



# Upgrading the M4 to a smart motorway

– road users' views one year on  
December 2020



In the work it undertakes on behalf of transport users Transport Focus places great importance on monitoring user satisfaction and priorities for improvement. Improving reliability and reducing disruption always feature highly among those priorities, which often leads to significant investment in infrastructure improvements. Unfortunately, such investments will generally bring short-term disruption.

Users of the M4 motorway between Reading and London have been experiencing this sort of pain while the road is upgraded to a four-lane smart motorway. Transport Focus is pleased to have applied its knowledge and learnings from research around major railway upgrades to help Highways England put the road user at the heart of its thinking and, specifically, to actively seek users' views through survey research.

Initial research was conducted in 2019<sup>1</sup> as the upgrade work was getting underway. That research has now been repeated one year on to understand whether road user views have changed. We have also looked for evidence of awareness among road users of actions taken by Highways England in response to the recommendations made after the initial research.

The latest research, summarised here, provides Highways England with evidence to monitor the effectiveness of, and potentially to further refine, its communications and other activities to provide road users with the best possible experience until the M4 works are completed.

**Guy Dangerfield**

Head of strategy  
Transport Focus



Since the formation of Highways England five years ago, there has been a real change in focus towards customer service. We listen to our customers to understand their priorities and expectations. We know that roadworks are frustrating, so continually look to see what we can do to improve them. Working alongside Transport Focus has enabled us to better understand road users' experiences of the M4 smart motorway project.

We're encouraged that our work to listen to and improve customer experience has led to an improved general awareness of the project. We will continue to engage with local media outlets to keep drivers up to date about all aspects of the works and will explore ways to improve how we share information with our customers, including our update bulletins.

The project has worked hard to improve its roadside communications. We've heard that road users want to know more about the progress of the scheme, so we are committed to installing signs to show this. We will also continue to explore the use of other channels, including text messaging and digital media and are committed to improving our closure information using these platforms.

The project has also been looking at how it can run at the highest safe speed through the roadworks whilst ensuring safety, both for road users and those workers out on site. From December we are committed to extend running at the highest safe speed up to 60mph in both directions between junctions 10 and 12.

Evidence shows that smart motorways are as safe as traditional motorways. This year we'll be giving our customers more information about how to drive safely on all types of motorways to help them feel safer and more confident.

**David Bray**

Smart motorways programme director  
Highways England

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/upgrading-the-m4-to-a-smart-motorway-road-users-views/>

# Introduction

Transport Focus is the independent transport user watchdog representing the interests of:

- rail passengers in Great Britain
- bus, coach and tram passengers across England outside London
- all users of England's motorways and major 'A' roads (the Strategic Road Network).

In its work for rail users Transport Focus has previously studied their expectations and experiences during major infrastructure projects where the works have disrupted passengers' journeys with line closures or diversions. Through the course of these projects Transport Focus has developed a proven approach to researching transport users' awareness of the work, their satisfaction with the information being provided and their journey experiences while it is going on.

Highways England operates and maintains England's motorways and major 'A' roads – the Strategic Road Network (SRN). It has embarked on a programme to upgrade the M4 motorway between junctions three (Hillingdon) and 12 (Theale/Reading West)<sup>2</sup> to a smart motorway<sup>3</sup>. Preparatory work started in 2018 between junctions eight/nine (Maidenhead) and 10 (A329(M)/Reading East) and the project is due for completion in spring 2022. During the works road users are experiencing temporary speed limits, narrow lanes, lane closures, as well as occasional overnight and weekend closures of stretches of the motorway.

Over the last two years Transport Focus has been working in partnership with Highways England to research road users' awareness, expectations and experiences of the M4 smart motorway work and the associated disruption to journeys on this key stretch of the SRN. Not only is this research being used to help enhance the experience for road users on the M4, it is also being used to inform the planning and execution of other major Highways England projects.

The starting point for the M4 road user research

was Transport Focus's established 'model' for planned engineering disruption on the railways. That model was adapted to suit the challenges – some similar, some quite different – presented by motorway usage (see more about the research method on page 14). An initial wave of research was successfully completed in early 2019 and this has been updated with a second wave one year on in early 2020.

The research consists of both qualitative research (primarily focus groups) to explore drivers' awareness, understanding and expectations, and quantitative surveys to measure awareness, knowledge and attitudes. It has been designed as a multi-wave tracking exercise to run at intervals until the works are completed. This has allowed Transport Focus to track changes in awareness and attitudes – potentially driven by changes made to the way the work is implemented and/or communicated as a result of learnings from the initial wave.

