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Coroner warns of risk of more deaths on controversial smart motorways

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MINISTERS are under mounting pressure to scrap smart motorways as yet another coroner warned of a risk of more deaths on the controversial roads.

Anne Pember, senior coroner for Northamptonshire, has written to road bosses warning that the lack of a hard shoulder means ‘there is a risk that future deaths could occur unless action is taken’.

It comes just days after Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced that all planned future smart motorways schemes have been cancelled due to drivers losing confidence in the ‘death trap’ roads.

However, he stopped short of scrapping hundreds of miles of existing schemes by restoring the hard shoulder.

Ms Pember’s warning came after she presided over the inquest of David Levett, the latest known victim of the controversial roads.





carer's Seat Leon was smashed into from behind by a lorry on the M1 while stationary.

The stretch had no hard shoulder as it had been converted into an 'all-lane running' (ALR) smart motorway.

This means drivers can become marooned in live traffic if they're unable to reach an emergency layby.

Ms Pember's intervention is the latest in a string of similar warnings from other coroners in recent years about the dangers posed by smart motorways.

In a report to prevent future deaths, sent to National Highways boss Nick Harris and dated Tuesday, April 18, she wrote: 'In my opinion there is a risk that future deaths could occur unless action is taken... during the course of the inquest, evidence was given that the location of the collision was on an all lane running smart motorway.

'There was nowhere for the driver of the first vehicle to park safely, e.g. on a hard shoulder.

'In my opinion, action should be taken to prevent future deaths and I believe you (and/or your organisation) have the power to take such action.'

National Highways now has 56 days to respond.

The inquest at The Guildhall coroner's court in Northampton last week heard that the smash which killed Mr Levett happened after his carer pulled over on the inside lane.

He did this to help his stricken brother-in-law, whose Volvo had broken down on the M1 between junctions 17 and 18 near Rugby.

After pulling in behind he switched on his hazard lights, he told the inquest.

He had intended to drive his brother-in-law somewhere safe while the Volvo was recovered, but an HGV ploughed into the back of the Seat as they climbed back into it.

Mr Levett was rushed to University Hospital in Coventry but died following extensive surgery after the smash on January 28, 2018, having suffered 'severe head and chest injuries'.

Concluding the hearing, Ms Pember said: 'I believe that, if the hard shoulder had been available for the broken down vehicle to pull into, it's quite possible that David Levett would not have died.'

And Mr Levett's sister Angela Mower, 57, said: 'The government needs to look into these because people are still dying.

'[National Highways] keep reassuring everyone they are safe but clearly they are not.'

Mr Levett's carer was 'lucky to be alive', the inquest was told. Both he and his

The inquest heard that Stationary Vehicle Detection (SVD), which is supposed to notify control room staff of a broken down vehicle so they can close off the lane, had not been installed at the time. It is understood to have now been installed.

Earlier this month Susan Evans, assistant coroner for Derbyshire, said Derek Jacobs, 83, and Charles Scripps, 78, would still be alive if the M1 section they were killed on had a hard shoulder.

They died in a three-car pile-up near Sheffield in March 2019.

And in November, Nicola Mundy, senior coroner for Doncaster Coroner's Court, wrote to National Highways to warn of a 'lack of public understanding' around smart motorways and what to do when breaking down on them following the death of Nargis Begum, 62.

Some 153 vehicles drove past the mother-of-five before a Mercedes smashed into the back of her Nissan Qashqai on the M1 in South Yorkshire on September 9, 2018.

Ms Mundy also wrote a report to prevent future deaths, saying: 'There is a risk that future deaths will occur unless action is taken.'

In January 2021, Sheffield coroner David Urpeth confirmed the lack of a hard shoulder on a stretch of M1 in South Yorkshire contributed to the deaths of Jason Mercer and Alexandru Murgeanu.

In a verdict of unlawful killing, the coroner explained the loss of a hard shoulder had 'contributed to this tragedy' in June 2019, adding: 'I believe smart motorways, as things stand, present an ongoing risk of deaths.'

The AA's roads policy chief, Jack Cousens, said: 'This tragic case only highlights why the hard shoulder should be reinstated across all existing "smart" motorways.'

National Highways regional director Andrew Jinks said: 'We offer our deepest sympathies and condolences to the family of Mr Levett and all those affected by this tragic incident.'

'We care about everyone who uses our roads and are continuing to make our network as safe as possible.'

'We have committed £900million to safety improvements on the network, including building additional places to stop in an emergency and installing new technology to spot stopped vehicles.'

'Safety on our roads remains our absolute priority and we will continue to build on the work and safety improvements already under way to help drivers and passengers feel and be safe.'

'We will consider the coroner's report and respond within the 56-day deadline.'

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