



No time to stop: why long-distance drivers avoid taking breaks

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Background

According to road traffic estimates around 70 billion vehicle miles are completed annually on motorways in Great Britain. With so many collective miles being driven it is unsurprising that driver fatigue can often set in, significantly impairing driver performance in the process, slower reaction times, decreased vigilance to hazards and a risk of microsleeps. These risks mean that as many as one in 15 collisions on England's major roads during July and August involve driver fatigue¹.

Motorway services play an important role in keeping road users safe by providing an opportunity for drivers to rest whilst travelling. Our 2023 Motorway Services User Survey found that 30 per cent of drivers arrived at motorway services feeling stressed, tired or frustrated, but only five per cent left feeling this way. However, while many drivers are happy to stop when making long motorway journeys seven per cent try not to break their journey at all².

This piece of research was targeted at these reluctant stoppers and aimed to better understand why they choose not to stop during long motorway journeys. We hope that this research will provide a starting point for a wider conversation with organisations that operate, oversee and regulate motorway journeys. Through these discussions we want to encourage these drivers to make better use of motorway services and in doing so create a safer motorway network.

Why don't reluctant drivers stop?

Put simply, long-distance drivers tend to avoid stopping because they do not see the value to them in doing so. This is partly a product of their approach to long distance journeys but also a reflection of how they perceive motorway services. Several factors which discourage these drivers from using motorway services emerged from our discussions including:

- Wanting to maximise the time at the destination (with the journey seen as a means to an end). This outlook was often linked to the risk of unexpected disruption which might cause delays during a trip (for example roadworks, congestion and bad weather).
- Scepticism about what the experience at motorways services will be like. In particular, reluctant stoppers tend to view motorway services as being overpriced and believe that they are too time-consuming to navigate.
- Some drivers have a strong faith in their ability to remain alert whilst making long journeys and don't feel the need to take a break.

¹ [2022 Road Safety Performance Overview 2005 to 2022 results](#)

² Nationally representative omnibus survey conducted in Spring 2024 among those making journeys of three or more hours which include motorways.

Reluctant stoppers also tend to take measures which reduce their chances of needing to stop during a long drive (for example obtaining food and drink prior to setting off or travelling at certain times of day when they expect motorways to be quieter). When these drivers do stop, their reasons for stopping are mainly functional (for example using the toilet, refuelling or the needs of passengers). Encouragingly, most of the drivers we spoke to were open to stopping more often under the right conditions.

"If you decide to stop ...you ruin yourself from stopping and, "oh, how complacent of me to stop and take care of myself. Now I'm stuck."... The plan would always be to not stop... It would generate anxiety; I'd be clock watching and looking at my ETA ticking up because I'm not moving."

"I only get tired if I'm the passenger. When I'm the driver, for some reason, because I know that the safety of my passengers is in my hands, I'm fully awake – eyes wide and everything – and I just have no tiredness."

"I take lots of snacks, but put everything into individual bags. They've all got sandwiches each, chocolate bars each crisp, each juice each, etc. So basically we can do about three or four hours without having to stop anywhere."

What might encourage more stopping?

Because of their locations, motorway services have an important role to play in encouraging reluctant stoppers to take more breaks. However, other stakeholders such as National Highways and the Department for Transport have an equally important role in promoting stopping during long motorway journeys. Based on our discussions with drivers we have identified suggestions relevant to these different parties which could encourage reluctant stoppers to take more breaks.

Motorway service areas

Small changes by operators could help shift the perceptions of these reluctant stoppers and in doing so encourage more stopping. Some of the suggestions provided by drivers are shown below:

Motorway services perceived as overly commercial and not as somewhere to rest

- Enhanced messaging emphasising the role of a motorway services a place to rest and recuperate without needing to spend money.

Stopping at motorway services seen as time consuming and as an obstacle to completing the journey

- Efforts to make sites easier to navigate (for example consistent signage and streamlined walkways) would help drivers find the facilities they want to use faster.

Motorway services feeling unwelcoming outside of peak hours

- Providing well-lit zones and a visible staff presence during quieter hours could help sites feel more welcoming.

National Highways and Department for Transport

By refining roadside signage (for example indicating where green spaces are available) which could help make drivers aware of opportunities to rest and recharge. This is particularly important when drivers are making unfamiliar journeys and may not be aware of the facilities available on their route.

The Department for Transport could also explore different ways of promoting self-awareness of tiredness as those drivers we spoke to were largely unaware of existing stopping guidance³. Some drivers also felt that the existing guidance was too rigid and therefore not always applicable to their own experiences.

Perception of motorway services as overly commercial and not as somewhere to rest

- Road signs could be used to highlight the availability of green spaces at motorway services. This might help reframe how reluctant stoppers view these sites, increasing their chances of stopping to take a break.

Drivers' high levels of confidence in their own alertness/guidance seen as potentially too rigid

- Drivers' suggested that the current stopping guidance for motorway journeys could be refined to encourage more self-awareness of tiredness.

³ Current Department for Transport guidance recommends that drivers should take at least a 15-minute break every two hours when driving on motorways.

Research method

A series of online focus groups were held amongst drivers who infrequently or almost never stop during long motorway journeys⁴. During the discussions drivers were asked about their barriers to stopping, strategies they use to avoid stopping during long motorway journeys, their perceptions of motorway services and their understanding of existing stopping guidance.

⁴ For the purpose of this research a long motorway journey was defined as a single continuous journey on motorways lasting three or more hours. Only those drivers who answered 'sometimes', 'if I absolutely have to' or 'never' when asked about their stopping behaviour during motorway journeys of three or more hours were recruited for this research.

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