This document covers the second wave of research conducted in March 2020 just before the Covid-19 lockdown. It should be noted that there had been media coverage around the safety of smart motorways in the weeks before the research took place, including a BBC television Panorama programme. This had been broadcast just before the qualitative research started. Although few participants reported having seen the programme, there was general awareness of the broader media coverage of the issue. We suspect that the media debate accounts for some of the concerns regarding the smart motorway programme and safety issues apparent in the 2020 findings.

This report draws comparisons with the first wave of research<sup>4</sup> where appropriate. To ensure comparability, the 2019 data quoted here differ from figures quoted in our previous report. This is because the 2020 document uses only the findings from the three locations covered in both waves of the research. Illustrative quotations included in the report were made by the drivers and fleet managers we spoke to.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://highwaysengland.co.uk/projects/m4-junctions-3-12-smart-motorway/>

<sup>3</sup> See the RAC's explanation of smart motorways: <https://www.rac.co.uk/drive/advice/driving-advice/smart-motorways/>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/upgrading-the-m4-to-a-smart-motorway-road-users-views/>

# Recommendations

Alongside publication of our initial research in May 2019 we made several recommendations. In July 2019 Highways England responded and explained how Transport Focus's recommendations were shaping future thinking on the M4 project. Highways England's response can be found on the Transport Focus website.

Following this latest research we restate the material recommendations from 2019 that require further work and make two new ones.

## Existing recommendations requiring further work

Transport Focus has been encouraged by Highways England's efforts to listen to what road users have said and to act on our recommendations. The 2020 research shows improvements in overall awareness of the project and an increase in communication. Particular encouragement comes from increases in awareness among younger people and road users from further afield than the immediate vicinity of the works. This demonstrates that acting on our recommendations makes a difference.

Nevertheless, the 2020 research shows that the following recommendations from 2019 still need to be fully addressed:

**We said:** *Awareness of the M4 smart motorway upgrade work is at an encouraging level but there is scope to do more to ensure individual drivers are made aware of the project and its benefits, particularly those living some distance from the stretch of road concerned and/or who use it infrequently.*

Highways England should continue to increase awareness of the project, particularly among less frequent users of the M4 or those who are switching to road in light of Covid-19. There also remains misunderstanding that the hard shoulder would be used only during times of congestion and some remaining ambiguity about construction timescales.

**We said:** *Road users are keen to receive information about the work through a wide variety of channels including roadside signage, news media, mapping tools and apps as well as social media, information at motorway service areas (MSAs) and, for businesses, direct contact with Highways England. In exploring all of these, Highways England should note users' particular interest in receiving information through satellite navigation systems and from the likes of Google Maps and Waze.*

This latest research shows that road users find the existing methods of getting information useful, however they would still like more. Highways England should prioritise suggestions such as the development of text messaging, links to satellite navigation systems, online mapping tools and apps such as Waze.

**We said:** *Users are particularly concerned to get timely information about overnight and weekend closures (including any changes to previously published plans). Highways England should ensure such changes are communicated in good time – both ahead of the work and as drivers approach any temporary closure. In addition, more assistance could usefully be provided to drivers regarding alternative routes (and potentially alternative modes) available during disruption or closures.*

The 2020 research shows that Highways England needs to keep focusing on making sure full road closures are well advertised in advance, using various media as well as signs on the road itself.

Although primarily a study into the user experience of the major roadworks on the M4, the research shows a general concern about not having a hard shoulder and the consequences if there is a breakdown or crash requiring the emergency services. The M4 project should therefore consider the recommendations in Transport Focus's recent report *All-lane running smart motorways: the driver's view*<sup>5</sup>.

