

‘Catastrophic failing’ of smart motorway technology puts lives at risk, says whistleblower

System to detect broken down vehicles stopped working over the weekend rendering affected travellers as ‘sitting ducks’

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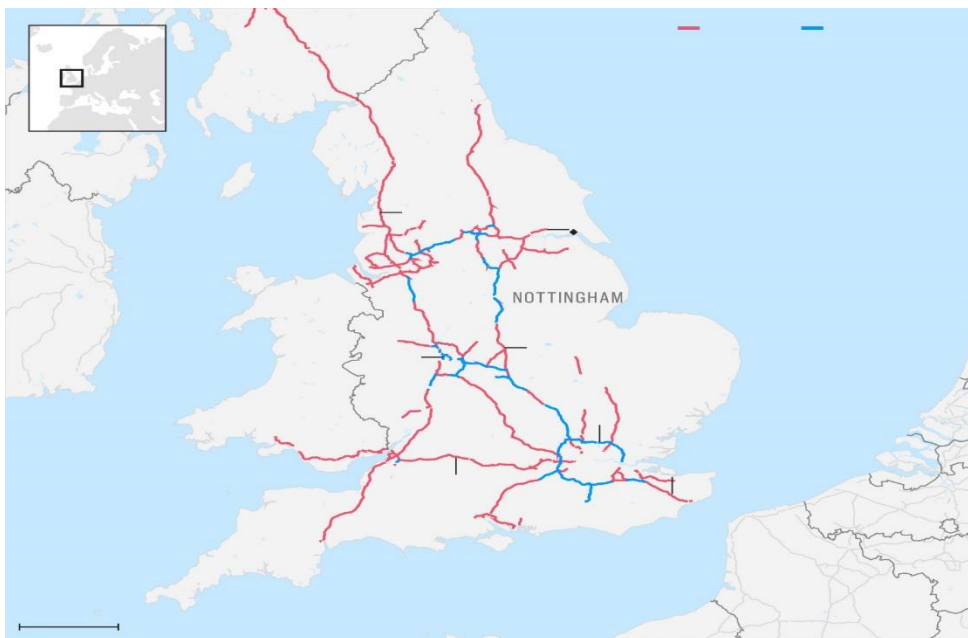
Smart motorway technology meant to spot cars broken down in live lanes suffered a “catastrophic failing” over the weekend putting motorists’ lives at risk, a whistleblower has told The Telegraph. Traffic was limited to 60mph as engineers struggled to identify the fault that meant stopped vehicle detection (SVD) radar shut down across huge swathes of the country.

A National Highways spokesman confirmed that the “intermittent fault” was first detected at 4.30pm on Sunday between junctions 13 and 15 of the M1. The system was restored by 1.15pm on Monday and “ongoing work is taking place to avoid a recurrence”.

All seven regional control centres were put on alert as the SVD failures spread to different stretches of smart motorway – routes where the hard shoulder has been scrapped to become an extra lane – in different parts of the country.

The whistleblower, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said: “Stopped vehicle detection had a catastrophic failure on all smart motorways for some of the weekend and into Monday.

The smart motorway network



“National Highways did not tell the public what had happened.”

The whistleblower said motorists should have been informed that National Highways safety technology was “down” and anyone who becomes stranded in a live lane was a “sitting duck”. The SVD technology uses radar to alert National Highways control room staff that a vehicle has come to a halt in a live lane. Controllers then trigger a “red X” sign on overhead gantries to warn motorists to move out of the affected lane as staff use CCTV to get “eyes on” the incident.

The Telegraph has revealed numerous instances where computer systems crashed leaving control rooms unable to monitor or control the smart motorway network.

A recent freedom of information request revealed that there were 174 power outages that affected vital smart motorway safety equipment in the six months to February.

Claire Mercer, who founded the campaign group Smart Motorways Kill after her husband was killed on the M1 where the hard shoulder had been scrapped, said: “This latest failing is yet more proof that smart motorways are only smart when all the technology is working, which doesn’t seem very often. When it doesn’t work they are dumb motorways.

“In this instance, the public was not informed that motorists could be stranded in life and death situations and would not be spotted by SVD radar and not be helped.

“We know that many of the deaths on smart motorways occur when lorries, which are limited to speeds of up to 60mph, hit stationary vehicles stuck in live lanes.

“So, imposing a 60mph speed limit during this latest technology failing would not have prevented most of the deaths that occur when the safety of the hard shoulder is removed. The only solution is to restore the hard shoulder to keep the motoring public safe.”

The National Highways spokesman said: “Stopped vehicle detection systems have been fully restored following intermittent issues experienced over the weekend.

“To ensure the ongoing safety of road users, 60mph speed restrictions were put in place while we investigated and solved the issues we were experiencing.

“We have well-rehearsed plans and mitigations in place to deal with such scenarios including extra traffic officer patrols, CCTV monitoring and the setting of reduced speed limits.”

They stressed that “at no point” did the entire SVD system go offline, adding how roadworks to fit more emergency refuge areas meant much of the 250 miles of smart motorway already had a 50mph speed limit imposed, only 35 miles of remaining “all lane running” routes needed the 60mph emergency limit.

They added that there was no need for “public messaging” to warn motorists of the SVD failing because of the intermittent nature of the fault, apparently caused by a “synchronisation issue”.

They did not say whether any stationary vehicles were involved in any collisions on the smart motorway network during this outage.