

Smart motorways given green light after bosses turned 'blind eye' to safety fears

Whistleblower claims National Highways suffered 'systemic cultural failure' when told of staff concerns

By [Steve Bird](#) 21 May 2022 • 9:00pm



The M3 smart motorway in Surrey. National Highways was responsible for turning hard shoulders into live lanes by creating 'smart motorways' CREDIT: Steve Parsons [Smart motorways](#) were given the go-ahead because National Highways bosses turned a “blind eye” to safety fears, a whistleblower has claimed as he released a dossier of classified documents.

A senior engineer has said the Government-owned company responsible for turning hard shoulders into live lanes suffered a “systemic cultural failure” when told of staff [concerns over safety](#).

The National Highways employee also accused successive government ministers of failing to widen motorways because they feared the “Swampy effect” - environmental activists, like Swampy from the 1990s, who fought road building with high-profile tunnel and treetop protests.

The whistleblower handed files from 2012 onwards to The Telegraph to illustrate how staff lodged safety warnings while other documents show how smart motorways could cut costs while increasing road capacity.

One leaked document warns how [scrapping the hard shoulder](#) could hamper emergency services' efforts to reach life and death crashes.

In a review of a safety report about the M25 becoming "smart", an engineer wrote that it was "inaccurate" to believe fire, police and ambulance response times would not be affected.

He added: "There must be a higher risk of not being able to reach an incident scene with no hard shoulder to use."

The "response" section from bosses reads, "access is achieved by closing lanes using [Red X] signals."

But the same report records "significant concerns" that Red X signs closing lanes to traffic could be ignored, with an engineer writing that "it only takes a few drivers not to comply and other drivers think it is acceptable to drive under a Red X and will follow".

Failure to educate drivers about new motorways

Another file about the M25 raised concerns that more needed to be done to educate the public about the shift to smart motorways.

The reviewer asked: "What local communications are planned to make drivers aware of the scheme and ensure they understand how to use it?"

Relatives of those who have died on smart motorways have complained that National Highways failed to properly educate motorists about changes to the country's motorway network by scrapping the safety lane. Last year, the company launched a national television campaign advising motorists to "go left" in an emergency.

The dossier shows how avoiding costly "land grabs" encouraged ministers to approve smart motorways.

A 2012 report says "there will be no land take required" to make the M25 "smart" by turning the hard shoulder into a live lane because construction remains "within existing boundaries" and so zero compensation claims would be received.

Two years later, a Treasury report into the "readiness for service" of a "smart" section of M25 noted it "provided a large proportion of the benefits of widening at significantly lower cost ... [helping to] exceed the 20 per cent efficiency target required..."

Of the 13 recommendations attached to that report, the only one rejected urged managers to "assure themselves the safety risks of the proposed [smart motorway] design have been suitably identified and mitigated and that cost has not been the only driver."

It was rejected because “a detailed safety case was developed before” the introduction of all smart motorways.

The whistleblower, whose identity cannot be disclosed, contacted The Telegraph after it uncovered examples of motorists being killed after breaking down in live lanes and failings with multi-million computer systems meant to spot marooned motorists.

He said staff - “from top to toe” - raised “red card” warnings about smart motorways, including an increase in live lane collisions and the inadequate spacing of emergency refuge areas.

“These concerns were logged in the design and before opening concept phases,” he said. “They were either reported up but not listened to or they were blocked from the top of the organisation.”

His greatest fear is bosses may have failed to report safety concerns to ministers.



People protest against smart motorways outside the Department for Transport in November 2021 CREDIT: Heathcliff O'Malley

“Either the risk was accepted or it was ignored,” he added, explaining how he felt some managers over the last 16 years “didn’t want to hear or had a tendency to turn a blind eye” to “uncomfortable messages”.

“Now they have realised they were in error and had to retrospectively fit things like emergency refuges closer together the project has cost many more millions of pounds,” he added.

The source believes ministers “caught a cold” after environmentalists like Swampy came to prominence to oppose roads like the Newbury bypass.

“Whether it was political or financial, the Swampy effect caused long delays and triggered huge costs to the road building programme as politicians and the then Highways Agency became risk averse.

“They avoided lodging planning applications that would involve seizing land. As a result, they kept within the existing boundaries of the motorway network when trying to increase capacity as the numbers of motorists increased.”

Technology flaws 'swept under the carpet'

Claire Mercer, whose husband, Jason, [died on the M1 in 2019](#) after being hit in a live lane after stopping, said: “Executives have drawn huge salaries with lucrative private contracts secured to force these roads through.

“They have consulted experts and sought staffs’ views, but then completely ignored warnings when cost conflicts with safety.

“Death after death, injury after injury and glaring technology flaws have been swept under the carpet.”

National Highways data released earlier this month showed smart motorways without a hard shoulder are three times more deadly to break down on than those with the safety lane. While stopped vehicle detection technology is spotting 1,000 emergency incidents a month, as many as 100 over the same period are being missed.

National Highways is adamant that when the overall data is analysed smart motorways are proven England’s safest roads.

Duncan Smith, the National Highways' executive director for operations, said: “We listened to the concerns raised prior to the M25 schemes opening in 2014 and continue to put safety first to help ensure drivers have confidence in the motorway network.”

He said the latest stocktake from this month showed the company was making “good progress” on the Government’s recommendations to introduce more safety measures on these routes.

“Most cameras are now able to be used by police to enforce lane closures and our traffic officers have the ability to close the most appropriate lane to allow emergency access to incidents,” he added.

A Department for Transport spokeswoman said: “The Transport Secretary has consistently acted to improve smart motorway safety, ordering a stocktake in 2020 and investing £900 million to equip them with stopped vehicle detection,

enforcement cameras, additional signs and emergency areas, while pausing the rollout of new smart motorways to collect more data.”