

# Phase 2 – managing critical incidents

This page is from APP, the official source of professional practice for policing.

First published 23 October 2013 Updated 14 October 2021

Written by College of Policing

21 mins read

Management of a critical incident (CI) should start with early identification and notification. It is particularly important that small-scale CIs are identified early, as even these can have a long-term impact on community confidence if left unchecked. Processes should be in place to manage issues that may affect the quality of the police response before they affect public confidence.

Particular attention should be paid to the needs of the victim, their family and the community.

Media and communication strategies should be based on openness and transparency, keeping in mind the particular needs of the investigation or operation.

Ongoing monitoring of CIs ensures that resources are used effectively and appropriately. Post-incident evaluation can lead to positive learning outcomes for the future.

## The impact of an incident

It is not always possible to predict the impact that an incident might have on an individual, or why. It is likely, however, that the greater the impact an incident has on those closely affected by it, the greater their expectations will be about the quality of the police response. There will also be an assumption that what is important to those affected will be equally important to the police.

The impact that an incident may have on an individual is influenced by:

- the circumstances of the incident
- the emotional, mental or physical impact of the incident (including the effect of trauma or bereavement)
- general feelings of security and/or vulnerability

## Personal perception

A minor criminal act, such as criminal damage, may be nothing more than a nuisance or inconvenience to some, but for others it has much greater significance. This may be because the victim is particularly vulnerable or because it is the latest in a catalogue of similar incidents that the victim has suffered (such as harassment, hate crimes or anti-social behaviour (ASB)) and they do not think enough is being done to stop it.

## **The effect of trauma or bereavement**

The sudden and unexpected death of a loved one may affect the way a person reacts to the police, and their perception of the service they receive (see reactions to grief). It is vital in all cases that the individual is treated with dignity and respect, and that their needs are taken into account.

A traumatic event or bereavement may not be directly related to the incident that the police are currently responding to. The individual's feelings and reaction, however, should be no less important when managing the current incident.

## **Impact of an event on the wider community**

A traumatic event can have a significant impact on an entire community (as in the case of the fatal shootings carried out by Derrick Bird in Cumbria, June 2010). Members of a community may suffer similar psychological and/or emotional trauma, because of their proximity to an event, to those who were directly affected. Their sense of safety and feelings of vulnerability may also increase.

## **Support organisations**

The Family Liaison and Coordination of Support Services (FLACSS) organisation has produced a booklet, [Support at a Time of Loss](#), for those who have suffered sudden or violent bereavement. This booklet provides details of a number of organisations which can offer advice or support to victims. FLACSS does not specifically recommend the organisations named in the booklet. Victims can decide which, if any, they wish to contact.

## **Reactions to grief**

These vary, depending on the individual, their resilience and the circumstances involved. What may be considered an irrational reaction by some, may feel perfectly rational to the individual, and it is important that these feelings are respected.

Reactions to grief may include:

- shock
- searching
- disbelief
- anger
- hate
- bitterness
- guilt
- fear
- ambivalence
- isolation
- frustration
- despair
- hopelessness
- anxiety
- loneliness
- acceptance

## Identification

It is impossible to provide a fail-safe tool or risk model for identifying a CI because:

- any incident can become a CI and may include crime and non-crime incidents or operations and those that are spontaneous or pre-planned (see [types of critical incidents](#))
- the quality of the police response can be undermined by one or more issues which can be compounded by poor quality assurance, poor victim care and/or poor community engagement (see [characteristics of critical incidents](#))
- the impact the incident will have on individuals, irrespective of the police response, cannot be predicted (see the impact of an incident)

## Tension and vulnerability

It is possible, however, to gauge general feelings of tension and vulnerability in a community (situation awareness) and to predict criticality factors which are likely to have an effect on how the victim, their family or the community may react to an incident, irrespective of the quality of the police response. These, along with the effective use of [intelligence](#), will help forces to identify

incidents which may escalate.

Early recognition of a poor police response and a prompt apology to those affected may prevent further escalation.

## Situation awareness

Understanding the mood of communities, and monitoring the impact that incidents and events have previously had on them, will help to identify those that have a significantly higher likelihood of escalating into a CI if they are not dealt with appropriately at the outset.

Situation awareness takes into account general feelings of vulnerability and insecurity, as well as the economic, political and social factors which impact on the local community.

