

The show must go on

Matt Pates, the Highways Agency's emergency planning manager for the Midlands, provides insight into all the hard work that went into ensuring music fans experienced better journeys when attending this year's V Festival in Staffordshire

Miles of motorway tailbacks bound for Staffordshire, carrying scores of excited passengers rushing to see their favourite line-up at the V Festival, would be any motorist's nightmare.

But the work that goes into planning routes, arrival times and diversions to reduce the impact of such a situation is improving year on year. Music enthusiasts who recently attended this year's event generally experienced better journeys, thanks to the Highways Agency's emergency planning team.

The emergency planning team ensures that the impact of any events or emergencies on the road network, surrounding communities and the environment are minimised.

"We share information, expertise and resource across internal and external partners," explains Matt Pates, emergency planning manager for the Midlands.

"The planning for this year's event started almost as soon as the last campers were driving off site in 2012 – with a debrief for operational staff on how they thought it went overall. It is important to capture what went well and more importantly the things that did not – so we can improve."

Sharing information

The emergency planning team works with a number of partners, sharing intelligence and best practice to ensure safer and improved journeys for motorists all year round, 24 hours a day.



Thousands of revellers attend the V Festival every year

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“Working alongside event organisers, traffic management contractors, local highways authorities and the emergency services, we identify the learning from past events and develop a new plan which repeats any successes and addresses issues.”

“Planning for any public entertainment event is an exercise in diplomacy, everyone involved genuinely wants to deliver a successful outcome, but have differing priorities and face financial as well as resource pressures.”

“V Festival traffic was originally routed from the M6, and while this did work, it placed too much strain on that road so we talked with our partner organisations and developed a plan which brought in some of the traffic along the M54. While that sounds obvious and simple, it means extra work and investment for the event organisers who need to place more signs and provide additional staff and extra car parks on that side of the site.”

“While it is easy to tell when a traffic management system is not working, it can be a lot harder to figure out why. Often it is because road users are exhibiting a new behaviour, for example, there is an emerging trend of young people arriving at a festival by public transport and being collected by parents afterwards. This creates an imbalance in traffic flows and creates congestion.”

Emergency planning

The Highways Agency has an emergency planning team in each of its seven regions. These teams coordinate at national level, to ensure lessons learned at an event at one end of the country benefit customers attending events hundreds of miles away.

The Midlands team covers the Highways Agency's largest geographic area and is also responsible for working with organisers of many of the UK's largest

and most high profile events including the Formula 1 British Grand Prix, Cosford Air Show, Download Festival and numerous large events at the National Exhibition Centre.

“Any event attracting tens of thousands of people will place a lot of demand on an already crowded network. We use a combination of techniques to optimise the use of road capacity and promote the most efficient route,” adds Pates. “In reality any traffic management system has to be a compromise between the needs of event goers and the day to day road users.”

Covering such a large area, the Midlands emergency planning team is able to transfer learning across a large number of events, such as the V and Download music festivals. This process is enhanced because the organisers use the same traffic management contractors as one another.

Such a responsibility doesn't escape without its fair share of challenges as Pates recalls: *“Last year, just a month before the London Olympic Games with the eyes of the world upon the UK transport infrastructure and following months of heavy rain, the Formula One British Grand Prix at Silverstone suffered significant disruption when car parks and camp sites became waterlogged, preventing traffic leaving the road network.”*

“This resulted in 10 mile traffic queues in each direction back to both the M1 and M40. The emergency planning team switched to ‘crisis management’ mode, supporting both the Highways Agency’s internal management response and coordination with the multi agency community to resolve the initial issues and ensure delivery of a successful Grand Prix. After all, the show must go on, and so it did.” ●

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