Scene management and cordons

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

First published 2 September 2026

Securing the scene is a primary role of the police.

It is important for commanders to retain authority over their own responders within each emergency service.

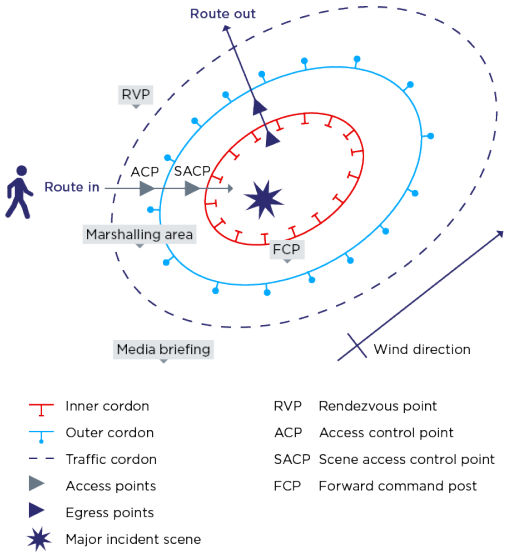
The initial incident commander oversees the implementation of the following actions:

- setting up a **forward command post (FCP)**
- creating **cordons**
- controlling the **scene access control point**
- identifying and managing **rendezvous points** (RVPs)
- managing initial traffic issues (this should be passed to the local authority or highways authorities at the earliest opportunity)
- identifying and managing **marshalling areas and strategic holding areas**

The effect incidents could have on traffic management should be considered in response plans.

The following is a standard scene structure for reference:

- a traffic cordon, an outer cordon and an inner cordon around the scene (all of which should be decided with consideration to the direction of the wind)
- points of access (route in) and egress (route out)
- an access control point (within the traffic cordon) and a scene access control point (within the outer cordon), both along the route in
- an RVP and media briefing area beyond the traffic cordon
- a marshalling area within the traffic cordon
- an FCP within the outer cordon



Network Rail – Safety and access

Responders should always consider live tracks and trains in operation, adhering strictly to Network Rail safety and access (JESIP). Route control must be informed as soon as possible via the control room. For location confirmation, use individual signal identification plates or gantry identification markers.

Pre-determined attendance

When establishing cordons, RVPs and marshalling areas, commanders and control room staff should take into account that the incident may trigger a pre-determined attendance (PDA) from one or more partner agencies. A PDA is a pre?agreed plan that specifies the exact emergency resources that will be automatically mobilised for particular incident types. For example, a dedicated number of fire appliances and ambulance assets with specialist teams and equipment PDAs are designed to ensure a rapid, consistent and effective multi?agency response. These may also be incorporated into site?specific major incident plans, including those for ports, airports and sites that are deemed a potential high-risk.

Forward command post

The forward command post (FCP) is the management post for the incident commander. This is also known as the forward command point (go to **Emergency responder interoperability: Lexicon** for

more information). It is also the central point of contact for all emergency and support services engaged at the scene. Equivalent commanders from partner agencies should be co-located here for effective joint working.

Co-location of incident commanders at the FCP provides the situational awareness to:

- undertake and coordinate operational command of resources at the scene
- undertake a joint **risk assessment**
- appoint roles as required, requesting further resources as necessary
- activate emergency plans
- set immediate priorities and agree them with other partner agencies
- consider early tactical responses

The location of the FCP is initially set by the lead agency's incident commander, who then discusses and agrees this with all incident commanders. An FCP should be located with the following considerations:

- In a safe location, considering foreseeable hazards.
- Close enough to the scene to maintain control but with enough distance that activity does not interfere with the work of responders.
- Somewhere easy to find with prominent signage. It is recommended that the only blue flashing lights illuminated are those of the emergency services' command vehicles.
- Somewhere secure from the media.
- Somewhere secure from any possible terrorist or other criminal activity. When establishing a secure area, commanders should consider the proximity of, for example, CCTV and video doorbells. These may be capable of recording discussions and decisions.
- Where access can be restricted to commanders and those supporting decision making.

Cordons

Legal basis for cordons

Statutory provisions that allow the police to impose and enforce a cordon are contained in the **Terrorism Act 2000**:

- **section 33** defines a cordoned area

- **section 34** gives the power to designate a cordoned area
- **section 35** explains the duration of a cordon
- **section 36** defines the police powers for enforcement of a cordoned area by a constable in uniform

In non-terrorism cases, police officers can establish and regulate a cordon under common law. Police community support officers (PCSOs) do not have this power. One or more of the following justifications must apply:

- to protect public safety
- to prevent an actual or anticipated breach of the peace
- to protect a crime scene
- at the request and consent of the landowner

Other relevant legal powers include the following:

- **Police Act 1996, section 89(2)** provides that a person commits an offence if they resist or wilfully obstruct a police officer in the execution of their duty. This provision may apply if a person does not comply with the directions of a police officer enforcing a cordon.
- **Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, section 24** and **section 24a** provide for powers of arrest, which may apply depending on the circumstances.
- **Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, section 44** provides firefighters with legal powers relevant to their roles in an emergency or major incident.

Effective cordons

Cordons should be put in place as soon as possible. Where relevant, this should be done following consultation with the commanders of other emergency services. The initial incident commander should also seek advice from the fire and rescue service incident commander, where appropriate, on the extent of the cordons relative to hazards and health and safety.

An assessment of the specific risks involved and the impact on health and safety of responding agencies should be considered. Each agency has a responsibility for its own staff. Each agency should, however, have a shared understanding of risk.

