

Time-saving road marking robot makes it a happy new year for drivers

The quirky machine uses precise positioning technology to mark out where white lines need to be painted on new or resurfaced roads.

The robot has already saved hundreds of hours of working time on various Highways England projects across the country, including Britain's biggest road upgrade, the £1.5 billion A14 Cambridge to Huntingdon improvement.

It also recently pre-marked eight miles of the M6 in Staffordshire in four hours. This work would usually take two engineers over a week to complete.

Savings elsewhere include saving 27 hours of working time marking three miles of hard shoulder on the M4 in Berkshire, 77 hours covering five miles of the M6 in Warwickshire, and six hours working on two miles of the M1 in Leicestershire, with further work done on the M60 smart motorway at Manchester.

Besides helping drivers, it also has safety benefits for roadworkers and enables them to focus on completing other essential work on each project.

Julian Lamb, construction director on the A14, where the robot has been used, said:

We're always looking at innovative new ways of working, which can help road users, and make our projects more efficient while supporting improved engineering. With safety our top priority, the time savings the robot can provide, coupled with removing our operatives from a potentially hazardous situation, make it a great solution.

We've also been working with a self-driving dumper truck on the project, completing trials of these new technologies to help Highways England more deliver its ambitious programme of roads improvement quickly, safely and efficiently. These technologies are also supporting new jobs, with the engineers of tomorrow needing to learn new skills such as programming this autonomous equipment.

[Road marking robot's Happy New Year message](#)

Ordinarily, pre-marking road markings is a time-consuming job, calculating the positioning of the markings and walking several miles to spray or chalk them on the road. By using the robot, road workers spend far less time in the road and are at less risk of an accident – around 250 drivers illegally drive into roadworks every month, putting workers' lives at risk. Bending down to pre-mark roads by hand can also raise the risk of back injuries. The robot

also boasts improved accuracy and can mark the road faster.

The robot has been so successful that specialist contractor WJ, which adopted the technology for it to complete the pre-marking, has now invested in a second one to help complete more of its work. By completing roadworks faster, the robot will help contribute to the goals of reducing congestion, improving journey times, and supporting economic growth, while cost savings can be used to provide more or better-quality road-building materials.

Wayne Johnston, WJ Group Managing Director, said:

I am passionate about changing the way we work in this industry and the WJ Robotic PreMarker represents a real step change. However, it is just a starting point, we will continue to invest in research and development to find better, more efficient and safer ways of working.

The 12-mile Huntingdon Southern Bypass, which makes up around two thirds of the A14 upgrade, opened a year early, in December. Work on the rest of the project, between Swavesey and Milton, continues and is on schedule to completed as planned by December 2020.

For the latest information about the A14 Cambridge to Huntingdon improvement scheme, including advance notification of road closures, visit the [A14 project website](#) follow @A14C2H on Twitter and like the [scheme Facebook page](#).

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.

[Year of action on railway starts with new fares trials](#)

- new fares trial for GTR passengers and start of LNER trials, providing more flexible tickets and informing wider improvements across the rail system
- government to establish new 'fares trials fund' to establish further fares trials across the country
- trials to provide evidence base in advance of the independent Keith

Williams Rail Review, which will provide recommendations focused on creating a simpler, more effective railway system

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps has today (2 January 2020) told passengers to expect a year of action towards creating a rail industry relentlessly focused on improving their experience.

Steps to pilot new fares systems have been announced today, designed to support people who want to travel and work flexibly.

A new fares trial on Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) will provide passengers on certain routes with the opportunity to purchase better value tickets aimed at part-time workers, reflecting modern working patterns.

The government will also establish a new 'fares trials fund', to kickstart further trials this year across the country. These will help thousands of passengers save money, and provide the foundations for reform.

Reforms of the rail system will be set out in a white paper this year, responding to the recommendations of [Keith Williams' root and branch review of our rail network](#). The recommendations will include plans for a more modern rail system, including ending the complicated franchising model to create a simpler, more effective system.

Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps, said:

This government will improve the railway system to ensure the focus is always on putting passengers first.

This commitment begins with the launch of innovative fares trials, to help explore the benefits and costs of a clearer, more flexible and fairer fares system.

Delivering such significant change will take time, but passengers can have total confidence that these trials will help provide the evidence needed to develop wider reforms to the fares system and a significantly better service.

The announcement of GTR trials coincides with the start of trials on LNER today, enabling passengers to purchase cheaper single-leg tickets on services from London to Leeds, Newcastle and Edinburgh.

Previously a passenger travelling between London and Edinburgh purchasing a ticket at the station would have paid £150.50 for a Super Off-Peak Single ticket or £151.50 for a Super Off-Peak Return ticket from 2 January. Under this trial, the cost of a Super Off-Peak Single is now £75.75.

The chair of the government's root-and-branch rail review has set out that his recommendations will focus on making the current system simpler and more convenient for passengers.

