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Planned Operations and Emergency Procedures:

Recognising and Responding to Critical Incidents

Version 2.4

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Authorised Professional Practice

These notes are aimed at learners completing their Initial training to meet the learning outcomes specified on the National Policing Curriculum. The primary source of content is the Authorised Professional Practice (APP) and the supporting evidence based research of “what works” in policing.

APP can be found at: <http://www.app.college.police.uk/>

1. Introduction

These notes are for Pre-Join, Police Officers, PCSOs and IL4SC Phase 1.

This chapter looks at what to consider if you as a first responder are sent to an incident which may become critical.

Different types of incidents can become critical. Often they are regarded as high profile, serious or homicide related, but this is not always the case.

The police service has a duty to respond to every incident in the appropriate way, first time every time and at every level. A proactive response prevents a significant loss of confidence in the police.

2. Critical Incidents (CI)

Critical Incident Management is intended to provide a response which satisfies the needs of the victim, their family and the community, but also provides an effective and proportionate outcome to an incident.

The definition is deliberately broad and should ensure that incidents which are likely to escalate into a CI are not missed. It recognises the fundamental importance of community confidence and trust in the police response to CIs, and applies equally to serious, less serious and internal incidents.

Although high-profile and/or large-scale incidents are more likely to develop into or contain multiple CIs, less serious incidents and internal incidents can, and do, escalate. A CI may appear to come from nowhere, but usually there are warning signs.

The purpose of these notes is to point you to the correct course of action at the scene of an incident and crime which may be critical in its very nature.

2.1 Critical Incidents

It's important to understand what a Critical Incident is:

Definition and explanations

ACPO's definition of a critical incident is:

“Any incident where the effectiveness of the police response is likely to have a significant impact on the confidence of the victim, their family and/or the community”

You will notice that the accent is on the police and what they do or do not do. Any police officer/police staff can notify an incident as potentially critical: officers/staff must always be aware of the potential for any incident to escalate and become critical.

Certain types of incident may be more likely to escalate to become critical, including:

- Suspicious, unexplained deaths
- Homicides
- Incidents requiring a police firearms response
- Vulnerable persons missing from home
- Domestic Abuse
- Serious sexual offences
- Hate crimes
- Crimes involving particularly vulnerable or young victims
- Linked series crime, especially when directed at a single victim or community
- Crimes involving high profile victims or offenders
- Crimes where a police officer is suspected of committing the offence
- Incidents where the police may be responsible for a death or serious injury

Whether crime is involved or not, primacy for local responses to critical incidents will be vested with the police, at least in the early stages and as an initial responder, that could be you.

It is imperative for the police service of the 21st century to maintain the confidence and trust of all the communities it serves. Police officers need to understand that some incidents by their very nature can have a significant impact on victims, families and communities and that the way in which such incidents are policed will significantly influence community confidence in the policing service provided.

The ability of officers to recognise these incidents and respond in a manner that demonstrates professionalism, objectivity, compassion and a duty of care towards those affected, is of paramount importance. Success depends in no small measure on the effectiveness of the officer's response to critical incidents.

Case study – Fiona Pilkington

The Fiona Pilkington case had its origins in harassment and anti-social behaviour (ASB). Fiona and her daughter suffered frequent and sustained local disorder, often directed at their home, over a period of several years. This was reported to the police, but ‘incidents were too often dealt with by police officers in isolation and with an unstructured approach’ (IPCC, 2011). This and other factors, such as not identifying the family as vulnerable, and not recognising the ASB and harassment as targeted hate crime, caused frustration. Fiona eventually took her own life and that of her disabled daughter, Francesca.

Case study – Stephen Mitchell

In January 2011 former police officer, Stephen Mitchell, was sentenced to life imprisonment after being found guilty of two counts of rape, three indecent assaults and six counts of abuse of public office.

Between 1999 and 2007, the former police officer from Northumbria had committed sexual offences against vulnerable women he had come into contact with during the course of his duties. This case not only undermined the confidence of victims, their families and the local community, but also that of officers and staff in the police recruitment processes (which missed the fact that Mitchell had a history of sexual offending). Officers and staff need to have confidence in the integrity of the colleagues they work with. This case also generated widespread public concern because of the high-profile media response the case received.

Initial Response Considerations when dealing with a Critical Incident

With any crime or incident there is the expectation that you will act quickly, efficiently and effectively. Police constables, special constables, police community support officers (PCSOs) and call handlers are on the front line and usually provide the initial response to an incident. As the first responder, you also need to understand their role in CI management which is to continually ask:

- what are they dealing with?
- what might develop?
- what the impact of the incident and/or the police response might be?
- whom they should tell if they believe the incident they are dealing with has the likelihood to escalate into a CI?

Management of a critical incident (CI) should start with early identification and notification. It is particularly important that small-scale CIs are identified early, as even these can have a long-term impact on community confidence if left unchecked. Processes should be in place to manage issues that may affect the quality of the police response before they can impact on public confidence.

Particular attention should be paid to the needs of the victim, their family and the community.

2.2 The Impact of an Incident

It is not always possible to predict the impact that an incident might have on an individual, or why. It is likely, however, that the greater the impact an incident has on those closely affected by it, the greater their expectations will be about the quality of the police response. There will also be an assumption that what is important to those affected will be equally important to the police.

The impact that an incident may have on an individual is influenced by:

- the circumstances of the incident
- the emotional, mental or physical impact of the incident (including the effect of trauma or bereavement)
- general feelings of security and/or vulnerability

Personal perception

A minor criminal act, e.g. criminal damage, may be nothing more than a nuisance or inconvenience to some, but for others it has much greater significance. This may be because the victim is particularly vulnerable or because it is the latest in a catalogue of similar incidents that the victim has experienced (e.g. harassment, hate crimes or anti-social behaviour) and they do not think enough is being done to stop it.

