

Americans at wheel as UK road network changes hands

Robert Lea Industrial Editor

The management of England's motorways and main roads is to be handed over to an American infrastructure company and a firm of accountants.

The Department for Transport is close to appointing a private sector consortium to manage the £11 billion, five-year road programme of Highways England, the body formerly known as the Highways Agency.

In a tacit admission that Highways England does not have sufficiently qualified personnel to build, upgrade and maintain the nation's M and A road network, a "programme management partner" is to be appointed consisting of CH2M Hill, the US project management group; Mace, the London-based consulting engineer; and PwC, the accounting firm.

The shadow privatisation is one of the biggest outsourcings of public services into private hands in Whitehall's history — akin to handing over the running of Network Rail to private sector consultants.

The creation of the more arm's-length Highways England has seen it dubbed by some as Network Road. It is envisaged that the body will have greater freedom to plan, innovate and deliver. Like Network Rail, it is ac-

countable to the regulator, the Office of Rail and Road.

CH2M Hill is best known in the UK for its nuclear decommissioning role and its work on Crossrail. It bought the civil engineer Halcrow in 2011 for £230 million. It is regarded in the industry as an arch-rival to Bechtel, the US group that managed the building of the Channel tunnel rail link and which hitherto has been seen as the government's favourite transport contractor.

CH2M Hill and Bechtel are going head to head to be appointed main project manager on the construction of the HS2 rail line.

CH2M Hill previously worked with Mace on the main Olympic Park delivery project until 2012. It also works with PwC as part of the Ministry of Defence's management contract providing the armed forces with equipment and support services.

According to papers seen by *The Times*, the CH2M Hill/Mace/PwC consortium is to "provide secondments to fill specific programme management roles and mentoring and on-the-job training to support upskilling Highways England staff".

It is also tasked with the "development and implementation of common systems and processes and personal development and training on project and

programme management".

Highways England is charged with redeveloping the 4,300 miles of England's national road network after the work freezes implemented by George Osborne in his 2010 austerity cuts.

Its initial commitment has been to introduce 1,300 miles of new lanes on the motorways, mostly through the greater use of the hard shoulder at certain times. It recently announced a £500,000 study into developing the so-called Varsity Expressway, a new important road linking Oxford and Cambridge via Milton Keynes, mirroring a plan on the railways to link the arc of technology companies from the Fens to the Cotswolds.

The agency has previously said that bringing in private sector disciplines would save £2.6 billion over ten years. Critics have warned that bringing in private sector innovation could lead to the introduction of toll roads.

Last night a spokesman for Highways England was unable to provide any comment. Officials at the consortium declined to comment.

La gestione della rete delle strade del Regno Unito passa di mano agli americani

