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Motorists lack awareness of emergency refuge areas on smart motorways

Smart motorways where the hard shoulder is used as a running lane for traffic, either permanently or at busy times of the day, are becoming increasingly common throughout England but new research has revealed that half of motorists are not familiar with emergency refuge areas (so-called 'ERAs').

A study conducted by the RAC* with more than 2,000 motorists found that 52% of those surveyed did not know what an emergency refuge area on a smart motorway was – a disturbing finding as they are intended to be a safe haven for broken-down or accident-stricken vehicles to stop in in the absence of a hard shoulder.

In addition, there was also considerable confusion about how to use emergency refuge areas, with two-thirds neither knowing what to do after stopping (64%) nor how to re-join the motorway (65%). And, even of the 1.5% who had actually used an emergency refuge area, only one respondent knew that they should contact Highways England to facilitate their getting back on to the motorway if the hard shoulder was operating as a running lane for traffic. Everyone else thought they should just wait for a gap in the traffic and then accelerate as quickly as possible to motorway speed.

There was, however, good awareness of when it is appropriate to stop in an emergency refuge area. Almost every motorist (98%) said they should be used in a breakdown situation and 90% stated they should be used after an accident, but four in 10 (40%) also thought it was appropriate to use an emergency refuge area for medical reasons such as needing to take medication. Worryingly, 27% thought they could be used for either the driver or a passenger to be sick.

On a positive note, there was a good understanding that emergency refuge areas are not there for rest breaks, toilet stops, to make or take phone calls or for changing a baby's nappy with only 1% of respondents saying they thought those were legitimate reasons to stop.

Highways England has run a [radio advertising campaign](#) reminding people of the correct use of emergency refuge areas and is currently conducting a review of ERAs, the findings of which will be reported in due course. The RAC has been also working closely with Highways England and is backing work to improve the motoring public's understanding of ERAs and how to use them. It also took part in an industry-wide Highways England workshop testing emergency refuge areas at the Fire Service Training College at Moreton-in-Marsh in Gloucestershire where it was found that all types of vehicles could be recovered safely from them.

Three billion pounds is being invested in upgrading existing motorways to become smart motorways by 2020 and have already added more than 472 extra lane miles of capacity to the strategic road network through their implementation.

RAC chief engineer David Bizley said: "Even though the first smart motorway was created more than 10 years ago and more schemes have come into operation in the last few years there will still be many people who have not driven on one purely as a result of where they live and drive. Existing signage for emergency refuge areas is clear but will be further improved to make it even better for everyone.

"It is essential that motorists understand how and when to use an emergency refuge area so they do not put their own safety and that of other road users at risk. Vehicles should pull up to the indicated mark on the tarmac or the emergency telephone and then the occupants should leave the vehicle from the passenger side. Everyone should stand behind the barriers and should use the emergency roadside telephone provided to speak to a Highways England representative.

"For anyone who hasn't driven on a smart motorway there are some very noticeable differences, the main ones being that there is no permanent hard shoulder, overhead gantries with variable mandatory speed limits, emergency refuge areas spaced up to 2.5km apart and variable message signs. Driving is just the same as normal but motorists need to be very aware of the speed

limit applicable at the time as well as watching out for red 'Xs' which indicate that a lane has been closed and it is an offence to drive in it."

The RAC's advice for using a smart motorway emergency refuge area is:

- Use an emergency refuge area if you are able to reach one safely. These are marked with blue signs featuring an orange SOS telephone symbol on them.
- If you can leave your vehicle safely, contact Highways England via the roadside emergency telephone provided in all emergency refuge areas.
- If required, a traffic officer will either be sent to help, or the motorway signs will be set to temporarily close lanes or reduce speed limits to help you re-join the motorway safely.
- If you cannot get to an emergency refuge area but the vehicle can be driven, move it to the hard shoulder (where provided) or as close to the nearside verge or other nearside boundary as possible.
- In all cases, switch on your hazard warning lights.

Resources

The RAC website carries a [comprehensive guide to smart motorways](#), as well as [advice to drivers that break down on any motorway](#). Further information is also available at [GOV.UK](#).

Notes to Editors

* Research carried out online among 2,076 members of the RAC Opinion Panel.

Photo courtesy Highways England ref 01_2016_074
- www.flickr.com/photos/highwaysengland/26367631230/in/album-72157665851298021/

About the RAC

With more than eight million members, the RAC is one of the UK's most progressive motoring organisations, providing services for both private and business motorists. Whether it's roadside assistance, insurance, buying a used car, vehicle inspections and checks, legal services or up-to-the-minute traffic and travel information – the RAC offers a solution for all motoring needs. The RAC is committed to making motoring easier, safer, more affordable and more enjoyable for drivers and road users.

The RAC is the motorist's champion and campaigns to support the interests of its members and UK motorists at a national level, including advancing levels of road safety, supporting the needs of young drivers and voicing concerns about the increasing cost of motoring. The RAC's annual [Report on Motoring](#) – first published in 1989 – provides a clear insight into the concerns and issues facing today's motorists.

For the very latest news on UK fuel prices, check [RAC Fuel Watch](#) or follow [#racfuelwatch on Twitter](#). This is a comprehensive guide to the latest UK unleaded petrol and diesel prices – both at the wholesale level and at the pump. RAC Fuel Watch analyses how prices changed through the previous month and compares the most recent prices with those from three, six and 12 months before.

Key facts:

- RAC patrols fix four out of five vehicles at the roadside and on average within 30 minutes
- RAC vans carry more than 500 parts and tools to get members' vehicles going again
- 92% of members would recommend RAC Rescue to their friends and family

Contacts



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