

Highways England
**Tone of voice and
style guide**

Contents

| | | | | |
|-----------|--|----|---|----|
| 1. | How to use this guide | 2 | Capital letters | 11 |
| 2. | The essentials..... | 3 | Clichés and jargon | 11 |
| | What we stand for | 3 | Dates and times | 12 |
| | What we call ourselves | 4 | Double spaces | 13 |
| | Capitals | 4 | eg and ie | 13 |
| | Acronyms and abbreviations | 5 | Ellipses | 13 |
| | Everyday, active language..... | 5 | Email addresses | 13 |
| 3. | Our tone of voice | 6 | Headings..... | 13 |
| | Using the right words..... | 7 | -ise and -sation..... | 13 |
| | Putting them together | 8 | Numbers and units | 14 |
| | Writing with confidence and integrity..... | 8 | Phone numbers | 14 |
| 4. | Our writing style..... | 9 | Quotation marks | 15 |
| | Acronyms and abbreviations | 9 | Slashes..... | 15 |
| | Ampersands..... | 10 | Titles of books, publications and reports | 16 |
| | Annexes, appendices and footnotes | 10 | Underlining | 16 |
| | Bulleted lists | 10 | Web addresses | 16 |
| 5. | Contacts | 17 | | |

How to use this guide

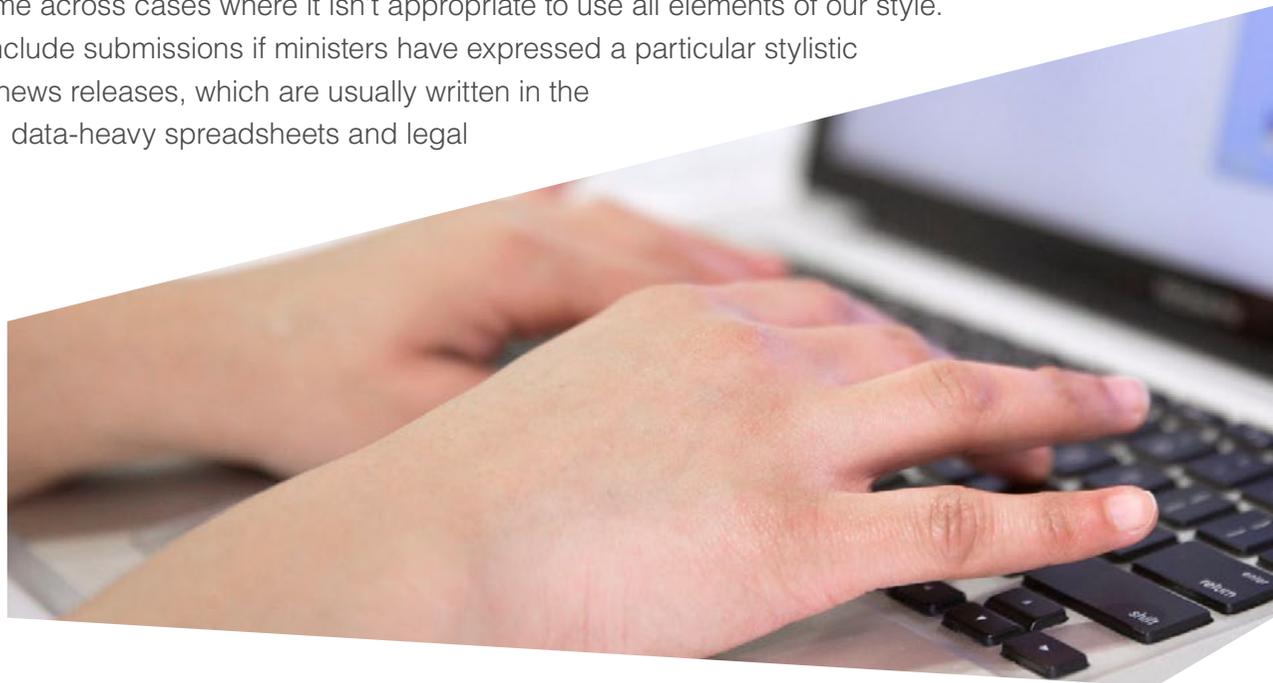
We write to communicate with our audience – to convey our ideas in the clearest way possible. Most people will say that this means we always need to use correct spelling, punctuation and grammar. This is vitally important and, if you get it wrong, you risk not being understood or frustrating your audience. But there's more to good writing than that. We need to write consistently, in a way that lets our audience understand who we are and what we're about.

