



# **‘A’ road services:**

What users of the A3 and A34 think  
November 2018





# Foreword

Roadside facilities play an important role in the experience of those making longer-distance journeys by road. They also provide a vital safety function – for all road users, not just those stopping at services – by allowing drivers to take a break.

**T**ransport Focus has built up a good understanding of what road users think about services, particularly those on motorways, through our *Motorway Services User Survey*<sup>1</sup>. Long-distance dual carriageways can carry as much traffic as some motorways, yet the provision of roadside facilities on them is not subject to the same mandatory requirements. Focussing on two important routes in Southern England, the A3 and A34, this study explores whether the current provision of services on major 'A' roads is meeting the needs of road users.

Despite identifying a number of areas for improvement, road users reported high levels of satisfaction with facilities on these roads. This is partly because road users have low expectations of what will be on offer – expectations that it's not difficult to exceed. On 'A' roads users also tend to make functional stops for fuel, the toilet and to grab a quick coffee – needs which are not difficult to satisfy. We were pleased to see that a visit to services has a positive effect on driver mood, particularly in reducing tiredness, indicating a positive benefit to driving standards and road safety.

Nevertheless, this in-depth research highlights shortcomings in current provision and makes a number of recommendations for action. Signs don't give enough information or provide it far enough in advance to help drivers plan their stop, and facilities for lorry drivers to take breaks – a legal requirement – are inadequate, despite these roads being crucial corridors for high volumes of long-distance freight.

Many of the findings in our 2016 *Take a break – road users' views about roadside facilities*<sup>2</sup> research are echoed in this new study. At the time Transport Focus recommended that:

- Highways England should explicitly acknowledge that roadside facilities are an integral part of their customers' experience. It should develop a strategy for the company to play an active role in facilitating high-quality provision to meet their needs, whether on the motorways or major 'A' roads.
- Highways England should develop a strategy to ensure there is sufficient capacity for lorries to park in the right places and with facilities that meet drivers' needs. It will need to work with the freight industry, government, local authorities and others to do this.

Although we are aware of some work in this area, there needs to be greater pace. It is disappointing that Highways England has not set out its strategy in these two areas. We expect it to do so soon.

We will continue to work with Highways England, government and operators of 'A' road services so these findings are used to make a difference for road users.

**Jeff Halliwell**  
Chair

1 <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/motorway-services-user-survey-2018/>

2 <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/take-break-road-users-views-roadside-facilities/>



## Recommendations

As well as calling on Highways England to act on our earlier recommendations (restated in the foreword to this document), we make a number of new recommendations.

Transport Focus recommends that Highways England should review its policy regarding signage for services on 'A' roads. It should develop a strategy for signage that will give road users the confidence to make an informed choice about which services to stop at, knowing what will be available, and in sufficient time to leave the road safely. Road users want:

- **earlier advance warning** of services, with a series of signs starting at least a mile before the services. This will help stop people getting stuck in the wrong lane and making potentially dangerous last-minute manoeuvres.
- **advance planning signs** to show the distance to the next few services and what is available at each one. This will help road users make an informed decision about the best services for them to stop at.
- **clearer icons and information** to help road users make an informed choice. Current icons are considered ambiguous and brand logos would aid quick recognition.

Transport Focus recommends that Highways England considers **setting a maximum distance between services on its 'A' roads**, as it does on motorways, given the safety and customer service benefits of road users having sufficient opportunities to stop, rest and refuel.

Transport Focus recommends that those who operate 'A' road services focus on improvements for lorry drivers. They want to see:

- **better facilities to sit, rest and relax.**
- individual **parking spaces that are truly suitable for lorries.** Use of these spaces by cars should be prohibited and controlled.
- where services are suitable for lorries, **signage that is clear** and **approach roads that are fit for purpose.**

Transport Focus recommends that those who operate 'A' road services do more to make their customers feel that their overall experience is worth the money they are spending. Users want:

- **clean and well-maintained toilets.**
- a **better range of food and drink**, including healthy options.
- **improved value for money** of food, drink, and fuel.



## Desired improvements to 'A' road services

The research identified areas for improvement in six aspects of the services:

### 1. Signage

- Provide advance planning signs showing the distance to the next few services on the road ahead
- Provide more advance warning signs indicating the approach of the next service area
- Make icons unambiguous and use brand logos where possible

### 2. Facilities for lorries and their drivers

- Ensure that facilities at 'A' road services intended for use by lorries are actually suitable for them
- Provide more parking spaces for lorries at 'A' road services and improve access to them
- Provide better and more secure facilities to allow drivers to rest and relax

### 3. Toilets

- Keep toilets clean and well-maintained
- Provide more toilets generally
- Ensure that signage to toilets is clear

### 4. Food and drink

- Provide a better range and choice of food and drink, including healthy options
- Provide better value for money

### 5. Look and 'feel'

- Improve general maintenance of services
- Make service areas more inviting places to take a break

### 6. More services

- Ensure that the distance between services on 'A' roads is not excessive
- Separately, ensure that the distance between services that are suitable for lorries is not excessive.

## Summary

Overall satisfaction with services on the A3 and A34 is very high at an average of 96 per cent across all of the services included in the study. This impressive score should be viewed in the context of the types of stops users tend to make, and in relation to their expectations. Those who stop at 'A' road services often do so for functional reasons and have low expectations of their visit, which many 'A' road services are clearly exceeding.

While users do not expect 'A' road services to be of particularly high quality, stopping at these services tends to give an uplift in mood. Users report feeling less tired after a visit to these services, indicating a positive impact on road safety.

Of the specific aspects related to 'A' road service areas, users tend to rate toilet facilities, signage on approach to the services, and facilities related to lorries and lorry drivers less well than others. Users particularly mention:

### The quality and frequency of signage on approach

Road users note that there are not enough signs which indicate the distance to the next few service areas; make clear what users can expect those services to offer; or that give enough warning of the approach of the slip road to access the service area. Road users report that a lack of information negatively impacts on driver behaviour, with drivers forced to make last-minute decisions to change lanes to access the services.

