

Command support

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

First published 23 October 2013 Updated 23 October 2013

Written by College of Policing

7 mins read

Maintaining effective command and control, especially when faced with a complex and fast-moving situation, can present significant challenges to commanders. There is the potential for those in command to be overwhelmed if not sufficiently supported. Command support is, therefore, an essential element of the command structure.

Organisation and level of command support

Officers performing a command role should recognise that they are not able to do everything all of the time. Commanders need support from both people and technology so that they can focus on their primary **function of command**.

Depending on the complexity of the incident or operation and the availability of staff, it is necessary to ensure appropriate functions are planned for and in place to provide adequate support to the commander at all three tiers of command.

Commanders should carefully consider the organisation and level of command support that is needed. This helps to ensure that the level of support is commensurate with the expected demand.

Considerations for commanders

These may include the:

- nature and dynamics of an operation or situation
- size of an operation, the scale and type of resources that are likely to be deployed
- size and make up of the **command structure**
- anticipated workload of individual commanders
- information and communication needs of individual commanders

The nature and level of command support should be adjusted in response to a changing information picture or situation, and take into account contingency plans as and when they are formulated.

Resource awareness

Commanders should also recognise that the level of command support provided varies depending on **resources** available at the time. Awareness of these issues during the planning process helps to:

- establish a realistic expectation of the capabilities, limitations and potential of the command support available, thereby avoiding assumption and unrealistic or unreasonable demands
- make judgements on the level of resourcing needed both in terms of people and **technology**, including the way in which the command structure is organised
- determine the nature of **command protocols** that maintain effective command, clarity of command and a robust audit trail

Gold support

It is essential that the appropriate provisions are put in place as soon as possible to support the gold commander and the **strategic coordinating group (SCG)** (if established) to discharge their functions and responsibilities.

The scale and nature of this support to the strategic tier of command are relative to the circumstances of the incident, operation or emergency. Issues that influence the decision on the support required for the gold commander and SCG include:

- potential impact on the police force(s) involved
- amount of multi-agency involvement
- provision of Ministry of Defence assets
- potential duration of the incident
- speed of developments in the incident
- role of central government and devolved government administrations, for example, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive
- international, national or local response of the media

Gold support officer

The gold commander may require only a gold support officer (also known as a chief of staff) and a small team to provide the necessary support to manage the incident at the strategic tier.

A gold support officer may oversee the provision of command support in terms of [resources](#), [logistics](#), [finance](#) and [legal](#) issues. They should not become involved in making command decisions, but may be delegated authority to facilitate and direct command support functions.

Strategic coordinating group

This group can provide the gold commander with valuable consultation and support. It helps to ensure coordination in multi-agency-type incidents, and provides links with the local community and other legitimately interested parties as appropriate. The gold commander is, however, ultimately responsible for any strategic decisions affecting the police response.

The principal function of the SCG is strategic, namely that it provides support, advice and analysis. The specific function, membership and content of the group varies for each operation or incident. There is a core membership and other members are included at the discretion of the chair.

Meetings

The gold commander must ensure that a sound framework for discussion is maintained during meetings. Care should be taken to ensure that the views canvassed represent those of the individuals and groups affected by the operation or incident. SCGs should include communities who may not appear to be directly affected but could be affected indirectly.

All SCG meetings must be documented and are subject to disclosure under the [Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996](#), unless public interest immunity (PII) applies.

Strategic coordination centre

Depending on the nature of the operational incident, the gold commander may decide to establish a strategic coordination centre (SCC). The role of the SCC is to provide support to the SCG and to coordinate the strategic response to the incident or operation.

Silver control and support

Depending on the nature of the operation or incident, the **silver (tactical) commander** may consider appointing a silver support officer to assist in organising the command support functions. These may include planning and intelligence.

Tactical coordinating group

Where established, the tactical coordinating group (TCG), otherwise known as a silver coordinating group, determines the coordinated response at the tactical level.