Situation awareness can be developed through:

- proactive community engagement
- environmental scanning
- collating and analysing community intelligence and information
- competent call handling and interrogation of computer recording systems

Situation awareness when linked to intelligence systems provides information for business processes such as threat and risk assessments, [tasking and coordination](#) and officer [briefing and debriefing](#).

## Criticality factors

It is not just a specific type of incident that can have a significant impact on the victim. There can also be particular factors in any type of incident which may increase its impact.

A critical thinking matrix is a tool to help practitioners identify incidents which have or may escalate into a CI.

## Demographics

Criticality factors will change over time and between forces and reflect local demographics such as:

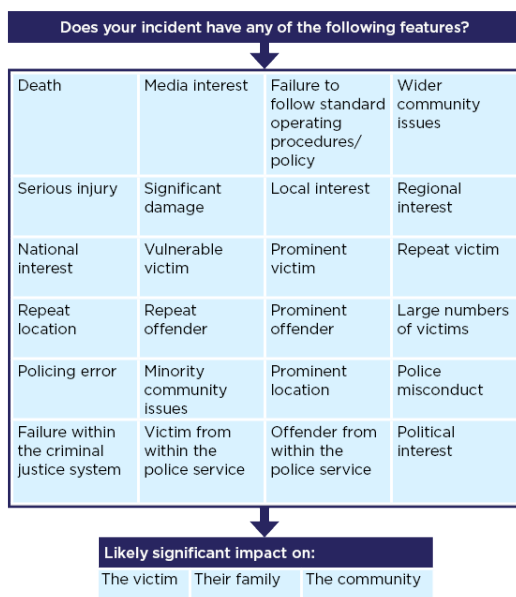
- ethnic mix

- diversity
- density of population
- local geography

This list is not prescriptive or exhaustive.

Criticality factors should also take into account local situation awareness, which will reflect the mood of the community at any given time.

## Critical thinking matrix



## Notification

A key element of CI management is giving senior officers early notification of incidents that have already escalated, or which are likely to escalate, into a CI. Criticality factors will help to do this.

Note: the quality of the police response is likely to cause or help to prevent a CI. On this basis, all incidents should be subject to a regime of quality assurance.

## Who can call a CI?

All officers or police staff dealing with an incident (including call handlers and first attending officers) should continually ask these questions:

- what am I dealing with?
- what might it develop into?
- what impact might this incident have?
- whom should I tell if I think this may escalate into a CI?

Where, in an officer or staff member's opinion, an incident is, or has the likelihood to escalate into a CI, it is essential that this is communicated immediately to an appropriately trained senior officer. This may be a duty inspector, the force control room manager or another line manager. Senior officers should not discourage officers or police staff from reporting these incidents because the next one may be a CI with significant implications for the force.

## Who can declare a CI?

Anyone can call a CI to bring it to the attention of a senior officer, but only a designated senior officer, for example the duty inspector, can declare an incident as critical. This acts as a quality assurance mechanism to avoid inappropriate declarations.

Notification should not prevent the provision of an ongoing police response in line with the policy or procedure relevant to the incident.

## Assessing the notification

Senior officers who are notified of an incident that is, or has the likelihood to escalate into, a CI need to decide whether the:

- report is valid
- current deployment will deliver an effective response
- incident should be escalated further and/or declared a CI

The decision to declare an incident as critical should be based on at least one objective reason why the effectiveness of the police response is likely to have a significant impact on the confidence of the victim, their family or the community.

## Force policy for notification

Chief officers should ensure that local force policy and procedures are developed and implemented for the prompt notification and assessment of incidents which escalate, or have the likelihood to escalate, into a CI.

## Declaring a CI

Declaring a CI needs to be done when information is sparse, but there is pressure to make the right decision quickly (see [decision making](#)). To do this, declaring officers should ensure that they have access to all sources of information available at the time. This may include:

- decision logs and case files
- briefings
- family liaison officers
- current situation awareness

Each incident should be assessed on its own merits. Chief officers will want to ensure that CIs are declared only when it is necessary and appropriate to do so, and that the response is proportionate to the scale of the incident.

Declaration is a means of supporting a competent and well-managed police response in line with standard policies and procedures. National and local policies and procedures are intended to ensure that there is a consistent and effective police response to a wide range of incidents. They incorporate key legislation and good practice, where this has been identified.

However, there are times when deviating from recognised policy and procedure can be the appropriate thing to do. Officers should clearly record their decision for this and the rationale behind it where this occurs.

