

Can UK music festivals really go green?

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Music festivals in the UK are now beginning to turn climate awareness into systemic action. With considered innovations, organisers are proving that green and eco-friendly infrastructure can actually elevate the fan experience, providing scalable lessons in collective stewardship.

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EXPERTS

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** Beyond symbolic activism, festivals are embedding sustainability into their core infrastructure and proving that eco-conscious operations can deliver a superior experience for fans
- 02** Pioneering events prioritise community stewardship, using savvy behavioural nudges and fan loyalty to make sustainable attendee behaviour the social default
- 03** By serving as testing grounds for clean energy and upcycled waste, the live events sector is creating a scalable blueprint for sustainable living that resonates beyond the festival gates

DATA

- **One in five** British adults say that music-based incentives would motivate them to take up more sustainable habits
- **77%** of UK fans want music festivals to cut down on waste
- **60%** of 18– to 34–year-olds say that environmental sustainability efforts are important when choosing live music events

SCOPE

Influential Bristolian trip-hop duo Massive Attack made headlines when they turned down an offer for a slot at Coachella 2025. “We’ve been there once, and once was enough,” said Robert Del Naja. “It’s in Palm Springs. It’s a golf resort built on a desert, run on a sprinkler system, using public water supplies. Mental. If you want to see something that’s the most ludicrous bit of human behaviour – it’s right there.” [1] It sent a resounding message throughout the festival circuit, highlighting sentiments that have been building for some time. Namely, that festivals are largely unsustainable and, understandably, that thousands descending on picturesque, often protected, green field sites to party is not immediately associated with environmentalism. However, with 77% of UK fans wanting such events to cut down on waste, festivals across the country are adapting to prove they can party without the planet paying the price. [2]

For John Rostron, CEO of Association of Independent Festivals (AIF), sustainability is not just an “add-on” but rather integral to festival operations. “For our members, sustainability is part and parcel of the whole event – same as being wildly creative, same as ensuring accessibility.” [3] These events have become a microcosm of broader environmental issues, and many are responding with innovative thinking that could have ramifications far beyond the live music sector. [Shambala Festival](#) is considered a leader in this regard, introducing biogas-powered amenities, effective green transport initiatives and even food vendors that address ecosystem imbalances. [4] [We Out Here](#) has received Dark Sky Accreditation after eliminating upward light pollution at night, helping protect the area’s renowned starry nights and reducing disruption of

local species. Even the large-scale pop-up city of Glastonbury Festival has run on [100% renewable energy since 2023](#). [5]

But while many are championing thorough and creative environmental policies, there remains still an onus on individual attendees. Enough people not adhering to guidelines can become a significant issue for the ecology of green field sites – with tents left behind, the land used as a public toilet, waste not disposed of properly and public transport eschewed for cars. But for Rostron, independent festivals are particularly adept at tackling these issues and are leading the way in sustainable operations. “There’s a bond and a care between our festival audiences and the organisers,” he says. “We all want the same thing – to come, to have a great time, to leave the site as we found it and to not trash the planet for the generations coming behind us.” [3] So how exactly are these festivals paving the way for a more eco-conscious live music industry? And how can attendees be persuaded not just to look after a site, but to take good intentions home with them?

CONTEXT

INDUSTRY ENVIRONMENTALISM AND FESTIVAL FOOTPRINTS

The launch of [Music Declares Emergency](#) alongside broader pop-cultural conversations marked a definitive eco tipping point for the music industry. With backing from global icons such as Billie Eilish, Bon Iver and Coldplay, the “No Music on a Dead Planet” message has reached over 500 million people worldwide, encouraging industry players to take heed and fans to actively engage with the issues at hand. [6] As CEO and cofounder of nonprofit A Greener Future (AGF) and the cofounder of battery-power provider Grid Faeries, Claire O’Neill reflects on this time as particularly pivotal for live events. “The demand for our work at AGF went from the forerunner festivals who had sustainability in their fabric to the world’s leading promoters, venues and agencies inspired by the calls from their audiences, artists or indeed their children,” she says. [7]

This cultural shift has forced many organisers to look critically at what Rostron identifies as the three main pillars of environmental impact – “power, food and transport.” [3] Since then, Glastonbury achieved 100% renewable power in 2023, and according to the latest figures from AGF, 20% of monitored festivals were fully vegetarian or vegan in 2024, up from 8% in 2023. [8][9] Transport is one area more difficult for operators to enforce from the top down. Research suggests that audience travel emissions can represent between 35% and 94% of festival carbon footprints, depending on the location, nature and scale of the event. [9] O’Neill notes that while travel progress is often “beholden to the wider social and infrastructural situation of the country”, operators have been focusing on reducing these emissions for over two decades. [7] Shambala’s [Green Traveller discount ticket](#), for example, incentivises attendees to use coach and train transport each year.