During operations, emergencies or major incidents, it is likely that other emergency services will appoint silver commanders to act as tactical commanders for their organisations. The police silver commander should bring all these tactical commanders and coordinators together and form a TCG as soon as is practicable.

Control rooms

Most command support comes from conventional police control rooms or forward command centres. There may be occasions when a specific incident or operation requires the establishment of a separate or unique control function to support the command team.

Prior to planned operations, commanders should consider inviting control room staff to planning meetings. This ensures that everyone understands the role that they will play, while providing them with the opportunity to offer advice on control facilities, staff and equipment. Commanders should ensure that control room supervisors and their staff are fully **briefed** during an incident or operation.

Mobile forward control facilities

For larger operations and incidents, or those that are dispersed over a wide area, it may be necessary to employ mobile forward control facilities in addition to a central control room. Any decision to deploy a mobile forward control facility should be carefully considered to avoid:

- confusion about who is controlling what resources and when
- an added tier of process and communication that unduly delays, distorts or disrupts the passage of information up and down the chain of command

- a lack of capacity if there is a serious and significant change in the operation or incident that involves a substantial increase in demand

Regional and national coordination

In line with the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) national coordination framework, if the potential scale, complexity or impact of an event or incident requires it, the National Police Coordination Centre will establish a multi-force, national or NPCC coordination group.

These structures will support the gold, silver and bronze (GSB) tiers of command and control which will continue to lead on operational response at a force level. They may be established for planning, as well any response phase to an event or incident(s).

The NPCC national coordination framework outlines the following scalable options.

1. Force executive oversight – a chief officer may support the force gold commander, or concurrent force golds, with any wider impacts on the force. This function does not direct the gold commander, who retains strategic command of the response. It oversees the wider consequences or contingencies for the operation(s) which may affect the force as a whole.
2. Multi-force coordination group – to coordinate a regional response or multi-force response.
3. National coordination group – to bring together gold commanders from across the country to coordinate a collective and aligned policing response. If necessary, a chief officer may be appointed as a national coordinator to lead a coordinated response.
4. NPCC coordination group – for the most impactful national events, formed to consider the consequences and contingencies for the wider service.

More information on national multi-agency and central government crisis response arrangements is available in [The Amber Book](#), published by the Cabinet Office (April 2025).

Partnership working

There may be occasions when the police work with partner agencies and organisations to respond to incidents or conduct operations. It is essential that each partner agency agrees and fully understands their role and jurisdiction throughout the operation or incident. The development of partnership protocols may assist in developing clear lines of responsibility.

Partnership protocols may include the following.

- Who is in command, when and where.
- What jurisdiction each of the agencies involved has in the planning or response to the incident.
- What procedures the agencies involved are working to.
- Any specific procedures that need to be considered.
- The capability that the partner agencies have in responding to the incident.
- The specific powers that the partner agencies have that can help to resolve the incident more quickly.

Advisory and specialist groups

Commanders should always consider seeking specialist advice when determining operational requirements.

In certain circumstances it may be appropriate to use advisers to assist GSB commanders. They can provide expert advice on the suitability and impact of available options, which may help the commander to make decisions.

Technology

Technology systems or processes can help commanders to make effective decisions. Commanders should, however, be aware of the risks of using technology. For example, the capacity and capability to make decisions can be severely limited if commanders are overloaded with information.

Similarly, commanders located in control rooms should not base their decisions solely on, for example, the images they see on screen. This has the potential for commanders to 'command through a keyhole', without taking into account other information sources, and may lead to them losing sight of the wider picture.

Airwave

This is a digital radio service that the emergency services in England, Scotland and Wales use. It is the common platform available to facilitate radio interoperability for voice communication and some data exchange. Airwave, through the use of a command talkgroup, enables communication

between the silver (tactical) and bronze (operational) tiers of command.

For larger operations, commanders should consult an accredited Airwave tactical adviser.

For further information see [ACPO \(2009\) Guidance on Multi-agency Interoperability](#).

Tags

Operations Force control rooms