Where an incident is declared critical, the response should quickly identify the cause.

Management plans should be implemented to ensure or restore the quality of the police response and maintain or rebuild confidence. A prompt and well-coordinated response enables the police to reassure the victim, their family and the community, and restore public confidence in the police service. See [restoring public confidence](#).

## Command and control

Unambiguous [command and control](#) that clearly outlines the roles and accountability of the personnel involved is required in CIs.

The incident may be part of a wider multi-agency response and have far-reaching consequences, in which case partners will follow the Joint Emergency Service Interoperability Principles. Further information can be found at [JESIP](#).

See JESIP training:

- [Command](#)
- [Control room](#)
- [All staff](#)

## A tiered response

Using a tiered response allows the command structure to be scaled up or down in light of changing circumstances. This is important where, for example, heightened community tensions could cause a minor crime or low-level ASB incident to escalate into a large-scale incident requiring a policing response crossing basic command unit (BCU) and force boundaries. Forces should look at individual incidents and assess whether they should be managed locally or at force or cross-force level.

Chief officers may wish to adjust the suggested rank nominations at each level, depending on local force size and structure and the scale and complexity of the CI. Senior does not always equate to length of service and rank does not always equate to experience. Role is, therefore, more important than rank when making sure command of an incident is allocated to the most appropriate person.

### Tier 1 – BCU response

This includes CIs within the capability of one BCU, where actions and risk are limited to that area.

### Tier 2 – cross-BCU response

CIs that affect more than one BCU, including series of linked incidents that have occurred in more than one BCU, require a tier 2 response. There is limited potential for the actions and risk to spread further.

### Tier 3 – force response

This level of response is applied to CIs with a force, cross-force or national dimension and where there is a significant threat to public confidence and the reputation of the forces involved.

Management requires substantial activity by a significant proportion of the lead force's BCUs.

## Strategic support

The following strategic support options are available to gold commanders to support the decision-making processes prior to and during CIs:

- [gold support](#)
- [strategic coordinating group](#)
- critical incident tactical advisers
- professionalising investigation programme (PIP) level 4 advisers

## Critical incident tactical advisers

### Spontaneous incidents

The critical incident tactical advisers (CITAs) can assist with spontaneous, crime-related CIs that are within the capability of a single BCU and are unlikely to require a large-scale deployment of officers or resources.

CITAs are officers with previous experience of managing such incidents. They can provide specialist advice and support to the officer in charge of the incident. They report to the BCU commander responsible for the location where the CI is taking place. CITAs may also provide a review function for the BCU commander to help them determine whether further escalation is required.

### Pre-planned operations

During the operational planning phases of a pre-planned operation, the gold commander may wish to consider having a CITA available to provide advice to the gold group.

Commanders may also wish to develop a contingency plan in case a pre-planned operation, or a part of it, escalates into a spontaneous CI.

## PIP level 4 advisers

When providing an effective police response to a high-profile or complex incident, the gold commander may wish to use a PIP level 4 investigator to provide support for the overall strategic

management of the investigation.

A PIP level 4 investigator is competent in a decision-making role and has the additional capability of providing advisory or review support as required by the investigation.

It is for individual chief officers to decide whether to use a PIP level 4 investigator, taking into account the circumstances of the incident.

The gold commander should issue written terms of reference where a PIP level 4 investigator is used. These terms should clearly set out the remit of the particular operation and be periodically reviewed as the wider policing operation develops.

## **PIP level 4 role profile**

A PIP level 4 investigator gives the organisation additional resilience by providing:

- a suitably qualified and experienced individual to take the strategic investigative lead for a complex homicide and/or other high-profile investigation
- advice and support to the gold commander, where appropriate, particularly in relation to the development of a professional and proportionate investigative response as part of a wider policing operation
- advice, support and, where necessary, direction to the SIO
- capability to review a particular operation

## **Management plans**

Every CI needs to be assessed. This helps to identify the remedial action that is needed to recover the effectiveness of the police response and to rebuild the confidence of the victim, their family and the community.

A focused and thorough review of information can identify the strengths and weaknesses of the police response, and determine a management plan for the future progress of the incident. This includes ensuring that the incident is allocated to the most appropriate officer.

Assessment should be based on all the immediately available information, such as decision logs, briefings from officers and, if appropriate, family liaison officers. It may also include a community impact assessment.

