



Department  
for Transport

Councillor Andrew Bowles  
Cabinet Member for Localism, Sport,  
Culture and Heritage  
Swale Borough Council  
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From the Parliamentary  
Under Secretary of State  
**Andrew Jones MP**

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*Dear Councillor Bowles,*

Thank you for your letter of 28 January (and your colleague Mike Whiting's letters of 26 January to Patrick McLoughlin and myself) regarding the closure of the A249, Sittingbourne, Kent. I trust you will be content for me to address both letters together, given that the contents have much in common.

Firstly, I want to stress that I appreciate the concerns that you, businesses and the local community have had about the recent problems experienced with the A249, and sympathise deeply with drivers frustrated by the delays.

The problems with the A249 were complex, and meant that a number of issues had to be resolved before the permanent works could be carried out and the road made safe for traffic to use. A significant volume of water had escaped from the burst water main over a long period. This resulted in considerable damage to the ground beneath the A249 and therefore it was not possible to carry out a ground investigation to determine the extent of the damage until the replacement temporary water main was in place.

To determine whether the carriageway was safe to use, Highways England's specialist contractors completed an initial pavement survey during the night of Friday 16 January. To ensure lane 2 was safe to open, a second survey was then carried out on Monday 25 January (after the temporary water main had been installed), to determine the stability of the ground underneath.

Agreement was then reached at an on-site meeting on Monday 25 January to pump foamed concrete into the void beneath the A249, with the aim of reopening lane 2 of the A249 as soon as was safely possible. A total of 80 cubic metres of foamed concrete was pumped during night works in that week (enough to fill a double decker bus), and lane 2 northbound was opened to traffic at midnight on Thursday 28 January. In order to minimize the impact of installing traffic management measures to allow traffic to run in lane 2 of the northbound carriageway, this work was also undertaken at night. Following further surface works, the full A249 main carriageway was opened on the morning of 5 February and the slip road was opened on the same evening.

With regard to traffic management in the early stages of the works, Highways England looked at three possible options; a contra-flow on the southbound carriageway; installation of temporary traffic signals at the A249/A2 Key Street, and the re-opening of lane 2 of the northbound carriageway to traffic.

The contraflow was not considered to be a viable option due to the road layout and local traffic patterns. There are no existing crossovers in the A249 central reservation to allow northbound traffic to cross over onto the southbound carriageway and then back again after the incident site. The existing wire rope central reservation safety barrier has to be highly tensioned to operate effectively, and creating new gaps within it to facilitate crossovers would require extensive works. As you have noted, morning southbound peak hour traffic flows regularly result in heavy congestion in both southbound lanes between Bobbing and the M2 Stockbury Junction, which would be severely exacerbated by the introduction of a contraflow.

Unfortunately, temporary traffic signals would not have been suitable, as they were unlikely to operate efficiently, causing further disruption and congestion.

Allowing a single lane of traffic to run in lane 2 of the northbound carriageway, under a temporary speed restriction of 50mph, was decided to be the only safe and viable option. The sequence of events outlined above was necessary to ensure the safety of road users and workers.

Once I heard of severity of the situation I asked Highways England to provide daily updates of their progress to both the constituency MP, Gordon Henderson, and myself. Following this incident, I have also asked Highways England to review the work that was undertaken so they can take away the lessons learned.

Should you have any further concerns or questions on the work to recover the A249, please do not hesitate to contact Highways England's Project Manager Tim Lyver, by e-mail at [Tim.Lyver@highwaysengland.co.uk](mailto:Tim.Lyver@highwaysengland.co.uk) or by telephone on 0300 470 1172.

*Yours sincerely,*

*Andrew Jones*

**ANDREW JONES**