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M6 disruption on 4 February 2016

I am writing regarding the significant disruption to road users caused by the 24 hour closure of the M6 on 4 February 2016 following a fatal accident.

Transport Focus has considerable experience of assisting the rail industry in focusing on the customer experience during major incidents, including input to post-event analysis and helping shape recommendations for the future. Examples include when 200 passenger had to sleep on a train at Kings Cross overnight in 2013, major signalling problems around Cardiff in 2014 and the infamous East Coast Main Line engineering overrun at Holloway on Boxing Day 2014. It strikes me that there may be scope for us to help you raise the profile of the road user in your post-incident reviews, whether on this occasion or in future.

Turning to the M6, aspects of Highways England's response to the incident, as aired at the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner's hearing on 18 March, give me cause for concern on behalf of road users. Specifically, that while the Police investigation was ongoing and efforts were made to repair the infrastructure and reopen the road, it appears that relatively little consideration was given to the plight of road users caught up in the queue. It is reported that some people were stranded for up to seven hours. Delays of that order cross the line between a customer service issue and a welfare issue.

The incident prompts me to ask the following questions, as much about the way Highways England manages significant unscheduled whole-carriageway closures network-wide as about this particular event.

In terms of looking after road users and getting them on their way as quickly as possible:

- How soon after an incident does Highways England expect, working with the Police, to help road users avoid the disruption by physically preventing more vehicles passing the last junction?
- How soon after the start of an incident does Highways England expect to start evacuating stranded road users, whether through a managed return to the previous junction, access to the opposite carriageway or some other method?



- What are the arrangements for distribution of welfare-related essentials like food and drink when road users are stranded for long periods? Had this incident happened in sub-zero temperatures, or during a heat-wave, what would Highways England have done differently?
- How does Highways England safeguard the welfare of disabled road users and those with time-critical medical conditions?

In terms of getting the road open again:


- Does Highways England consider temporary repairs to get traffic moving again as quickly as possible (for example in time for a morning or evening peak), with full repairs following later on a planned basis?
- While accident investigation is ongoing, does Highways England get access to the site to determine what repairs are required – enabling you to mobilise labour and materials so work can start the moment Police finish their work?

In addition, this incident highlights the seeming under-use of the M6 Toll as a temporary free-at-the-point-of-use alternative route when there is a lengthy closure of the original M6. We have heard both financial and practical reasons given for why, historically, the M6 Toll hasn't been used to keep through traffic, and some intermediate traffic, moving when the M6 is closed. Whatever the historic position, I would suggest that this incident presents a good opportunity for Highways England to work with Midland Expressway to reach a satisfactory commercial and practical solution. Failure to make full use of an obvious diversionary route does not feel like being on the customer's side!

I am conscious that I have raised a number of issues here. Perhaps we should arrange a specific meeting to discuss?

For your information I am copying my letter to Andrew Jones MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State and other interested parties.

Yours sincerely


Anthony Smith
Chief Executive