## New recommendations

In light of the 2020 research, Transport Focus makes two new recommendations:

- Highways England should ensure diversion routes are designed to ensure that road users unfamiliar with the route are confident that they are going the right way and do not get lost.
- Highways England should regularly audit the roadside information provided throughout the roadworks and on diversionary routes. Particular attention should be given to:
  - sign clutter – ensuring that important information is not missed because there is too much to take in
  - clarity – ensuring information is clear and concise.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/all-lane-drivers-view/>



# Key findings

## Journey satisfaction

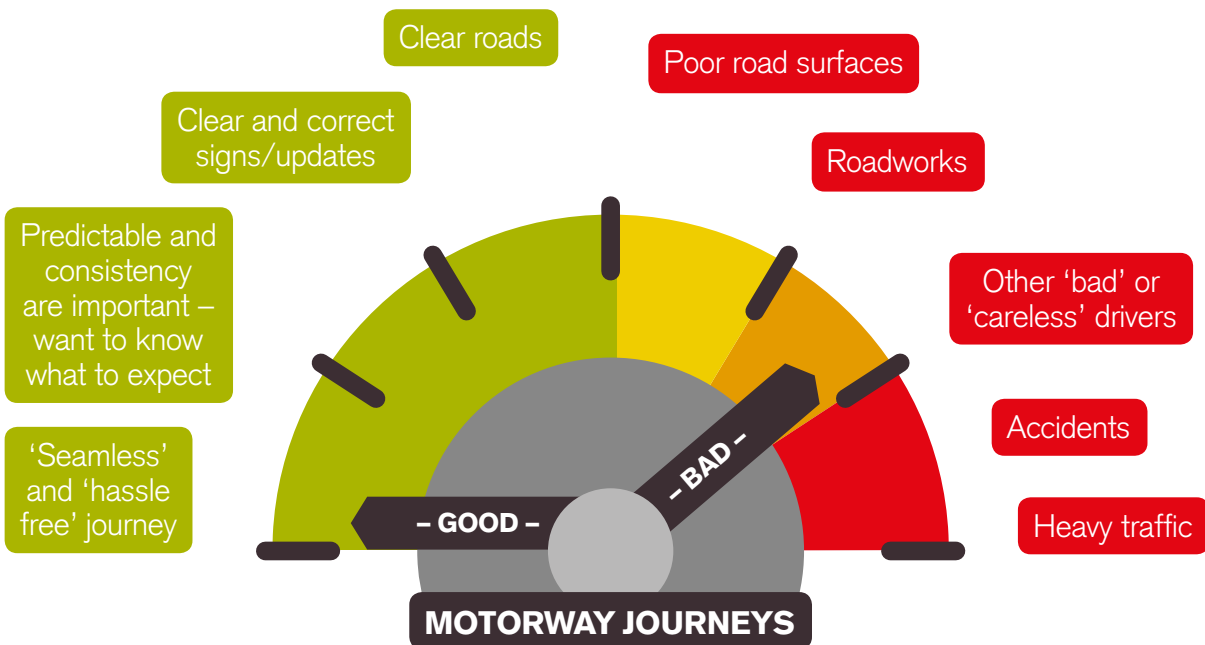
Just under half of drivers (46 per cent; down from 53 per cent in 2019) were 'satisfied' with their most recent experience of the M4. One in 10 (11 per cent; down from 16 per cent in 2019) said they were 'very satisfied'.

In the initial qualitative research in 2019 road users described what makes for a good or bad journey on the motorway (see chart below).

Transport Focus explored many of these areas in the quantitative research. Aspects with which drivers are most dissatisfied are:

- their personal safety in case of a breakdown (37 per cent; not asked in 2019)
- having somewhere to go in case of a breakdown (35 per cent; up substantially from 19 per cent in 2019)
- speed limits and the quality of the road surface (both 17 per cent; both 13 per cent in 2019)
- the width of the lanes (16 per cent; 12 per cent in 2019)
- speed cameras and not seeing people actually working (both 13 per cent, as in 2019).

### What makes for a good or bad journey experience on the M4?



## Awareness of the smart motorway upgrade and potential for disruption

In March 2020, two thirds of drivers (67 per cent) said they were aware of the M4 smart motorway upgrade work. This is up from a half (53 per cent) at the same point in 2019. A third of drivers (36 per cent) claimed to know 'a fair amount' about the smart motorway work and 10 per cent 'a great deal'. Almost four in 10 (37 per cent) said they knew 'just a little'.

Awareness was higher among fleet managers (74 per cent; 65 per cent in 2019) and truck or van drivers (80 per cent; 78 per cent in 2019). Awareness was highest at the services on the M4 (Reading – 77 per cent; 65 per cent in 2019; Chieveley – 63 per cent; 49 per cent in 2019) and lower at Cobham on the M25 (54 per cent; 46 per cent in 2019).

