

The drive to improve motorway journeys for disabled people

Nearly one in four people report they have a disability and disabled drivers represent five per cent of the driving population.

The company announced the new services on International Day of Sign Languages (Wednesday 23 September) with one service which will help Deaf people communicate with the organisation using British Sign Language, the other seeing the introduction of access guides to help explain the facilities offered at motorway service areas.

Highways England Customer Service Director, Melanie Clarke said:

We always encourage everyone to plan their journeys before setting off and appreciate that for some people this isn't as easy as for others. That's why we're launching new services, to break down barriers and help people reliably plan and feel confident about their journeys. We'll continue our work to improve facilities in collaboration with the expertise of the Roads for All Forum members.

Highways England established the Roads for All Forum in 2018 bringing together a wide range of organisations that represent, or provide services to, disabled road users. Working together, the forum ensures that accessibility and inclusivity shapes England's roads, both now and in the future.

Guy Dangerfield, head of strategy at the independent watchdog Transport Focus, said:

We know that driving gives disabled road users vital independence, but the lack of relevant information in suitable formats can make planning a journey very difficult.

Our research showed the barriers that disabled people can face. It is good to see Transport Focus recommendations being taken onboard to make it easier for all road users to plan journeys and get assistance when they need it.

Highways England offers support to road users 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Its Customer Contact Centre provides journey planning advice, information about roadworks and traffic conditions, and assistance to people who have broken down and need help. Its new contact service allows anyone who is a British Sign Language (BSL) user to use SignLive to contact the Customer Contact Centre.

An estimated 150,000 people in the UK use British Sign Language (BSL) as their main or sole means of communication. The free SignLive service connects deaf users with an online professional BSL interpreter, who will contact Highways England on their behalf and translate the conversation between them and a Highways England contact centre advisor.

Joel Kellhofer, Director at SignLive said:

SignLive are delighted to be working with Highways England to make the organisation more accessible for the Deaf community. They provide a vital service and we're happy that British Sign Language users can get in touch more easily.

Highways England has also joined up with AccessAble, which provides accessibility information on thousands of venues across the UK and Ireland via a free App, to include information on motorway services areas in England.

AccessAble survey in progress

Over 100 service areas on England's motorway network will be surveyed to determine the accessibility of key areas including parking, toilets, petrol stations, shops and restaurants. The first survey took place at Watford Gap on 5 August, with all 113 Access Guides due to launch in early 2021. Virtual Access Guides will also be created. This new type of guide, which uses 360-degree imagery, will enable people to travel the route to key facilities, like accessible toilets and changing places, so they can find out exactly what to expect when they arrive.

Speaking about the project David Livermore, Director of Business Development at AccessAble said:

We are delighted to be working with Highways England on this ground-breaking initiative to deliver a world class standard of access information across the service area network. Highways England shares our commitment to user-led service development and improving access and customer experiences for the UK's 18 million disabled people and carers.

The project will not only give people all the information they need to plan a trip but also support Highways England and Motorway Service Operators to see how facilities could be improved in the future. We are particularly looking forward to working in collaboration with disabled people and disability organisations who are experts in this space to ensure the service is the best it can be.

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.