As awareness has matured, the industry’s operational backbone has followed suit, moving towards a standardised framework of accountability. The [Green Events Code of Practice](#), updated in September 2025, has transformed from a voluntary pilot into a common language for sustainability, enabling local authorities to ensure consistency across the entire sector. This framework supports the UK live music sector’s ambitious goal of becoming [net zero by 2030](#). Organisations such as AGF and [Julie’s Bicycle](#) are instrumental in this transition, partnering with festivals to monitor current footprints and implement rigorous green policies. These partnerships are helping the festival community lead a unified charge towards sustainable operations. By embedding sustainability into the fabric of production, the industry is demonstrating that large-scale cultural events can serve as viable blueprints for a low-carbon society.



Many music festivals are making the effort to go green, with Glastonbury now fully running on renewable energy since 2023

Glastonbury (2025)

TACKLING TENT GRAVEYARDS

An estimated 250,000 tents are left behind at festivals every year, often made from non-recyclable, flame-retardant materials that end up in landfill. [10] For Jess O'Riley, founder of slow fashion brand [J.O.STUDIO](#), which upcycles discarded festival tents, this is fuelled by a retail culture where fans factor the "£20–£40 cost of a tent into their weekend" and view it as a reasonable price to pay for convenience. [11] She argues that the issue is compounded by a lack of regulation, noting that for many large operators, "it's more economically viable to simply bulldoze the site and send it all to landfill than to enforce taking your tent home." [11] Major festivals also produce hundreds of thousands of discarded plastic cups and bottles, and news of trashed festival sites has been met by broad condemnation and calls for change. The scale of the problem demands systemic solutions – and they're coming. Of the events assessed by AGF in 2024, 70% had implemented a complete ban on single-use plastics, and the average recycling rate increased from 38% in 2022 to 49% in 2024. [9]

But for [many independent festivals](#), tent abandonment and waste disposal have been thoroughly tackled or never been a problem in the first place. Small and medium-sized events such as [Fire in the Mountain](#), [Green Gathering](#), and [Between the Trees](#) see every single tent brought on site taken away by attendees, largely because they operate on a stewardship model rather than a transactional one. As Rostron notes, "Independent festival-goers often buy tickets before a line-up is even announced, signalling a deep loyalty to the festival's values rather than just its headliners. I think that buy-in is a big part of why independent festivals don't have trouble with tent waste, and why we move so much more quickly with new initiatives in areas like this." [3]

But for those festivals that do have problems with discarded tents and rubbish, some are finding creative and highly effective solutions. [Kendal Calling](#) is one such success story. After feeling dismayed by the levels of on-site waste, organisers launched a campaign to stimulate behavioural change. They saturated the site (banners, flags, cups) and communications (socials, emails, letters) with consistent messaging, making tidy behaviour the only socially acceptable option. Since then, it has achieved a 98% tent removal rate. [12] Elsewhere, Boomtown, one of the UK's largest independent festivals, with many young and first-time festivalgoers, uses drone monitoring, poster campaigns and

'Eco-Warriorz' clean-up crews to encourage site stewardship. It achieved a record 86% tent removal rate in 2024. [12] These initiatives demonstrate that waste issues, which can feel insurmountable, are actually solvable design challenges that can be tackled with creative systems and audience buy-in.



The UK's live music sector is making efforts to go net zero emissions by 2030, championing a more sustainable future

Kendal Calling (2025)

PIONEERING FESTIVALS LEADING THE CHARGE

While sustainable operations remain a work in progress across the UK festival circuit, some events are spearheading positive environmental impact. In 2024, Music Declares Emergency teamed up with Shambala, Boomtown, FORWARDS and Love Saves The Day, documenting their sustainability details to produce a [green festivalgoer guide](#). It outlines what attendees can do before they attend, while travelling to the site and while they're at the event to help reduce emissions and waste. Beyond the usual compost toilets and recyclable containers and cups, Shambala has critically engaged with environmental and ecological issues. With average emissions associated with food and drink vendors second only to transport, the festival has been completely meat and fish-free for a decade. [13] "That can be done today by any festival," says O'Neill. "No need to wait for national infrastructure and policy to catch up." [7] However, operators are now considering [introducing wild venison](#) as a means of ecosystem management – demonstrating not just a desire to reduce its carbon footprint, but to actively benefit the local ecology.