*"A smart motorway is a section of motorway that uses active traffic management techniques to increase capacity by use of variable speed limits and hard shoulder running at busy times."*

When asked what they knew about the M4 work, drivers' top, spontaneous mentions were:

- upgrade to smart motorway (30 per cent; up from 18 per cent in 2019)
- the hard shoulder being converted or removed (24 per cent; up from 13 per cent)
- traffic disruption (14 per cent, as in 2019)
- changes to the speed limit (12 per cent; up from five per cent)
- the works taking a long time (seven per cent; eight per cent in 2019)
- provision of an extra lane (five per cent; seven per cent in 2019)
- installation of information signs/gantries (five per cent; less than three per cent in 2019)
- bridges being upgraded (five per cent; less than three per cent in 2019)
- hard shoulder used as extra lane during heavy traffic (four per cent; three per cent in 2019).



In drivers' minds, short-term negative consequences appear, in the main, to outweigh the ultimate benefits that the upgrade is designed to deliver. More reliable journeys were mentioned by just two per cent of drivers (three per cent in 2019) although this remains among the top four benefits for fleet managers (at nine per cent; 10 per cent in 2019).

When prompted to consider various implications of the roadworks, drivers again tended to focus on the negative impacts on their journeys – increased journey times (78 per cent; up from 69 per cent in 2019), lower speed limits (77 per cent; up from 70 per cent) and narrowed lanes (59 per cent; up from 54 per cent). They were less inclined to mention specific activities such as rebuilding several bridges (45 per cent, albeit this is up from 31 per cent), working round the clock (38 per cent; again, up from 29 per cent) or limiting significant noise to the daytime (16 per cent; 17 per cent in 2019).

"Lots of overnight and weekend closures for demolition and rebuilding works."

"There are a lot of speed limits. Also, the motorway will be closed sometimes for new bridges to be installed."

"It's affected the journey that I take; if I'm going on the motorway, if I've got time, I'll avoid it, go on the A4."

"Long delays possible, introduction of average speed limits to regulate traffic." – Fleet manager

In the 2020 qualitative research we saw that speed limits divide opinion. Many recognised the safety benefits, both to themselves and to the workforce, while others disliked the length over which the speed limit applied and questioned the need for it, especially at night and/or weekends when nobody appears to be working. There were also mixed views about whether the limit should be raised to 60 mph on the central section when the works on that stretch are substantially complete; some would welcome the chance to 'put their foot down' and others feared a queue when the limit drops back down.

"I think it's best to keep it consistent personally because you might forget about the speed limit, mightn't you?"

"I don't agree, I would rather put my put foot down a bit."

Transport Focus asked drivers what actions they might take to limit disruption to their journeys – just under half (44 per cent, as in 2019) were not planning to do anything different, while two out of five (40 per cent) said they would allow more time for their journeys (not asked in 2019). Many drivers seem resigned to the disruption with fewer mentioning specific mitigations than in 2019 – around a quarter said they would consider alternative routes (25 per cent; down from 37 per cent in 2019) or travel at less busy times (17 per cent, down from 28 per cent) while one in 10 (10 per cent, as in 2019) said they would use an alternative mode such as the train.

"You've just got to allow more time for your journey at the moment."

"I knew it was going to be bad, so we were planning for it."

## Closures and diversions

In the latest research we took the opportunity to ask about motorway users' experience of closures and diversions (not asked in 2019). A quarter of drivers (28 per cent) reported having experienced a closure and having to take a diversionary route – split almost equally between weekend (12 per cent) and overnight (11 per cent) closures or both (five per cent).

"They are quite well advertised when you come on to the motorway. On the slip-road, as you enter on to the slip-road, like the one that was at Reading said there would be closures."

Bearing that proportion in mind, it is concerning to note that almost a quarter of all drivers we spoke to (23 per cent), expressed dissatisfaction with signage on diversion routes.

*"I've been caught out with a couple of junction closures, but when I entered the motorway, I saw absolutely nothing, got to J2, I realised."*

Two thirds of fleet managers (69 per cent) reported their drivers as having experienced a closure/diversion, more often overnight (37 per cent) than at weekends (22 per cent; nine per cent both).



## Perceived benefits and support for the M4 smart motorway upgrade

Perhaps influenced by national media coverage of smart motorway safety, fewer drivers list any benefits from the smart motorway upgrade. Reduced congestion (33 per cent; down from 38 per cent in 2019) tops the list of perceived benefits, followed by faster journeys (28 per cent; down from 35 per cent) and more reliable journeys (19 per cent; down from 27 per cent). Just one in 10 (11 per cent) mentioned increased driver safety, down from one in five (20 per cent) in 2019, while just over a third (36 per cent; up from 25 per cent) saw no benefits to them personally.

