

# Definitions and procedures

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

First published 23 October 2013 Updated 11 September 2018

Written by College of Policing

10 mins read

It is essential that the language of command and control is clearly understood when responding to an incident or operation, particularly where the response involves partner agencies. The terms identified here are well known and widely used throughout the police service.

## Definitions

### Integrity of command

The principle of integrity of command is that each emergency service and responding agency at an incident retains command and control of its own personnel, albeit they are all working towards the common aim and objectives agreed with partners.

This principle applies unless an agreement exists between the ambulance service, the fire and rescue service, and the police service for one emergency service to take effective command of personnel from another emergency service under specific circumstances.

### Command resilience

This is the ability of the command and control structure to function effectively over extended periods of time.

Emergencies and major incidents may last for several days or even weeks. Continuity is important in a **command structure**, for example, to ensure commanders do not become overtired or exhausted.

**Operational planning** for the potential handover of command functions from one individual to another at an appropriate time should begin at the start of an emergency or major incident.

## Span of command

The term span of command relates to the hierarchy of the command and control structure within each service. In both planned operations and spontaneous incidents, all personnel must know which commander they report to. Correspondingly, each commander needs to know which personnel they have responsibility for. Gold (strategic), silver (tactical) and bronze (operational) (GSB) commanders are required to know and understand their tasks so they do not overlap with tasks allocated to other commanders.

Span of command clarifies the command structure. This includes:

- who reports to whom
- who is accountable for what
- which individual is responsible for specific functions or tasks

The span of command relating to the ambulance, fire and rescue, and police service command and control structures is to be communicated and understood prior to a planned event, or early on in the response to a spontaneous incident. This allows each GSB commander to establish an interoperable communications network for the emergency services and responding agencies.

## Span of control

This refers to the number of lines of communication that one individual can realistically maintain. The actual number will vary depending on a range of factors, such as the:

- capacity of the individual person
- availability and capacity of technology
- complexity of the information
- working environment

Commanders may be able to receive, assimilate and action only certain amounts of information. The danger of information overload should be managed, so that commanders are able to perform their key role of making well-informed, clear decisions at their allotted tier of command.

## Memorandum of understanding

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) is an agreement that may exist between organisations such as the police, other emergency services, the UK Government, the Scottish Executive, Cabinet of the Welsh Government, utilities and service industry, and the Trades Union Congress. It provides clear guidelines for local implementation of policies, strategies, and tactical and operational practice in accordance with local circumstances.

GSB commanders should be aware of any MoUs in existence and comply with the requirements.

In order to achieve the intentions stated in the MoU, it may be appropriate for the police force in the areas affected to take the role of lead coordinating authority and to establish a command, control and coordination structure at strategic, tactical and operational tiers in line with relevant guidance.

## Steady state policing

The term used to describe the activities that the police respond to and manage as part of their everyday responsibilities. Steady state may also be known as business as usual or normality.

The different sizes of police forces, availability of resources and their ability to respond to incidents and operations mean that what one force may consider a steady state may differ from that of a neighbouring force.

## Rising tide incidents

These incidents develop from a steady state, to become an emergency or major incident over a more prolonged period of time.

Examples of a rising tide incident include severe weather events such as widespread flooding, or epidemics such as foot and mouth disease.

Managing the incident requires careful consideration. Using the [national decision model](#) can help to ensure that the nature of an incident is properly understood and that a proportionate response is applied. In the event of a multi-agency response partners will also refer to the [joint decision model \(JDM\)](#).

## Planned operations

This is where the police service has had the opportunity and time to develop strategies, tactics and contingency plans before an anticipated operation takes place. The amount of time of the advanced warning will, however, vary.

In some cases the date, size and nature of an upcoming event is known for many months or even years in advance. Police planners should use the time available to work closely with event organisers, partner agencies and others, such as community groups, as part of a pre-event strategy.

While the nature of a planned operation suggests that the police have advance notice of a departure from a steady state, what may at first appear to be a straightforward, planned operation may have the potential to develop into a spontaneous incident where information and intelligence identify a new or evolving threat.

## Spontaneous incidents

The police do not have prior warning to develop strategies, tactics and contingency plans for a spontaneous incident. An initial response is required, even though the information about the incident may be incomplete. As a result, the initial response to a spontaneous incident may be directed towards increasing the level of intelligence. Commanders should, therefore, ensure that robust information and intelligence management processes are in place to provide as clear a picture as possible of the spontaneous incident as it develops. This will then help form the basis of the police response.

## Procedures

### Function of command

Authoritative command is carried out by those who have been given authority over others for a specific operation or incident.

Commanders should be aware that their role is to make decisions, give clear directions and ensure that those directions are carried out. Working in this way promotes cohesion and provides direction that helps to deliver the strategy.

