

The great slowdown: average highway speed drops to 55mph

This figure is the lowest in ten years — and you're losing one minute of your life for every five miles that you drive



[Nicholas Hellen](#) Transport Editor | [Dan Atherton](#) , Deputy Data Editor

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Motorways and major A-roads are being choked by a record number of roadworks, slowing down journeys by a minute for every five miles travelled.

Delays on the strategic road network — measured in seconds per mile and compared with freely moving traffic— rose from 6.7 seconds in 2020-21, when traffic had not yet recovered from the pandemic, and reached 10.6 seconds last year. In the six months to September delays averaged 11.4 seconds, almost two seconds per mile slower than National Highways' target.

It means a journey from London to Birmingham would take 23 minutes longer because of delays, while Manchester to Glasgow would be 43 minutes.

Problems with the 4,500-mile strategic road network cause disproportionate disruption to the economy and people's lives. The network accounts for less than 3 per cent of all roads but around a third of total traffic.

Analysis of official data showed that there were planned roadworks at 1,357 locations last week, higher than in the corresponding week in every year since 2017, when comparable data was first compiled.

A record 349 planned roadworks were serious enough to cause a delay of ten minutes or more.

As a result, driving speeds on the strategic road network dropped to an average of 55.1mph in September, the lowest level since comparable records began in 2015, and have fallen by an average of 2mph since the start of the year.

The speed limit on motorways is 70mph and the national speed limit on A-roads is 60mph, unless they are dual carriageways.

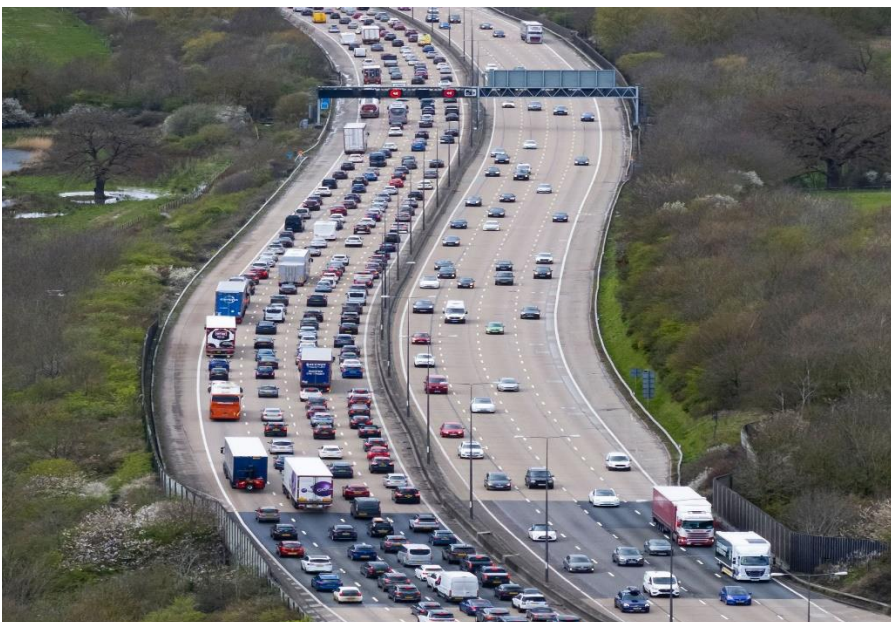
Further delays are forecast by National Highways, which manages England's strategic road network, while it retrofits 150 emergency areas in a £900 million programme to improve the safety of smart motorways.

Ken McMeikan, chief executive of Moto Hospitality, which operates 59 motorway service stations across the United Kingdom, said motorists were suffering twice over. "We are sitting here now with probably the most roadworks we've had in the past 20 years on the M1, the M4 and the M6, because they are retrospectively putting escape bays into the same smart motorways that they spent years disrupting motorists' journeys for," he said.

This Sunday there will be closures at 56 different locations on the strategic road network, including a carriageway on the M1 northbound between junction 11A and junction 14 between 10pm and 5am, and on junctions 6 to 8 of the M42 until 6am on Monday.

The go-slow will continue well into next year, even though National Highways is carrying out fewer disruptive roadbuilding programmes than it had originally planned.

The official watchdog, the Office of Rail and Road, said it had challenged National Highways to explain why average delays had increased in the past five years, despite traffic levels being largely unchanged. It was unable to do so.



A record 29 million car journeys are expected to be made over the festive period

PETER MACDIARMID/SHUTTERSTOCK

Rishi Sunak's government cancelled plans for new smart motorways in April last year, announcing that it recognised "the lack of public confidence felt by drivers". The new emergency areas provide a place for drivers to stop on a stretch of motorway with no permanent hard shoulder.

They are typically 100 metres long, painted orange and fitted with emergency phones. During building work, National Highways closes one lane of the motorway and imposes a 50mph speed limit.

Richard Owen, chief executive of Agilysis, a transport consultancy, said drivers would welcome safety improvements on "so-called smart motorways" but that many "would ask why these measures weren't designed from the start".

- [My 53mph day on the M1: Matt Rudd](#)

Edmund King, president of the AA, also blamed the delays on "excessive roadworks". He added: "Ironically, most of the roadworks are a result of engineering incompetence, which meant hundreds of miles of 'smart' motorways were opened with inadequate safeguards. That is now being partially rectified.

"Many motorways don't seem like motorways, as reduced speed limits are often more common than the national speed limit. More urgency is required to get essential work done as soon as possible. More than 23 million drivers hitting the roads next Friday will be slow driving home for Christmas." Roadworks are likely to affect 106 miles of motorway this Sunday.

A record 29 million car journeys are expected to be made over the festive period, according to the RAC, with about 3.7 million on Saturday, December 21, and around the same number on Christmas Eve. The rail network shuts down entirely on Christmas Day, with a limited service on Boxing Day. Passengers are advised to be aware of last-minute cancellations, because train operators do not have enough drivers, and many are rejecting overtime after they were handed a bumper pay rise by the government in the summer. Meanwhile, passenger numbers at Heathrow are expected to break the 6.7 million record set in December 2023.