This guide is for those times when there are different ways of writing something, all of which are correct. It's split into 2 sections:

- The tone of voice guide shows you how to write in a way that demonstrates Highways England's personality and values.
- The style guide shows you how to write in a clear and consistent way, and how you should use things like acronyms and capitals.

You should use this guide for all of your writing on behalf of Highways England. This includes any internal or external publications, letters, formal emails, reports, presentations, our internal communications channels and our websites.

You may come across cases where it isn't appropriate to use all elements of our style. This might include submissions if ministers have expressed a particular stylistic preference, news releases, which are usually written in the third person, data-heavy spreadsheets and legal documents.



The essentials

What we stand for

Collectively, we are the voice of Highways England. The way we write should therefore reflect our company values and bring them to life. Where possible, our communications should take the chance to express the forward-thinking role we play in national life, as we support the journeys of today, while investing in those of tomorrow.

Our values

Driven to improve

Performance: building on our professionalism and expertise, we are always striving to improve and deliver a network that meets the needs of our customers.

Leading the way

Leadership: we have a clear vision for the future of the network and our personal contribution towards it. We take others with us on the journey.

A trusted friend

Engagement: we have an open and honest dialogue with each other, as well as our customers, stakeholders and delivery partners.

A responsible custodian

Stewardship: we are custodians of the network, acting in the long-term national interest, with integrity and pride.

A creative thinker

Creativity: we find new ways to deliver by embracing difference and innovation, while challenging conventions.

Being true to these values means reflecting their sentiments in our tone of voice and writing style. It also means using natural, everyday and active language, while taking a contemporary approach to grammatical conventions. This guide shows you how to do that.

What we call ourselves

We are Highways England. In all cases other than our logo, we write this with a capital 'H' and 'E'.

When we refer to ourselves, we initially use 'Highways England' followed by 'we', 'us' and 'our'.

We use 'Highways England is...', not 'Highways England are...'.

We always write 'Highways England' in full and do not use 'HE'.

Abbreviating our name excludes others, makes our writing harder to read and hides our identity.

We don't use 'NewCo', 'GoCo' or similar.

Capitals

Modern English uses initial capitals sparingly. Too many makes our writing difficult to read and appears old-fashioned. We should only use a capital letter:

- at the beginning of a sentence
- for a proper noun – i.e the name of a person, place, month, day, brand, institution or publication
- when referring to the names of directorates, but not when just using the word 'directorate' generally
- when referring to people by title, but not when referring to their job description - for example, we say 'Chief Executive Jane Doe', but 'Our chief executive'

Other than for the above, our rule is to use lower case, unless the result is confusing. We shouldn't give words capital letters just because we feel they are important.

Never write general text ALL IN CAPITALS as THIS LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE SHOUTING and is DIFFICULT TO READ.

Our logo uses a graphical 'highways england' with no capitals. In all other cases, it is written 'Highways England'.

| Capitalise | Don't capitalise |
|--|--|
| Highways England | the company, the organisation |
| Highways England Strategic Business Plan 2015-20 | our business plan |
| Customer Operations | the directorate |
| Traffic Officer Jane Smith | Jane Smith is one of our traffic officers |
| Barbara Jones, Accounts Payable | the accounts payable team, executive committee |
| Traffic England, Traffic Officer Service | smart motorways, strategic road network |
| M1, A1(M), A50 | the motorway, junction 32 |
| London, Cumbria | south-west London, the north |
| Local Government Association | government, governmental |
| Department for Transport | the department |
| Roads Minister | the minister, ministers, ministerial |
| Monday, September | spring, summer |

Acronyms and abbreviations

We should use acronyms and abbreviations only in exceptional circumstances where we are sure they will help our audience better understand our writing. See page 9.

We should avoid the feeling that something isn't official unless it has its own abbreviation or acronym.

If you are developing a new project, system or initiative, avoid giving it an acronym or abbreviation. Instead, give it a simple, descriptive name that will help people to understand what it is.

If you need to refer to something several times, using a shorter form of the phrase is much clearer than using an abbreviation or acronym.

If you are sure that using an abbreviation or acronym will make your writing more understandable, then follow the rules on page 9.

Everyday, active language

We should use everyday, modern English with confidence, using the same language that our audience uses. In all communications, we are open and honest and take responsibility for our actions.

We should avoid jargon and bureaucratic language, use short sentences, and translate technical information into language we are sure our audience will understand.