*"At the times I commute along the M4 between J12 & J3 (6am & 2pm), I do not believe I will benefit from the upgrades and yet I have to suffer 3.5 years of disruption."*

*"Not sure that smart highways give that much benefit to be honest, I am particularly worried about there being no hard shoulder available if you have an emergency."*

Fleet managers were more likely to acknowledge the benefits of the smart motorway upgrade. Just 16 per cent said there will be no benefits (albeit this is up from eight per cent in 2019). They listed faster journeys (30 per cent; 32 per cent in 2019) and more reliable journeys (also 30 per cent; up from 27 per cent), reduced congestion (27 per cent; down from 32 per cent) and greater capacity (28 per cent; 27 per cent in 2019) as their top benefits.



*"Smart motorways are much safer and allow continued traffic flow at a slower speed."* – Fleet manager

One third of all drivers interviewed (33 per cent) supported the work – rising to six out of ten fleet managers (61 per cent) – these figures potentially reflect adverse media coverage of smart motorways as they are lower than in 2019 (49 per cent of drivers and 70 per cent of fleet managers).

*"Because even though the works are quite disruptive, it will mean that journeys will flow better and with less hold ups. It's a very important motorway off the M25 to the west."*

*"Increasing the capacity and reliability of this stretch of road will be of benefit to the individual and to businesses, and should help reduce emissions arising from hold ups and slow-moving traffic."*

*"Although it is a bit of a pain at the moment, I do not have anything against efforts to ease congestion or increase road safety. Or to help the environment, which I understand smart motorways will do."*

Opposition to the smart motorway upgrade has increased markedly since 2019, potentially as a result of wider media coverage of smart motorway safety at the time. Two out of five drivers (40 per cent) and one in five fleet managers (20 per cent) said they do not support the work (up from 17 per cent and 12 per cent respectively in 2019).

*"Removing the hard shoulder is extremely dangerous given the speed at which traffic travels on a motorway. There have been deaths already and there will be more. The signage has been utterly confusing and you cannot get out of the car for fear of being hit by a passing car."*

*"When there is an accident there will be a four lane gridlock and it will take the emergency services longer to attend the site."*

*"You cannot choose where your car will break down and if there is no refuge area right next to the car, you and other cars are in danger. Many electric cars cannot be pushed or towed if they break down and could therefore create a major danger if they are blocking a lane."*

The qualitative research suggests that the 'red X' lies at the core of drivers' concerns about smart motorway safety. Drivers believe they know what it means, but there appears to be a fundamental split between those who interpret the sign as meaning 'lane closed' and those reading it as 'lane closed ahead'; this leads to different opinions as to whether they need to move out of the lane immediately, or to be prepared to do so once they encounter an obstruction or a queue. This divergent interpretation undoubtedly fuels the animosity shown by those who have moved out of the lane towards those who continue in it for as long as possible.

*"I think if you're abusing that one, you've really got no excuse, because it's the most obvious thing in the world... There's no confusion over a red cross, is there? If I'm honest."*

*"Just a lane is going to be closed up ahead."*

*"I'd worry that if I were the one broken down I'd be the one they'd crash into 'cause they're zooming down that lane – they'll not have time to react."*

– Disabled driver

## Information channels

Roadside signs remain the most effective means by which drivers learn about the work (32 per cent; 34 per cent in 2019). Temporary information screens (20 per cent), local media news reports (20 per cent) and overhead gantry signs (19 per cent) are also effective, followed by word-of-mouth from friends or colleagues (16 per cent). Eight per cent mentioned the Highways England website (six per cent in 2019; all other channels are within one or two percentage points of their 2019 levels).

For the future, a quarter of drivers (26 per cent; down from 32 per cent in 2019) would like to get information through their satellite navigation system, a quarter (26 per cent) through a mapping tool such as Google Maps (also 26 per cent), and one in five through social media (17 per cent) or a travel app such as Google's Waze<sup>6</sup> (14 per cent). With the exception of satellite navigation systems, these figures are within one or two percentage points of their 2019 levels. As before, Highways England should look to utilise almost all available channels to communicate with road users about the work.

One third of drivers (32 per cent) were 'fairly satisfied' and a further seven per cent 'very satisfied' with information about the works. These numbers are essentially unchanged from the previous wave of research and still offer scope for improvement.

