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My Ref : AB/JT/11/110

Your Ref :

15 June 2012

Mr K Walters
9 Kenmore Road
Swarland
NE65 9JS

Dear Mr Walters

Inquest into the Death of Eric Smith

Thank you for your e-mail to my Clerk Mrs Tait and for providing details of your interest as a representative of Swarland Residents who have expressed concerns regarding the number of casualties or deaths at the nearby A1 road junction.

I appreciate your providing me with the further information attached to your e-mail.

As you will probably know, my role as an independent judicial officer means that once I have concluded an inquest I should not comment further upon the circumstances disclosed at the inquest, my function and involvement being completed. I am however willing to recognise that you are a person having a legitimate interest in the Rule 43 Report which I am making to the Highways Agency and have included you in the List of Recipients of that Report which is attached to this letter.

I shall in due course also provide you with a copy of the reply received to this Report when it is available.

Yours sincerely

Tony Brown
HM Coroner for North Northumberland

The action I am asking you to take is to draw the attention of motorists to the junction at Swarland by considering one or more of the following:-

You will be aware that there have been numerous other deaths on the A1 at Swarland. I concluded from the facts at the Inquest that the absence of a slip road or other safe road layout means that when collisions occur at this location there is an increased likelihood of a fatal outcome.

It is my understanding that the Department of Transport when considering the action which needs to be taken in relation to road safety takes account of the number of reported accidents or incidents which occur on the roads over a given time period.

Whilst it is fully appreciated that the Department must prioritise schemes and the resources involved, the concern that I have after dealing with several Inquests and bereaved families involving road deaths on the A1 in Northumberland, is that the outcomes from traffic incidents have a higher fatality rate on this road.

I have personally driven the full length of the A1 from the Scottish borders to the M25 and am not aware of other road junctions on this national route, from which communities on either side of the A1 must cross four lanes of a roadway carrying traffic up to the national speed limit, without the benefit of a slip road or other safe means of access.

My description and summary of the situation disclosed at the inquest is given below, for your information:-

"The collision investigation carried out by Northumbria Police shows that this fatal accident has probably involved driver error.

The aspect which concerns me greatly about the traffic junction on the A1 at Swarland is that there have been other deaths at the same location in very similar circumstances.

While it is acknowledged that Mr Smith might not have accelerated when he needed to do so, the section of the A1 at Swarland is unquestionably hazardous. It is one of the few lengths of dual carriageway on the A1 north of Morpeth on which drivers can get an opportunity to overtake before the road reduces to single carriageway again. At the same time, residents of and visitors to Swarland Village who need to cross the A1 in a west to east direction or vice versa must cross four lanes of briskly moving traffic and in doing so must look for a safe chance to cross.

Because of the limitations of the present road the A1 in Northumberland is very unforgiving when it comes to driver error. There may be fewer reported incidents on the A1 than other areas because of the lower population and traffic volumes, but the collisions which do occur are frequently devastating and fatal.

On most sections of dual carriageway which are joined or crossed over by slow traffic or vehicles moving from the standing position there is either a slip road or some other layout which allows oncoming traffic to clearly see, avoid or react to joining traffic, whether or not the speed or position of the joining vehicle is correct."

The action I am asking you to take is to draw the attention of motorists to the junction at Swarland by considering one or more of the following:-

Schedule of Recipients:-

- Warning signs to the North and South of the road junction
- Additional road markings
- Revising the road layout to provide a safer means of access
- Clearance of vegetation/trees if that would improve awareness and visibility of traffic approaching the road junction
- Any other action which you may deem necessary

In accordance with Rule 43, a copy of this Report is being sent to the Lord Chancellor and all the other properly interested persons identified at the Inquest (together with other people I believe may find it useful or of interest). A list of copy recipients can be found at the end of this report. Your response to this Report will also be shared with those listed.

The Lord Chancellor may send a copy of the Report and response to any person who the Lord Chancellor believes may find it useful or of interest. In addition, the Lord Chancellor may publish a full copy of a summary of the report and response (unless I have decided otherwise in response to a written representation about the release and publication of your response).

Rule 43A requires that you give a written response within fifty-six days of the day the report is sent. If you are unable to respond within that time, you may apply to me for an extension. The response is to contain details of any action that has been taken or which it is proposed will be taken whether in response to this report or otherwise or an explanation as to why no action is proposed. If there are circumstances where you do not want your full response to be shared with the copy recipients listed at the end of this report, or for a copy of it to be published, you may make written representations to me at the time of giving your response. Instead of releasing or publishing your full response it may be possible to share or publish a summary in accordance with Rule 43A.

Yours faithfully

Tony Brown
H M Coroner for North Northumberland