

Risk assessment

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

First published 23 October 2013 Updated 3 April 2024

Written by College of Policing

6 mins read

By their nature, emergencies and major incidents can be traumatic events for personnel involved directly or indirectly. Basic needs of personnel should not be neglected as this may affect the response. The strategic and tactical commanders should ensure appropriate arrangements are in place and identified individuals nominated to carry out these arrangements. Consideration should be given to appointing a health and safety adviser to assist in preparing appropriate health and safety risk assessments. Health and safety risk assessments should be recorded in writing.

Understanding risk is central to emergency response. The willingness to make decisions in conditions of uncertainty is the first of [ten principles of risk management](#).

These principles and the [joint decision model \(JDM\)](#) encourage a positive approach to risk by supporting decision-makers and building their confidence in taking risks.

The [Code of Ethics](#) defines standards of behaviour for everyone who works in policing and outlines the principles that should guide decision-making. Officers and staff should use these ethical principles and feel supported in 'doing the right thing' when facing decisions involving risk.

Health and safety duties

Emergency responders must ensure that their plans, assessments and major incident response facilitate the quick identification and management of hazards in all stages from initial report to recovery. For example, each emergency service has a responsibility to ensure that their personnel have the correct personal protective equipment (PPE) when entering the inner cordon and that they are given an adequate health and safety briefing.

In the event of major incidents, a wide range of physical, psychological and safety hazards may be faced by the public and emergency responders. All such hazards need to be managed to protect staff and the public from harm.

Health and safety duties range from developing generic risk assessments for pre-planned operations to dynamic risk assessments in emergency situations.

It is important to note that while working on joint risk assessment and a shared situational awareness, the responsibility for the health and safety of staff remains with each individual emergency response agency. This is coordinated through either the strategic commander or strategic coordination centre. There should be a two-way flow of information, support and advice between the emergency responders involved and the command structure to minimise risk of harm to staff – and ultimately, the public.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) 2018 have published '[Striking the balance between operational and health and safety duties in the Police Service.](#)'

Joint risk assessment

One of the [five JESIP principles](#) is risk assessment. See [JESIP guidance on joint risk assessment](#).

Initial incident assessment

The initial incident assessment forms part of a dynamic risk assessment (outlined in the [JDM](#)) and contributes to shared situational awareness. The initial incident assessment seeks to identify any immediate potential hazards to staff and public.

No single emergency response agency can initially appreciate all relevant dimensions of an emergency situation. A conscious effort is required to share information, to reach a common understanding of risks and their implications. A joint understanding of risk, achieved through sharing information about threats and hazards, enables agencies to agree potential control measures.

To identify all significant hazards and to set a safety strategy, the lead emergency responder should consider setting up an incident safety advisory cell.

Incident safety advisory cell

The incident safety advisory cell should comprise relevant multi-agency operational practitioners, health, safety and medical professionals, and scientific advisers. The purpose of this group is to ensure the continuity of hazard identification and to manage risk control measures across agencies. Professional collaboration ensures the effective use of safety and health expertise and resources.

The incident safety advisory cell should:

- set the strategy for safety
- inform the tactical decision-making process, providing timely and consistent safety-critical strategy, information and instruction to all those affected or dealing with the incident
- implement the operational plan and support the development of safety options to support informed inter-agency operational decision-making
- coordinate an oversight of health and safety advice and support
- advise on the incident hazard profile, assess and monitor hazards and activity, and support the recovery and clean-up, including:
 - hazard-profiling of the scene
 - supporting the development of incident risk assessments and management of hazards, including safe systems of work
 - provision of pragmatic safety advice for what can often be a dynamic changing scenario and environment
 - post-event debriefing of staff and structured organisational learning

Generic risk assessment

Forces are required to undertake documented risk assessments in accordance with the requirements of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. This risk assessment is intended to identify hazards that could cause harm, to assess the risks that may arise from those hazards, and to decide on suitable measures to eliminate or control the risks.

Risk assessments should be completed for all pre-planned operations and should:

- identify hazards that could cause harm to police officers and staff
- assess the risks that may arise from those hazards
- ensure that all control measures are in place
- note if any further action is required to eliminate or control the risks

As the incident progresses, the officer in charge must continually assess any new hazards or risks and reassess any identified existing risks. Risk assessment forms should be retained by the officer in charge and filed with all relevant documentation.

Tags

Civil emergencies