The police service has agreed [command protocols](#) for establishing appropriate command structures, that is, command roles at GSB levels (strategic, tactical and operational), and these apply to large-scale, multi-agency events, and mobilisation events. In cases of multi-agency events, see [Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles \(JESIP\)](#).

Effective command is, therefore, based on the existence of:

- a role within an organised GSB command framework
- training, exercise and experience
- processes and systems to support effective decision making

## Command interoperability

Interoperability is where the scale or nature of a [planned operation](#) or [spontaneous incident](#) requires the adoption of a formal command and control structure. This requires commanders appointed by the police, emergency service and/or partner agencies to communicate and coordinate with each other throughout the tiered command structure.

For further information see:

- [HM Government \(2008\) Fire and Rescue Manual Volume 2 Fire Service Operations Incident Command, Third Edition](#)
- [JESIP](#)

## Gold (strategic) command tier

In response to an emergency (as defined in the [Civil Contingencies Act 2004](#)), or to a major incident, or in a planned response to an event involving the emergency services and/or other partner agencies, a gold (strategic) tier of command should be established and a strategic coordinating group (SCG) should be formed. The police gold commander usually chairs the SCG.

## Silver (tactical) command tier

At both spontaneous incidents and planned events where silver (tactical) commanders are appointed by the police and other emergency services, consideration must be given to how they and their personnel will communicate and coordinate with each other.

## Bronze (operational) command tier

The nature, extent and autonomy of interoperability at bronze (operational) tier is based on the scale and nature of the incident or event and is defined by parameters set by the silver (tactical) commander.

## Command accreditation

Command roles can be challenging and, at times, extremely demanding, with both corporate and personal implications.

Chief officers must ensure that arrangements exist whereby appropriately selected, trained, assessed and accredited commanders and tactical advisers are available to command and advise on situations in which officers have been deployed.

## Command procedures

Effective command and control requires commanders to adjust quickly to changing circumstances. One way of achieving this is by developing command protocols. The purpose of command protocols is to maximise clarity of command in order to reduce risk and produce more effective decision making.

Appropriate command protocols vary according to the nature and scale of an incident.

Rapid intervention may be required to avoid an imminent threat to the public or property. It is important for forces to have pre-agreed command protocols already in place that identify the range of circumstances in which officers should take decisive action.

For further information see the APP on:

- [Armed policing](#)
- [Public order](#)

## Command protocols

A command protocol may contain formal arrangements that allow each commander assigned to an operation to see:

- how the command team will react to changes

- that the use of legal powers (and compliance with the [Human Rights Act 1998](#)) is proportionate to meet this
- how the deployment of specialist equipment will be managed, taking into account any community issues
- how the command team rely upon and complement other commanders
- when their command role should be considered (for example, firearms, reserve deployment)

Where there is a multi-agency or interdisciplinary element to an incident, operation or investigation, command protocols can assist in clarifying areas of responsibility and command function, channels of communication, primacy of command, and in dealing with potentially competing demands, for example, dealing with related threats within the context of an ongoing operation or major enquiry.

A command protocol may also set out:

- what the desired outcome of the operation is
- who is responsible for achieving each of the tasks allocated (including contingency plans where activated)
- who commands what resources and where
- when and how resources will be transferred between one commander and another
- who commands each separate geographical area
- who is responsible for managing specific risks
- procedures for the [transfer of command](#) from one commander to another – this includes how this is initiated, communicated and recorded
- the relationship between the formal [command structure](#) and existing force systems and processes
- how each of the functions will operate during the planning, operational and post-deployment stages

Where multiple command elements are engaged in the response to the same incident, operation or investigation, it may be necessary to describe scenarios that explain the transfer points. In the case of cross-boundary operations, where variations may exist between forces, it may be necessary to agree terminology.

For further information see [JESIP](#).

## Initial command of spontaneous incidents

Where an incident requires an immediate operational deployment by the police, the person having ready access to information, communications and resources will usually take initial command. This may be the force control room supervisor.

The command of the incident rests with the initial commander until such time as command is transferred. Forces should have structures in place to ensure that accredited GSB commanders are readily available. This should include the arrangement to enable transfer of command to dedicated gold and silver commanders, so that others may return to their normal duties as soon as practicable.

In multi-agency incidents [JESIP](#) will be followed. Agencies will be identified by wearing tabards – see [incident commander tabards](#) for more information.

## Transfer of command

The transfer of roles at any level in the [command structure](#) should be documented and include the time and date of transfer. This should also include confirmation that relevant information and intelligence has been reviewed, and that the new commander understands the situation and decisions taken thus far.

Officers involved in the incident should be made aware of any changes in command, provided this is practicable and where relevant to their role.

A gold (strategic) or silver (tactical) commander's ability to effectively perform their respective command functions depends on them having:

- knowledge of the circumstances and available intelligence
- the ability to communicate
- appropriate tactical advice available
- a suitable environment from which to exercise the command function

## Tags

Operations