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Families of smart motorway victims left disgusted by ‘crass’ squashed fly advertising campaign

Grieving relatives condemn Public Highways England over insensitive promotion featuring Pet Shop Boys singalong

By [Steve Bird](#) 11 March 2021 • 7:07pm

A television campaign featuring squashed flies on a car windscreen giving safety advice has been reported to the advertising watchdog by relatives of those killed on smart motorways for being “crass and insensitive”.

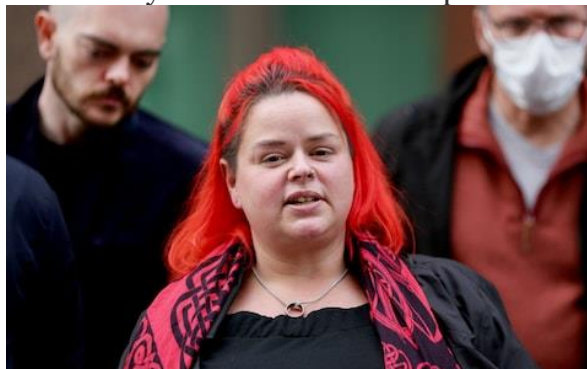
The £5 million Highways England public information campaign was launched yesterday in an attempt to educate motorists about what to do if they break down on routes where hard shoulders have been turned into live lanes.

Two fly characters sing “Go Left” to the Pet Shop Boys tune “Go West” to ensure a driver running out of petrol pulls in to an Emergency Refuge Area (ERA).

But, relatives of those killed on smart motorways have condemned the campaign for “joking” about a life-and-death situation and failing to explain what to do if someone cannot reach an ERA and becomes stranded on a live lane.

The Government’s continued roll-out of smart motorways has attracted widespread criticism because Highways England [takes 17 minutes on average to spot a stationary car](#) stuck in a live lane before closing it to traffic.

Claire Mercer, whose set up the campaign group Smart Motorways Kill after [her husband, Jason, was killed on the M1](#), said the Government-owned company’s first national television advertisement about the new motorways was “crass and stupid”.



Claire Mercer, whose husband, Jason, was killed on a smart motorway, condemned the television advertisements CREDIT: Lorne Campbell / Guzelian

“Did Highways England not see the analogy of people dressed up as flies squashed to a windscreen to the deaths of our loved ones, most of whom were not in their vehicles when they died?” she asked.

“It still doesn’t answer the question – ‘what if you can’t go left or reach an emergency refuge area?’”

After watching the advertisement, Saima Aktar, whose mother, Nargis Begum, was also killed on the M1, prompting a coroner to [refer Highways England to the Crown Prosecution Service](#), said: “I can’t believe what my eyes have just seen.”

In her complaint to the Advertising Standards Agency, Mrs Mercer said her mother was “so upset she was shaking and unable to sleep” after watching the advertisement.

She added: “Could nobody at Highways England see the comparison between two squashed people and the broken bodies of our loved ones?”

An Advertising Standards Authority spokesman said it had received the complaint and would assess whether there were grounds for further action.

Mike Wilson, Highways England’s chief highway engineer, said: “Our deepest sympathies remain with the families and all those affected by these tragic incidents.

“We are determined to do all we can to make our roads as safe as possible and although the tone of the campaign is light-hearted, it is designed to deliver life-saving information in an accessible and memorable way and to keep people safe.”