

Written evidence submitted by Martin Wood (RSM0042)

1. My name is Martin Wood. I am submitting this response to your call for evidence in relation to your enquiry into the roll-out and safety of so called “Smart” motorways – a deceptive misnomer if ever there were one. I am doing so as a private citizen because of my personal concerns about the safety of smart motorways and the disingenuous approach of Ministers and Highways England.
2. The disquiet about the safety of so-called Smart Motorways relates to the removal of the hard shoulder, which provides a refuge for motorists when they are forced to stop for whatever reason, such as breakdown or medical emergency. So let me start with the Smart Motorway Safety Evidence Stocktake and Action Plan, prepared on the direction of the Secretary of State in response to this disquiet and see what it says about this issue.
3. So, what does this document reveal? The key takeaways from it are the following.
 - A. The removal of the hard shoulder has led to an increase in collisions between a moving vehicle and a stopped vehicle in a live lane.
 - B. Highways England actually expected this to happen.
4. So, we know that Highways England went ahead with removing the hard shoulder fully expecting that this would lead to an increase in collisions involving stopped vehicles trapped in a live lane. The report admits it. This is a truly shocking revelation.
5. Yet both Ministers and Highways England continue to claim, as they have done repeatedly, that Smart Motorways are safer than conventional motorways.
6. Let us consider how they justify this claim. It is as follows. Smart Motorways as so designated in fact include two sets of measures. These are:
 - A. the installation of measures designed to improve safety and traffic management for moving traffic

B. the removal of the hard shoulder (either altogether or part of the time).

7. Now, we know that the first of these does improve safety and that the second worsens it: the Stocktake and Action Plan confirms this. Accordingly, Highways England combines the positive effect of the first with the negative effect of the second to claim that overall Smart Motorways are safer than conventional motorways.
8. Their calculation is along these lines: 2 fewer moving traffic collisions set against 1 additional stopped vehicle collision equals a net improvement of 1 collision, therefore Smart Motorways are safer. They essentially seek to treat the two sets of measures as an indivisible package in order to justify their claim.
9. This is a disingenuous and cynical manipulation of the position. You must not let them get away with it.
10. In truth, the issues of (A) safety and traffic management measures for moving traffic on the one hand and (B) how to deal with vehicles having to come to a halt on the motorway on the other are really quite separate. You can do the first without doing the second. Of course, that the moving traffic measures improve safety is welcome. But the installation of these measures on any stretch of motorway cannot possibly of itself justify removing the hard shoulder, a step that was expected and has irrefutably been shown to cause an increase in collisions and deaths.
11. The original designers of motorways included a hard shoulder for a very good reason; as a place a motorist could get off the live carriageway in the event of having to stop. That reasoning is as valid today as it then was; perhaps even more so given the much greater volume of traffic these days.
12. One does not need a degree in road design or a lengthy investigation to know that doing away with the hard shoulder is creating a “death trap”, as the chairman of the Police Federation has said. It is patently obvious. To his credit, Alan Billings, the PCC for South Yorkshire, has also been vocal in his demands for hard shoulders to be restored. Concern has also been expressed by more than one coroner at inquests into the deaths of people killed as a result of having to stop on a motorway without a hard shoulder.