Independent Chair of the Williams Rail Review, Keith Williams, said:

My review's proposals will make recommendations aimed at modernising the railway, creating a system that's built for its passengers.

The trial launched today will help to shape my recommendations for a fairer, more flexible and modern service, which better reflects the way people want to travel.

The move comes as the government freezes regulated fares in line with inflation for the seventh year running. Since 2014 fares have, on average, remained below the annual inflation cap.

The government has also helped cut the cost of fares for a generation of passengers through the new 16-17 and 26-30 'millennial' railcard, and will be rolling out a new veteran's railcard to give 700,000 former servicemen and women a third off their rail costs.

[Government backs UK firm to build three hospitals in Oman](#)

- UK firm wins contract for the construction of the Salalah, Suwaiq and Khasab hospitals, backed by over £500 million worth of support from UK Export Finance (UKEF).
- Three hospitals to provide intensive care, emergency services and specialist baby care.
- International Hospitals Group (IHG) will draw on world-renowned expertise and equipment from the UK supply chain for all three projects.

[International Hospitals Group](#) has its UK headquarters in Denham, Buckinghamshire and partners with the University of Cambridge, the United Nations and the World Bank to provide health care projects all over the world.

UKEF has provided support to help win these major contracts in Oman, and provided a loan, repayable on a commercial basis.

The new projects will support jobs in the UK throughout the duration of the build, by drawing heavily on the expertise of the UK supply chain, including the supply of specialist knowledge and medical equipment.

International Trade Secretary, Liz Truss, said:

The size of this contract demonstrates the appetite for the UK's world leading healthcare expertise across the globe.

I am delighted UK Export Finance is supporting the construction of these three hospitals which will not only improve healthcare provision in Oman but will also expand IHG's overseas business.

IHG will provide a full design, construction and services package for all three hospitals. Work will also include the construction of emergency power systems, maintenance facilities, roads and other associated infrastructure.

An International Hospitals Group spokesperson said:

International Hospitals Group is most grateful that UK Export Finance is supporting the development of these three hospitals, which will enhance the provision of healthcare services in the Sultanate of Oman.

UK Export Finance is the [UK's export credit agency](#) and a government department, working alongside the Department for International Trade as an integral part of its strategy and operations.

It exists to ensure that no viable UK export lacks for finance or insurance from the private market. It provides finance and insurance to help exporters win, fulfil and ensure they get paid for export contracts.

Sectors in which UKEF has supported exports include: infrastructure, aerospace, healthcare, telecommunications, transport and industrial development.

UKEF has a regional network of 24 [export finance managers](#), who support UK businesses export their goods and services.

UKEF support exporters with a range of products that include:

- Bond insurance policy
- Bond support scheme
- Buyer & supplier credit financing facility
- Direct lending facility
- Export insurance policy
- Export refinancing facility
- Export working capital scheme
- Letter of credit guarantee scheme

The latest information on UKEF's country cover positions can be [found here](#).

If you're a business owner and want to learn more about how UKEF could help you, [tell us about your business](#).

Microchipping your pet is the best New Year's resolution you could make

The government and leading animal welfare charities are urging pet owners to microchip their cats and dogs this New Year, to give them the best chance at being reunited if their pet gets lost or strays.

Microchipping pets, and ensuring the data is kept up to date, is a vital part of being a responsible pet owner. Thousands of cats and dogs end up in rehoming centres every year and a microchip offers the best chance of identifying lost pets quickly and safely.

Since compulsory dog microchipping was introduced in 2016, [92% of dogs are now microchipped](#). Furthermore, data from Dogs Trust has shown [a 15 percentage point decrease in dogs handled by local authorities since the change in the law](#) as microchips allow them to be scanned and safely reunited with their owners before they formally become a stray dog.

While microchipping is a legal requirement for dogs, it is not currently mandatory for cats, unless they are travelling under the Pet Travel Scheme. Cats Protection reported that 8 out of 10 stray cats handed in to their adoption centres in England during 2018 were unchipped.

This government has always urged cat owners to microchip their pets as the right thing to do as responsible pet owners and is now taking steps to introduce compulsory cat microchipping to give pet owners peace of mind, help tackle cat theft and identify cats injured or killed on roads.

As the first step, in October, the Environment Secretary [launched a call for evidence on cat microchipping](#) to find out what the effects of making it mandatory would be on owners, rescue centres and cats. The closing date for evidence is 5pm on 4 January 2020.

Zac Goldsmith, Animal Welfare Minister said:

Microchips are often the only hope of reuniting lost pets with their owners so it truly is the best New Year's resolution you could make to protect your furry friend in 2020. I urge cat owners to microchip their cat and for dog-owners to make sure the details on the chip are up to date.

Jacqui Cuff, Cats Protection's Head of Advocacy and Government Relations said:

It is so important that cat owners microchip their pet cats as it

is a safe and permanent form of identification. Cats love to explore, and are also great escape artists, so microchipping is important for cats, even those that live indoors.