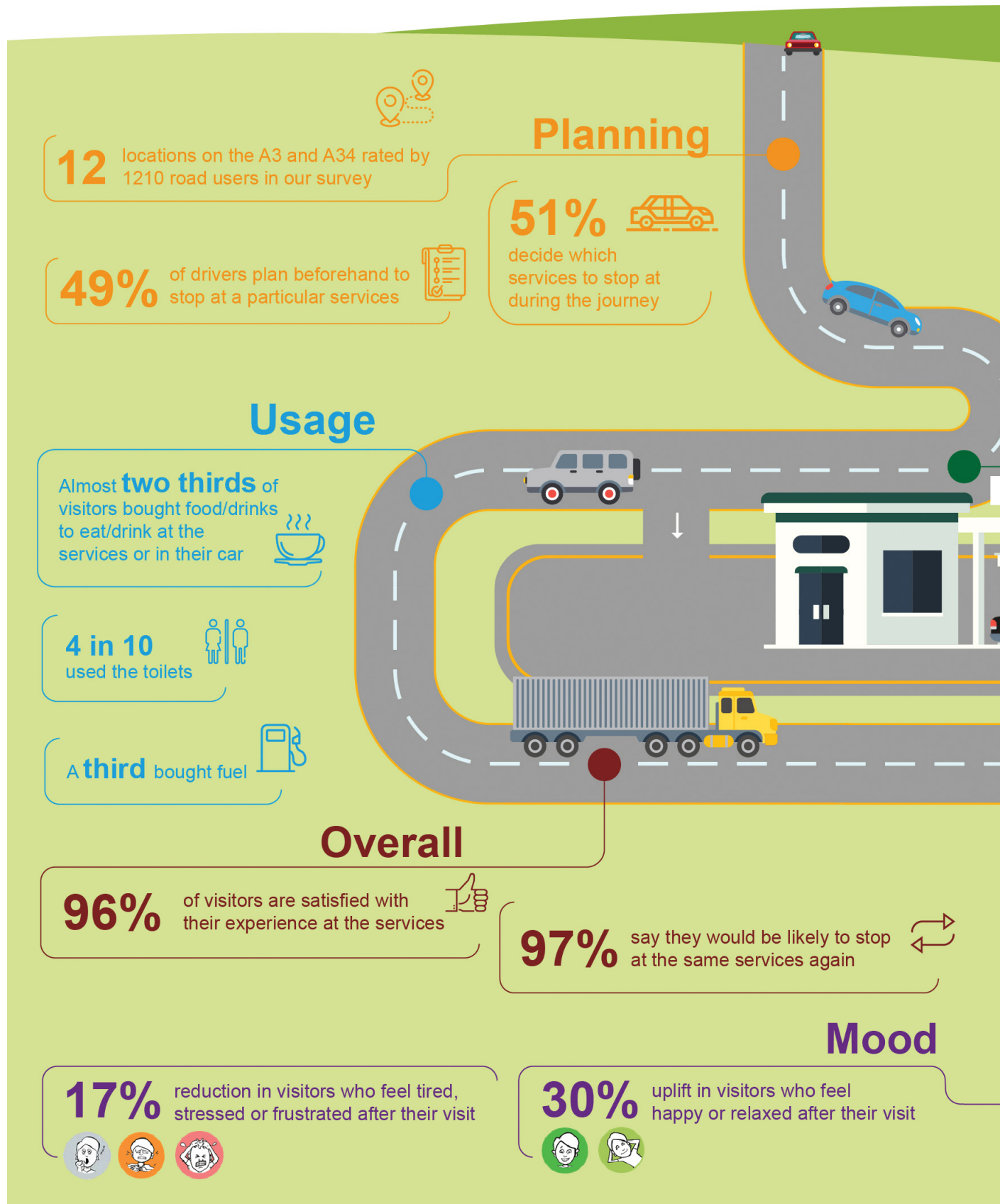
### Toilet facilities

Users comment that toilets tend to be poorly-maintained, too few in number and are poorly signed.

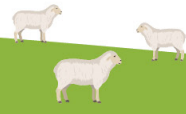
### Facilities for lorry drivers

Compared with the more commonly used aspects of the services, lorry drivers are less happy with those aspects which are designed specifically for their use. Lorry drivers report that access to services on these 'A' roads is not always suitable for their vehicles and that dedicated parking spaces tend to be small and limited in number. They also note a lack of facilities for relaxing and socialising. For that reason, alternative areas for rest are often sought, either in unsuitable laybys or in areas away from major 'A' roads altogether.

# 'A' road services







**85%** rate the usefulness of approach signs as good



**72%** think the layout of the car park is good

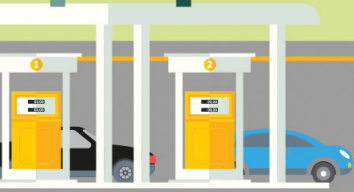


**86%** have a good overall impression of the building as they walk up to it



## Arrival

### PETROL



### SERVICES



## Ratings

**73%** rate the value for money of the food/drink they had as good



**81%** rate the cleanliness of the toilets as good



**98%** rate waiting for a fuel pump to be available as good

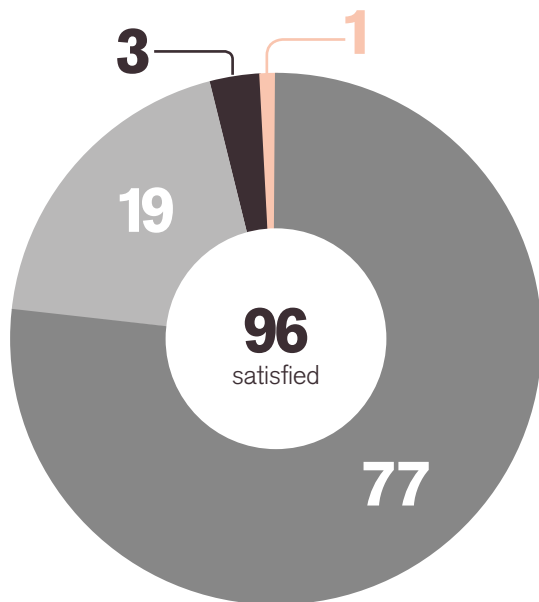


# Key findings

## Overall satisfaction

At services on the A3 and A34 a total 96 per cent of visitors said they were fairly or very satisfied with their experience on the day. This high level of satisfaction is consistent across different types of visitor to the services, with satisfaction among lorry drivers and those aged 55 and over lowest among the various visitor groups.