The response to individual CIs will be as unique as the incident itself. Officers involved need to continually ask themselves the following.

## What is right in this case?

Not all incidents will require specific action to be taken to recover the effectiveness of the police response. It may simply be a case of ensuring that the ongoing response is managed and communicated competently. Where action is needed to improve the quality of the police response and/or to restore public confidence, chief officers may wish to develop a management plan to support this process.

## Allocation

An important aspect of a review is to consider whether management of the CI is currently allocated to the most appropriate officer.

Allocation is key to ensuring an effective police response.

Every CI should be assessed and allocated according to the needs of the incident. Allocation should not be based solely on rank, seniority or availability of resources.

If a CI is identified, chief officers have a responsibility to formally consider the demands on the senior investigating officer (SIO) and who is best placed to meet those demands so that appropriate appointments are made.

### Sir Ronnie Flanagan's report into Operation Fincham

This observation applies as equally to operational commanders for pre-planned non-crime events as it does for spontaneous events.

## Record keeping

The primary purpose of a decision log is to help incident commanders resolve an incident by providing an accurate record of the decisions made and the reasons for them. During a fast-moving CI, completing a policy log can be difficult, but entries should always be made as soon as practicable.

The secondary purpose of a properly completed policy log is to allow the progress of an incident to be reviewed, by having past decisions placed in context.

**Decision making** and policy logs should not be a way of protecting organisational reputation. They should provide an open, honest and accurate account, and be used to determine whether, given the impact of the police response, an informal or formal apology may be necessary.

## The victim, their family and the community

One of the most important considerations is the relationship between the police and the victim, their family and/or the community. The police should treat everyone professionally, appropriately and with respect in accordance with their diverse needs.

The **Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales** (Ministry of Justice 2020) provides that all victims of crime have a statutory right to expect a minimum standard of care, irrespective of whether their allegations are substantiated. See also **gov.uk** for advice for victims and witnesses of crime.

Positive relationships and effective communication with victims, families and wider communities during a CI will:

- encourage open and honest dialogue between the police and victims, families and communities
- increase understanding of family and community needs
- improve confidence in the police response
- improve community intelligence
- increase investigative opportunities
- improve policing outcomes

Officers should take time to understand the needs of those concerned and consider alternative ways of building relationships, as necessary. This may be through family representatives, intermediaries or community representatives.

For further information, see APP on **victim and witness strategy**.

## Media and communication

During a CI, the officer in charge is responsible for the initial formulation of a media strategy in partnership with the force media department. The strategy should be based on openness and transparency, keeping in mind the particular needs of the investigation or operation. The gold commander's role, in most cases, is one of quality assurance. Where a CI is declared, it may be necessary for the chief officer to take responsibility for the media response or to be the 'face' of the force. It is vital for the police service to understand the relationship and interaction between the following:

- the experience of families and communities
- media interpretation, analysis and subsequent reporting
- the consequent impact on an investigation or other incident

It is equally important during a complex or high-profile incident to have an internal communications strategy, keeping officers and staff up to date with progress and key messages. They may be directly affected or live in the communities affected by the incident.

For further information, see APP on [engagement and communication](#).

The [College of Policing Leadership](#) offers courses on media skills and producing an effective media strategy.

## Media strategy key principles

When developing a media strategy, the following points should be considered:

- the media must not be used to negotiate with the family
- the media strategy should be consistent with all other strategies
- the type and tone of language should be tactful and take account of past experience
- the role of the family and their representatives in liaising with the media
- there should be clarity about timing and content of any acknowledgement regarding previous mistakes or gaps in the police response
- the use of shared media statements with the family and their representatives – a united approach may help to build community trust and undermine the confidence of perpetrators
- the perspectives of others involved in the response to the incident, for example advisory groups, police and crime commissioners or other emergency services
- key messages should have clear objectives and be consistent in future releases

- the type of media to target
- force websites can be used to inform and advise the local community
- the effectiveness of different types of messages for particular communities

## Internal communications strategy

This helps to reassure staff and dispel any myths. It can also help to avoid mixed messages being given to the media and the local community via friends and family of staff. The strategy may include:

- daily intelligence briefings for operational team briefings
- weekly email briefings from a senior officer to all staff
- verbal briefings to teams
- all staff email briefings from the chief constable

During **Operation Sumac** (available to **authorised users** logged on to the restricted online College Learn), all of the above methods were used and helped to ensure that a consistent message was given, along with a sense of empowerment and inclusiveness.

