

Written evidence submitted by the Professional Recovery Operators Federation (RSM0043)

In May 2016 I gave evidence to the select committee on Smart Motorways. I have never been so astounded listening to the evidence that was provided to the committee by both the Minister Andrew Jones and Mike Wilson and Highways England. A summary of the evidence I gave is a matter of record as were the recommendations I made to the committee.

I criticised Highways England for their lack of research and consultation with the vehicle recovery industry, before smart motorways were rolled out.

There were no minutes of consultation or no real evidence provided and it turned out that their consultations were with motoring organisations the likes of the AA and RAC. Who are considered by the DFT and Highways England to be the recovery industry.

Even though they have no specialist incident vehicle recovery equipment have any expertise experience or equipment to assist in commercial freight transport or HGV's.

Highways England has an ominous track record of ignoring the vehicle recovery industry even though we are essential to the running of the Strategic road network. We just clear up the sometimes a mess left behind by a non-existent consultation.

Ill-conceived roll outs of reckless cost cutting schemes dressed up and branded with trendy key worded named "Smart Motorways! Justified and backed up with delusional statistics used to mislead and confuse basic public and Parliamentary scrutiny.

It is my contention that these new all lane running motorway schemes were called Smart Motorways to confuse road safety scrutiny by using the statistics from the original Active Traffic Management scheme on the M42 which is indeed in my opinion is Smart. This scheme is fitted with all of the basic safety mechanisms needed to be operated safely and constructively.

Digital gantries and consistent information actually explaining with diagrams which lanes could or could not be used during busy traffic flows. If the hard shoulder was being used as an extra lane there updated signage providing information and instructions to control traffic flow and which lanes could or

should now not be used. Emergency refuge areas were signed and are spaced between 400/ 800 meters apart this reducing the prospect of vehicle being stranded in live lanes. That is a smart motorway! It is safer than conventional hard shoulder motorways. The M42 was built 20 years ago at an average cost of £9m a mile and its basic function works and has proven to be as reasonably safe as a busy motorway can be.

By seeming to use the statistics from that M42 to justify a far cheaper model of basically driving on a motorway, without a hard shoulder and greatly reduced digital signage, without stopped vehicle detection and dressing these schemes up as a smart motorway has proven to be in my opinion economically self-serving.

In my opinion the evidence provided to the select committee by Andrew Jones was defensive, misleading and dismissive of the many safety issues consistently raised by the committee. Which was mirrored in his response to the concerns raised by the select committee's findings.

He stated - " We have a version of active motorway management system in place for around 20 years and that the department for transport has had all lane running configuration evolved from successful earlier forms of smart motorway and that All lane running was the logical next step in a process of incremental improvement. He also states that all lane running with the permanent removal of the hard shoulder is a fundamental change. Which I find incredible given the evidence provide by his colleagues from Highways England provided evidence to the committee which stated that the danger to road users increased by 216% when broken down in a live lane. The prospect of breaking down in a live lane has increased by 38% on all lane running schemes.

Emergency refuge areas were being installed at a distance of between 1-2 / 2-5m not the original spacing of ever 400m or so. Which was signed off by former roads minister Sir Mike Penning, who was blatantly misled as it seems we're many of us.

Highways England also conceded that the Red Xs seen on gantries and used to close live lanes that now contained emergency incidents had a low rate of compliance by other road users increasing the obvious risks to other road users. He also conceded that information letters were being sent out informing

road users of the risks invoked with the non-compliance of the road users but these letters carried no penalties.

Both Andrew Jones and Highways England informed the select committee of radical safety measures were being discussed and implemented, including the much vaunted Stop Vehicle Detection SVD. Which is supposed to alert Highways England within seconds there is an incident in a live lane that needs an immediate response. It was stated in evidence that stop vehicle detection was to be retrofitted to schemes already up and running and would be fitted to the new roll outs of smart Motorways such as the M4 between junction 3 to 12.

Again in my opinion these statements regarding SVD were encouraged by Roads Minister Andrew Jones and were portrayed as being imminent.

Lack of Public information was also a major and obvious bone of contention. It seemed incredible that life challenging schemes were being implemented in virtual secrecy and being branded as something they certainly were not. All it was doing was confusing the general public in areas of country where these schemes being rolled out but consistently endangering public safety.

I personally raised the subjects of Red Xs, ERAs size and the total lack of consultation with the recovery industry. I've asked to see minutes or documents which should have clarified who was consulted on any changes to the original concept. Which were never supplied.

The findings of the 2016 select committee were totally dismissed by the DFT in fact, the speed of roll outs increased and after reviewing the select committee findings it looks to have been totally ignoring the concerns raised regarding safety.