Although more than two in five drivers surveyed (45 per cent; down from 49 per cent in 2019) said there was nothing more they wished to know about the smart motorway work, this leaves more than half open to receiving more information.

The timescales for the project top the list of desired information (13 per cent of all drivers surveyed; 15 per cent in 2019), followed by details of the impact of the works (nine per cent; up from three per cent in 2019) and the benefits of the scheme (four per cent; five per cent in 2019). There were lower level mentions (three per cent of drivers or fewer for each) for information on planned disruption, why the work is being undertaken and information on how to avoid the works, as well as questions about what a smart motorway is, and what to do if you break down where there is no hard shoulder.

*"A specific end date and explanation of the necessity of speed restrictions at night when traffic is very light."*



## Information leaflets

The qualitative research in 2020 explored drivers' reactions to the M4 upgrade information leaflet and news bulletin.

Both were generally well received although very few drivers we spoke to had actually seen either of them.

The content was regarded by most as informative and useful and felt to be well presented. It is the sort of information drivers would like to have, but they see the challenge as getting the material into their hands. Both might usefully be distributed at Motorway Service Areas (MSAs) and made available online, but few could see themselves picking one up or subscribing to receive email updates. Some also said the leaflet was too long for them to be bothered to read it.

"Accurate information regarding night time road closures, as information provided through the Commonplace updates is different to signs on the carriageway and also different to Highways England website!"

"I'm sure all of it is relevant, but some people might feel it's just too much to read and can't be bothered."

"How long it is going to take and will there be delays during Easter?"  
– Fleet manager

"Would appreciate a weekly update and possible finish date!" – Fleet manager



Although they are relatively few in number (65 – eight per cent of the driver sample), those drivers who were recruited as subscribers to the Highways England update database were all (100 per cent) aware of the works. Nevertheless, they are only slightly more satisfied with the information being provided (45 per cent; against 38 per cent overall) and marginally less likely to support the upgrade (28 per cent; against 33 per cent overall).



The news bulletin was valued in particular for its topical coverage of forthcoming closures and giving a progress update on what was being done.

"Would have been nice to have seen this a while ago."

"It's interesting to see the pictures. I like seeing engineering and stuff like that, it's fascinating."

Given the heightened concerns about smart motorway safety following national media coverage of the issue, some drivers feel this issue and advice on how to drive on a smart motorway might usefully be included.

"I guess it is quite a lot of information, but you know, not everyone's going to read this and now I've read it, I know what to do if you break down."

## Trial signage

The qualitative research in 2020 explored drivers' reactions to some of the signage being trialled on the M4.

The large signs at the start of the works and at some entry points were generally welcomed and thought to be informative, although some drivers expressed confusion at the term 'digital roads' – something they had not encountered before – and were unsure what it means.

Few had noticed the white-on-black variable messages signs but most agreed that they are clear and there is a belief that they will stand out well at night. Others wondered what the difference is between these and the more normal, orange dot matrix displays.







Some felt there is too much text to take in, while others disliked what they see as a somewhat ‘self-congratulatory’ tone.

Further criticism is levelled at the conventional black-on-yellow signs announcing what work is being undertaken – such as ‘constructing new bridge’. In part this is down to a feeling that this is obvious and does not need a sign, but also a fear that while trying to read the text on the one sign, drivers might miss the more important message on the next ones that the lanes diverge and one needs to ‘keep right’.

## Fleet managers

In answer to the question whether the M4 between junctions three and 12 currently meets the needs and requirements of their company/organisation, over three quarters of fleet managers (78 per cent; 79 per cent in 2019) replied that it does, with a quarter (27 per cent; 30 per cent in 2019) saying ‘very much’ so. Just four per cent said it does not meet their needs at all (as in 2019).

Many fleet managers, particularly in larger organisations, have a somewhat greater focus than drivers on the overall impact and, ultimately, on the benefits to their business of the M4 upgrade. They also have access to a wider range of information sources than drivers themselves, including trade bodies such as the Road Haulage Association and Logistics UK, as well as direct contact with Highways England. A quarter of fleet

managers (27 per cent; 21 per cent in 2019) said they found out about the works on the Highways England website. One in five (19 per cent; 21 per cent in 2019) were informed in a letter or email from Highways England and one in 12 (eight per cent; down from 14 per cent in 2019) through direct contact with Highways England. Clearly there remains scope for more direct contact, with 16 per cent saying they would prefer to find out in this way.