### 1 Overall satisfaction (%)



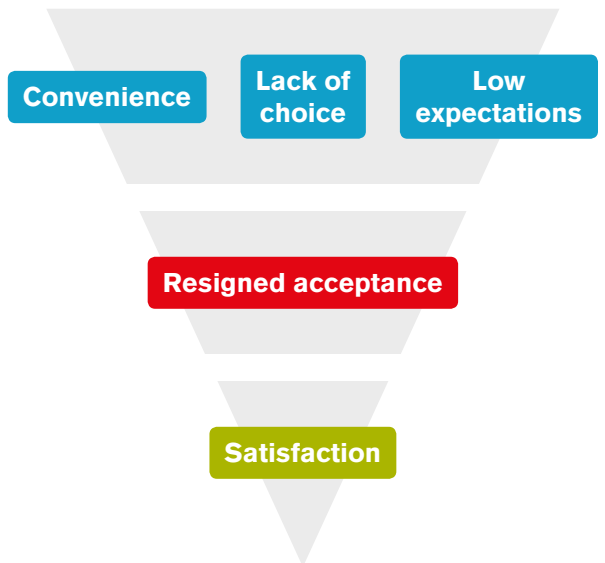
- Very satisfied
- Fairly satisfied
- Neither/nor
- Fairly dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

Base: all respondents (1210)

This high level of satisfaction should be viewed in the context of visitors' expectations: the majority of stops at these services are for functional reasons and visitors do not generally plan to spend much time or money. Low expectations of what is likely to be available, and the quality on offer sets a low bar for satisfaction, which is often exceeded.



### 2 Why is satisfaction high?





"You just want to go in, do what you need to do, then get back in your car and continue with your journey."

"I feel like I don't have that high expectation of a service station on an 'A' road. For me it's just somewhere I can have a quick wee, and can grab a quick drink, so as long as there's some form of coffee shop, whatever it may be."

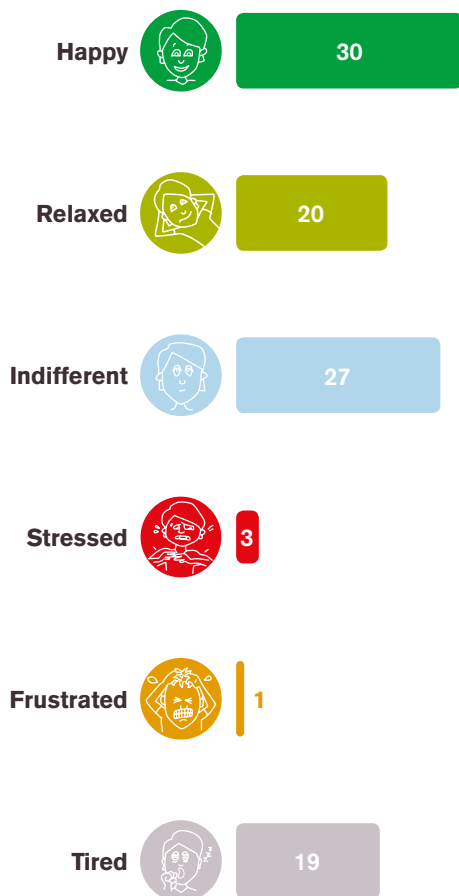
## Impact on mood

The proportion of visitors who feel happy or relaxed increases from 50 per cent to 80 per cent after a visit to these services. This is mainly accounted for by fewer people reporting feeling tired or indifferent after their visit, rather than by a reduction in feelings of stress or frustration.

A stop at these services has the greatest impact on mood among those who drive for a living or drive on business. Similarly, longer and/or spontaneous stops are more likely to have a positive impact on mood than other types of stops.