The effect of trauma or bereavement

The sudden and unexpected death of a loved one may affect the way in which a person reacts to the police, and their perception of the service they receive. It is vital in all cases that the individual is treated with dignity and respect, and that their needs are taken into account.

A traumatic event or bereavement may not be directly related to the incident that the police are currently responding to. The individual's feelings and reaction, however, should be no less important when managing the current incident.

Impact of an event on the wider community

A traumatic event can have a significant impact on an entire community (as in the case of the fatal shootings carried out by Derek Bird in Cumbria, June 2010). Members of a community may experience similar psychological and/or emotional trauma, because of their proximity to an event, to those who were directly affected. Their sense of safety and feelings of vulnerability may also increase.

You may consider that solving the crime is your primary task and many victims would agree that it is important. However, at the time, their reaction of shock and horror could make them totally unconcerned about the crime being solved.

Example:

Arthur and William are returning from a meal at a restaurant when they are attacked by a group of young people. The youths shout abuse at them, knock Arthur unconscious and repeatedly kick him before stealing William's money and running away.

An officer asks the William for details of what was stolen and a description of the attackers. Despite not being physically injured himself, William is unable to respond clearly to the officer's questions as he is deeply affected by the trauma of the experience.

There could be a conflict:

- The conscious victim's focus is unlikely to be where the police want it to be
- The officer's focus may not be where either of the victims would want it to be
- Despite needing the discovery of precise and comprehensive information which would lead to the identification the criminal, the **primary task** is taking care of the victims
- The officer needs that person to be precise and comprehensive, but they are hardly likely to be so whilst still experiencing a major trauma.

If you deal with the trauma first it will pave the way for a thorough and useful investigation. So, meeting the victim's immediate needs is one of the skills of a good investigator; it's about dealing with the situation in an intelligent and professional manner.

2.3 Identification of a Critical Incident

It is impossible to provide a fail-safe tool or risk model for identifying a CI because:

- any incident can become a CI and may include crime and non-crime incidents or operations and those that are spontaneous or pre-planned
- the quality of the police response can be undermined by one or more issues which can be compounded by poor quality assurance, poor victim care and/or poor community engagement
- the impact the incident will have on individuals, irrespective of the police response, cannot be predicted

Tension and vulnerability

- It is possible, however, to gauge general feelings of tension and vulnerability in a community (situation awareness) and to predict criticality factors which are likely to have an effect on how the victim, their family or the community may react to an incident, irrespective of the quality of the police response. These, along with the effective use of intelligence, will help you identify incidents which may escalate.
- Early recognition of a poor police response and a prompt apology to those affected may prevent further escalation.

Situation awareness

- Understanding the mood of communities you work in and monitoring the impact that incidents and events have previously had on them, will help to identify those that have a significantly higher likelihood of escalating into a CI if they are not dealt with appropriately at the outset.

2.4 Notification Process

A key element of critical incident management is giving senior officers early notification of incidents that have already escalated, or which are likely to escalate, into a CI.

Note: it is the quality of the police response that is likely to cause or help to prevent a CI. On this basis, all incidents should be subject to a regime of quality assurance.

Who can call a critical incident?

As the first responder when dealing with an incident (including call handlers and first attending officers) you should continually ask yourself these questions:

- what am I dealing with?
- what might it develop into?
- what impact might this incident have?
- whom should I tell if I think this may escalate into a CI?

Where, in your opinion, an incident is, or has the likelihood to escalate into a CI, it is essential that this is communicated immediately to an appropriately trained senior officer. This may be a duty inspector, the force control room manager or your line manager. Senior officers should not discourage officers or police staff from reporting these incidents because the next one may be a CI with significant implications for the force.

Who can declare a critical incident?

Anyone can call a CI to bring it to the attention of a senior officer, but only a designated senior officer, e.g. the duty inspector, can declare an incident as critical. This acts as a quality assurance mechanism to avoid inappropriate declarations.

Notification should not prevent the provision of an ongoing police response in line with the policy or procedure relevant to the incident.

Assessing the notification

Senior officers, who are notified of an incident that is, or has the likelihood to escalate into a CI, need to decide whether the:

- report is valid
- current deployment will deliver an effective response
- incident should be escalated further and/or declared a CI

The decision to declare an incident as critical should be based on at least one objective reason why the effectiveness of the police response is likely to have a significant impact on the confidence of the victim, their family or the community.

2.5 The Police Relationship with the Victim, their Family and the Community

One of the most important considerations is the relationship between the police and the victim, their family and/or the community. The police should treat everyone professionally, appropriately and with respect in accordance with their diverse needs.

The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime provides that all victims of crime have a statutory right to expect a minimum standard of care, irrespective of whether their allegations are substantiated.

Positive relationships and effective communication with victims, families and wider communities during a CI will:

- encourage open and honest dialogue between the police, and victims, families and communities
- increase understanding of family and community needs
- improve confidence in the police response
- improve community intelligence
- increase investigative opportunities
- improve policing outcomes

As the first responder, you should take time to understand the needs of those concerned and consider alternative ways of building relationships, as necessary. This may be through family representatives, intermediaries or community representatives.

2.6 Revision Questions

- What is ACPO's definition of a critical incident?
- Which questions should continually be asked by anyone dealing with a critical incident?
- What factors might influence the impact that an incident may have on individuals?
- Which factors might help you to identify a critical incident?
- Who can call a critical incident?
- What would a senior officer need to decide before declaring a critical incident?
- What are the potential results of positive relationships and honest dialogue between the police and victims, families and communities?

3. Key Legislation

- Common Law
- Human Rights Act 1998
- Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984
- Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000