

Smart motorways trade 'driver safety for lower costs', police and crime commissioner says

Just days after a coroner calls for a review into smart motorways, a police and crime commissioner calls for them to be scrapped

By [Steve Bird](#) 23 January 2021 • 7:00pm

Dr Alan Billings has written to Grant Shapps to register his fears about the "flawed logic" used to scrap hard shoulders following two deaths in South Yorkshire CREDIT: Scott Bairstow/Alamy Stock Photo

Grant Shapps and Highways England "have traded driver safety for lower costs" and are using "flawed" logic to claim "dangerous" smart motorways are safe, the police and crime commission for South Yorkshire has said.

In a letter to the Transport Secretary, Dr Alan Billings calls for an urgent review into smart motorways saying scrapping the hard shoulder should be "abandoned" before more people die.

His letter comes just days after a coroner ruled that turning the hard shoulder into a live lane on the M1 contributed to the deaths of two men near Sheffield.

David Urpeth, South Yorkshire's senior coroner, said smart motorways "present an ongoing risk of future deaths" at the conclusion of the inquests into the "unlawful killings" of Jason Mercer, 44, and Alexandru Murgeanu, 22, in 2019.

Dr Billings, who sent a copy of his letter to the Telegraph, wrote: "In summary, I think the coroner's verdict makes it imperative now to abandon this type of motorway before more lives are lost."

Dr Billings says he attended a meeting "to discuss road safety" with Highways England in January last year, adding how they "sought to persuade me that smart motorways were as safe if not safer than the usual type of motorway."

He says: "I said then and repeat now that I believe the way this conclusion is arrived at is the result of a flawed way of arguing.

"I do not believe it is helpful to compare collisions or deaths on the two types of motorway. The relevant test for us is whether someone who breaks down on this stretch of the motorway where there is no hard shoulder, would have had a better

chance of escaping death or injury had there still been a hard shoulder - and the coroner's verdict makes it clear that the answer to that question is: 'Yes'."

He says he believes Highways England has been "seduced by false comparisons in order to increase the number of lanes to aid traffic flow at a lower cost than would have been the case if a hard shoulder had been built."

Explaining how he travels on the M1 regularly he says not having a hard shoulder "increases anxiety and tension" because of the fears you could break down in a live lane "with heavy goods vehicles coming up at speed behind."

He adds: "This is not my idea 'safe'. People need to be safe but also to feel safe when driving."

He adds the smart motorways system is "one of a number of different types" operating in south and west Yorkshire which "is confusing and unhelpful."

He warns how the route is "busy" with many lorries from abroad so "the different types of motorway within a relatively few miles cannot be easy for them to understand."

He concludes: "I believe smart motorways of this kind - where what would be a hard shoulder is a live lane with occasional refuges - are inherently unsafe and dangerous and should be abandoned," he wrote.

"This is a view we have consistently held in South Yorkshire and a previous chief constable was forthright in saying this before the programme was embarked upon."

A Department for Transport spokesman said a stocktake showed in most ways smart motorways are "as safe as, or safer than" the conventional ones. The Transport Secretary has asked Highways England to deliver an 18-point action plan to "make them safer still".

A spokesman for Highways England said its staff were "aware of the ongoing concerns" and are "working hard" to deliver the improvement Mr Shapps requested.

He pointed out how there were 27 fatalities and 100 casualties on hard shoulders between 2014 and 2017.

Meanwhile, 'managed motorways' with gantries relaying speed restrictions and advice have led to fewer multiple collisions, fewer rear shunts, less tailgating or vehicles drifting across lanes and even reduced speeding.