

18 April 2024

Operation Freeway

Wards: All

Portfolio: Deputy Leader & Regeneration

1. Aim

- 1.1. To manage and maintain the road network effectively and efficiently to facilitate transportation, supporting economic growth, and enhance the quality of life for residents and businesses.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. The committee is asked to note the information provided in respect to Operation Freeway.

3. Report detail – know

- 3.1. The UK highway authority operates under a two-tier system comprising national and local levels. At the national level, National Highways oversee the strategic road network, largely motorways and trunk roads, ensuring consistency and strategic planning across the country. Local authorities, including Walsall Council, manage minor roads, including urban and rural routes, within their boundary.
- 3.2. The M6 Toll is a northern bypass for Birmingham and the West Midlands conurbation. In 1991, the decision was taken to build a new privately funded motorway. Midland Expressway Ltd was awarded the concession to build and manage the M6 Toll and the road opened in December 2003 and carries over 50,000 vehicles a day.
- 3.3. Operation Freeway is a strategic response plan, owned by National Highways, which aims to mitigate the impact of exceptional events on the strategic road network. It focuses particularly on the M6 between junctions 3a & 11a. The plan is classified as “official sensitive” and is therefore not publicly available to view.
- 3.4. The plan outlines the criteria for triggering Operation Freeway. These triggers include a declared major incident that results in the Strategic Road Network becoming inoperable in both directions for a time likely to exceed 24 hours.
- 3.5. In the event that a major incident is declared, a dynamic risk assessment is completed. Consultation with a regional tactical group is undertaken and authorisation is then sought from the Secretary of State for Transport to suspend toll charges on the M6 Toll for 24 hours.
- 3.6. The measures can be extended in 24 hour increments up to a full duration of three days.

3.7. Since its inception in 2008, Operation Freeway has been a consideration for any significant incident on the M6 in the West Midlands urban conurbation. However, no incident has ever reached the thresholds required to activate the measure.

4. Financial information

4.1. Operation Freeway has no financial implications for Walsall Council.

5. Reducing Inequalities

5.1. Effective management of the UK strategic road network reduces inequalities by improving connectivity between regions, facilitating smoother access to economic opportunities, essential services, and education. Enhanced infrastructure benefits marginalised communities, promoting socio-economic balance and narrowing spatial disparities across the country.

6. Consultation

6.1. Operation Freeway requires coordination with various stakeholders, including the Central Motorway Police Group, Midlands Expressway Limited, and local authorities, to manage traffic flow and provide accurate information to the public.

7. Decide

7.1. The committee is asked to note the detail provided in this report.

8. Respond

8.1. Should the need to activate Operation Freeway arise and there be a likely impact on the local road network, Walsall Council would be actively involved in discussions and multi-agency action.

9. Review

9.1. Operation Freeway was initially created in spring 2008 and is currently on its 20th version.

9.2. Walsall Council do not directly influence the review cycle or content or the response plan. If a need to input was required, this would be channelled through existing arrangements with National Highways and the Department for Transport.

Background Papers

None.

Authors

Lianne Deathridge - Emergency Planning Manager
Lianne.Deathridge@Walsall.gov.uk

Kathryn Moreton – Director [Place & Environment]
Kathryn.Moreton@Walsall.gov.uk