

Press release: True grit – the husband and wife keeping motorways moving this winter

Karen Smith-Storer and her husband Neil work for Highways England as gritter drivers in Worcestershire.

The pair – together for 12 years and married for three – have been working around the clock this winter to keep the Midlands' major A-road and motorway network running freely.

Karen – who lives in Worcestershire with Neil – has worked in her role for the past 11 years. The former HGV driver and Class 1 licence holder says there's a healthy rivalry between her and her husband.

We do have a laugh about it when we are together at home, albeit my husband knows I am the better driver out of the two of us.

We're lucky in the sense that working and living together hasn't impacted on our relationship.

There have even been times when we have crewed up together and it's quite nice to work with Neil as we have that familiarity and understanding of the other person's traits. I think it really helps with pressurised situations at work because we have that support and understanding for one another.

She was enticed into the haulage industry by her father, Jeffrey, who was a HGV driver. Karen works on vital routes including the M5, M50, A49 and the M42. And she says some motorists still look twice when overtaking her on the motorway.

It's quite funny and it always makes me smile because I have seen several male drivers look at me and they are clearly surprised to see this petite woman driving such a large piece of equipment.

I really love my job and I really enjoy the solitude of driving the truck and being in my own office, of sorts. That said, the camaraderie of the team in and around the depot which we work out of makes the role what it is.

Neil says he loves working alongside Karen.

We do have some banter between us but it's nice because we can

learn from each other and that's how we look at it.

I also think that's one of the aspects that I enjoy the most around the job because our company is very good at listening to what we tell them, and they will always do what they can to train us and help us to develop new skills.

But it isn't always plain sailing working as a gritter driver. Despite weighing in at some 26 tonnes, last year 36 Highways England gritters were driven into by motorists.

The pair – who operate from the Strensham depot next to the M5 – have thrown their support behind calls from Highways England for motorists to leave plenty of distance between themselves and the gritter in front of them.

Each spreading machine is limited to 40mph and must travel in the middle lane to ensure the salt is spread evenly and safely across the whole of the carriageway.

Neil added:

I often see cars trying to undertake me and driving in the hard shoulder where there could be a stranded vehicle in snow or a breakdown. The advice would always be to overtake on the outside lane and leave plenty of distance between themselves and those driving the machine.

The back of a gritter is the most vulnerable area as it's where the salt spreading equipment is located. If it's struck it can mean the gritter has to be taken off the road to be repaired, which is costly and could affect critical services in extreme weather conditions.

Highways England's national winter and severe weather team leader Paul Furlong added:

Although the vast majority of people support our gritter drivers by leaving a sensible distance and only passing when it's safe to do so, we do have occasions when people misjudge the situation and end up colliding with one of our vehicles.

We have also noticed a growing problem with driver using the hard shoulder to undertake gritters, risking a collision with stationary vehicles on the hard shoulder and causing a hazard to gritter drivers who need to exit at motorway junctions.

It's really important that we keep traffic moving and our gritters are out on the network enabling us to do that.

During severe winter weather drivers are urged to follow this advice:

- In snow and ice: drivers should stick to the main roads where they can and only travel if necessary. Drivers are also encouraged to make sure they have a winter kit in their vehicle, including an ice scraper and de-icer, warm clothes and blankets, and sunglasses to cope with the low winter sun.
- In high winds: drivers should slow down and avoid using exposed sections of road if possible. Lorries, caravans and motorbikes are at particular risk.
- In heavy rain: drivers should keep well back from the vehicle in front, gradually ease off the accelerator if the steering becomes unresponsive, and slow down if the rain and spray from vehicles makes it difficult to see and be seen.
- In fog: drivers should switch on their fog lights and not use lights on full beam as the fog will reflect the light back. If drivers really cannot see, they should consider stopping until it is safe to continue.

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.

[Press release: Baseball bat attacker has sentence increased](#)



A man who beat another man over a crop of cannabis has today had his sentence increased after the Solicitor General, Robert Buckland QC MP, referred it to the Court of Appeal.

Darren Williamson, 36, went to his victim's home to confront him over rumours that he had stolen Williamson's crop of home-grown cannabis. The victim

answered the door and they argued. Williamson then proceeded to beat the victim so violently with a baseball bat that his spleen was ruptured and he risked dying of blood loss.

Williamson was originally sentenced in November 2018 to 4 years in prison at Worcester Crown Court. Today, the Court of Appeal has increased his sentence to 6 years and 9 months in prison.

Speaking after the hearing, the Solicitor General said:

“Williamson subjected his victim to a brutal attack based on unproven allegations against him. I am pleased that the Court of Appeal today decided that this act of violence warranted a longer sentence, and hope that Williamson will use this time in prison to reflect on his actions.”

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Press release: Operation Brock – overnight work to start on the M20 in Kent

The work will pave the way for HGVs travelling to mainland Europe to be held on the coastbound carriageway while a contraflow system will minimise the impact for other people living, working and travelling in Kent.

The arrangement is part of a package of measures, known collectively as Operation Brock, that will help improve the resilience of the county's roads. They also include Manston Airfield and the M26.

