

DfBB Women in Transport Podcast:

Meryl Roberts – Contract and Performance Team Leader, National Highways

Sharon: Welcome to the Driving for Better Business podcast celebrating women working in transport, fleet management, and road safety. Today I am delighted to welcome Meryl Robert who is the contract and performance team leader at National Highways.

Can you share with us your journey so far, working in the highways sector?

Meryl: Yes, I've been privileged in joining the Department for Transport many years ago – National Highways was not a thing at that time. I've been able to take on lots of different roles in the civil service which has given me quite a broad experience. Though that I managed to transfer to the earlier version of National Highways, and I've worked on contract teams, I've delivered schemes, I've delivered finance, commercial and procurement, I purchased land. I worked through to national operations where I set up the customer contact centre and that's led to the delivering operational services. I built my experience over many years and with many diverse teams.

Sharon: I've been lucky enough to visit Quinton recently where the National and Regional Traffic centres – NTOC and ROC as they are known – so I've seen first-hand how busy your customer services teams are. How do you support the customers who use the road networks?

Meryl: As you say there are quite a few different teams based at the Quinton office. We're the National Traffic Operations Centre, and we look after the whole of the network, it's one of the few offices in NH that covers the whole of the strategic network. We have the customer contact centre there that works 24/7 & 365 days answering front line services, and we also have the Strategic Traffic Operations which means we have operators who set strategic signs. The National Incident Liaison Officers keep their eyes and ears open for critical incidents that impact the network. We are very interested in the impact of an incident and looking at the information around that incident, so it leaves the regional office to tactically manage the incident and mobilise the traffic officers. Our offices can then look at what information can we give to customers? What signs can we set that give the customer the opportunity to make key decisions about their journey. They can either take a break or take an alternative route but it's so that the information is far enough away from the incident for them to make those key decisions. The data we have is particular to the centre really. It's collected from assets on the network. We receive it in the centre, and it's processed and verified and that happens every minute, so the data comes into the office, goes out to America, comes back again and that is happening once a minute so it's real time information. Then that is disseminated to businesses – not only National Highways – it enables other companies to use that data to provide traffic information services and in-car services which people probably don't realise that data is shared so far afield, and it's free.

Sharon: That's amazing, it would be fair to say that National Highways – a lot of people think they're responsible for building and maintain the motorways but from what you've said they do a lot more than that?

Meryl: Yes – we build, operate, and maintain 4300 miles of motorways and major A roads and there are over 4million journeys travelled every day and the data we collect for the network and from mobile devices means that we have that Realtime information about what's happening. It's shared with providers that users will know about on their phones and in car systems and we also work with communities and stakeholders – to deliver a social value and a community benefit to leave a lasting legacy if you like. This leads on to supporting key messages about pollution affecting towns and villages, reminding road users about important safety messages, so it's an extension of that engineering capability.

We also work closely with organisations who are planning events that attract thousands of visitors. More recently we were active in giving information to the Department of Transport when they were planning the complex detail with Operation London Bridge. We support lots of sporting event, activities that take place at Wembley or at the NEC, Commonwealth Games, so we're able to provide signing, and useful info to direct people to carparking and to let them know what's happening in and around that area. We also help the strategic signing and timing of roadworks so that the project teams can vary the times so that the roadworks aren't suddenly going on the network at the same time as someone leaving a very busy football event for example.

Sharon: It's so interesting. It shows how much interaction and engagement is happening with communities that many of us wouldn't think about.

Meryl: We're not just building roads and causing problems – it's actually being very proactive and how we can help these people on the network.

Sharon: The strategic road network is at the core of our national transport system. Its performance is important to the whole of the country.

Meryl: Yes, the network links people to places, materials to manufacturers and goods to markets – it's really important for lots of companies that have critical deadlines to deliver goods to supermarkets and it has an impact on how much they're paid. If they are late delivering, they have to pay a forfeit for that so it's important that we work with them and give the information so they can plan their journeys. A lot of the team in the National Centre work very closely with them so we can make sure when we are planning roadworks or something that might compromise the network that they are aware of it, and we have actually consulted some of these companies directly so they can use this information. Part of the current contract that I manage is now working on how we can deliver that data in a simple way so they can use it to help plan. They have to plan routes, the safety of their drivers and to ensure the perishable goods are delivered on time - and the network will also support people to travel to work on a daily basis which now is increased after COVID. Home deliveries and visiting friends and family holidays – it's interesting to know that the network carries 34% of all traffic and 68% of that is freight. We move 3 times more people than the rail network, so it puts it into context how important the strategic road network is to the economy.

