

Written evidence submitted by Mr Mike Neale (RSM0039)

Introduction

I am a private motorist who has been driving on the country's motorway network for around 33 years. Last year I had the scariest experience of my life when I suffered a breakdown on a so-called "Smart Motorway." I am making my submission to the committee because I feel I must do anything possible to try and bring about the long-overdue abolition of these death-trap roads. Lives are at stake and no action seems to have been taken to prevent further unnecessary loss of life.

Evidence submission

Like many people, I have become extremely concerned at the increasing number of so-called "Smart Motorways" that keep appearing across the country as a cheap way of increasing road space.

Removal of the main safety feature of a motorway, namely the hard shoulder, has always struck me as a fatally flawed idea. It turns out that this concept is literally fatally flawed, with around 40 people killed who would most likely still be alive today had there been a hard shoulder.

My concerns were significantly reinforced when I had the misfortune to break down on a so-called "Smart" section of the M25. There was no possibility of getting to a refuge area. First, I had no idea how far away the next one was (I subsequently discovered that it was over a mile away), and second, as the car had developed an electrical fault, the engine cut out so there was no way of driving any further in any case.

I pulled the car over as far to the left as I could, driving it up a grass bank as much as possible. The car was thus half up the grass bank and half on the active running lane of the motorway. That situation, although dire, was not as bad as on many other sections of so-called "Smart Motorway" where there is a solid barrier, meaning that anyone breaking down would be fully in the active lane.

Nonetheless, with traffic thundering up behind me at 70mph in the lane that my car was half occupying, and only just missing it, I have never been so scared in my entire life.

I phoned my breakdown cover number, but the noise of the traffic was so loud when I was outside the car that I could not hear the person at the other end of the line, nor be heard by them, so I had to get back into the car, sitting half on the active lane of the motorway, in order to make the phone call and report my position. The breakdown operator also said that they would contact Highways England to report the breakdown to them.

I, perhaps naively, had thought that any car breaking down on a so-called "Smart Motorway" would be detected automatically.

It soon became evident that, far from breakdowns being monitored on camera by Highways England, no-one was aware that I had broken down at all. In fact, despite the breakdown being reported to Highways England, it took 30 minutes from the time that I first broke down before they did anything to try and stop other traffic from driving on the inside lane where my car was. After 30 minutes, most traffic began driving only in lanes 2, 3 or 4, but several vehicles were still driving on the inside lane, despite it having been officially suspended by the red X.

Some 45 minutes after I had broken down, a Highways England vehicle arrived, and they brought the whole motorway in that direction to a halt in order to hitch up my car to tow it to a refuge area, which as I say was over a mile away.

That brings me onto the next dangerous feature of so-called "Smart Motorways", the refuge areas. As well as being clearly far too far apart, they are also far too short. When the breakdown truck finally came and my car was loaded onto the back, the truck driver backed up as far as he could to the rear of the refuge area. With as many flashing lights as he had available, he then had to floor the truck to try and accelerate as fast as he could to pull out into the (by then) active inside lane of the motorway. I don't know exactly what speed he was doing, but I would say no more than about 20-25mph when the refuge area ran out and he had to pull out into the inside lane, with vehicles coming up behind at around 70mph. On a proper motorway, vehicles can accelerate up to speed on the hard shoulder before pulling out into the traffic, but this is totally impossible on a so-called "Smart Motorway."

Since that experience, and hearing the reports of many fatal accidents on these roads, I no longer feel safe driving on a so-called "Smart Motorway."

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to know where they are, so I have found myself on them unexpectedly. If this happens, I never drive on the

inside breakdown lane, as that is far too dangerous a place to be, so always pull out into lane 2. Even that is dangerous, as if there were a broken-down car on the inside breakdown lane, any vehicle driving in that lane would have to swerve out to avoid it.

My biggest fear is if I were to break down again. I was lucky last time, as I was not killed and no-one drove into my car, but I should not have to rely on luck to stay alive.