[LIDO](#) festival – operated by AEG Europe – also entered the fray in 2025, proof that it's not just independent events changing the state of play. Massive Attack's headlining set, powered entirely by a battery system in partnership with Grid Faeries, replaced droning diesel generators with silent power, demonstrating how green initiatives can enhance the live music experience. [14] "When we power an event with batteries instead of generators, there's no smell and no noise," says O'Neill. "The air is cleaner, the power is more responsive to drops in the bass, and you can only hear the sounds of music." [7] At the bars, a streamlined [two-stream waste system](#) increased service speed, while food stalls used [A-E eco-labels](#) to nudge fans towards low-impact choices. Based in London's Victoria Park, emissions were also massively reduced by virtue of seamless transport links and zero on-site parking. [15]

As these events lead by example, they are helping positively shift the dial towards the broader adoption of innovative sustainability initiatives for both festival operators and attendees. One in five UK fans say that music-based incentives would motivate them to take up more sustainable habits, and over four in five (83%) think music has the power to unite people and effect change. [16] “People at our festivals are part of a whole; they party together and they will work together with us too,” says Rostron. “And, like at Kendal Calling, when they identified a behaviour they wanted to improve and change, they were able to communicate it well and the audience responded positively and speedily.” [3] These successes prove that when bold infrastructure meets an engaged audience, sustainability ceases to be a logistical hurdle and becomes a celebratory achievement for the entire industry.



Tent abandonment and rubbish are big issues in many festivals, and many volunteer organisations help clean up after an event to maintain the area after the festival has gone

Kendal Calling (2025)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

FESTIVALS ARE TESTING GROUNDS FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVING

UK-based events are embracing their role as incubators for green tech and circular economy solutions, highlighting a considerable opportunity for partnerships. Think beyond sponsorship to genuine R&D partnerships that serve both commercial and environmental goals. O'Neill points to Massive Attack's Act 1.5 show in Bristol, which acted as a "Climate Action Accelerator." [17] “We were able to show what's really possible when the headliner, the main sponsor, the promoter and the whole team behind music events put climate, justice and the environment first. And it's quite remarkable,” she says. [7] The concert successfully implemented 100% battery power, a total removal of air freight and local-only ticketing windows to drastically reduce event emissions by 98% compared to comparable outdoor events. [18] With 60% of 18- to 34-year-olds saying that environmental sustainability efforts are important when choosing live music events, forward-thinking green policies have become crucial for operational excellence and brand relevance among modern festivalgoers. [19]

CLOSE THE LOOP ON WASTE

The tent graveyard problem has led to the emergence of organisations turning festival waste into social good. There's a real opportunity for brands to work with UK festivals during clear-up operations to ensure abandoned tents, camping gear and materials don't hit landfill but are instead upcycled or [redistributed to charities](#). Sheffield-based [Retribe](#) exemplifies this circular shift by upcycling discarded tents from festivals into functional, high-quality bags and clothing – helping to rebrand festival waste as a resource for the circular economy rather than a permanent environmental liability. “Creative upcycling is a response to the problem, not the prevention,” warns O’Riley. “It can add a tool to clean-up operations that’s beneficial for both the festival site and partnering brands.” [11] With 21% of Britons willing to spend more on products that favour sustainability, these moves transform a visual symbol of environmental failure into a high-impact demonstration of brand purpose, allowing partners to bridge the gap between abstract ESG pledges and tangible, boots-on-the-ground action that fans can actually see – and wear. [20]

THOUGHTFUL INFRASTRUCTURE PROMOTES SITE STEWARDSHIP

On-site green schemes and carbon-saving initiatives only work if people actually use them. The opportunity for brands here is to lead with simple, consistent communication, making green options the path of least resistance and giving people a sense of agency and stewardship. O’Neill points to [Portuguese festival Boom](#) in this regard. “It’s the most glowing example of this,” she says. “Over time, they’ve bought the land and have been boosting the biodiversity on the site ever since. They design the site with nature principles in mind, with a permaculture approach. It’s a truly transformative place to visit.” [7] Organisers educate attendees by [hosting workshops](#) and encouraging site stewardship during the event, with the aim of transforming people and regenerating the land. With 67% of UK adults saying sustainability is an important part of their lifestyle, but 95% admitting they feel guilty about not doing more, live events provide a perfect microcosm to stoke green behaviours and get people actively engaging with their natural environment. [21]

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