place, the Agency works closely with the trade associations, the sector skills councils and other stakeholders to develop an appropriate standard.

As Lance states, without NOS, personnel in some sectors of the industry – temporary traffic management, for instance – would not have their competencies recognised:

"Roadworkers carry out a vital job in keeping the country moving, but it is a dangerous job too, and using NOS has helped our efforts to ensure that all staff have the right competencies before they are exposed to an on-road environment. Often NOS accreditation is the first qualification that road workers have ever had and they are, quite rightly, proud of that recognition of their skills. With NOS their competence is being valued and, as a result, their career path broadened."

Keeping up to date with best practice

The requirements of the Highways Agency are reviewed annually.

"If best practice changes," says Lance, "we can pick that up very quickly and change it within our documentation and requirements. We operate refresher training on a three to five year basis, depending on what the scheme is, and that is then incorporated into the training requirements. When the relevant NOS are reviewed, which is usually once every five years, the modifications are subsequently included."

The Agency has a proactive relationship with the sector skills councils resulting in the various bodies liaising over updating the relevant NOS. Suppliers' competencies are checked on a rigorous basis by a third body which demonstrates to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) that the Highways Agency is taking its duties under legislation seriously. The price of maintaining a competent workforce, however, is not insignificant, with an NVQ costing up to £2,000 per person, per subject, per level. This is usually borne by the suppliers who are required, by the Highways Agency, to employ a competent workforce.