



Populus

M4 Smart Motorway Roadworks

May 2019 – Local Authority qualitative insights

transportfocus 

 **highways**
england

SECTION 1

Approach

SECTION 2

Overall satisfaction

Overall, local authorities are happy with both their relationship with Highways England and their management of the smart motorway roadworks

- Local authorities felt positive about the level of communication they receive/have received from them about the smart motorway upgrade
- Our local authority respondents had been visited by Highways England several times to talk about the smart motorway upgrade plans and discuss how it could/would impact their areas. They also maintain regular contact with them via email and phone
- There was some concern about the rigidity of the Development Consent Order for the smart motorway upgrade. One felt that it didn't go far enough to help the local areas with the potential traffic pressures their road networks might receive due to diversions, accidents etc.
- When asked about their preference for phasing the roadworks there was push back about having them take place at one time in a longer stretch
- However ultimately they felt that the finished smart motorway system would benefit their local area



A clear impact of the smart motorway roadworks for local authorities is dealing with residents' concerns and questions

- The majority of those we spoke to did consider the impact the smart motorway roadworks has on residents and businesses in their areas, and felt these impacts were something they actively needed to mediate (with HE's help/guidance)
- They either communicate relevant information about the smart motorway roadworks to local organisations/residents themselves or help facilitate Highways England in doing so e.g. displaying Highways England communications on their social media channels



“If there’s work taking place **overnight** that’s **particularly noisy** then residents will come to the council and **complain** to us but I haven’t heard of any issues”

Local authority

“Residents would **complain** about how they **weren’t aware** of the closure, the **diversion route wasn’t clear** but again I’ve heard nothing which is a really good thing”

Local authority

“I guess there is an **obvious benefit** once the works are complete... the **additional capacity** that it has to deliver will benefit my area”

Local authority

At the same time, they also have broader area concerns about the smart motorway roadworks at a local authority level

- Significant areas of impact included:
 - Area capacity**
 - Perhaps the largest impact they considered was the effect that diversions or accidents could have on their road networks e.g. increased volume of traffic and subsequent flow management
 - Air pollution**
 - Some consulted with independent environmental groups about best practice and how to lessen the impact of pollution driven by the roadworks and ultimately the increased levels of vehicles once the road is complete
 - Landscape changes**
 - The removal of trees and vegetation was also a concern for local authorities, due to the desire to preserve local environments and the impact of increased noise levels
 - Noise levels** (during and after the roadworks)
 - Particular concern for residents who live near to the motorway
- Most raised these topics/issues with Highways England during the consultation phase of the project e.g. the council response to the smart motorway proposal
- The majority felt that their questions/issues had been adequately met by Highways England during this phase and were satisfied that a robust plan had been put in place

Let's hear about concerns from our local authorities

"If anything goes wrong then the traffic diverts through my area which can cause problems ... **we do get complaints from residents** from time to time about **traffic volumes and lorries**"

Local authority

"When people **divert through my area** it can cause problems, it doesn't take much for my area to grind to a halt"

Local authority

"A lot of **vegetation** has been taken out as part of the works and a lot of the **residents have been concerned** because they can see that that's going to take a **long time** to grow back and it's going to be **noisier** for them in that respect"

Local authority

The majority of local authorities report having a positive working relationship with Highways England

Positive aspects of the relationship included...

- ✓ The level of communication they received
- ✓ Receiving communication well in advance of the roadworks
- ✓ They appreciated the variety of ways that Highways England communicated with them
- ✓ If there was an urgent issue (on either side) then usually there is a phone call
- ✓ General communication was received via email
- ✓ They also had meetings on site or in the office to run through specific issues that needed their attention
- ✓ And they mentioned that Highways England often work with them to help lessen the impact/plan for overnight closures

However they did feel some aspects could be improved, these included...

- ✗ Some needed more reassurance about whether HE had a plan for how they should manage extra traffic in their areas due to the roadworks
- ✗ Some felt that the process surrounding the Development Consent Order could be more flexible

Let's hear about concerns from our local authorities

"We talk to Highways England reasonably **regularly**"

Local authority

"I'm **very satisfied**, we don't ever have any issues in getting hold of anybody, the communication on this project has been **excellent**, people have been very, **very good at getting in contact with us**"

Local authority

"**No complaints**, they've been excellent in the way they've handled it from the start and **swift** to come back on any of our queries"

Local authority

"We would expect Highways England to be **consulting with residents** in the area about the scheme and that's what they've done"

Local authority

"They've come and **talked to us** on **numerous occasions** and given presentations to members of our transport action group"

Local authority

"We've had **relevant email contact** and phone calls where necessary during the time of the inquiry through the development process but also we get **various updates** now that we're into the delivery phase"

Local authority

The current process for securing a Development Consent Order makes it difficult for local authorities to feel reassured about the level of impact they face

- Local authorities fully support the idea of upgrading the motorway and admitted that they felt the specific issues they raised (e.g. air pollution, noise, etc.) were satisfactorily addressed
- However some felt there were other factors that also had an impact
 - That ultimately the Secretary of State is the determining authority on the project and whilst they are comfortable with this fact they found it difficult at times to communicate this to other organisations, residents and businesses who put pressure on them to ‘do more’
 - Others felt that the DCO did not go far enough to protect their infrastructure. An example of this could be that the areas affected would want to take measures to widen/add to their own network in order to deal with the overflow of traffic during the works, however they may not be able to make the business case for this due to the temporary nature of the roadworks



However, local authorities felt that the smart motorway upgrade project on the M4 was a unique ‘once in a lifetime opportunity’ that Highways England could use to their advantage by setting the ‘gold standard’ in how to implement large scale infrastructure projects in the future