Six in 10 fleet managers (61 per cent; down from 70 per cent in 2019) supported the work, compared with one third of drivers (33 per cent), and six out of 10 (59 per cent; down from 65 per cent in 2019) were satisfied with the information being provided (compared with 38 per cent of drivers). While there are still opportunities to improve fleet managers’ awareness and knowledge of the upgrade, these findings confirm that the primary need is to focus on individual drivers – although they are probably a harder and more varied audience to address.

## Disabled motorists

One in 10 of the drivers interviewed (10 per cent) reported having a Blue Badge. The responses from these disabled motorists generally reflect the awareness, knowledge and attitudes of all drivers – with a slight tendency to be more positive/knowledgeable. That said, it is interesting to note there is no discernible difference in support for the M4 smart motorway upgrade between Blue Badge holders and other drivers (34 per cent and 33 per cent respectively).

## Research method

This research was undertaken using an approach Transport Focus has developed to measure rail users' awareness and experience of, and attitudes towards, significant infrastructure projects causing planned disruption to train journeys. Transport Focus believes that the two waves of M4 research demonstrate that, with some modifications to reflect modal differences and journey circumstances, this approach to capturing users' awareness and attitudes is equally valid in a roads context as on rail.

Transport Focus commissioned Populus\*, an independent market research agency, to conduct both the initial and the second wave of the research.

The second wave of qualitative research was reduced in scale compared with the initial wave as we did not anticipate significant changes in road users' basic attitudes and expectations. We undertook three focus groups (nine in 2019) among drivers and four depth interviews (six in 2019) with a selection of disabled motorists in Reading at the heart of the affected stretch of the M4 (Slough/Windsor and Hayes had also been included as venues in 2019).

The quantitative phase consisted of four elements:

- a face-to-face, intercept survey at three motorway service areas: Chieveley and Reading (both on the M4) and Cobham (on the M25); a total of 335 interviews were completed (462 in 2019)
- an online panel survey with drivers split between London and the south east and further afield; a total of 680 interviews were completed (509 in 2019)
- an invitation to complete the same online questionnaire was emailed by Highways England to subscribers on their database who had signed up to receive information about the M4 works from the company; a total of 65 responses were received (this was a new element added to the survey for 2020)
- an online panel survey among fleet managers from different types and size of businesses that use the M4; a total of 201 interviews were completed (205 in 2019).

The 2019 face-to-face element had covered Heston (but achieved a low number of responses so this location was not included in 2020) and Membury (where the site operator chose not to participate in 2020). Where we show 2019 data in this report, please note that it has been re-analysed and is based solely on the results for the three locations covered in both waves.

The intercept survey and the majority of the online interviews were conducted before the lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic came into effect. Nevertheless, interviewees at the service areas reported that footfall appeared lower than normal and

that some visitors were disinclined to engage in the interview process. We do not believe this will have had a significant impact on the survey results. It should also be noted that there had been extensive media debate (including a BBC television Panorama programme) as to the safety of smart motorways in the weeks before the 2020 research was undertaken which may have influenced drivers' attitudes.

Transport Focus believes that users' views are best captured 'in-the-moment' or as soon as possible after they have made a journey. Intercepting drivers at MSAs makes it possible to get the 'in-the-moment' picture, however we recognise that MSA users do not provide a representative cross-section of motorway users (in particular, regular commuters probably rarely stop at an MSA). The online element of the research is designed to ensure we get that cross-section. A comparison of the responses from the MSA and the online samples has shown that there are in fact few differences in drivers' responses.

This intercept survey was designed to capture the 'in-the-moment' views of drivers using the M4 at the time they were interviewed. This ensured that they could focus on their experience on that particular day when everything was fresh in their minds. It should be noted that responses from the online survey may in some instances be an aggregation of drivers' views based on a combination of recent (and not-so-recent) journeys rather than just the last journey. Moreover, their last journey on the affected stretch of the M4 may have been up to one month ago (London and the south east) or three months ago (drivers from further afield).

In total the quantitative survey has canvassed the views of 1080 drivers (971 in 2019) covering a mix of age and gender as well as various driver types (including car, van, motorcycle, HGV) and disabled motorists. It provides a solid benchmark against which to measure changes against the initial wave and any conducted in the future.

This document summarises the findings of both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research. It draws on two separate presentations delivered by Populus which are available on the Transport Focus website for those wanting to examine the findings in more detail.