### 3 Mood on arrival and exit (%)

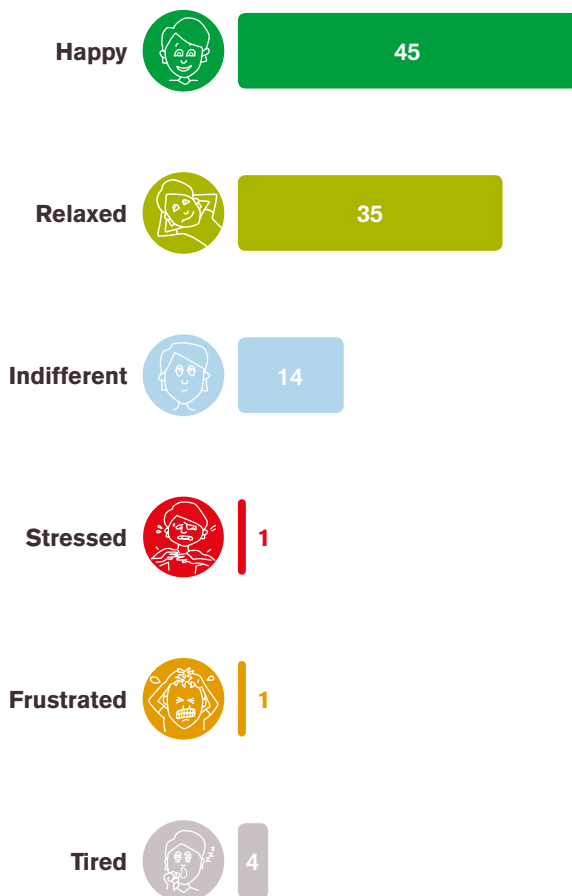
#### Mood on arrival



#### Change in mood



#### Mood after visit

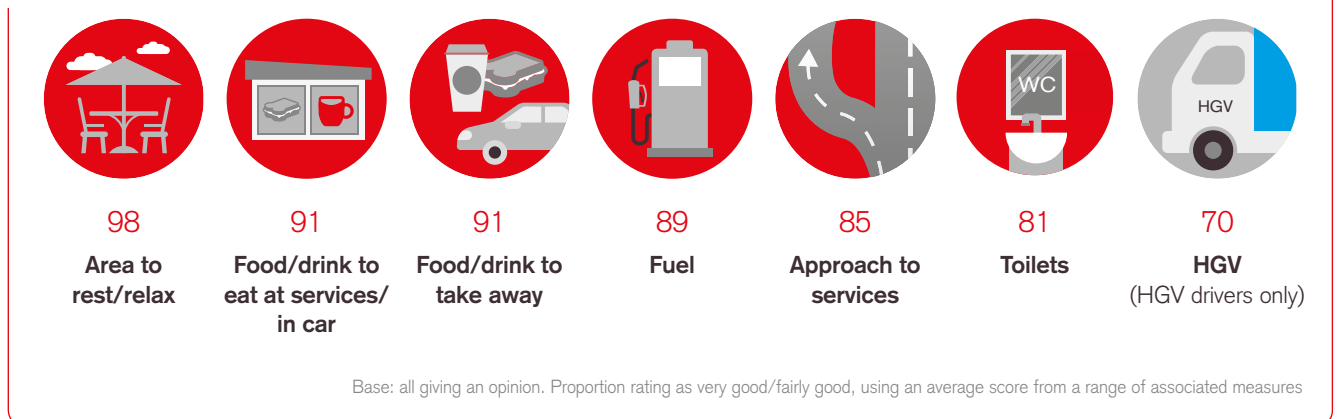


Base: all respondents (1210)

## Satisfaction with the specific facilities available

Users of the specific facilities available at each site were asked to rate various aspects of these services. An average score was then derived for each facility or feature.

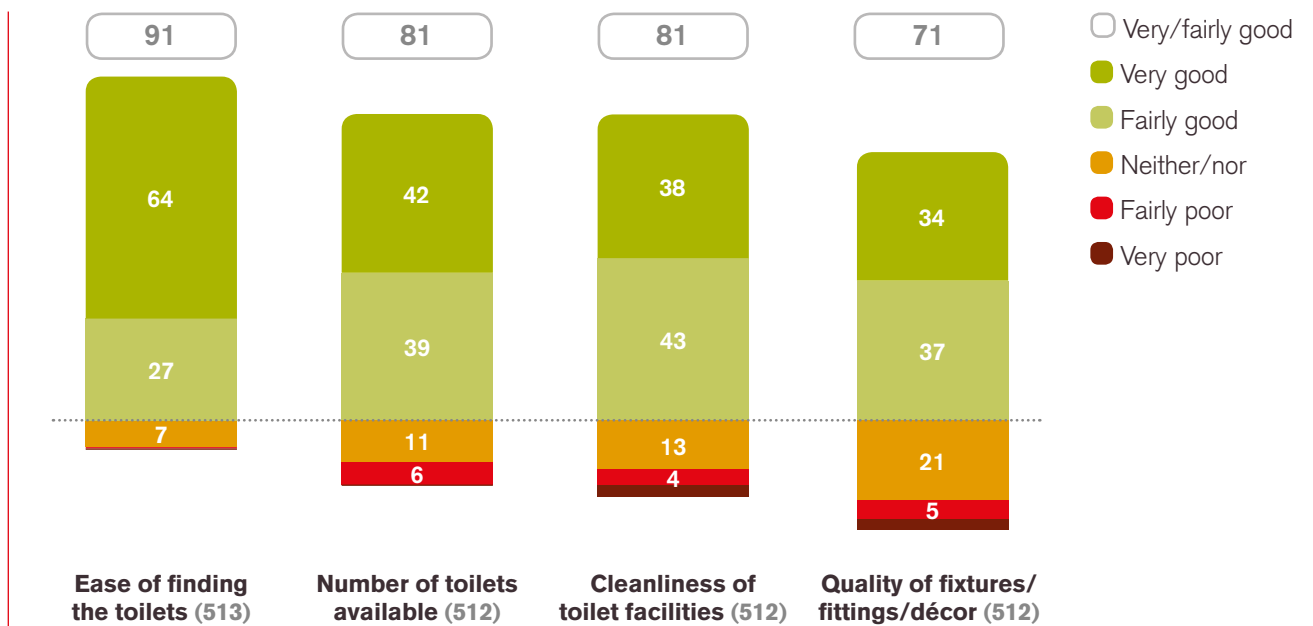
### 4 Rating of facilities offered (%)



On average users rate aspects related to **toilet facilities** lowest in terms of satisfaction. Users see room for

improvement in terms of ease of finding the toilets, the number available, and their general quality and cleanliness.

### 5 Rating of aspects related to toilets (%)



Road users were sometimes unsure if a purchase was necessary for them to use the toilet at 'A' road services. Some felt that it would represent a significant

improvement if toilets were provided for all *without* the need to buy something first – or if that is already the case, for this to be made clear.

"[Toilets] would be the first thing that I'd use if I was stopping – if it was dirty, that would probably put me off any hot food. It gives you an idea of the standard."

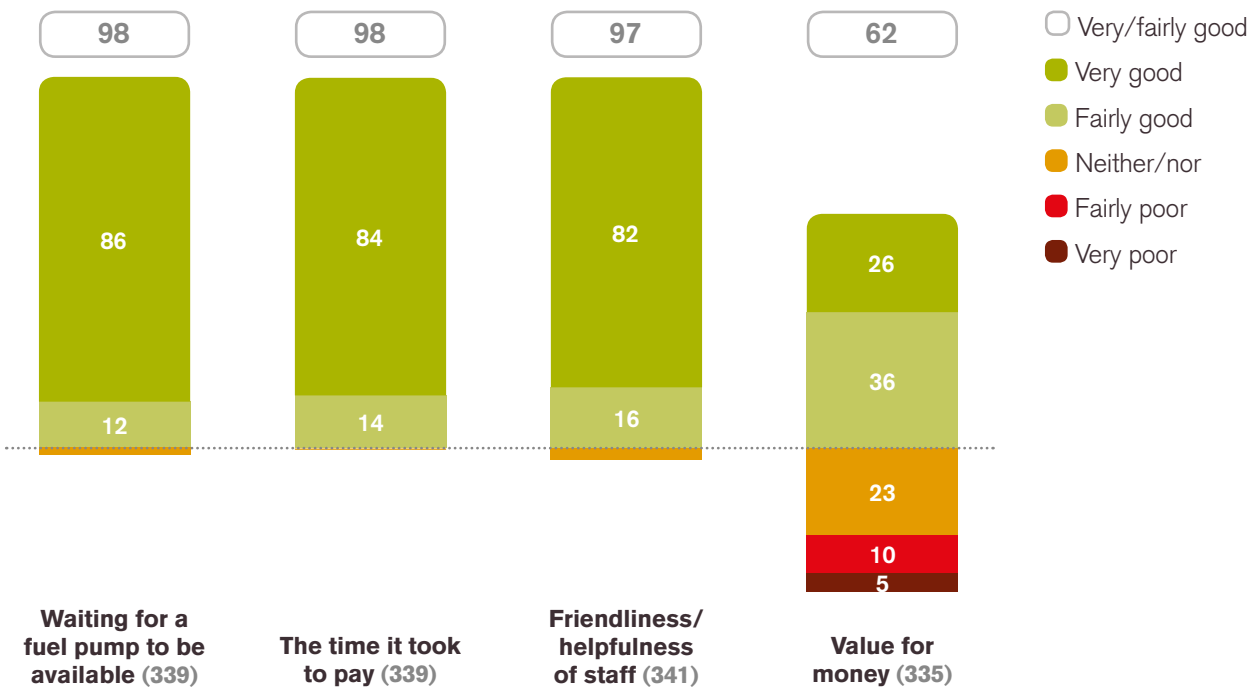
"It would put me off to go into a service station that's not got very clean toilets, it would make me think twice about going there again. The other day the toilets were round the back of the garage. It wasn't a proper services and it was dreadful and I thought I'd better not stop there again."

