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# Drivers stuck for hours in jam chaos

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Schoolchildren were stuck on a bus home for hours during traffic “madness” that brought drivers to a standstill.

Pupils returning to Ley-down from Westlands in Sittingbourne arrived home at 7.50pm on Monday, despite being picked up at 4.30pm.

It came after a crash on the A249 coincided with various road closures.

Network Rail shut the Kingsferry Bridge on Friday for eight days, one of two routes onto the Island. Meanwhile a lane of the approach on the A249 is down to one lane due to works at the Grovehurst junction. Chestnut Street on the A2 at Key Street was also closed in both directions for utilities.

One Sittingbourne driver claimed it took him more than an hour to get from St Michael’s Road to the Esso garage on London Road – a journey which would usually take four minutes.

Another said that when he walked through East Street for a doctor’s appointment he could see the same cars that were waiting in traffic after his appointment – 45 minutes later. A gymgoer told the News it took him 50 minutes to get from Teynham to the Swallows Leisure Centre in Sittingbourne town centre – normally a 20-minute journey.

And Sheppey commuters having to use rail replacement services during the closure of the Kingsferry Bridge were left at Sheerness station for three hours because buses were unable to get onto the Island.

Network Rail is carrying out the works to urgently replace the 40 steel ropes that lift the

bridge for maritime traffic.

A spokesman said the repairs would avoid a “sudden” and “disruptive unplanned” closure over the winter.

But Tim Lambkin, managing director of Travel Masters, says the thinking behind the works, which clash with the Grovehurst roundabout redesign, have not been “joined up”.

His firm has been providing the rail replacement services, as well as operating its usual school buses, something he says has been a “struggle”.

He said: “Because of the numerous closures, including the single lane closure for the Grovehurst works, all it takes is one accident for the roads to snarl up.

“Usually drivers would have another route to use through Iwade to get to the Island but because of the bridge works, this option is not there. It means there’s more traffic going through Bobbing which backs up into Sittingbourne past Key Street.

“We were lucky on Monday that four busloads of primary school children who were on a trip returned before rush hour. It was bad enough that secondary school kids were stuck on a bus for hours but the younger children would not have handled it.

“It has been a real struggle for us and if the bridge works had been pushed back until the A249 flyover was open there would be less of a problem.

“People say everyone should just leave 15 minutes early, however, the problem is we are running at a strict timetable as kids need to get to school on time.”

Traffic issues, Mr Lamkin added, have been part of daily life for 10-12 months since the Grovehurst works began.

The £38.1 million improve-

ment project was due to finish by the end of the year, however, a range of problems – including “issues with trapping reptiles” – have seen this date pushed back to next June.

Jackson Civil Engineering, which is delivering the scheme, was approached for comment.

A Network Rail spokesman said: “We know that the impact of the Kingsferry Bridge closure this week, as well as a crash and a broken down vehicle in the area on Monday night, meant that there were delays for motorists’ and bus passengers’ journeys.

“We’re grateful to people for their patience as we complete these urgent repairs. Making these essential repairs now avoids us having to put in place a sudden and much more disruptive unplanned closure over the winter. By doing the work in summer, the risk of Sheppey Crossing, as the alternative route to the island, closing due to high winds is also significantly reduced.”

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**Traffic backing up on the Sheppey Crossing on Monday and, right, Travelmasters boss Tim Lambkin**

Picture: David Thurman-Newell