I personally urged the DFT that Smart Motorway schemes would cost lives in their current format and the possibility that the recovery industry would have to risk assess their own safety before responding to any jobs that are on Smart Motorways .

The AA who were and still are the DFT main source of consultation made it public that they would not endanger their own staff in attending Smart Motorway incidents, instead they would leave their own stranded members to their own devices when stranded on a smart motorway, often for hours and

until the stranded AA members then become a statutory removal. The statutory removal of stranded AA members is becoming a safety issue and I encourage DfT and Highways England how the statutory removal scheme is being used in this. However, The AA and the AA funded Survive group is still being used as Recovery industry consultants.

I found it even more concerning that this major public issue was looked to be being handled by a roads minister aided by his humble servants from Highways England. The Smart Motorways hearings were in May 2016 and in July 2016 Chris Grayling became Secretary of State for Transport. In September 2016 his department totally dismissed the select committees findings.

Its rejection coming in the form of his letter to Chair of Select Committee, Louise Ellman and in my opinion a less condescending dismissive communication would be hard to find.

Consultation with anyone from DFT was impossible and Highways England continued to dismiss the recovery industry as a necessary evil as long as it had the marketing profile of the AA.

The Recovery industry, Britain's fourth emergency was sleep waking into a motorway catastrophe of which we would somehow be culpable was on the horizon. In order to be heard and ignite public awareness and perception I founded the campaign for safer roadside rescue and recovery. A campaign to grant the use of red lights to increase the safety of roadside side rescue and recovery operators and to the public we are attending but we would also campaign to stop the roll out of smart Motorways. Until their safety could be revalued and reviewed.

It was time for the recovery industry to have a voice and to raise its own profile as an essential service and in particular for Highways England and the DfT to recognise our vital contributions to England's strategic road network. The support for the campaign was enormous this campaign was ably led and supported by former roads minister Sir Mike Penning and former minister for Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Tracey Crouch. The recovery industry became a voice no longer being totally dismissed. The campaign had the support of over 40 MPs we created together an APPG and this is still chaired by Sir Mike Penning whose commitment and support for the recovery industry has been unstinting and his insight and support has been invaluable.

He understands the nature of the beast and the recovery industry is forever in his debt for his passion commitment and his political guile. He has helped to change the Recovery industries profile.

Between Brexit, the General Election and the Pandemic but unlike Chris Graylings deficiency's as a Transport Secretary. Which were becoming very evident and a wind of positive began to blow and especially when he was replaced by our new Transport Minister Grant Schapps.

For the First time in the history of the recovery industry we had a Minister for Transport who understood and publicly valued the recovery industry. Mr Schapps publicly proclaimed that the recovery industry were essential to the SRN and supporting the economy in keeping people moving.

He said that in fact the recovery industry was the real 4th emergency service and by some coincidence the attitudes of certain key figures and departments at Highways England were also beginning to change to a more positive stance.

Under the stewardship of acting CEO, Nick Harris and greatly supported by a team of committed constructive key personnel. It gave me great pleasure and increased optimism that Highways England was becoming a completely different mechanism. That I now trust and optimism has not been displaced. The growing relationship between the Professional Recovery Operators Federation and Highways England has been key in creating an open and honest industrious strategic partnership agreement.

This new partnership agreement is fiercely committed to improving road safety, public communication, education and to making key changes that will attempt to radically improve public safety when driving on all lane running schemes.

PROFS partners within the Institute of Vehicle Recovery will create and implement, first class training and technical input contributing to any advice needed for new schemes and roll outs. In the past, Highways England have been badly advised and complacent in research and seemed to be relying on historical relationships based on brand rather than expertise and professional experience. I believe historical consultations have led to many of the safety deficiencies, publicly condemned and associated with smart motorways.

I've put below the progress that has been made with Highways England over the last 18 months:

1, Highways England has signed and committed to a strategic partnership agreement improving communication and direct consultation with VROs. It also commits us to continually reviewing and updating industry standards on both sides. Our combined focus is centered on increasing industry regulations and the public's health and safety when using smart motorways.

2, Highways England have created an executive working group which consists of the recovery industry's major stakeholders. They have also created 7 regional groups. These groups are contributing to different regional input to the executive committee from all aspects of the SRN and the variances created by different roll out of Smart Motorways identifying safety hotspots or anomalies experienced in different parts of England's SRN.

3, we have a working group working and consulting on retro fitting of ERAs and making practical changes to their design.

4, we have a working group focused on improving digital signage which is vital in raising public awareness of their surroundings and vital to informing motorists of imminent incidents.