Local authorities felt that a range of different channels should be used in order to reach residents, road users and businesses

- They felt that the inclusion of the use of social media was vital as the majority of people are used to using this channel
- They also felt that social media would be best used for ‘signposting’ where people could go for more information e.g. a Facebook advert with a link to the relevant Highways England page
- However they did feel that there was still a need for the use of more ‘traditional channels’ for those who don’t use social media and those who do but still want the option
- Similarly to road users there's a feeling that all channels (or as many as possible) should be used to get through to road users and residents
- They were particularly supportive of local events as they have seen these work in the past
- Text and email alerts were suggested for urgent messages (such as closures or accident alerts) but they did feel that mailing lists could also work well here
- They felt it was important to communicate both information about the roadworks and the long term benefits of the motorway



Let's hear about communication channels from our local authorities

“**Social media** is a **quick and effective** way of updating people ... but there is still a need to have **leaflets or exhibitions** or things where people can go along and speak to someone directly”

Local authority

“In times when we do have **significant traffic this will keep it moving** and keep them safe, I think that's a key message to get out”

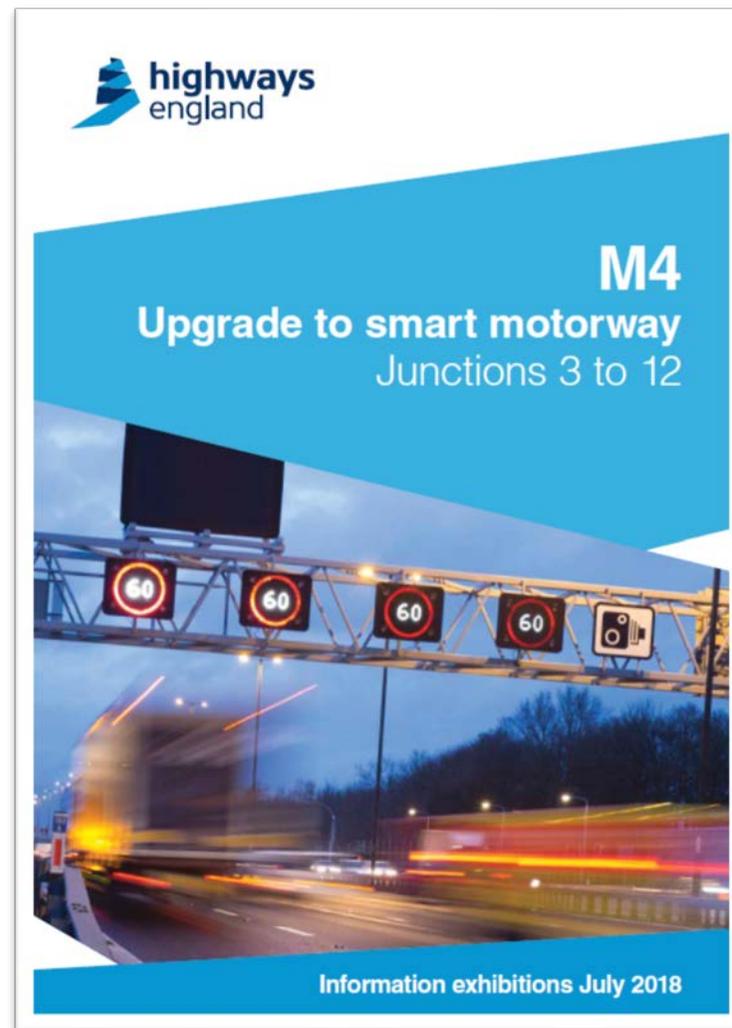
Local authority

“There's been **leaflets**, there's been **emails** and **twitter updates** but there's also been **exhibitions** that have taken place in my area so businesses and residents were able to come along and see what was proposed”

Local authority

Local authorities liked the leaflet and felt that it was optimally designed for road users, residents and businesses alike

- Liked the layout – particularly the use of bullet points
- Good visual outline of the scheme
- Felt it adequately covers the key areas that effect users –variable speeds and the emergency refuge areas
- Thought the language was the ‘right level’ e.g. not too technical
- Liked the map as it showed the scale of the project and key dates
- Thought it was good to show the meanings of different signs as users will need to change their behaviour when using them and so need to know what to do
- Ultimately they thought it was concise but captured vital information



Let's hear about the leaflet from our local authorities

“They’ve **pitched it just right**, when the works start and then the benefits as well, I think it’s pretty good”

Local authority

“The photo’s support, **a picture speaks a thousand words**”

Local authority

“I was happy to have it around the office if people were interested”

Local authority

“I would have thought this is for residents and businesses”

Local authority

“The **language was good** it’s not overly technical but it doesn’t ‘dumb it down’; it doesn’t treat the reader ‘foolishly’”

Local authority

Local authorities appreciate the work being phased as this reduces the potential for pressure on the networks in their areas

- They felt there would be a significant impact on their areas if the roadworks were not phased and worried how the area would accommodate this
- One local authority member even said they would go so far to counsel against this or in their words ‘block’ it
- Ultimately, they support the smart motorway upgrade but would need considerable reassurance about the planning put in place if the roadworks were to take place in one or longer stretches

“If you had all of that construction going on at one time it would be **quite a hit** say travelling from London to Bristol for example”

Local authority

“It’s important to **not have the whole stretch busy** ... I think it would be preferable to **break it down into phases** and it would be interesting to see the time gains broken down if it was done in one stretch... those time gains might not be as significant as you would think”

Local authority

“We’d just like things to be **finished**, we’re talking an almost two year construction period...but **doing it all at once would be an awfully long stretch** and I think that would be difficult to achieve, plus the level of disruption along the route would make this hard to successfully occur”

Local authority