We are agile and focused on delivery, so we use the active voice ('I will do this'), not the passive voice ('This will be done').

- ✓ 'We've improved the signs.'
- ✗ 'The signs have been improved.'

- ✓ 'We'll consider your application as soon as we receive it.'
- ✗ 'Your application will be considered upon receipt.'

- ✓ 'We will be resurfacing the road.'
- ✗ 'The road will be resurfaced.'

Our tone of voice

The way we write and the language we use send strong signals about who we are and what we stand for. By using a consistent tone of voice in our writing, we can make sure that our values shine through and, whoever is doing the writing, people know they are talking to Highways England. And by writing clearly and concisely, we can make sure that our message is understood.

When you are writing, always remember that we're real people working very hard to help the rest of society. Crucially, we communicate in a way that reflects this approach and embodies our values (page 3).

This means being open, engaging, confident and energetic. As custodians of the strategic road network, we're passionate about what we do and we're driving forward improvements at pace. As well as modernising, maintaining and operating roads, we're changing the way everyone thinks about them – and us.

That's who we are, but how do we show it?



Using the right words

- **Use language from our vision, values and strapline** to bring them to life. Which values underpin your piece of writing? Performance, stewardship, leadership, creativity or engagement? Try to identify this and use related language, such as ‘driving’, ‘striving’, ‘deliver’, ‘expertise’, ‘benefit’, and ‘pride’.
- **Use ‘we’ and ‘us’ and ‘our’** as much as possible so we sound like a group of real people. When you need to name the organisation, use phrases such as ‘At Highways England, we...’.
- **Use ‘you’** to address the reader, and avoid ‘customers’, ‘motorists’ and ‘road users’ – so they feel you’re talking to them personally.
- **Use natural, everyday language** that you’d be happy to speak, and avoid being overly formal. For example, use ‘before’, ‘next to’ and ‘start’ rather than ‘prior to’, ‘adjacent to’ and ‘commence’.
- **Challenge grammar conventions.** It’s fine to sometimes start sentences with ‘and’, ‘but’ and ‘because’, end sentences on a preposition, such as ‘of’, ‘to’ or ‘with’, and split an infinitive if it sounds better.
- **Choose lively, active verbs**, which are all about doing, to make us sound agile. Nouns and passive verbs can make us seem more distant. For example, say ‘We are resurfacing the road’ rather than ‘The road is being resurfaced’ or ‘We are undertaking work to resurface the road’.
- **Sometimes use contractions** to sound more conversational. For example ‘we’ve’ or ‘don’t’. Use them in moderation.
- **Use language you know your audience will understand.** For a non-technical audience, this means making complex things easy to understand. Use short words, and find simple alternatives to technical terms and business jargon. This isn’t about dumbing down. It’s about making our writing appetising and easy-to-read for a wide range of people.
- **Follow contemporary usage** of correct English so you don’t sound stuffy or pedantic. Avoid old-fashioned words like ‘thus’, ‘hence’, ‘whilst’ and ‘whom’.
- **Choose original language** over clichés and worn-out expressions which will make your writing look stale.
- **Use co-operative vocabulary** like ‘help’ and ‘work with’ to show that we work as a team – we want to help others and show they have a part to play too.

Our writing style

Acronyms and abbreviations

We should use acronyms and abbreviations only in exceptional circumstances where we are sure they will help our audience better understand our writing. See page 5.

An abbreviation is a shortened form of a phrase or name, often made up of its initial letters ('DfT', 'ASC', 'RCC'). If the abbreviation is usually pronounced as a word ('Defra', 'laser') then it's called an acronym.

We should avoid the feeling that something isn't official unless it has its own abbreviation or acronym.

If you are developing a new project, system or initiative, avoid giving it an acronym or abbreviation. Instead, give it a simple, descriptive name that will help people to understand what it is.

If you need to refer to something several times, using a shorter form of the phrase is much

clearer than using an abbreviation or acronym.

If you are sure that using an abbreviation or acronym will make your writing more understandable, then follow these rules:

- Don't use a full stop between or after the letters.
- Define the abbreviation or acronym the first time you use it. Write the full term and put the acronym or abbreviation in brackets.
- Widely recognised abbreviations and acronyms (BBC, UK) are fine to use without explanation – but you need to be sure your audience will understand it.
- Just because a phrase has an abbreviation or acronym, it doesn't follow that the full phrase should have initial capitals (see page 4).

