

Disaster victim identification - Guidance overview

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An emergency or major incident may result in fatalities. Disaster victim identification (DVI) is the internationally accepted term for the processes and procedures for recovering and identifying deceased people and human remains in multiple fatality incidents. The process involves bringing together Ante Mortem and Post Mortem information to make a positive identification by scientific means in a dignified manner, considering the needs of the investigation process, the needs of the bereaved and the needs of the community. Many organisations including National Policing Chiefs Council and the College of Policing have committed to the principles of the [Charter for Families Bereaved through Public Tragedy](#).

See [Jones, J. KBE \(2017\) 'The patronising disposition of unaccountable power' A report to ensure the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is not repeated. London: TSO.](#)

DVI takes place concurrently with investigations into the cause of an incident and into any criminal culpability arising from it. DVI principles are subject to international agreement through [INTERPOL](#), which maintains a command centre and a crisis management support group. In the event of a mass fatality incident in a member country [INTERPOL](#) can assist with the coordination of the international response.

Terrorism is identified as a tier one risk to UK national security. The government sets the UK security aims and priorities, based on an understanding of the risks the country currently faces or may face in the future. The [CONTEST](#) strategy outlines how the threats from terrorism to the UK will be managed across departments and with a wide range of partners.

Reliable identification of the deceased forms a key part of any investigation into the circumstances of death. Investigations may lead to findings such as accidental death, suicide, misadventure, negligence, murder or manslaughter in the case of criminal investigations, including terrorism. The investigation to identify human remains should complement and not unreasonably hinder any criminal investigation.

This authorised professional practice (APP) on DVI must be used with consideration to the wider investigative requirements, according to the specific incident or incidents that are being investigated. Close cooperation with the Senior Investigating Officer (SIO) or Counter Terrorism Senior Investigating Officer (CT SIO) is important in a successful DVI operation.

The current DVI processes have developed through the lessons learned following major incidents which resulted in significant loss of life. In particular, the findings from the public inquiry into the collision on the river Thames between the pleasure boat the 'Marchioness' and the dredger 'Bowbelle' chaired by Lord Justice Clarke.

Charles Haddon-Cave QC represented the Marchioness Action Group, which was formed by the families and friends of the deceased. In his oral evidence to the inquiry, he said:

The care with which our dead are treated is a mark of how civilised a society we are. Much goes on for understandable reasons behind closed doors. For this reason, there is a special responsibility placed on those entrusted with this work and the authorities who supervise it to ensure that the bodies of the dead are treated with the utmost care and respect. This is what bereaved and loved ones are entitled to expect and what society at large demands.

CLARKE, A. (2001) Public Inquiry into the Identification of Victims Following Major Transport Accidents: Report of Lord Justice Clarke, volume 1, CM 5012, London: TSO, p 9.

The following principles outlined by Lord Justice Clarke in his report in 2001 form the bedrock of DVI processes:

- provision of honest and as far as possible, accurate information at all times and at every stage
- respect for the deceased and the bereaved
- a sympathetic and caring approach throughout
- the avoidance of mistaken identification

The report reaffirmed that the statutory responsibility for identifying the deceased lies with HM Coroner or Procurator Fiscal. The role of the police service is to assist HM Coroner or Procurator Fiscal in fulfilling their responsibilities. The four principles should be adhered to by all police officers and staff and apply whatever the number of fatalities arising from a mass fatalities incident.

This APP can be used as a reference by all agencies responsible for dealing with a multiple fatality incident.

Home Office

National planning for a mass fatality response is coordinated centrally by the Fire Resilience and Major Events Team (FRaME) within the Home Office.

The Home Office is the lead government department for the mass fatality capability. It provides a framework for the multi-agency response to such incidents.

For further information, see the Home Office's [Guidance on dealing with fatalities in emergencies](#), Land Supplementing local response options: A concept of operations for accessing central assistance to supplement local responses to mass fatalities in England and Wales (this document is available from the Home Office on application).

See also [Civil contingencies](#).

Professional development

The College of Policing is responsible for the training and maintaining of standards of police personnel in relation to DVI on behalf of the NPCC for the United Kingdom. Training is required to support personnel and procedures, and all relevant agencies should be involved in a programme of exercises.

The importance of an exercise programme that includes the response to a mass fatality incident. It may not be practicable or financially viable to cover the full DVI process in one exercise. However, police forces should be able to show that they have tested all aspects of a mass fatality response within a reasonable timescale.

In addition to formal training and exercising, and to remain current in the area of DVI, all personnel who may be involved in the response to a mass fatality incident should pursue continuing professional development. All DVI foundation-trained staff must complete refresher training in accordance with the mandated national standard.

Tags

Civil emergencies