"Personally I think all services should provide a toilet at least where you don't need to buy anything. Without feeling awkward that you've gone into McDonald's and snuck in because everyone needs to go."

Most aspects related to the overall **fuel purchase** experience at these services scored very highly.

However, users tend to give a low rating for the value for money of the fuel.

### 6 Rating of aspects related to fuel (%)



Base: all buying fuel and giving an opinion (in brackets)

"When I do stop on the A3 I'm always annoyed with myself. It's expensive to fill up and the difference is quite substantial when you're filling up at a service station compared to where I would normally go at Sainsbury's."

"Not unless I absolutely have to, but that's really rare. And I'd only put a tenner in just to get you to Tesco."

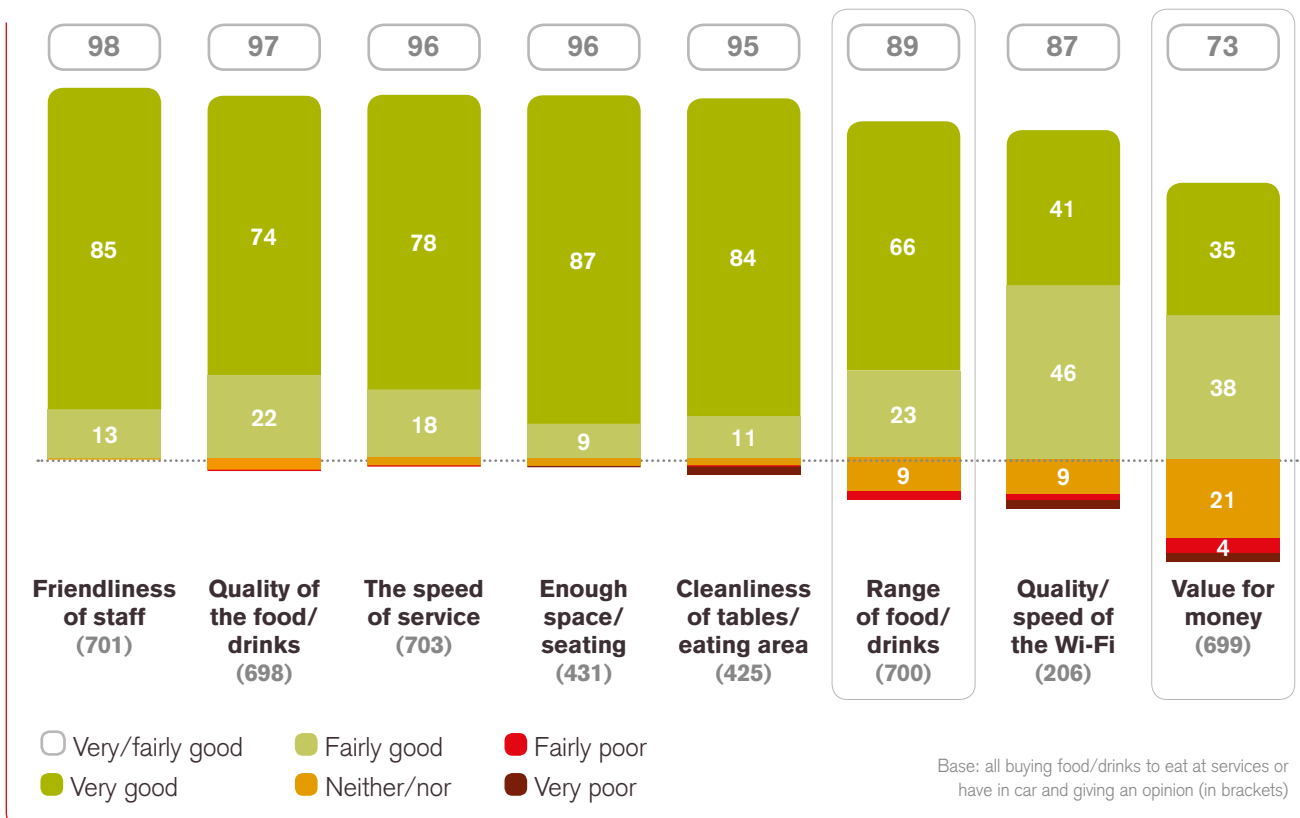
"They're expensive. Absolute rip off! Worse than the motorway. That's how I feel about it."

"Really, really rare that I'd fill up at services. Occasionally I might get caught short, like if I've just been on holiday or something. Those kind of dire situations."

Many users say that they avoid buying fuel at 'A' road services because of the high cost, and they say that they will fill up at these services only in an emergency. In terms of the A3 and A34 specifically, 43 per cent agree that the cost of fuel along the road is similar to the cost elsewhere.

On average those who have bought **food and drink** at these services rate the experience relatively highly. The friendliness and helpfulness of staff is particularly highly rated. Nevertheless, those who have bought food and drink are less satisfied with the range and the value for money of that which is offered.

### 7 Ratings of aspects related to food and drink (%)





"I think they're too expensive so I just take sandwiches."

"The variety has got a lot better, don't get me wrong, but there are some of the smaller places where you just have no options a lot of the time."