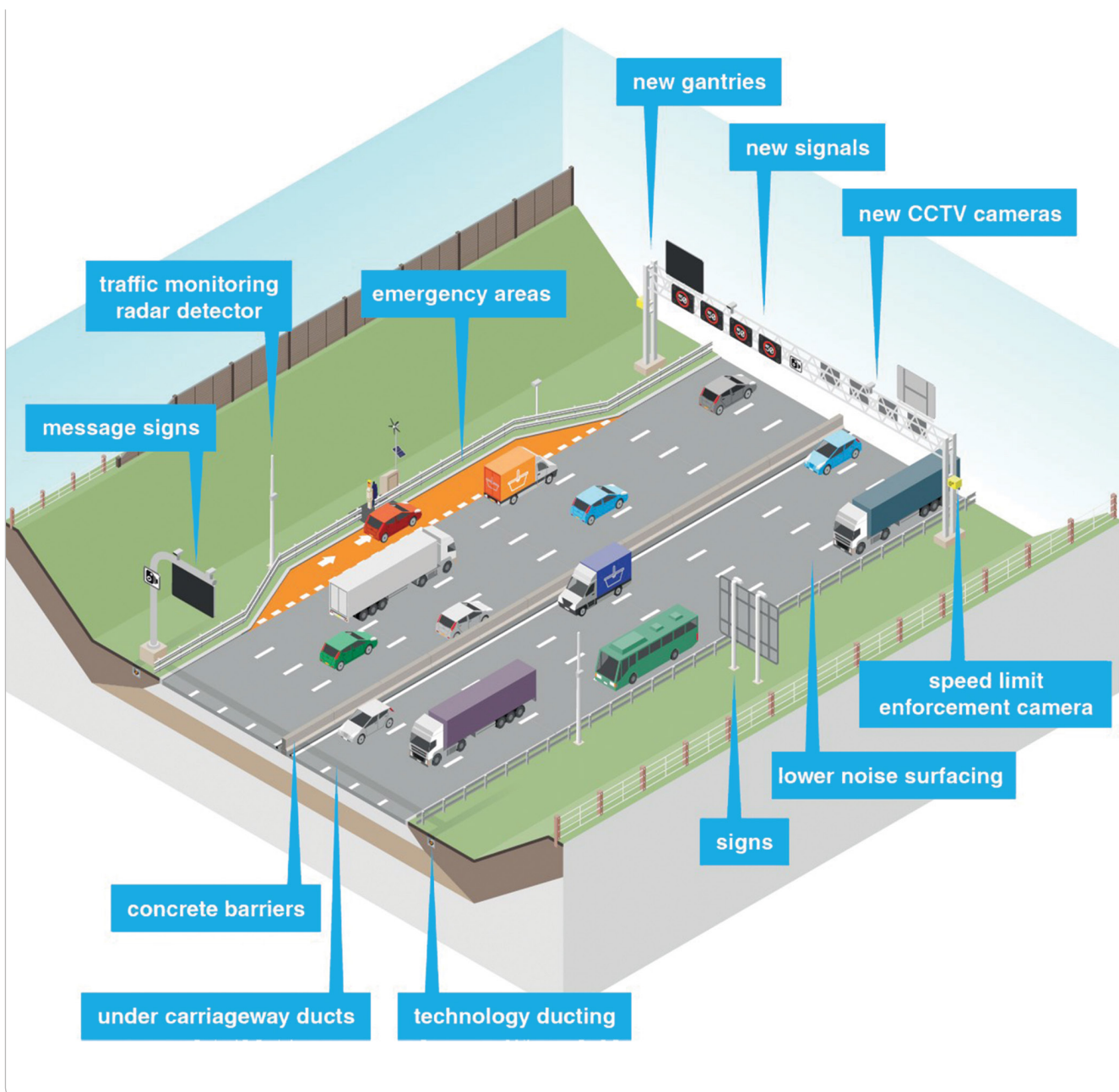
The research agency's full report can be downloaded at: <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/upgrading-the-m4-to-a-smart-motorway-road-users-views-one-year-on/>

\* Now known as Yonder

# Further research

Transport Focus would welcome the opportunity to work with Highways England to repeat the research as the project moves towards completion, monitoring changes in user awareness and attitudes and evaluating the effectiveness of communications and operational activity for the benefit of users of the M4 and other roads being turned into smart motorways.

**The M4 is the main strategic route between London, the west of England and South Wales**



## Contact Transport Focus

Any enquiries about this research  
should be addressed to:

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