

[News](#) [Sport](#) [Money](#) [Business](#) [Opinion](#) [Israel](#) [Ukraine](#) [Royals](#) [Life](#) [Style](#) [Travel](#)[See all News](#)

Anger as ministers fail to release safety report on smart motorways

Department for Transport source stressed ‘data was coming’ as campaigners call on Government to publish ‘stocktake’ on controversial roads

By Jack Simpson, TRANSPORT CORRESPONDENT

11 November 2023 • 2:09pm



The Government has been criticised for failing to publish a key document with data showing the rate of fatalities on smart motorways.

Campaigners and motoring groups have called on the Department for Transport (DfT) to urgently publish its annual smart motorways stocktake, saying drivers need to know

whether safety has improved on the controversial roads.

The Telegraph can reveal that one table in the report shows the rate of drivers killed or seriously injured in stopped vehicle collisions increased on all-lane running smart motorways, where the hard shoulder has been turned into a live lane.

The current figures show motorists are still twice as likely to die if they break down on this type of smart motorway, than on a conventional motorway.

The full stocktake, which includes full collision data, has yet to be published despite the Government previously promising it for the spring.



Claire Mercer, whose husband Jason was killed on the M1 smart motorway, has called on Government to make data public
| CREDIT: ASADOUR GUZELIAN

The Telegraph understands that National Highways, the body responsible for managing England's motorways, has had the document ready for several months but the Government has been reluctant to publish.

Claire Mercer, whose husband Jason was killed on the M1 smart motorway, has branded the delay “very worrying” and called for the Government to make the data public.

She said: “It’s especially concerning that the report has been produced but not released. So it is not like they are behind with the work.

“The Government and National Highways like to try and present that the only problem with smart motorways is the public’s confidence in them, if that’s the case why hide data that would prove that?”

Smart motorways, first introduced in the UK in 2006, replaced the hard shoulder on some roads with an extra lane of traffic in an attempt to reduce congestion.

However, there have been widespread concerns about their safety, with at least 38 people being killed on these stretches of roads.

Following a spate of these deaths, the then transport secretary Grant Shapps agreed in 2020 to provide yearly stocktake reports that compared collision data, and monitored National Highways’ performance in making the roads safer.

The last two versions have been published in the spring, and Richard Holden, the roads minister, promised in January that data would be published this year at the same time.

A source in the DfT stressed that the “data was coming” but it is understood National Highways was set to publish it and briefed industry experts, before it was suddenly pulled.



Richard Holden, the roads minister, promised in January that data would be published this year in the spring | CREDIT: MATTHEW HORWOOD/GETTY

The delay comes despite Prime Minister Rishi Sunak taking the decision to axe plans to build any new smart motorways over safety concerns. In total 14 schemes were shelved,

with the Government pledging to spend £900 million on improving safety on existing schemes.

The latest report includes key safety analysis around the number of stopped vehicle collisions on these types of roads when compared to conventional motorways.

The Telegraph understands that while the document shows that smart motorways have a lower rate of collisions overall when compared to conventional motorways, people are killed or seriously injured in stopped vehicles more often.

In the period between 2017 and 2021 there were 12 incidents that saw a driver killed or seriously injured while stationary, a rate of 0.21 collisions every per hundred million vehicle miles. This was up from the nine incidents between 2016 and 2020, which had a rate of 0.19.

Latest safety data

Conventional motorways and controlled motorways, both with hard shoulders, also saw slight increases in incident rates. National Highways regularly points out when presenting this data that because the dataset is so small it can be sensitive to tiny changes.

Edmund King, president of the AA and longtime campaigner against smart motorways, said that it was essential the stocktake was published as soon as possible so drivers could see progress.

He said: “In our view, it is essential that the third year stocktake is published as soon as possible so that drivers can see progress against the 2020 stocktake, and latest safety data.

“The prime minister’s announcement on scrapping any new smart motorways was welcome but drivers need to know what is happening on the current 193 miles of all lane running and 63 miles of dynamic hard shoulder smart motorways.”

A DfT spokesperson said: “Drivers deserve to have confidence in the roads they use and, recognising public concerns, the Government has cancelled plans for all new smart motorway schemes.

“Working with National Highways, we continue to invest £900 million in further safety improvements on existing smart motorways.”