- If your document is long, repeat the full version and its acronym in each section to help your audience.
- Never use an abbreviation or acronym if you are only referring to something once in a piece of writing.
- Always consider what an abbreviation or acronym stands for and do not duplicate words. For example, when talking about asset support contracts (ASCs), make sure you don't say 'ASC contracts'.
- If an acronym is normally read as a word, rather than a set of letters, then you should generally only use an initial capital letter, for example 'Defra'.
- Use an apostrophe with an abbreviation or acronym to show possession, but not for plurals ('The BBC's current affairs team visited one of our RCCs').

Ampersands

Use 'and' instead of '&' in general text.

Annexes, appendices and footnotes

An annex is information that would make complete sense in the main text of the document but that is placed at the end for clarity. It generally only makes sense when read along with the main document. An appendix consists of further information that supplements the main text. An appendix stands on its own and can be read in its own right.

If your document has a single annex or appendix, then call it 'Annex' or 'Appendix' and refer to it in the document as 'the annex' or 'the appendix'

If your document has multiple annexes or appendices, then call them 'Annex 1', 'Annex 2', 'Annex 3' or 'Appendix 1', 'Appendix 2', 'Appendix 3' and refer to them in the document in the same way. You can use letters instead of numbers for annexes, but be consistent.

Try to avoid using footnotes for general writing as they can break up the text and make it difficult to read. If you do use them, refer to them in the text using a superscript number immediately after the punctuation.

Bulleted lists

Bullets are a useful way of breaking up your writing and clearly showing a list. They are much easier to read than a list incorporated into general text. There are 3 main styles of bulleted lists:

- Short items
- Longer items but not complete sentences
- Complete sentences

When writing bullet points, use a colon after the introductory text. Start each bullet point with a capital letter, unless it is a list that carries on from the introductory text. Only use full stops at the end of complete sentences, and try to have a consistent grammatical construction throughout the list. Never use 'and' or 'or' after the penultimate item. Don't use commas or semicolons after each item.

Example 1. Short items

The whole life cost of a lighting scheme includes several elements:

- Installation
- Operation
- Maintenance
- Removal

Example 2. Lists that follow on from the introductory text

Before driving in winter, you should:

- check the anti-freeze in your radiator
- make sure your lights are clean and working properly
- ensure your windscreen is clean
- replace the battery if it's not reliable

For this type of bulleted list, make sure each bullet makes sense when read straight after the introductory text. Note that each line starts with a lower case letter and there are no full stops.

Example 3. Complete sentences

The *Roads Investment Strategy* highlights several challenges:

- The strategic road network is struggling to cope in the face of increasing demand and the volume of high speed traffic.
- Delays to journeys deter investment and constrain the ability of business to compete.
- Stop-start funding available for roads investment has made it difficult to plan for the long term.
- Vehicle emissions and noise significantly impact local communities.
- Our customers need better and more up-to-date information to manage their journeys.

Capital letters

We use initial capitals sparingly (see page 4).

As well as the obvious use at the beginning of a sentence, there are some specific cases where we should always use a capital letter:

- For a proper noun:
 - A person's name
 - The name of a place (but not for compass directions – 'the north', the 'south-west', 'south Wales')
 - The names of days and months, but not seasons
 - The name of a brand or institution
 - The title of a publication, but only when referred to in full
- For the 'M' and 'A' in the names of our roads, for example 'M1' or 'A50'.
- For the names of directorates, but not when just using the word 'directorate' generally.
- For the names of teams as part of a title, but not when just referring to the team (for example, we say 'Barbara Smith, Accounts Payable', but 'Barbara Smith from the accounts payable team').

- When referring to people by title, but not when referring to their job description (for example, we say 'Finance Director Steve Dauncey', but 'our finance director').
- For the names of services that our customers recognise as a 'brand' in their own right, such as 'Traffic England' and 'Traffic Officer Service', but not for things that are just features of the work we do, such as 'smart motorways', 'regional control centres' and 'strategic road network'.

Other than for the above, our rule is to use lower case, unless the result is confusing.

We shouldn't give words capital letters just because we feel they are important.

Never write general text ALL IN CAPITALS as THIS LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE SHOUTING and is DIFFICULT TO READ.

Clichés and jargon

First and foremost, clichés are a bit old hat. At the end of the day, we should avoid them like the plague.

Clichés and jargon start just as words and phrases that we use often. But they can become annoying to read and, often, people don't really know what they mean.

