

Driving home for Christmas

Nobody wants to be stuck in traffic when they are on their way to their Christmas lunch. The Highways Agency National Traffic Operations Centre (NTOC) is committed to maintaining a high level of service for road users, has a vital role in keeping traffic moving all year round, and its real-time traffic information gathering and dissemination will be running as usual over Christmas to keep England's strategic network running smoothly, and getting road users to their Christmas lunches



NTOC houses the national traffic information service, which is being delivered by Network Information Services on a seven-year contract. NTOC is staffed 24/7. It captures and verifies data from the roadside which is used to build up knowledge and information about traffic speeds and capacity.

The Highways Agency has 3,000 large electronic matrix signs on its network. Known as variable message signs (VMS), they give road users important information about road conditions, traffic collisions and other emergencies that could result in delays to drivers journeys. They also have the capability to display roadworks information, although the Agency will be lifting or completing the majority of its roadworks over Christmas and the New Year to make journeys easier.

Information is gathered and sent to the electronic signs in a variety of ways:

From 5,000 motorway incident detection and automatic signalling

(MIDAS) sites; 2,600 inductive loop sites at the roadside; 1,429 traffic cameras; and from 1,100 automatic number plate recognition (APNR) cameras at 539 sites.

The APNR cameras measure the time that it takes vehicles to move from point to point on the network. An APNR camera tags a vehicle as it passes it, and records the time. The next camera further along the road reads the number plate again, recording the time. This difference is used to derive the actual journey time of a vehicle. This tagging happens continuously to many vehicles, building up a picture of the time it takes to complete a section of a road and all the data received is anonymised so that no individual vehicle is identifiable. These journey times are compared to an ideal journey, and are used to indicate accurate estimations of travel times on travel time VMS (TTVMS).

Information from NTOC is not only used within the Agency. It is supplied to radio stations for travel news, Atlas Pro, a tool for professional users, and Atlas Tip,

a web based service for traffic media partners. It is also used on Highways Agency information points (HAIPS), which are information screens located in motorway service areas, airports and shopping centres.

The Highways Agency information line (HAIL) (0300 123 5000) takes calls directly from customers, and gives real-time information for journey planning and traffic conditions based on the data collected by NTOC.

Information from NTOC is also used to provide information to a number of the Highways Agency's Twitter feeds, used to keep road users up to date with traffic conditions across the country. Road users also use Twitter to alert the Agency to real time issues.

Whether it is updating our own signs on England's motorways and major A roads or providing information through the media, the Agency is committed to ensuring drivers reach their destination safely and hopefully in time for Christmas lunch. 🍷

