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Safety in Numbers

The challenges of managing free-to-attend events

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Introduction

Community events have long been a cornerstone of local life (Getz & Page, 2020; Ferdinand & Kitchen, 2017; Shone & Parry, 2019), but these events have evolved significantly in recent years to become annual traditions and signify a wider community identity (Antchak *et al.*, 2019). The communities around the event expect the event to happen, that they will be able to attend without charge, and that it will be a safe and enjoyable experience. The societal expectation is that the local council (that is, the public sector) fund and manage the event (Richards & Palmer, 2010), creating a potential perception by some attendees that it is not their responsibility to either contribute or behave safely (Silvers & O'Toole, 2021). Therefore, for community events, the tangible challenge is ensuring safety and fulfilling expectations within the financial resources available, particularly when public funding can be limited.

Most community events take place in public spaces, and the legal requirements around access to public spaces mean that controlling access, ingress and egress for free-to-attend events is challenging (Smith, 2016). Operationally, this may require significant resources, such as security personnel and stewards, and barriers and signage, to ensure securely controlled access. This creates the need to manage a delicate balance between staging a successful event without impinging upon public access. Simply put, event managers cannot restrict pedestrian access to the entirety of a public space, such as a high street or park (Smith, 2016), even though there may be allowances for closing off or controlling elements of a public space when delivering the event. Financially, delivering events in public spaces requires significant cost and personnel, requiring high levels of knowledge, expertise, and time. It is this tension between expectation and resource that results in many community events failing in terms of safety, expectations, or financial viability.

Across the world there are numerous examples of safety issues and failures concerning public, free-to-attend events, and in many cases, these failures lead

to significant learning and improvement for future events. Whilst safety is of paramount importance for events, it is the crowd management aspects that are most relevant within free-to-attend events, due to the potentially high number of attendees using a public space as the event venue. In this chapter, we consider two case studies, in Truro and Chester, UK, as examples of crowd management and safety failings, and explore suggested changes to practice. The impact of Covid-19 on the events sector has been catastrophic and the resources to support events are under renewed pressure as a result. To conclude this chapter, we will discuss whether large scale, free-to-attend events are safe and if they have a future.

Theoretical underpinning

The academic field of events management has evolved rapidly in the last 25 years, to include the adoption and amalgamation of existing theories and academic ideology from other disciplines such as: business, health and safety, finance, marketing and project management, as well as the development of specialised events management techniques and processes (Bladen *et al.*, 2018; Bowdin *et al.*, 2011; Dowson & Bassett, 2018; Ferdinand & Kitchin, 2017; Getz & Page, 2020; Raj *et al.*, 2017; Shone & Parry, 2019; Van der Wagen & White, 2018). The continuous development of events knowledge and practice is critical to the events management industry and its continued professionalisation (Brown & Stokes, 2021; Dowson & Bassett, 2018; Getz & Page, 2020; Silvers, 2012). Despite the wealth of research regarding safety in events there is very little literature concerning the challenges of managing 'free-to-attend' or 'un-ticketed' events, and whilst ticketing is examined, this is predominately from the perspective of pricing strategy (Bladen *et al.*, 2018; Bowdin *et al.*, 2011; Dowson & Bassett, 2018; Raj *et al.*, 2017). In this chapter, we recognise that event safety is not managed in isolation but is intrinsically interlinked with two other key facets: stakeholder management and resourcing. This creates a delicate trichotomy which is applicable to many events, including community and free-to-attend events. Therefore, event safety cannot simply be considered as an isolated task within the event management process, but as a complex iterative process that is intertwined with stakeholder engagement and resourcing, as well as with audience expectations and perceptions.

■ Stakeholder management

The management of stakeholders is recognised as a vital element of event management (Evans, 2020; van Niekerk & Getz, 2019), and this is particularly relevant in the consideration of free-to-attend events due to the comparatively large number of stakeholders, and the complexity of these relationships. As outlined by van Niekerk (2016), events and festivals are not static and develop in context to the interactions with people in their internal and external environments, and their influence on the event. Getz (1991: 15) states that for events "*stakeholders are those people and groups with a stake in the event and its outcomes, including all groups par-*