There are too many to list here, but a few examples (in addition to those in the first paragraph) are:

- Going forwards
- Step change or sea change
- Quantum leap

Dates and times

For dates, the general rules are:

- Use the order: day (in full), date, month (in full), year (in full) – but don't separate with commas.
- Don't use 'th' or 'st'.
- Don't use a leading zero for single-digit dates.
- You can omit the year if this is clear from the context.
- Use 'between' and 'and' or 'from' and 'to' – don't interchange them.
- Use hyphens, not slashes, for financial years ('2015-16').

Here are some examples:

- '26 January 2016' or 'Wednesday 26 January 2016'
- '26 January' or 'Wednesday 26 January'
- 'Between 26 and 30 January'
- 'Between 2015 and 2016' or 'From 2015 to 2016'
- 'Between 26 January and 4 February 2016'
- 'Between 26 January 2015 and 4 February 2016'
- 'The 2015-16 financial year'

For times, the general rules are:

- Use either the 24-hour or 12-hour clock consistently in a document – don't interchange them.
- The 24-hour clock is best for operational situations, while the 12-hour clock is best for general writing.
- When using the 24-hour clock, use a leading zero, separate hours and minutes with a full stop or colon, and don't use the word 'hours' or 'hrs' after the time.
- When using the 12-hour clock, don't use a leading zero, separate hours and minutes with a full stop or colon and write either 'am' or 'pm' (lower case and no punctuation) without leaving a space.
- When using the 12-hour clock, you can omit the minutes for whole hours, unless you're using a time that includes minutes in the same sentence.
- When using the 12-hour clock, there are no such times as 12:00am or 12:00pm – use 'midday' and 'midnight'.

Here are some examples:

- 'Traffic officers arrived at the scene at 08:32'.
- 'I will arrive at 8.45am and leave at 10.00am'.
- 'The meeting will last from midday to 3pm'.



Double spaces

Lots of us were taught to insert 2 spaces after a full stop when typing. This isn't necessary using modern fonts and word processors, and can affect the word spacing in a document.

If you can't break the habit, you can use the find and replace function in Microsoft Word.

eg and ie

Avoid using these terms if possible as they are not clearly understood by everyone. Consider these alternatives:

- eg – 'for example' or 'such as'
- ie – 'that is' or 'specifically'

If you are sure your audience will understand what you mean, then don't use a full stop in between or after the letters.

Ellipses

Use ellipses (...) to show that words have been left out. It can be effective to show that something is happening in the future, but use this sparingly.

- Look out more information on this in the future...

Email addresses

Do not use capital letters in email addresses:

- ✓ john.smith@highwaysengland.co.uk
- ✗ John.Smith@highwaysengland.co.uk
- ✓ internal_comms@highwaysengland.co.uk
- ✗ Internal_Comms@highwaysengland.co.uk

Headings

Use sentence case for all headings in documents – this means an initial capital for the first word and the remainder in lower case, apart from proper nouns.

- ✓ Highways England's vision, values and behaviours
- ✗ Highways England's Vision, Values and Behaviours

If the heading is in 2 parts, use a colon to separate them. Don't use an initial capital letter for the word after the colon, unless it would normally have one.

- Learning and development: a guide for line managers

-ise and -isation

We use the '-ise' spelling for words like 'maximise', 'realise' and 'organisation'. Microsoft Word may disagree and suggest '-ize' or '-ization', so be careful when you are spellchecking.

Numbers and units

Although we are a metric country, we still use miles, not kilometres, on our road signs. Make sure you always use 'mile' when describing distances.

- Write all numbers in numerals (including 0 to 9) except where it's part of a common expression and it would look strange, such as 'one or two of them'. Use common sense.
- At the start of a sentence, use words ('Thirty-four miles of queuing traffic...')
- Don't leave a space between the digit and a unit, unless you are writing the unit in full.
- Use the full spelling of 'miles' and do not abbreviate.
- Use the full spelling of 'kilometre' in text but abbreviate to km in tables.
- Miles-per-hour is abbreviated to 'mph' and kilometres-per-hour to 'km/h'.
- Always use the words 'million' and 'billion' in full as a unit.
- Use commas to separate thousands (1,000 or 15,000,000).
- Use the '%' symbol for percentages.
- Use hyphens with fractions and when writing numbers greater than twenty as words.