Microchipping ensures lost cats can quickly be returned home, and that owners can be informed if their cat is injured and taken to a vet. We all want the best for our much-loved pets, so making a resolution to have your cat microchipped is a great way to start the year.

Cats Protection is delighted that the Government has shown its commitment to cat welfare and issued a call for evidence on cat microchipping including the benefits of making microchipping compulsory for cats, as it is for dogs.

Dogs Trust's Veterinary Director Paula Boyden said:

We see first-hand both the heartbreak that dog owners suffer when they are separated from their pets, as well as the joy of being reunited.

This is why it is so important that owners keep their details on the microchip database up to date, as required by law. Doing so significantly increases the chances of a lost or stolen dog being reunited with their owner.

As an example, in last year's Stray Dog Survey we uncovered that, of the dogs seized who were microchipped, a staggering 69% weren't able to be reunited due to incorrect contact details.

This government is committed to animal welfare and has already taken a strong stand in this area by banning wild animals in travelling circuses, committing to increasing maximum sentencing for animal cruelty from six months to five years, and making CCTV cameras mandatory in all slaughterhouses.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive Board appointments

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Rt. Hon Julian Smith MP, today announced that he has appointed Councillors Allan Bresland, Catherine Elattar and Michael Ruane and Alderman Amanda Grehan to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) Board. In the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers, these appointments were made possible by the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018.

These appointments will take effect from today (1 January 2020) until the date of the next Council elections and will ensure that the NIHE Board can continue to deliver vital public services within its remit for the benefit of the Northern Ireland community.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE)

The NIHE is a Non-Departmental Public Body of the NI Department for Communities and was established by the Housing Executive Act (Northern Ireland) 1971. Under this Act, the NIHE took over the housing responsibilities of 65 separate authorities and became Northern Ireland's overall housing authority. It is currently landlord to approximately 86,500 dwellings and is one of Northern Ireland's largest public sector organisations with a budget of over £740m and a staff of approximately 2,700. It also makes a substantial contribution to better health, education and wellbeing through housing.

Provision for the NIHE Board is set out in the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. The principal role of the Board is to set the strategic direction for the Housing Executive and to provide stewardship of all public resources entrusted to it to implement the policies and priorities of the Minister and the Executive. The Board oversees the performance and outputs of the executive team, which is responsible for the day-to-day conduct of the business within the Housing Executive. The Board also sets the attitude and disposition of the organisation towards compliance with applicable laws and best practice.

Terms of appointment

Current remuneration for the position of a Board Member is £6,892 per annum plus expenses, with an expected time commitment of 1 day per month.

CPANI Code of Practice

This appointment process has been regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointment NI (CPANI) and the appointments have been made in accordance with the CPANI Code of Practice.

Political Activity

All appointments are made on merit and political activity plays no part in the selection process. However, CPANI requires the political activity of appointees to be published which is included in the biographies below.

Biography of Appointees

Cllr Ruane has served as a local councillor for Sinn Fein for 19 years, previously with the Newry and Mourne Council and currently with the Newry, Mourne and Down Council. Mr Ruane has served on a number of committees within the councils, including the Audit Committee and brings relevant governance skills to the Board. He has relevant stakeholder engagement skills and experience. He holds no other public appointments.

Alderman Grehan has been a Local Councillor for the Alliance party for five years and was Deputy Mayor of Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council in 2018-19. She was also chairperson of its Governance and Audit Committee in 2017-18, where she has gained relevant governance and risk management experience. Alderman Grehan was also vice-chair of the Corporate Services Committee in 2016-17. She has also been the manager of her local MLA's constituency office for 12 years, and brings communication skills and resource management experience to the Board. She holds no other public appointments.

Cllr Elattar has been a Sinn Fein local Councillor since 2011 when she was elected to Magherafelt District Council. She has previously held the position of Chair and Vice-Chair of the Council. She was elected to the new Mid Ulster District Council in May 2014 and is a member of the Development Committee and the Policy Resources Committee. Previously employed in community education, Councillor Elattar is now a midwife, working for the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. She previously served on the NIHE Board from 1 June 2015 to 1 May 2019, and holds no other public appointments.

Cllr Bresland has served as a DUP councillor for over 28 years and is currently a member of the Derry and Strabane Council. Mr Bresland has served on a number of committees within the councils, including the Planning Committee and Environmental and Regeneration Committee, skills and experience of which he brings to the Board. He is a former member of the NI Assembly, having served as a member of the Standards and Privileges Committee. He holds no other public appointments.

Statutory Requirements

Provision for the NIHE Board is set out in the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. In October 2018, the Secretary of State for NI introduced legislation in Parliament; the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 received Royal Assent on 1 November. This legislation provides for the appointment to a number of public offices by the Secretary of State. The NI (Ministerial Appointment Functions) Regulations 2019 came into force on 18 February 2019. This Instrument provided for further critical appointments, including that of the NIHE Board.