5, we are collectively working on campaigns to raise public awareness on road safety, reducing tailgating, but most importantly educating the public regarding these new all lane running schemes.

6, collaboration between the independent work providers who are the life blood of the recovery industry, has led to a strategic partnership agreement with the country's 5 biggest independent work providers. This partnership agreement will contribute to faster sharing of breakdown and incident location data leading to faster response times reducing risk to the public's safety. The

sharing and communication of incident information between the independent motoring organisations and Highways England's traffic officers will help to enhance joint traffic officer and VRO response and attendance times. Enabling the sharing of information of complications that VROs may face on arrival at an incident will improve incident clearance times and make both traffic officers and VROs more efficient.

7, one of the most common faults contributing to motorway incidents are punctures. PROF has instigated and helped to complete a strategic partnership agreement between the National Tyre Distributors Association (NTDA) and Highways England. The NTDA represent commercial tyre technicians who are key service providers in effecting tyre changes and repairs to HGVs and contribute to the safe running of the SRN. The NTDA has a wealth of experience providing robust technical support and training to tyre technicians through their REACT training scheme.

The landscape around Highways England's support from the independent recovery industry and its major industry stakeholders has changed dramatically and will ultimately benefit us all.

It must seem strange that someone who has been so vociferously aggressive towards Highways England hierarchy and smart motorways project is now trying to support both Highways England and the DFT with this submission. The reality is that after every battle there needs to be constructive dialogue.

In my humble opinion, both Nick Harris and the SoS Grant Shapps has inherited a poisoned chalice. But this can be an opportunity for radical change rather than looking for blame or for scapegoats and after 3 select transport committee hearings a government stocktake and the illusion of Government inquiries on smart motorways they are still a major bone of contention with the spectre of possible litigation and especially when it's so obvious where the blame lays and who is ultimately responsible.

In the meantime, Highways England should be commended on its proactive change in direction, its accessibility and its willingness to engage openly on the real problems that exist. It is important for me to stress that this change in attitude and commitment to working with recovery industry stakeholders and vehicle recovery operators was well underway long before the government stocktake recommendations were made.

This input is invaluable especially as different areas of smart motorways have consistently thrown up different risks and safety challenges, DfT should be advised of the commitment and focus being shown by Highways England on this subject. The Professional Recovery Operators Federation has seen the proactive commitment to improving road safety and commitment to improving smart motorways.

But radical change is much needed, and PROF would like to submit various proposals that may help support Highways England in their quest for safety.

1- It is vital that Smart Motorways are rebranded and are renamed as to exactly what they are alongside of a comprehensive media and public information campaign. An honest declaration, that explains the reality of All lane running while explaining the risks involved along with the presumed benefits of the extra capacity and the reduction travel times. A virtual All Lane Journey could be posted on a Highways England site, explaining the differences and the different risks involved from a live lane breakdown.

2 - extreme Penalties for non-compliance of Red Xs is vital in increasing public safety and Penalty points need to be doubled and repeat offenders should be banned. Stiffer penalties will very quickly increase public compliance.

3- A programme of retro-fitting of additional emergency areas to reduce the spacing between them. This will also help to reduce the percentage of live lane breakdowns

4 - Updating of signs and Red Xs Signs are vital to informing motorists of current status of the motorway. Rather than building more gantries the existing ones can be used more frequently. If signs can inform you of travel times they can maybe warn motorists that are approaching an incident where a Red x incident is in place. Earlier compliance may keep lanes more accessible for emergency services on route to incidents.

5- Honest and practical updates on stopped vehicle detection program. Promised to the select committee back in 2016. A realistic timetable of retro fitting or the availability of the software that would restore confidence and dramatically assist in public road safety.

If the Highways Agency can be rebranded into Highways England than surely Smart Motorways could very easily be rebranded into, lets say - “Digital Highways Expressways “ this should happen alongside a campaign to inform the public that would educate the public and stakeholders.

6/ a comprehensive paragraph on All Lane Running a recognition and highlighting Red X compliance would make sense being included in the Highway Code especially for new drivers.

I have been in the recovery industry for 40 years.

I founded the campaign for Safer Roadside Rescue Recovery.

I founded the Professional Recovery Operators Federation

My personal interest and vocation within my industry, is for us to be valued and Recognised as an essential emergency service.

But also, to help create and maintain a safer SRN, safer for the public and the thousands of VROs working at the roadside.

As the partnership agreement with Highways England and other stakeholders continues to grow under the enlightened and progressive stewardship of Nick Harris I am confident that positive progress will continue.

I hope this evidence and contribution with assist with that objective.

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