Phone numbers

Use these formats:

- '01234 123 456' for standard landline numbers
- '020 7123 4567' or '020 8123 4567' for London numbers
- '01x1 123 4567' for numbers in major cities, such as Birmingham or Manchester
- '07700 123 456' for mobile numbers
- '0300 123 5000' for non-geographic numbers



Quotation marks

Use double quotation marks when directly quoting someone's words and single quotation marks when using a word in a special context, such as giving an example.

Use single speech marks sparingly, though, as it can be 'jarring' and make your writing seem 'stilted', just like someone doing 'curly quotes' with their fingers as they talk to you.

For direct quotations, there are 3 main methods:

- 'Bob Smith said he was "very happy" with the results of the survey.'
- 'Mrs Smith said, "Thank you to the two traffic officers who helped me last week."'
- 'Project Sponsor Jane Jones says:
 "I'm delighted that we have completed this scheme to time and budget.
 Thank you to everyone who was involved.
 "Our customers can now expect safer and more reliable journeys on
 this section of road."'

Note that, in the third example, you omit the double quotation marks from the end of each paragraph other than the last one. This indicates to the reader that the quote is continuing.

Use italics rather than quotation marks for the titles of publications:

- 'We drew many of our ideas from the white paper, *A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone*.'

Slashes

Don't use the slash mark (/) in general writing, as it gives your work a feel of being written in note form. In particular, you can usually just replace the phrase 'and/or' with either 'and' or 'or'.

- ✓ 'Our on-road and control room traffic officers manage incidents on our network.'
- ✗ 'Our on-road/control room traffic officers manage incidents on our network.'
- ✓ 'Please get in touch with us if you have any questions or comments.'
- ✗ 'Please get in touch with us if you have any questions and/or comments.'

You can use the slash mark in:

- the phrase '24/7'
- web addresses
- some units of measurement (such as 'km/h')

Use hyphens, not slashes, for financial years ('2015-16').

Titles of books, publications and reports

Use italics rather than quotation marks. Give the full title in the first instance and follow this with any recognised shorter version. Capitalise the title as in the original, rather than following our own style. For example:

- First reference: 'We drew many of our ideas from the white paper, *A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone.*'
- Subsequent reference: 'As in the previous case, you can find much of the information in *A New Deal for Transport.*'
- Alternative subsequent reference: 'For the final report, we used section 4 of the white paper'.

Underlining

Don't underline as it can appear to be a hyperlink in documents that are read on screen. In printed documents use bold for emphasis, if necessary.

Web addresses

- For documents that will only be viewed online, you should use hyperlinks, where the actual web address is hidden behind clickable text
- For documents that will be viewed both online and in print, you should use the full web address with a hyperlink: www.highways.gov.uk
- For documents that will only be viewed in print, you should use the full web address without a hyperlink: www.highways.gov.uk

When giving the full web address, in print documents, you should replace long addresses with clear instructions:

- For advice on how to plan your journey, go to www.highways.gov.uk and click on *Traffic information* then *Planning your journey*.

You should always place hyperlinks behind relevant text rather than using 'click here' or similar:

- ✓ 'For more information, visit [our website.](#)'
- ✗ '[Click here](#) for more information'

Always make sure that any web addresses and hyperlinks are accurate and work properly before publishing or sending your document.

Contacts

Communications Business Partners

Dave Fawbert

dave.fawbert@highwaysengland.co.uk

Iain Andrews

iain.andrews@highwaysengland.co.uk

Sharon Creary

sharon.creary@highwaysengland.co.uk

Sharon Willis

sharon.willis@highwaysengland.co.uk

Anthony Beeby

anthony.beeby@highwaysengland.co.uk

Deborah Lawrence

deborah.lawrence@highwaysengland.co.uk

Toby Cross

toby.cross@highwaysengland.co.uk

© Crown copyright 2015.

You may re-use this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence: visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/ write to the **Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU**, or email psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This document is also available on our website at www.highways.gov.uk

If you have any enquiries about this publication email info@highwaysengland.co.uk or call **0300 123 5000***. Please quote the Highways England publications code **PR145/14**.

Highways England creative job number N140751

*Calls to 03 numbers cost no more than a national rate call to an 01 or 02 number and must count towards any inclusive minutes in the same way as 01 and 02 calls.

These rules apply to calls from any type of line including mobile, BT, other fixed line or payphone. Calls may be recorded or monitored.

Registered office Bridge House, 1 Walnut Tree Close, Guildford GU1 4LZ

Highways England Company Limited registered in England and Wales number 09346363