This is covered in detail in the Cabinet Office's (2013) **Emergency response and recovery** guidance.

An effective cordon should:

- assist in protecting the scene, the public and those working at the scene
- control unauthorised access
- assist emergency services operations
- ensure that the integrity of the scene is maintained for any investigation

Role	Responsibility
Initial incident commander	• Should establish the cordon management as early as possible. This should be agreed with other partner agencies as required. • Should nominate bronze inner cordon and bronze outer cordon (in some incidents, this could be the same person initially).

Role	Responsibility
Bronze (inner and outer) cordons	• Where possible, determine cordon distances and staff requirements for specific locations or high-risk areas in advance and incorporate these into plans. • This should be decided through communication and agreement with other partner agencies. • These should be adjusted as determined by the requirements of the unfolding incident. • Assign and brief personnel positioned on cordons on their role and any developments as they occur (including security information, and health and safety advice). • A cordons log book should be started to monitor and record personnel entering and leaving the scene.

Role	Responsibility

Scene access control officers	• Should maintain the cordon.
	• Record immediately:
	  • the details of people entering
	  • reason for entry
	  • their entrance time
	  • their exit time
	• People entering should be directed to a scene access control point to verify they have the authority to enter.
	• Provide health and safety advice (including any personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements) and security information to entrants.

Inner cordon

Coordinating the setup of the inner cordon is the responsibility of bronze cordons. The inner cordon encloses the scene of an incident. This contains any area of hazard or contamination. During the **rescue phase**, the **fire and rescue service** may be responsible for the inner cordon area, working in cooperation with other **category one responders**.

Red and white tape designates the inner cordon. The size of the inner cordon is determined by the incident. The minimum distances recommended for a bomb scene are provided in the table below.

Minimum distance	Device size
100 metres	A briefcase
200 metres	A small vehicle

Minimum distance	Device size
400 metres	A large vehicle

Where there may be an explosive or ballistic threat, cordons should be out of line of sight and behind hard cover.

If in doubt, cordon off a large area and seek advice from military explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) experts. Requests for EOD resources should be made to the Joint Services EOD Operations Centre.

There should, generally, be a single scene access control point (SACP), through which all personnel enter and leave the scene.

Scene access control officers may find it useful to explain to people entering or exiting the inner cordon why their information is being recorded. These reasons are:

- to only allow those with a justifiable reason to enter
- for forensic and investigation reasons
- to account for everyone in an evacuation
- to meet record keeping requirements

When the rescue phase is complete, the police have responsibility for the area enclosed within an inner cordon to:

- establish a specific route for access to the scene to prevent disturbance and protect evidence
- **recover** the deceased and human remains, where present
- carry out forensic examination of the scene
- collect evidence on behalf of an **senior investigating officer (SIO)** or **senior identification manager (SIM)**
- record all details of the retrieval of the deceased and human remains from the scene (records are disclosable and should be made available to the **SIO**) – this is the responsibility of the staff at the scene access control point

Outer cordon

The tactical (silver) commander should determine the radius of the outer cordon, in consultation with other emergency services. An outer cordon should provide responding agencies with a safe working area. Determine the radius depending on the:

- type and scope of the incident
- availability of resources
- impact on the wider community, as determined by a **community impact assessment** (CIA) or **critical incident declaration**

Bronze cordon should ensure that the outer cordon is identified using blue and white tape marked ‘police’. Staff should be positioned at the **scene access control point** and exit point.

Within an outer cordon, restrict the use of blue lights to ambulances transporting patients, as well as designated command vehicles.

Cordon access for external investigators

There are circumstances in which other partner agencies have a duty to investigate. These agencies include:

- structural engineers
- local authority building control surveyors
- authorised voluntary sector workers
- Accident investigation branches (AIBs) from the **Department for Transport** and Ministry of Defence (MoD)
- Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

Where relevant, these agencies should be permitted urgent access. Further information about the remit of these agencies in relation to major and/or critical incidents and events can be found in the **resources** section. This also includes links to their websites.

Traffic cordon and management

An emergency or significant event can affect transport networks, especially road and rail. As such, the use of cordons and appropriate methods to control traffic in and around the site are needed.

The incident commander should:

- establish a traffic cordon to restrict vehicle access to the area surrounding the scene
- nominate a bronze traffic

Traffic management should be pre-identified as an operational (bronze) specialist function, unless there are valid reasons not to. This allows it to be activated at any spontaneous incident.

The bronze traffic should:

- divert all non-essential traffic from roads leading to or from the incident – this prevents congestion and allows emergency services to enter and exit easily
- implement a one-way system with defined access and exit routes, where possible
- plan emergency routes to and from designated hospitals in advance and make arrangements for keeping them accessible
- pass information on traffic diversions to the media or media cell for public broadcast
- share situational awareness updates, using METHANE

The bronze traffic should draw from their consultation with the RVP manager and a local authority traffic manager, as required by the **Traffic Management Act 2004**, when making decisions. Local authority traffic managers can provide important information about the road network.

Local authorities, **National Highways** (or devolved equivalents) and motoring organisations may be able to assist with suitable signage on request.

National Highways

When an emergency or major incident occurs, the force control room supervisor should ensure that the relevant regional control centre of National Highways is contacted. These centres coordinate operational resources for managing the country's strategic road network. Most motorways and some all-purpose trunk roads are part of that network. For these roads, they should:

- implement emergency road closures
- get, and keep, traffic moving
- remove obstructions

They are jointly responsible with the police for reducing incident-related congestion and improving safety on the roads.

Tags

APP Critical incidents Major incidents