I now avoid these dangerous roads wherever possible, taking A-roads through towns and villages instead. This adds quite a bit to journey times, but I would rather stay alive than risk the huge dangers of so-called "Smart Motorways." They are just too dangerous to travel on.

Whoever is behind these roads seems to have thought that the mere act of adding the adjective "Smart" in front of the word "Motorway" has automatically made them so. Clearly it has not, as the families of the people killed on these roads will testify.

The whole concept is just wrong. Even if there were refuges closer together that were long enough to get out of safely, and there were cameras or sensors being continuously monitored to detect breakdowns or accidents (which evidently is not the case at the moment), these motorways would still be dangerous.

At present, there seems to be a mistaken assumption that any car that breaks down will be able to limp on for up to a mile and a half to get to a refuge area.

There has also been the suggestion that drivers need to be better educated on how to use these roads. But you cannot educate a broken-down car into moving.

If a vehicle breaks down, has a puncture, is involved in an accident, or its driver is suddenly taken ill, it needs to get out of the active lanes immediately. No amount of technology can make that possible without a hard shoulder.

Once the broken-down vehicle has stopped, even with the best monitoring system in the world, it would not be possible to stop traffic behind from driving in that lane within a few seconds or even a few minutes (never mind the 30 minutes it took in my case). A stationary vehicle in an active lane is a sitting duck. And as I know from my own experience, even if the lane were to be

suspended, some people will still drive in it. Without a hard shoulder, people will continue to die unnecessarily.

Grant Shapps has said that we are stuck with these roads. That is just nonsense. We are only stuck with them if he chooses to keep them. They could be removed overnight by putting up a red X on the inside lane and then with a few lorries full of white paint to put back the solid white lines that have been removed to reinstate the hard shoulder.

Highways England have claimed that they do not have a duty of care to road users. This is frankly unbelievable and incredibly insulting to the families of the deceased. Are they really suggesting that they can make the roads as dangerous as they like, and it is not their responsibility?

Government reports have concluded that so-called “Smart Motorways” are not being implemented in the way that they were originally planned or tested, and are significantly less safe than they could or should be. Despite this, more are being created that do not meet the minimum recommended safety standards. This needs to be stopped immediately. Yet no-one seems to be taking responsibility for this.

At the moment, we seem to have the three Cs: Cost-cutting; Cover-ups; and Culpability-denial. The scandal of so-called “Smart Motorways” looks set to be the new Grenfell Tower.

Why do we need so-called “Smart Motorways” in the first place? There was congestion on some motorways, and someone obviously decided that it was better to ease that congestion by getting rid of the main safety feature than by building any additional carriageways.

These decisions were mostly made before COVID-19. That has changed the situation significantly. Whilst we remain under COVID restrictions, traffic is obviously considerably lighter, but even when things return to some sort of normality, the world will have changed. Not everyone will go back to working in an office. Traffic levels and patterns are likely to be very different to the way they were before COVID. The impact of this needs to be assessed.

If the conclusion of these assessments is that increased motorway capacity is still needed in certain locations, then an additional lane should be built in those locations.

These roads are not safe and will never be safe. The fact that people have died who would still be alive today if there had been a hard shoulder is now beyond dispute, as more than one coroner has confirmed this.

The fact that the Transport Minister and Highways England have still not abolished these roads, and indeed are continuing to introduce more, must mean that they have decided that there is an acceptable number of excess deaths. I do not know what that figure for “acceptable excess deaths” is, although presumably it must be greater than 40. In my view, a single excess death is unacceptable.

What does it take for them to change their mind about this and for them to be held to account? A coachload of small children to crash and for them all to be killed? Or would that still be considered acceptable? It can surely only be a matter of time before this happens.

It is simply unacceptable that costs are being cut at the price of people’s lives. How many more people must die before this concept is finally abandoned?

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