Sharon: We also know National Highways likes to engage with their customers and et them involved in consultation and surveys

Meryl: Yes, I joined that department many years ago and we didn't think of road users as customers – we were engineering - but that has now changed, and our key imperatives include putting safety first for our customers. We work hard to ensure that not only do we engage with the community and the users of the network but that everyone who works at National Highways is able to understand and communicate what we do and why we do what we do. There are many ways in which we talk to our customers – different surveys and consultations that we use so that they feel they can have a say about what we are planning. We have customer insight services which underpin our customer service strategy. As you probably picked up, we have a diverse group of people who use the strategic road network and there's a variety of ways that customers can get involved. The transport Focus that is one of our regulators have a strategic road user survey known as SRAS. It asks drivers about journeys they've taken in the last 4 weeks on our network. This reaches out to 21,000 customers each month. There are other more internal insights surveys called High View that compliment the SRAS survey but also asks people about their journey experience – it's more detailed and more specific and flexible about the type of journey they take.

We have customer panels and freight panels, and they are used to explore and understand responses to perhaps different types of signs we've set. We try to react to customer feedback that we get and that's often from Transport Focus. We vary our campaign messages and the type of signs that we set so we get specific feedback and of course we use social media for real time feedback on particular incidents. There are lots of other ways of us receiving feedback – correspondence, people telephone the contact centre, and then also audits are undertaken to support the projects that are happening and IPSIS MORI undertake independent assessments where we have particular areas where complaints are high. We can look at how that project is working and make changes to support some of the feedback we get. In real time it's important that people contact us through the contact centre and they will either deal with the enquiry or direct it to the right part of National Highways. If it's something bespoke to a particular project...

Sharon: I guess it's really important to us that customers do contact us and give us their feedback and their thoughts and experiences so we can make a positive difference

Meryl: Absolutely, and of course we have our web-based services on the website where they can use ECHO, and this is fed directly to the projects – and we do get ECHO feedback about our Traffic England website that is used for real time information.

Sharon: One thing you mentioned earlier was engagement and language is important to National Highways – so why are road users referred to as customers?

Meryl: Principally we connect the country by maintaining and improving the SRN and we provide real time information about the network and we do this for the people that use it, so it's a subtle difference from having a customer that walks into a shop but actually these are the customers of our network and sometimes they don't have much choice in how else they travel – they have to travel on our network – so it's important we let people know that we care about them, their journey and we have a key focus on keeping people safe.

Sharon: I think that would be reassuring to many people that use the road networks. You touched on signage and incidents in the network. Every year we still see many incidents involving drivers and roadworks so many of these we know are due to a combination of distraction, fatigue and fast speeds. When you see these incidents unfolding what should customers be doing to minimise the risk? How can we work together to reduce them?

Meryl: I think it's important that road users pay attention to the signs – it's very easy to drive past them and perhaps they've previously seen a sign they didn't believe or didn't think gave them the right message. The signs are there for a reason., They are triggered by the speed of traffic in the network and so it's important that people take the time to slow down and think about what could be happening up ahead. We do consider how we design our traffic management to ensure that roadworks are easy to follow. It can be confusing but that is something we have worked to improve. In principle road users are asked to follow the speed limit when travelling through roadworks and that then leads to avoiding confusion and perhaps driving into someone who is in front of them, so it's giving yourself space and time and giving the respect to other people, so they feel they have space and time and you're not driving too close to the vehicle in front.

Sharon: You talked about your driving style. We know we are leaving Summer behind now and moving into Autumn driving conditions. How should we be driving in Autumn and Winter?