For further information see:

- [Mary Fox](#)
- [Aamir Siddiqi](#)

## Monitoring

A CI may affect some families for the rest of their lives. Chief officers should, therefore, consider offering support to all families for as long as it is appropriate to do so. This should include key events such as case reviews, memorial services and anniversaries.

## Long and short-term imperatives

A force may have more than one CI running at any given time. Some may run for several days or months. From the outset of any CI response, it is important to recognise the distinction between short-term investigative inquiry or incident issues and medium to long-term community issues.

There is a clear link between investigative or incident priorities and community policing imperatives. Access to community intelligence (and evidence) in the short term is inextricably linked to the development of community confidence in the medium and long term. The ability to access witness evidence, for example, depends, in no small measure, on the confidence of a witness to come forward.

## Monitoring logs and processes

Chief officers should implement a system to log and monitor CIs. This will ensure that each CI continues to be managed and progressed in a timely and efficient manner. A monitoring process could include:

- a centrally maintained register of all CIs
- regular agenda items at BCU or force senior management team meetings to oversee and monitor progress (these meetings can be used to request further [reviews](#), [community impact assessments](#) or resources, if required)
- a formal closure and exit strategy

## Closure and exit strategies

It may be possible to conclude or scale down a CI when it has been assessed that the risk of significant loss of confidence has been averted, or where [management plans](#) are in place to prevent further loss and restore confidence. Consideration can be given to scoring the risk (loss of confidence) using the risk scoring principles, such as impact versus likelihood.

## What is normality?

Where there has been a traumatic event or significant media interest over an extended period of time, or where police activity and visibility have been abnormal for the locality, there may be an information vacuum when the police leave. It may also have caused an increased fear of crime or sense of vulnerability, or an increase in underlying community tensions. It will definitely raise questions about what has happened, why it has happened and who might be affected.

It is, therefore, important to understand what the concept of normality for the affected community looks like, and to develop an action plan that will help the community return to this. It should include a communication strategy that seeks to reassure and provide answers. This applies particularly

where there is a clear operational reason for concluding the police response to a CI, but there has not been an arrest or any other form of closure for the victim and/or their family.

## Notifying the victim, their family and the community

The decision about when to conclude or scale down a CI and the reasons for doing so should always be recorded and explained fully to the victim, their family or the community.

## Post-incident evaluation

After a CI, whether it is crime or non-crime related, there should be a process of post-incident evaluation and learning. The focus of evaluation should be on positive learning outcomes and identifying good practice to be incorporated into national and local policy and guidance. For multi-agency responses, see [Joint Organisational Learning](#) accessed via JESIP.

Traditionally, evaluation has taken the form of a debrief. In normal circumstances, [debriefs](#) are internally facing, focusing on the police response from their perspective. There is, however, merit in taking a broader view and including evaluation from the perspective of the victim, their family and community.

The use of qualitative and quantitative public confidence surveys and analysis may help a force to understand the impact that an incident has had on the local community, including:

- what worked
- where the police could have done better

A quality [community impact](#) assessment could also assist this process.

## CI debriefs

Forces may wish to consider a formal debrief for police officers and staff involved in a CI, including any non-police groups or individuals associated with the police response to an incident. This provides an opportunity for identifying good practice and lessons learned which can be included in future training, planning and risk management. It also helps to address potential welfare issues, and support referrals to appropriate staff associations or occupational health representatives for further support and advice. See [Joint Operations Support Debrief Knowledge Hub community](#) for identified good practice and areas of learning. Note: the reader must already be logged into the

Knowledge Hub to access the link.

## Management considerations aide-memoire

- CI management should start with early identification. A minor incident can escalate into a large-scale CI if not properly managed from the outset.
- Local force policies and procedures should provide clear and unambiguous reporting and assessment systems for CIs at BCU and force level.
- Chief officers may wish to ensure that CIs are declared only when it is necessary to do so, and that the response is proportionate to the scale of the incident.
- CI management should take into account the needs of the victim, their family and the local community.
- All CIs should be subject to ongoing review and monitoring to ensure that they are being progressed and managed in an efficient and timely manner.
- After a CI, chief officers should be prepared to allocate long-term resources to assist in rebuilding public confidence and to help return a community to normality.

### Tags

Critical incidents