

Written evidence submitted by the Staffordshire Chambers of Commerce (RSM0081)

Staffordshire Chambers' of Commerce is the voice of the business community in Staffordshire. With more than 1,200 member businesses across the county and beyond, we represent our members' views on the local, regional and national issues affecting their businesses. We're proud to represent such a diverse business community across the area, home to some world-renowned brands and a great place to do business.

For some years, construction works have taken place to upgrade sections of the M6 to a smart motorway, between the West Midlands and the North West. The M6 runs through the heart of Staffordshire and is a key transport artery for our member businesses, helping them to travel to meetings with customers, move freight and get staff to and from work. We understand that the upgrade works in Staffordshire, are due for completion in early 2022.

Congestion on the M6 has been a significant issue for many years, particularly in and around Birmingham, with ongoing congestion issues at peak times of the day costing time and money for our member businesses. We therefore support the concept of Smart Motorways and see the value of taking a technology-driven approach to dealing with congestion, by increasing capacity on motorways and controlling the flow and speed of traffic.

However, we do have genuine concerns about the operation of Smart Motorways. These concerns tend to focus on the gaps between each emergency refuge area, which allow motorists to stop in the event of an emergency. These refuge areas can mean the difference between serious injury or even death, allowing motorists to exit from a live line of traffic, in the event of an emergency. We understand that these refuge areas are spaced some 500-800 metres apart on Dynamic Hard Shoulder Running Smart Motorways and some 2.5km (1.55 miles) apart on All Lane Running Smart Motorways. This latter version being the standard for all new Smart Motorway schemes from 2013 onwards. We believe that the variation in gaps between the two versions of Smart Motorway, is hugely significant, with one version being able to close the hard shoulder and the other version where the inside lane looks like and is in use as a permanent lane.

The ROSPA Road Safety Factsheet for Smart Motorways (January 2021), details the concerns under the heading of 'The Future of Smart Motorways' on page

4. The Government's extensive action plan announced in March 2020 in response to the recent concerns and higher reported accidents / near misses, includes 'Measures to ensure that the distance between emergency refuge areas is one mile maximum, ideally three-quarters of a mile'. We fully support the principles of the action plan and strongly believe that emergency refuge areas should be more frequent and that the recommendations should be implemented as quickly as possible.

This action plan goes on to suggest that improved "stopped vehicle detection" systems should be installed within 3 years (several years earlier than originally planned) but we feel that three years is far too long in terms of a desired timescale and that improving visibility and signage for emergency refuges should be implemented at the earliest opportunity.

We accept that constructing additional emergency refuge areas needs a lot more planning and physical work (including land acquisition) and would suggest that in areas where further research shows higher risk, the hard shoulder should be reintroduced as a temporary safety measure. We would also suggest more prominent signage for the existing emergency refuge areas and improved CCTV surveillance, linked to swift alerts to notify emergency vehicles about reaching the stranded motorist. In some sections, warning signage can be missed, when passing larger vehicles. An increase in publicity to educate and inform drivers about safely using Smart Motorways, would also be seen as a very positive step in the right direction.

One of our members provided anecdotal personal experience of a loss of tyre pressure, when driving along the M6. Less than 1 mile before junction J16 north bound at night and the tyre pressure warning light came on. As it was dark and the driver was close to the junction and decided to continue at reduced speed to the layby just off J16 and drove less than 1 mile at 40 - 50 mph. On reaching J16, the driver noted the rear tyre was shredded, but fortunately had stayed on the rim. If this incident happened in another part of a Smart Motorway, the driver may have ended up with a very dangerous car to drive, or even worse.

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