Meryl: We have the variance of heavy rain which create spray and impacts visibility and other times you have a very low sun that impacts your vision and how much you can see. Allow extra time for braking, leaving a good space between you and the vehicle in front, also checking that you have the correct lights. There are cars that have the lights that come on automatically – you may notice that some vehicles don't have their lights on – because the light hasn't quite triggered the lights to come on. It's a simple thing to check yourself to manually put your lights on because you might not think about it, but they might not have. You're not visible in your vehicle. Following the clock change you're driving home in the dark, because of the time zones so make sure that you have actually checked your eyesight. It seems a strange thing to say, but suddenly you realise your sight has deteriorated, working with IT and things like that, so it's important that you have regular check ups and you have the right support if your eyesight has deteriorated. The other one is to keep your windscreen clear when the sun is shining on it, as the inside of can be smudged so bear that in mind. These seem obvious but it's amazing how many people don't carry out these simple things that can make a real difference.

Sharon: I've heard car drivers comment about driving at night-time and the glare from other vehicle lights on their windscreen. In fact, I've heard many people say they have refused to drive in the dark because they feel safer not to do so

Meryl: Yes, that's exactly right. I think the other impact is if you're wearing contact lenses – so people need to change to wearing glasses, but these are simple things you can do.

Sharon: That's a good tip. Meryl, have you got any other more top tips or requests for driving in autumn or winter?

Meryl: Yes there's a few simple things to think about. Prepare your journey, look for travel updates, check your journey before you leave. Ensure your phone is charged – have a charger in the car – and that your phone has emergency contact numbers. The contact centre is one to have in there. Understanding what to do if you do breakdown – this information is on our website and there's been a lot of adverts recently about what to do if you breakdown. Have your vehicle checked – tyres, wipers, windscreens and screen wash – that's important when we come into the season of winter and I do have in my car a bag which has got a brightly coloured hi-vis jacket , a very old pair of walking boots because if you're caught out and have to clamber over a safety barrier or stand at the side of the motorway it's cold whatever the season and you may not be wearing the right shoes – it helps to have them in the back of your car. Make sure you're fit to drive and you're not tired or fatigued and my final ask would be – understand where you are on the network – don't just rely on

your satnav. I have these conversations with my children – if they were broken down, they wouldn't know where they were – so understanding the place where you are going and where you are on the network and if anything should happen then at least you can alert someone.

Sharon: Meryl as someone who has experienced a blow out on my tyre and stood on the side of the motorway, I can support your top tip of a hi vis warm coat and sensible boots and knowing your location because that definitely helped me

Meryl: Yes and turn your mobile phone to vibrate so you can hear it if anyone is calling you as you might not hear it ring on the side of the motorway – it's a hostile noisy environment.

Sharon: As you know, this is a series of podcasts and articles to celebrate successful women working in transport but to also showcase the diverse range of roles available to them – you're co-chair of the leading women's network and equality diversity and inclusion champion so I couldn't possibly let you go without asking you to tell us more about this and why it's important to you.

Meryl: I am excited to say that very recently I became the co-chair and Amy Lynch who also works for National Highways shares that role with me, and Mel Clark set up the leading women network and she recently handed the baton to Amy and myself. We have done a lot of work over the last few years to raise our profile and we're proud that in 2020 that we were winners of the employee network of the year. What I like is that we provide so many interesting forums and we talk about lots of different subjects ranging from looking after your health, keeping safe and also career development. We have a very diverse membership across National Highways and everyone enjoys sharing their experiences sharing their stories, and helping each other – it's a good way of doing that – and during COVID we had lots of bitesize sessions through Teams – and talked about various subjects with invited speakers to share information – that was a great way to network but now we are delighted that we can meet face to face and we're planning our next event which is on the 17th November and this is with a focus on the power of your brand. We are keen to broaden our links with similar networks across different organisations and we are learning and sharing resources. I am delighted to say that we have the support of our supply chain at this next event so we're finalising the agenda – I feel very privileged to be involved in that and to lead a team of people who are supporting us and we hope to do some exciting things next year and plan for international women's day in March.

Sharon: Meryl – that sounds like a great support network and community, and I will make a note of that and we may come back to you following next year's International Women's Day to see how you got on.

Meryl – thanks you so much for talking to us and sharing your story and top tips.

For those of you who want to know more about Driving for Better Business and the benefits to managing and reducing your road risk, visit the website at

<https://www.drivingforbetterbusiness.com>