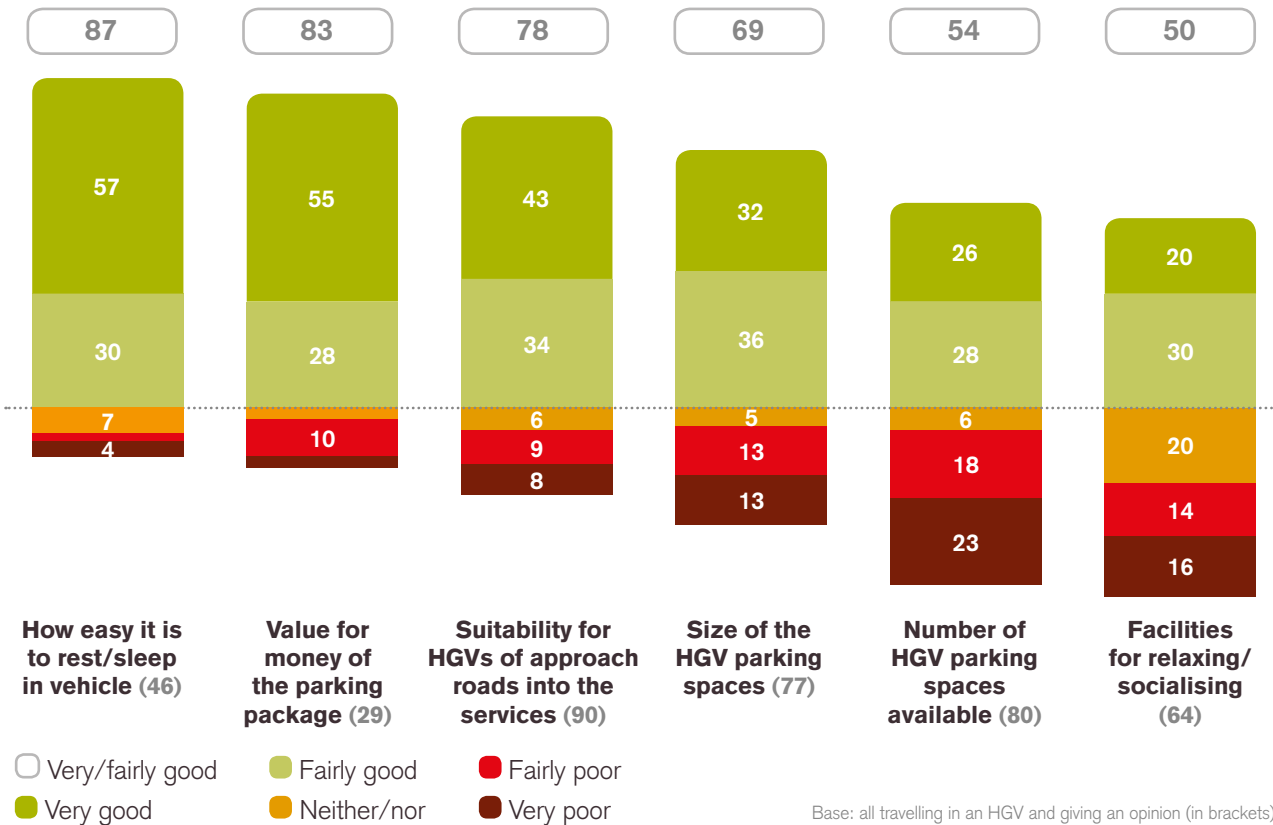
## Services and lorry drivers

While lorry drivers are generally positive about commonly used facilities, they are, on average, less happy about those aspects of the services which are specifically designed for their use.

Particularly, lorry drivers rate lower than other aspects

the facilities for relaxing and socialising, the number and size of the parking spaces available, and the suitability of approach roads into the services. These themes are also prevalent when HGV drivers are asked what improvements they would like made.

### 8 Rating of facilities for HGV drivers (%)



"Even at the bigger services [on the A34] there's not enough space for large vehicles. You go use the facilities then move off and park in a layby."

"Well there isn't anywhere you can sit down - I always go back to my cab and sit in there which is not ideal."

"I would never park there overnight. There's not enough space and the security is non-existent."

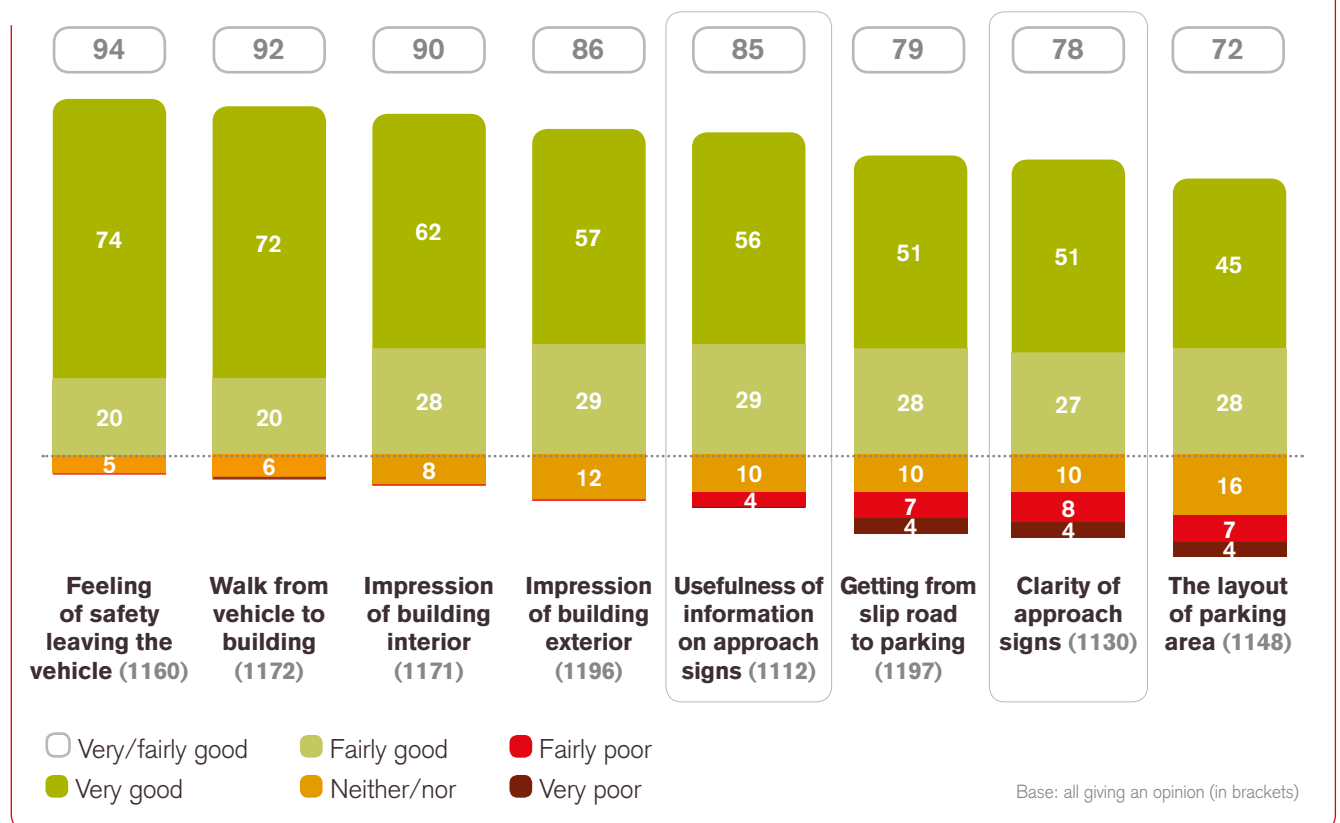
"It's not like on the motorway where you get a whole section for parking up. Sometimes there's only space by the pump, and you end up getting in the way. But there's nowhere else to park."