13. Smart motorways have also been strongly criticised by an all-party group of MPs, who have described Highways England's actions in introducing them as shocking and careless. Dubbing them “smart” is nothing less than a cynical ploy to make them sound clever, when they are merely a cheap but far from cheerful attempt to increase road capacity with a disregard for the safety consequences.
14. Are there perhaps signs that in the face of these pressures Highways England is beginning to grasp that its public stance is untenable? I note that in The Times today, 31 March 2021, it is quoted as saying: “The evidence stocktake of the safety of smart motorways found that in most ways they are as safe or safer than conventional motorways”. Note “in most ways”. So they now appear to have been forced to accept that they are not safer in every way. They could hardly do otherwise, given the stocktake’s findings in relation to vehicles stopped in a live lane.
15. The prospect of being trapped stationary in a live lane is terrifying. Bad enough for fit adults, absolutely horrific if there are people in the car who would take time to evacuate, such as disabled people or children.
16. Nevertheless, one reads that Highways England are ploughing ahead with the creation of more Smart Motorways despite the strength of the concerns and in the face of the Committee’s enquiry. This only goes to emphasise the reckless disregard it has for the safety of the public and its contempt for Parliament. It’s repeated statements that the safety of the public is their top priority ring hollow. Actions speak louder than words; and what is clear from their actions is that their priority is increasing road capacity to ease congestion as cheaply as possible, regardless of the dangers to the public.
17. This situation is a public disgrace and must be addressed with the utmost urgency.
18. So, what is to be done? In my submission, the only effective solution is to restore the hard shoulder which is effectively a continuous lay-by and the only means of providing an ever present safe haven.
19. Instead of this, the Stocktake and Action Plan proposes essentially two measures.

A. Having refuge areas at more frequent intervals than at present;

B. Having radar to detect stationary vehicles coupled with lane closure effected by display of a red cross on an overhead gantry.

20. These measures are inadequate, for the following reasons.

21. As to more frequent refuge areas, the fact is that there will still be some occasions when the driver cannot reach a refuge area and so comes to a stop in a live lane. Intermittent refuge areas are not an adequate substitute for a continuous hard shoulder. This is in the category of the blindingly obvious. Indeed, the fact that the Stocktake and Action Plan additionally proposes the “stopped vehicle detection radar” is a tacit admission that intermittent refuge areas alone are not sufficient.

22. Turning to the radar detection system, it is irredeemably inadequate, for the following reasons.

A. First and most fundamentally, the inevitable delay in effecting lane closure. Any delay, however short, that leaves a stopped vehicle in a live lane is potentially lethal. A collision can easily occur within a few seconds, and there is no way that any detection system, however sophisticated, can effect closure of the lane quickly enough.

B. The system does not in any event effect actual physical closure of the lane. It merely signals closure by the display of a red cross on overhead gantries. There are obvious flaws with this. First, vehicles may already have passed the last gantry before the stopped vehicle before the red cross is turned on. Secondly, it in any event relies on drivers seeing and obeying the red cross.

23. I will not dwell on the fact that it has recently been reported (The Times, 22 March 2021) that the radar detection system fails to detect at least 15 per cent of stopped vehicles and possibly as many as 35 per cent. Highways England apparently claim that the detection figure was more than 85 per cent, thus “surpassing the benchmark set”. So Highways England regard it as acceptable for the system to fail to effect lane closure in 15 per cent of cases, thus leaving motorists unprotected. But these points are a distraction from the main point, which is that the system can never be made to operate fast enough.

24. Nor do I propose dealing in detail with each of the 18 points in the action plan in the Stocktake and Action Plan. No doubt Ministers and Highways England will seek to obfuscate the position by diverting you into detailed discussion of these points. But this would be nothing more than a distraction because it is clear that even if all 18 points were implemented the fundamental issues would remain:

A. More frequent refuge areas are no substitute for a continuous hard shoulder;

B. The radar system can never be made to effect lane closure fast enough;

C. Drivers may not see the red cross, either because they have passed the last gantry or through inattention;

D. Drivers may ignore the red cross;

E. The system does not effect physical closure of the lane.

25. One final point. The call for evidence refers to the fact that motorists lack confidence driving on a smart motorway and suggestions elsewhere that what is required to deal with this is driver education. This view is entirely misplaced. Motorists have every justification for their lack of confidence and the notion that it is their lack of education that is the problem is a classic case of victim blaming.

26. I therefore repeat: the plain and obvious facts are that there is no effective substitute for having a hard shoulder to enable drivers to get off the live carriageway and that removing the hard shoulder makes motorways inherently more dangerous. Ministers and Highways England need to be made to face up to these facts however unpalatable they may find them, and live up to their oft repeated claims that the safety of the public is their top priority.

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