

Labour waters down pledge to scrap smart motorways

Party now only promising to conduct a ‘review’ after calling for an outright ban in 2023

[Gareth Corfield](#) 31 May 2024 • 6:17am



Both AA and RAC have called for return of hard shoulders on smart motorways CREDIT: Geopix / Alamy Stock Photo

Labour has watered down its pledge to scrap smart motorways, saying it will carry out a “review” of the controversial roads if it wins the general election.

The party has previously called on the Government to restore hard shoulders to smart motorways, branding the highways as “not fit for purpose” and “putting lives at risk”. Yet on Thursday Louise Haigh, the shadow transport secretary, would only commit to a “review” of the controversial highways.

“Labour will review the evidence to determine whether existing smart motorways are fit for purpose, and will deliver a new, comprehensive road safety strategy to save lives and make our roads safer for everyone who uses them,” she said.

Last year, after Rishi Sunak cancelled plans to double the number of smart motorways across the country, Ms Haigh called on ministers to scrap smart motorways altogether by reinstating the hard shoulder.

RECOMMENDED

How smart motorways failed

Smart motorways consist of converting the hard shoulder into a live running lane, replacing it with safety laybys every mile and a half.

Ms Haigh said in April last year: “The public know what ministers still refuse to accept: smart motorways, coupled with inadequate safety systems, are not fit for purpose and are putting lives at risk.

She added: “That’s why Conservative ministers should reinstate the hard shoulder on existing smart motorways and carry out an urgent review of the inadequate safety systems and evidence.”

The Government is spending £900 million upgrading current smart motorways with new laybys to allow broken-down drivers to safely pull over.

Labour’s watered-down pledge comes as the AA called on both main political parties to scrap all 14 existing smart motorways.

Edmund King, president of the motoring organisation, said that the dangers of smart motorways outweighed the benefits.

“Breaking down in a live lane on a smart motorway makes car occupants sitting ducks and has cost too many lives,” said Mr King.

“This fatally flawed design, no matter how good the technology, means drivers are made to play Russian roulette and pray they won’t be hit.

First rolled out 18 years ago, smart motorways have been linked to 50 avoidable deaths from crashes and other accidents – and have cost the taxpayer in excess of £3 billion.

Mr Sunak announced in April last year that the planned roll-out of new smart motorways would be halted, but did not address the future of the existing ones.

Currently there are about 250 miles of smart motorways across the country, making up just over 7 per cent of the motorway network.

The AA’s call to scrap the remaining 14 smart motorways was immediately backed by Sarah Champion, the Labour candidate for Rotherham and a long-time campaigner against smart motorways.

She said: “All of the evidence shows reinstalling the hard shoulder is the most effective way to keep motorists safe.

“I sincerely hope the next government listens to the facts, not National Highways, when making this lifesaving choice.

“I strongly back the AA’s campaign and hope common sense wins out.”

Smart motorways were a cut-price answer to the problem of congestion on the country’s main highways.

Instead of widening roads and building new lanes, smart motorways saw the hard shoulder converted into a running lane, carrying traffic instead of acting as a refuge for broken-down cars.

National Highways, which is responsible for motorways in England, uses overhead gantry signs to signal to drivers which lanes are open and which are closed to traffic.

The first smart motorway trial, rolled out in 2006, involved so-called Emergency Refuge Areas (ERAs) being built on the M42 in Birmingham every 400-500m.

These are laybys that stricken cars can safely pull over into, away from fast-moving traffic.

Later smart motorways such as the M1 and stretches of the M25 had these ERAS spaced at 2,500m (1.5 mile) intervals instead, however.

Critics have said that the intervals between ERAs are too long and risk the lives of drivers and passengers in broken-down cars, forcing them to run for their lives to reach the safety of the roadside verges.

When he halted plans to double the number of smart motorways around the country last year, Mr Sunak said: "All drivers deserve to have confidence in the roads they use to get around the country.

"Many people across the country rely on driving to get to work, to take their children to school and go about their daily lives, and I want them to be able to do so with full confidence that the roads they drive on are safe."

According to the AA, 38 per cent of breakdowns on smart motorways happen in live lanes where traffic is still running.

Mr King, the AA president, believes the solution to the smart motorway problem is as simple as reopening the hard shoulders and permanently setting overhead signs to close the former running lanes.

"On the all-lane-running sections, reinstate the hard shoulder with a red X and new lane markings. This would bring them in line with the dynamic hard shoulder sections," he said.

Labour, the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats were all contacted for comment.