## Approaching the services

Alongside facilities for lorry drivers and the toilets, features related to the approach to the services were on average rated relatively poorly. Of the approach features, users

tend to rate less well the clarity and the usefulness of the information on signs than they rate other aspects.

### 9 Rating of aspects related to the approach to services (%)



During qualitative research, service users were shown different types of signage related to roadside services and asked to make comments. Several themes emerged from these conversations. To begin with 'A' road users mentioned that there should be a greater number of advance planning signs, indicating the distance along the road to the next two or three service areas. This would allow road users to make an informed decision about where to stop, thereby avoiding last-minute, potentially dangerous decisions.



"I like it where you know how far you've got to travel. Oh yes definitely. And I think it's good to have the closest place, and then the next one."

"A lot of them it just says services, tells you a couple of miles back, and it doesn't seem to give you enough detail. Not enough warning, and not a big enough sign sometimes."

"You know those signs where it tells you how far away the services are... like services 3 miles, services 23 miles. I don't remember seeing any of those along the A34. There's one right at the very top when you're ready to go onto the M40, but that's for services on the M40. But I don't recall any on the A34 saying there's a services 3 miles ahead or whatever."

For similar safety reasons, 'A' road users also mentioned the need for more frequent signage alerting them to the turn-off ahead to the services. They also expressed a preference for clearer and less ambiguous icons on these signs: brand logos would, for example, give road users a better idea about what would be available at each of the services, as has become established practice on motorways.

"These blue ones with the logos are just much better. You can glance at it and very quickly take in all the information without having to read everything."



"I'm not often stopping for food but it would be helpful for me to have the logos because I don't eat meat. And then you know what you're going to get."

"What's the difference between a coffee cup and a knife and fork? Like a Costa sells sandwiches, so which one is that? What makes it just a coffee cup versus something that sells food?"

## Non-users of services

To get a clearer sense of any shortcomings in service provision, we asked those who avoid using these services why they do so. These discussions indicate that there is both an emotional and rational element to avoiding services on 'A' roads. On the emotional side non-users expect services on 'A' roads to be 'run-down', 'run of the mill',

or 'grubby'. More rationally they feel that these sites will lack facilities and that the service offering will be limited and poor value for money. Non-users who know more about the road and the surrounding area are also likely to 'hold out' or make detours to access facilities perceived to be better than those on the road itself.

### Case study **Regular leisure traveller, avoids services if possible**



**Stella, 59 years old**  
Regular leisure traveller

- Usually travelling with one other person
- A34
- Avoids services if at all possible

#### **Type of journey**

I travel on the A34 several times a month.

Usually I travel with my husband but also my daughter and my sister.

We regularly go up to the NEC in Birmingham to watch a show or see an exhibition. I also go to Bicester Village. More recently I had to visit a specialist vet a few times for our dog which takes me onto the A34.

I know the road very well, having travelled on it for a number of years, so I don't plan, just use the sat nav for traffic, roadworks and cameras.

#### **Not using services**

I avoid services if I can; only use them in an emergency if I need the loo but even then I try not to.

I don't like the feel of a service station, it's got a dirty feel to it. It's just not for me. There are so many people going through it – you have got no peace using the toilet. It is also more expensive – why is that?

I usually take a packed lunch or fill up a thermos with hot porridge and some compôte on top. I could not imagine anything worse than a McDonald's breakfast.

#### **Ideal service station**

I'm really not interested in chains. The food comes out of a pack and it all tastes the same.

I really like independent shops and cafes. The ideal service station I imagine a bit like a co-operative type thing where it does not cost people an arm and a leg to sell stuff. Everyone would put their wares out. The food is freshly made but quick, like a jacket potato or homemade scones or fresh toast.



Case study **HGV driver, avoids 'A' road services with a preference for truck stops**



**Rami, 57 years old  
HGV driver**

- Making long trips with overnight stays, lasting 2-3 days
- All over the UK, including A3 and A34
- Non-user

### Type of journey

I'm making long trips with multiple deliveries. They last for days so I need to make overnight stays.

I travel all over the UK, and have done for years; I know the roads really well and all the best places to stop.

I always plan the trip thoroughly.

### Using services

For overnight stays I will do my very best to avoid 'A' road services, or motorway services for that matter.

Truck stops are ten times better: they're set up for lorry drivers, and know exactly what we need. They're normally family-run, personal and feel like a home-from-home. There's also a social aspect with a lounge area with other drivers.

There's secure and organised parking, where they know exactly when you're leaving in the morning and plan around this. They normally have good food and good washing facilities. Services just aren't set up in the same way. There are a few motorway ones which are decent, but if you get stuck at an 'A' road services overnight, it's just not set up for lorries.

