

Suicide prevention focused on motorway bridges

A partnership operation to reduce suicides and improve responses to attempts on motorway bridges.

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20 December 2024

Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Prevention
Organisation	Merseyside Police
Contact	Haydn Ward
Email address	haydn.ward@merseyside.police.uk
Region	North West
Partners	Police Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of practice	The practice is at a pilot stage.
Start date	September 2022
Scale of initiative	Local

Key details

Target group	Victims
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Aim

This initiative aims to reduce the number of suicides from motorway bridges by making it easier for emergency services to find the exact location of a person in crisis on a motorway bridge – all of which have been numbered with location point signs installed on the parapets to assist callers to provide the exact location of an incident.

Merseyside Police aims to see a reduction in response times to the bridges in the Wirral area as they are now more identifiable through signing.

The initiative also aims to improve joint emergency service responses to bridge suicide attempts, which will ultimately reduce lives lost and injuries sustained.

Intended outcome

Outcomes include:

- reduced fatalities and injuries
- reduced response times when attending these incidents
- reduced demand on operational resources
- reduced disruption to the motorway network during these incidents

This activity addresses these issues by making it easier for police and emergency services to pinpoint the exact bridge of a suicide attempt.

Description

Feedback from frontline officers suggested a need to streamline the process of responding to incidents on motorway bridges. These incidents are resource-intensive, often due to officers being given the wrong location by informants resulting in several locations being checked. If a member of the public does not know the road name or exact motorway junction of an ongoing incident, a rough

area is given such as between two junctions. This results in several officers responding and checking bridges in the area until the incident is located.

Following the feedback, a report was written by an analyst documenting the number of incidents over a 12 month period. Between November 2019 and November 2020, Merseyside Police took 87 reports relating to suicide risks on motorway bridges and a further 20 incidents of concerns for people known to mental health services on or near motorway bridges. This data was taken from the M53 in the Wirral area between the Wallasey Tunnel and Junction 5.

A partnership operation was then formed to address the high number of cases. This operation was named Operation Copenhagen, formulated with Merseyside Police, the local authority, National Highways, Wirral MIND mental health charity and Samaritans charity. The plan of numbering each bridge with clear signage was presented to the team and it was agreed by all parties that numbering the bridges with signs would make it easier for the police to identify the exact location of potential suicide incidents, therefore preventing suicides.

After this was discussed and agreed, Wirral Borough Council and Merseyside Police agreed to joint fund the costs. The local authority had the A3 signs designed and made up costing a total of approximately £2,500. This covered enough signs for 26 bridges, the number of signs on each bridge varied between 2-8 depending on the size (length) of the bridge. This ensures that the signs are accessible by situating them no further than 25m apart. The signs are A3 in size and read with the following text.

- In an emergency call 999, Bridge Location Point (followed by number) and a logo of the police force.

Any signs that are removed are replaced by local highways and this is arranged by the sergeant leading the project.

Merseyside Police worked closely with Wirral Borough Council and their road safety team to agree a launch date and a planned a press release to inform the community why these signs had been installed. Merseyside Police highlighted this work through their social media, force website and press team informed local news. Wirral Council also carried out a press release through their own channels. Merseyside Police Instagram and Facebook pages were used to publish videos explaining how to use the signs. This received good responses online, but likely requires a refresh

each 12 months or so to maintain public awareness.

Internally a briefing package was sent out to all officers and control room staff covering the Wirral area. This package informed officers and staff of the purpose of the signs and how to use them. The control room programmed each location point into the WebSTORM system so when an informant provides the police with the location point, the number generates the exact bridge on the force's map and officers can be deployed. The training package was in PowerPoint format which is easy to share and use on team briefings.

This PowerPoint has also been shared with Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service and North-West Ambulance Service for their own awareness. Also, they have been sent a document detailing each bridge and the location sign reference but are more commonly passed the location from Merseyside Police. In turn, deploying to the scene is less resource-intensive as police do not have to search or check numerous locations. By quickly obtaining the exact location, response times should reduce and therefore earlier intervention can take place, leading to reduced disruption to the motorway network.

Overall impact

Analysis has been completed which compares data from 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. Both data sets are from a 12-month period, the former taken when the bridge locations signs were not in place, and the latter data is taken with the signs in place.

In total, 42 incidents met both the "Bridge" and "Suicide Risk" criteria, (down from 57 in Nov 2022 – Nov 2023, decrease of 15, 26%). Out of the latest such incidents, 25 met the "Priors" criteria (22 fit the "Misbehaviour" criteria, 17 fit both). As a note, it is possible that this includes persons reported as suicide risks in the vicinity of a bridge but not actively on it at the time of reporting. The results of this were subsequently mapped in Northgate XD, with accidents and non-bridge misbehaviours excluded.

Response times improved in all areas as per below:

- 38 of the 42 incidents with bridge and suicide risk (90%) were dispatched to. Improvement on Nov 22 – Nov 23, when 50 of the 57 incidents with bridge and suicide risk (88%) were dispatched to.
- Of the 38 incidents dispatched to, 23 (61%) were at scene within 5 minutes. Improvement on Nov 22 – Nov 23, when of the 50 incidents dispatched to, 23 (46%) were at scene within 5 minutes.

- 37 (97%) were at scene within 10 minutes. Improvement on Nov 22 – Nov 23, when 44 (88%) were at scene within 10 minutes.

Response times to these incidents have improved since the implementation of the bridge location signs, subsequently improving chances of saving lives. While response times have improved, these improvements are only slight and the force believe this can be improved by ensuring call handlers utilise the system by asking informants to provide the bridge location sign at the earliest opportunity.

Frontline officers have provided the following positive feedback since the implementation.

- The location signs have helped to locate people in crisis and have also assisted officers asking for assistance.
- Officers have also stated that the project has helped to reduce demand on resources as fewer officers are now deployed to check each bridge in the area.

Learning

National Highways were clear in stating that Merseyside Police could not install location markers on the external side of the bridges and therefore, would not be viewable to motorway road users. This was because signs intended to be viewed by motorway users would have to conform to motorway sign regulations. As they would therefore have to be very large, the bridges may not withstand the wind loading caused on their structures. Also, National Highways expressed this would be very costly.

Therefore, it was agreed that smaller signs could be attached to the bridges and would be visible to people passing over the bridge.

Although National Highways identified a barrier to installing larger signs visible to motorway users, feedback from officers and the public indicate this is still considered highly necessary. Further conversations with National Highways and local authorities are needed to address this. At present Merseyside Police have not been able to discuss this further with National Highways and would benefit from a more effective line of communication with the organisation. Discussions are being had with Merseyside Police's Prevention departments to consider Operation Copenhagen being taken on by the department so this work can be formally assigned to a team.

An effective press release is needed so the community understand the purpose of the signs and how to use them. This requires joint press release across numerous agencies and support from local press.

Also, training for call handlers is important so they are trained to obtain the bridge number from the informant reporting an incident. It is particularly helpful when the informant cannot provide the road name or junction. This would ideally be implemented during initial training, so they are aware of this as soon as they reach operational status. Merseyside Police intends to work on this as there is no formal training package within their initial training.

The numbering of bridge location points has deterred people using sites for such purposes. The force are now currently reviewing the response times to see if the location points have reduced time taken to attend incidents.

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Tags

Vulnerable people