

John Larkinson
Chief Executive Officer
Office of Rail and Road
25 Cabot Square
London
E14 4QZ

Nick Harris
Chief Executive Officer
National Highways
Bridge House
1 Walnut Tree Close
Guildford
GU1 4LZ

12 December 2022

Dear John,

Office of Rail and Road – First annual assessment of safety performance on the strategic road network

Thank you for your report, the “*first annual assessment of safety performance on the strategic road network*”, covering the following three areas which we recognise the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) have grouped together for reporting purposes:

- safety performance on the strategic road network in 2021
- your progress and findings related to the Transport Select Committee (TSC) recommendation to independently evaluate the effectiveness and operation of stopped vehicle detection (SVD) and end-to-end systems; and
- your progress and findings related to the TSC recommendation to evaluate the effectiveness of the 2020 stocktake action plan in reducing live lane breakdowns on all lane running (ALR) motorways, reducing the time for which people who break down or stop in a live lane are at risk, and educating drivers on what to do if they break down in a live lane.

I welcome ORR’s scrutiny and the constructive approach your team has taken in preparing this first report.

Safety performance on the strategic road network in 2021

At National Highways, safety is always our number one priority. Every road death and life changing injury is a tragedy, and we will continue working hard to help drivers and their passengers be safer and feel safe on our roads.

England has amongst the best performing road networks internationally and we undertake a significant number of activities to deliver, support, enable or motivate actions focused on safe roads, safe people, safe speeds, safe vehicles, post collision response and safety management.

As you acknowledge, we are on course to achieve our target of halving the number of people killed or seriously injured on the strategic road network by 2025, compared to a 2005 to 2009 baseline.

We will maintain this strong focus on safety as we work towards our 2025 target. This will include even closer engagement with key organisations such as DfT, ORR, Transport Focus and the emergency services to prioritise and where possible deliver actions that provide the greatest safety benefit for drivers and their passengers.

Independent evaluation of the effectiveness and operation of SVD and end-to-end systems

Smart motorways remain the most scrutinised parts of our road network and at the same time the latest data (2016 to 2020) shows that overall, in terms of serious or fatal casualties, they are our safest roads. We are continuing our work to make them our safest roads in every way. The technology currently used on smart motorways, all focused on drivers, is a system of inter-related features, creating a layering effect. This means that there is no over-reliance on one single feature.

As you recognise, we have delivered on our commitment to put radar-based SVD technology in place on all existing ALR motorways, meaning it is in place¹ on over 200 miles of ALR². SVD is also being added to ALR schemes still under construction, so when complete, these stretches have it in place. These schemes were more than 50% complete when the current pause into the rollout of new ALR schemes was announced.

ALR motorways are designed to, and do, operate safely, without the need for SVD technology. It adds to the system of inter-related features to help further reduce the risks associated with live lane stops, enabling us to respond quicker through the setting of 'report of obstruction' warning signs, setting of a Red X signal to close one or more lanes, adjusting speed limits and deploying traffic officers.

I welcome your observation that the roll-out of SVD technology will have improved the detection of stopped vehicles, with a further likely positive impact on reducing the duration of live lane stops.

While SVD does not exist on other high-speed roads, we recognise that it is currently not meeting the high performance standards we set for it. By end of June 2023, we will aim to have met the performance specification for SVD where it is in place, in a way which is manageable to our operators.

While we have made good progress during 2022, completing a number of actions from the 2020 Stocktake, and the 2021 Transport Select Committee inquiry, recent examples have shown that our systems and processes are not always operating as we would expect. I recognise the seriousness of this situation. In short, we need to do more to help ensure people feel safe and confident when using our roads.

Recognising the importance of operational technology to all lane running motorways, we are investing in a £105million programme between now and the end of the second roads period to improve CCTV, MIDAS, variable message signs and signals.

¹ This is the point in time post construction and following initial calibration where SVD alerts begin activating and are responded to within our regional control rooms. During this period we continue to calibrate the SVD system

² Subject to internal auditing now taking place



Furthermore, over the coming months and years, wherever possible, we will strive to exceed these performance expectations

Our staff are passionate about their jobs and our road users deserve the highest standards, so while we are working to address these issues, we will do everything we can to support and listen to both.

And we will continue to work with the ORR to demonstrate our progress and further support your work in evaluating the effectiveness and operation of SVD and end-to-end systems on smart motorways.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the 2020 Stocktake action plan in reducing live lane breakdowns on ALR

In March 2020, following the evidence-based stocktake of smart motorways, we committed to further improvements across our smart motorway network delivering the actions committed to in the 2020 action plan.

We have made significant progress completing the 20 actions, and I appreciate the regular progress reviews held with ORR to reflect the substantial progress made to date. Our most recent achievements include:

- completing the installation of extra signs, so drivers will almost always be able to see a sign informing them of the distance to the next place to stop in an emergency³
- completing the upgrade of all enforcement cameras to enable the detection of vehicles that pass under a Red X or enter the lane beyond a Red X, to further increase the safety of drivers, their passengers, road workers and emergency services
- reducing the national average time it takes traffic officers to attend incidents from 17 minutes to below 10 minutes (in October 2022) on all lane running motorways where emergency areas are spaced more than a mile apart³. Further to our action plan commitment, we have also committed to maintain the 10-minute attendance time until the end of the second road period.

Of the 20 stocktake actions we have completed 16, of which four are subject to internal audit. One is paused as a result of the TSC and a further three remain open and on track, including DfT's review into the use of red flashing lights by roadside recovery vehicles. While we have completed most of these actions, we are committed to go above and beyond the stocktake and take action to further improve safety of road users. This includes the actions noted above to improve SVD performance.

I welcome your endorsement that the way in which we monitor and evaluate the success of the action plan and our approach to evaluating education campaigns are well aligned to the relevant best practice guidance across government. We will consider the opportunities you have highlighted to further strengthen our campaign evaluation approach.

We are committed to taking action to help drivers and their passengers feel safe and be safer on all our roads, including smart motorways. While it is too early to fully understand the impact of the delivery of the action plan, I believe this work is continuing to have a positive impact on

³ Subject to internal auditing now taking place



safety. Clearly this is not the end of our work, and we will continue to deliver further improvements.

Thank you again for your report. Safety is at the forefront of every decision we make at National Highways and we are committed to constantly raising the bar when it comes to the safety of everyone on our network. We look forward to working closely with you as you continue to monitor our progress.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick Harris', written over a light grey circular watermark.

Nick Harris
Chief Executive