### Priorities

Secure parking – I'm responsible for my load, and I'll worry about it if there's no security overnight, even if I'm sleeping in the cab.

Good food. And healthy – at least not just fast food!

Enough clean showers and toilets.

A personal, family-run environment is a nice touch.

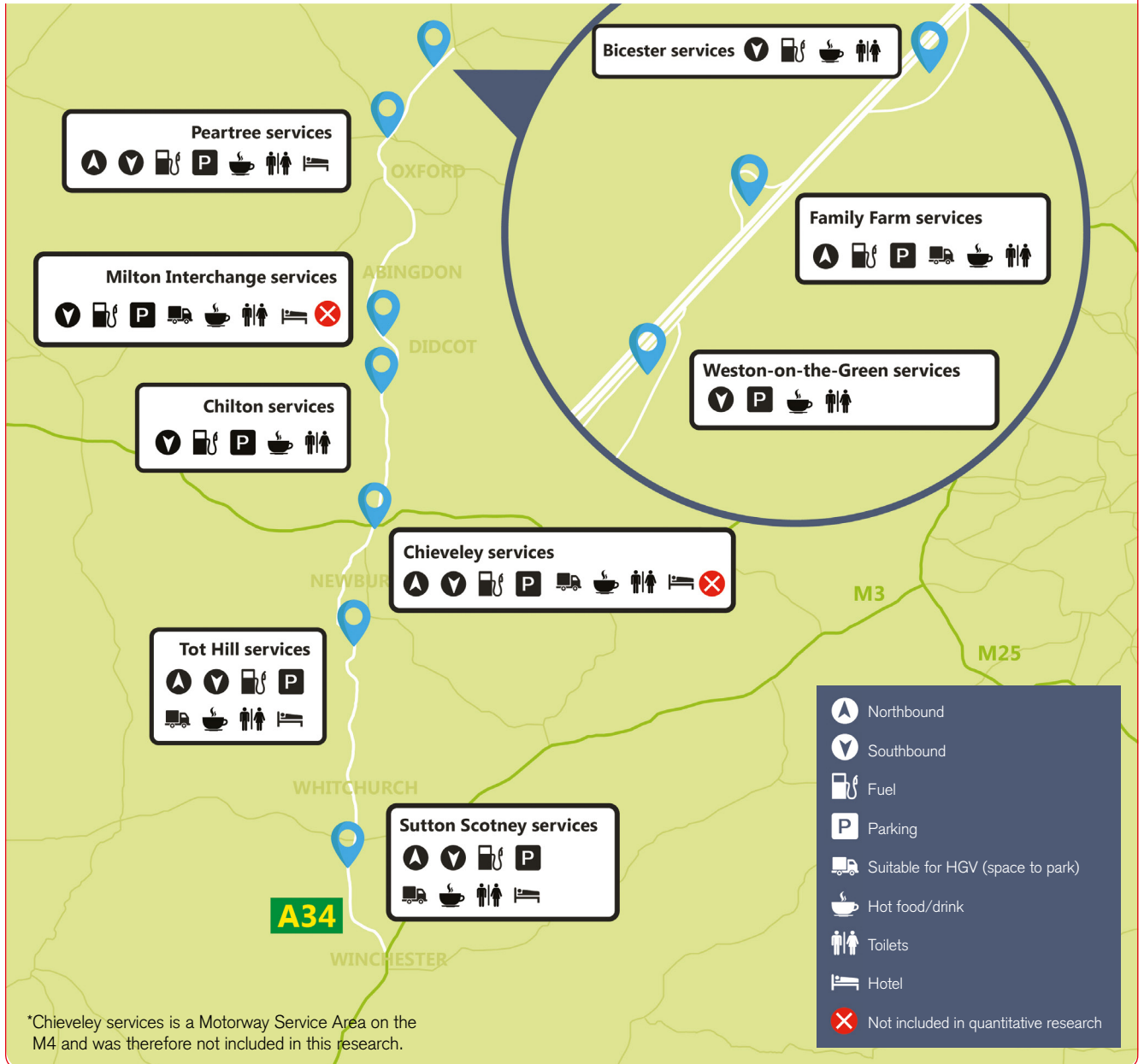
Truck stops just take away so much of the hassle.

*"You just don't get a good night's sleep – you'll be worried about people trying to break in, and they can be pretty noisy with people coming and going a lot, and you have to organise everything yourself. You have to check with the other drivers when they plan to leave so that you don't get boxed in."*

*"Our company has a journey-planning tool, which I always use to make sure that when I have an overnight stay I'll be close to a truck stop. I'll only go to services if I really have to. And services on 'A' roads really are a real last resort."*

# How we did it

A34 services map – **what is available, and where?**



## Background

Over the past two years Transport Focus has developed the Motorway Services User Survey (MSUS) which measures the user experience of services on motorways in England<sup>3</sup>. This 'A' road service user research is being developed alongside MSUS. It explores the provision and user experience on the major 'A' roads that, together with motorways, form the Strategic Road Network, managed by Highways England on behalf of the government.

This research concentrates on provision in one Highways England operational area covering parts of Surrey, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire, looking particularly at provision on the A3 and a section of the A34. We hope to roll out this research in other Highways England operational areas in the future.

Transport Focus was supported by the research agency BDRC Continental in conducting this project.

A3 services map – **what is available, and where?**



Fieldwork was undertaken between February and April 2018.

### Auditing

At the beginning of February 2018, the A3 and A34 within this area were audited to establish the number and type of services which were signed or accessible from the road. The information gathered was used to inform the latter stages of the research, in particular the sampling plan for the quantitative research.

### Qualitative research

In February and March 2018 qualitative research was conducted among users of the A3 and A34. Four focus groups and 34 in-depth interviews were conducted.

They involved both users of the services along the roads and those who said that they avoided these services. This part of the research covered users and non-users of services making journeys for a variety of reasons such as commuting, travelling for work, and travelling for leisure. In-depth interviews were undertaken with seven HGV drivers.

### Quantitative research

In March and April 2018, a total of 1,210 interviews of ten minutes in length were conducted with service users at 12 locations on the A3 and A34. Users of the services were approached for interview as they left the services and returned to their vehicles. Interviewing shifts were conducted over a six-hour period and covered a range of times of the day and days of the week.

3 <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/motorway-services-user-survey-spring-2017/>

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