The New Departures Process

Introduction

The end-to-end departures process was reviewed and in early 2019, the new National Highways Departure Approval System, DAS 3.0 was released. This replaced WebDAS and DAS 2.0.

DAS 3.0 process is leaner and more streamlined, making departure submission and appraisal processes quicker, whilst also resulting in higher quality applications and improving visibility of departure progress.

This briefing note explains the key changes that you should be aware of as a Project Manager.

A full definition of requirements for departures is given in the Departures Manual.

What is a departure?

A departure is the formal process for approving a variation to the scheme requirements laid out in National Highways' standards.

As a Project Manager, you own your scheme's requirements and therefore are ultimately responsible for any variations.
The departures process is the formal route to get advice for how to deal with a departure application from technical specialists in the Safety Engineering and Standards (SES) directorate.

You should follow the technical specialist's recommendation, as they represent the Chief Highway Engineer. However, there are cases where you may choose to go against, this recommendation. Guidance for these scenarios are all laid out in the new Departures Manual.

Departures Manual

The official status of the Departures Manual is an advisory document, but it is strongly recommended that it is adopted as scheme requirements under the employer's procedures. Ultimately, you are responsible for deciding whether a departure can be used and the Departures Manual lays out SES' preferred method. Any alternative process will need agreement from SES stakeholders.

The rest of this briefing note gives an overview of the changes that were introduced in early 2019.

New user interface

• The new web address for DAS will be: departures.highwaysengland.co.uk
• DAS will now be accessible via the majority of web browsers with the exception of Internet Explorer.
• Better reporting and dash-boarding tools will give project managers full visibility of all departures on their scheme, their criticality to project delivery and progress in development and appraisal.
• The SES Technical Partners will use the information available in DAS to support relationship management between schemes and SES.
• These new reporting tools will also be used to review where standards can be better kept up to date to keep pace with innovation in delivery.

Early engagement

Designers will now notify you of the possible need for a departure as soon as it is identified, no matter what stage in the project life cycle. They shall then record it within DAS.

• Departures need to be considered as part of the project's risk management to avoid critical departures being rejected late in design development and impacting the programme.

• Schemes are sometimes progressed beyond statutory powers with designs based on departures that are subsequently rejected, putting the whole scheme at risk. The new process gives a way to recognise and manage critical departures that are fundamental to the viability of the scheme (see section 3.3 of the Departures Manual for departure criticality categories).

• Early on, a Technical Specialist can give an initial view of critical departures. If they anticipate that the principles of the departure are feasible, they can give provisional agreement. Otherwise, they can indicate changes that would need to be made for approval to be recommended. This prevents the design progressing too far with an unacceptable departure and allows the designs to be changed as early as possible.

• Constructive early engagement with the Technical Specialist, facilitated by the new Technical Partner team, will provide better assurance that a departure can be approved and what evidence will be required to support.

Pre Submission review

Before a departure is sent to SES for appraisal, you are responsible for authorising the application's submission.

This involves reviewing the application to consider the benefits and potential adverse impacts of the departure. If you believe that the benefits will outweigh the negative impacts of the departure, you can support the submission.

More information on Pre-submission review can be found in section 6.6- 6.10 of the Departures Manual.

Predetermination

This is the option for the Project Manager to automatically determine the departure application in line with the Technical Specialist's recommendation, helping to streamline the determination process

• You should only pre-determine an application if the justification for the departure is clear and there are no significant contractual, commercial or programme implications.

• Prior to supporting the departure, you will indicate if you will automatically accept the Technical Specialist's recommendation or if you would like to determine the departure yourself. In either case, DAS prompts you to declare this prior to you supporting the departure submission.

• All users involved within the departure, at the moment the decision is made, are notified through email notification, diary entry and timeline workflow headings.

• Further clarification of this option is found in section 6.11 to 6.12 of the Departures Manual

Changes to rejection

Previously, in any instance where a departure application could not be approved, it would be rejected. There is now the additional option for it to be returned to the Designer for rework.

• Applications will still be rejected where the departure would not be acceptable, even with improvements.

• If the application cannot be appraised due to quality and completeness issues, this will be returned for rework. This will be a leaner process, as the subsequent resubmission process can be streamlined.

• It also allows better reporting on where quality issues exist to support continuous improvement activities.

Quality improvements

• The role of the Proposer at the Design Organisation has been clarified in the new departures process. It will now be necessary for a Proposer, a senior technical expert, to check every departure before submission, helping to reduce the number of applications that are incomplete or have missing information.

• The Departures Administration Team will work with the supply chain to monitor the quality of submissions to help facilitate continuous improvement. It is anticipated that the quality of departure applications will improve over time, and the number of applications being returned for rework will decrease. The result will be an overall more efficient process.

- DAS 3.0 will enable detailed records for departures to be captured. This will provide a clearer audit trail to support incident investigations and using the data to support continuous improvement activities

Will the process take longer or require more effort?

The entire departures process has been reviewed and the changes that are being introduced are intended to:

- Reduce the end-to-end time taken to determine a departure
- Reduce the total amount of effort required to develop and appraise a departure application, including by reducing the proportion of applications that are rejected on quality grounds
- Minimise the number of departures that are submitted due to out of date or unclear requirements (facilitated through the DMRB review and proposer role)

The changes have been designed so that, although superficially there are more stages, the total amount of effort required will be reduced through elimination of waste, quality issues and duplication.

Further guidance

The Departures Manual is available to assist you with applications. It gives a full overview of the departures application process.
If you have any queries, please contact departures@nationalhighways.co.uk