Highways England Chief Executive Jim O'Sullivan said:

The steps we are putting in place on the M20 are based on our extensive experience of working with partners to keep the road network in this region operating safely and reliably.

They incorporate the lessons learned from our experience of Operation Stack in 2015 and techniques from our major construction schemes in other parts of the country. They will make a significant difference to reducing the congestion and disruption to both the M20 itself and the wider road network and people of Kent.

Roadworks to install the temporary steel barrier on the M20 that will be used for Operation Brock is starting this weekend and is scheduled for completion

by mid-March. Overnight closures will be in place between junctions 9 (Ashford) and 7 (Maidstone) to enable the work to take place safely. From Tuesday 12 February until mid-March there will be narrow lanes and a 50mph speed limit.

During the overnight closures a clearly signed diversion will be in place via the A20. If drivers need to travel while these works are taking place, we recommend they plan ahead and allow more time for their journeys.

Operation Brock gives Kent Resilience Forum partners a set of scalable measures that can be used to queue lorries heading for mainland Europe, while keeping other traffic flowing. Highways England is working in close partnership with Kent police, Kent County Council and the Department for Transport to ensure that each phase of Operation Brock can be deployed sequentially and scaled up or down to meet demand.

These new arrangements offer a significant improvement to Operation Stack and, crucially, keep the M20 open to traffic in both directions in all but the most extreme circumstances.

Highways England will also publish traffic orders that will underpin the new arrangements.

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[Press release: Project to resume to reduce risk of flooding in Earby](#)

Essential work on a £1million flood alleviation project is to resume in Earby next week, to reduce the risk of flooding to 91 homes and 17 businesses.

The culvert repair project started in the Lancashire town in July 2018, and was expected to take 13 weeks to complete.

The project experienced a set back due to a major obstruction being discovered whilst drilling the new culvert beneath the disused railway embankment just under halfway along the new route.

The Environment Agency's contractors, JBA Bentley have now found a solution to complete the remaining part of the Victoria Clough culvert repair project.

Further investigation of the existing Victoria Clough culvert beneath the disused railway embankment has found that a technique called 'pipe bursting' can be used, to remove the obstruction and install a new culvert along the existing line.

Works are due commence on Monday 11 February to replace the existing culvert beneath the disused railway embankment and install an improved trash screen at the culvert inlet. This work is expected to take 8 weeks.

Temporary traffic management will be set up on Monday 25 February on the A56 to allow for the permanent repair of the footpath, kerbing and road to take place safely. This work is expected to take 2 weeks to complete.

Paul Swales, flood risk advisor for the Environment Agency, said:

We are now closing in on the completion of this project and would like to thank residents and businesses for their patience and understanding while we carry out this essential work to reduce flood risk in Earby.

The flood alleviation project involves making Victoria culvert structurally sound. Culverts are structures which carry water underground. They were often built to allow development to take place around them such as roads, homes and businesses. Many people live and work near culverts and may not even know they are there.

Other elements of the project have progressed well and have been completed, including 60 metres of structural re-lining of Victoria Clough culvert from the junction of Valley Road and Victoria Road and the Victoria Road/A56 junction.

The Environment Agency continues to explore other options to reduce flood risk from all sources in and around Earby. The team is investigating the options in more detail, which include flood storage areas on Earby Beck, the New Cut and Victoria Clough and installing a flood defence wall at Albert Street.

The Environment Agency is looking for volunteer flood wardens to play a key part in keeping Earby prepared and informed before, during and after a flood. Anyone interested in becoming a flood warden can email heather.cottrill@environment-agency.gov.uk to find out more.

By signing up to the Environment Agency's free Flood Warning service residents and businesses can receive flood alerts and flood warnings for Earby Beck and/or Earby New Cut directly to their phone and emails, 24/7.

Press release: Joint statement on behalf of the Prime Minister and President Juncker

Prime Minister May and President Juncker have met today to review the next steps in the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

The talks were held in a spirit of working together to achieve the UK's orderly withdrawal from the EU, especially in the context of a shared determination to achieve a strong partnership for the future given the global challenges the EU and the UK face together in upholding open and fair trade, cooperation in the fight against climate change and terrorism and defending the rules-based international system.

The Prime Minister described the context in the UK Parliament, and the motivation behind last week's vote in the House of Commons seeking a legally binding change to the terms of the backstop. She raised various options for dealing with these concerns in the context of the Withdrawal Agreement in line with her commitments to the Parliament.

President Juncker underlined that the EU27 will not reopen the Withdrawal Agreement, which represents a carefully balanced compromise between the European Union and the UK, in which both sides have made significant concessions to arrive at a deal. President Juncker however expressed his openness to add wording to the Political Declaration agreed by the EU27 and the UK in order to be more ambitious in terms of content and speed when it comes to the future relationship between the European Union and the UK. President Juncker drew attention to the fact that any solution would have to be agreed by the European Parliament and the EU27.

The discussion was robust but constructive. Despite the challenges, the two leaders agreed that their teams should hold talks as to whether a way through can be found that would gain the broadest possible support in the UK Parliament and respect the guidelines agreed by the European Council. The Prime Minister and the President will meet again before the end of February to take stock of these discussions.