

Title:	Incident Command
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Synopsis:	This guidance supports the work of fire and rescue services to put in place a system for an all-hazards approach to incident command. It is an essential guide to the safe systems of work needed at an incident and is aimed at policy writers in all fire and rescue services.
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National Operational Guidance – Incident command first edition version two (ARCHIVED on 15-11-2016)

ARCHIVED

Introduction

The guidance supports fire and rescue services to put in place a system for an all-hazards approach to incident command. It is an essential guide to the safe systems of work needed at an incident and is aimed at policy writers in each fire and rescue service to support them in producing their local guidance and procedures. This policy guidance is accompanied by [The Foundation for Incident Command](#), which provides further detail and is essential reading for all fire and rescue service incident commanders and other staff, including firefighters and control room operators.

Other emergency agencies will base their expectation of the fire and rescue service response to multi-agency incidents on the incident command system contained within this guidance. For this reason fire and rescue services are expected to adopt this guidance. The guidance is likely to be considered as national best practice in any review or enquiry following a significant incident.

The guidance provides details of specific hazard and control measures that have been developed following a literature review. The control measures support a fire and rescue service in delivering assertive, effective and safe incident command.

The incident command system provides the incident commander with a clear framework to structure, organise and manage an incident. It can be adapted to all sizes and types of incident and will help them deploy and utilise resources in an efficient and safe way. The incident command system allows the incident commander to use health and safety arrangements, including standard operational procedures tailored to the characteristics of an emergency. Fire and rescue services should therefore ensure their policies and procedures are based upon it. This helps the incident commander to achieve an appropriate balance between the benefit of undertaking planned actions and the risks associated with them.

National Operational Guidance: [Operations](#) gives guidance on operational planning and the storage and dissemination of risk information to the incident ground. Fire and rescue services should also refer to that guidance when preparing policies and procedures relating to the command of incidents.

Operational response is hazardous and firefighters respond to thousands of incidents each year. Some incidents need only simple actions and procedures to be dealt with effectively and safely, as risks are low. Others are more challenging and may quickly increase in size, complexity and duration. The [Health, Safety and welfare framework for the operational environment](#) (the Framework) provides guidance to fire and rescue authorities to assist with planning the delivery of their health and safety responsibilities. It contains the safe person principles upon which fire and rescue services should base their policies. The Framework and the application of risk assessment and control measures should not prevent fire service operations from taking place.

Commanding operational situations is different to managing controlled and defined situations or workplace scenarios. Commanders need a range of qualities together with command skills to deal with the wide-ranging nature of emergencies. Therefore fire and rescue services must provide their

incident commanders with the necessary training, equipment and resources to effectively apply the incident command system to any incident.

Assertive and effective commanders:

- Are confident and self-aware
- Are well-trained and competent
- Have sound situational awareness
- Are able to lead, direct and instruct others
- Can communicate effectively
- Are able to plan and implement
- Can apply sound judgement and effective decision-making
- Are able to adapt to changing situations
- Are calm and controlled

Fire and rescue services must have selection processes that ensure personnel who are responsible for performing command functions are capable of doing so. They should appoint incident commanders that are able to demonstrate clear potential to deal with stressful situations where there is sustained pressure. Once appointed they should periodically be required to demonstrate competence in their role.

Fire and rescue services must ensure they appropriately train and assess their incident commanders. They should ensure incident commanders understand and have sufficient time and facilities to practise the skills they need for command. Fire and rescue services must equip them with the operational knowledge and understanding needed to resolve the full range of reasonably foreseeable incidents and enable them to adapt to those that are not.

More details can be found in the CFA [Command Training, Assessment and Qualifications Fire and Rescue Service Guidance](#) and the [National Occupational Standards for Fire and Rescue Services](#).

Fire and rescue authority and service responsibilities

A fire and rescue authority's responsibilities are set out in the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, or equivalent legislation in devolved administrations. Some of these duties are classified as core duties. These duties should be read with other relevant legislation, specifically the [Health and Safety at Work Act](#) and the Management of [Health and Safety at Work Regulations](#).

The Fire and Rescue Services Act, or equivalent, requires each authority to make provision for the purpose of extinguishing fires and carrying out rescues in its area, including the provision of personnel, equipment and training.

The Health and Safety at Work Act includes a requirement for employers to provide information, instruction, training and – critical for this guidance on incident command – the provision of supervision as is necessary to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of its employees.

Further sections of the Health and Safety at Work Act place a duty on employers to conduct undertakings in such a way as to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, people not employed by them, who may be affected thereby, are not exposed to risk. [Note: in this context a risk has to be created or made worse by the service].

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations places a duty on the employer to make a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks to the health and safety of their employees and to record the significant findings of the assessment.

The Health and Safety Executive set out how they will apply health and safety legislation to the fire and rescue service in [Striking the balance between operational and health and safety duties in the Fire and Rescue Service](#).

Foundation guidance for fire service legislation will be published on the National Operational Guidance website in due course.

Risk management plan

As part of their risk management plan each fire and rescue service should consider the resources they need to mobilise to an incident to support effective incident command at operational events. Their plans should be developed with regard to the guidance in this document.

For incident command the risk management plan should include:

- The role and level at which incidents will be commanded, for example, Level 1 incident, crew manager and watch manager
- The types of equipment to provide command support functions, such as command boards and control units, and the size of incidents at which each will be used
- The arrangements for command teams and any support vehicles
- The need for competent and skilled officers to be available for command support and functional or support sectors, such as water, foam or inter-agency liaison

Hazard and control statement

Hazard	Control measure
Failure to comply with relevant	Understanding legal responsibilities and duties with regard to fire

legislation	service operations
Failure to select effective incident commanders	Effective selection process incorporating a practical assessment of incident command
Failure to develop effective incident commanders	Command skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Situational awareness • Command decision-making • Operational discretion • Incident commander communication • Personal resilience
Ineffective organisation of the incident ground	Clearly defined command roles and responsibilities, incorporating multi-agency arrangements Structuring an incident Arrangements in place to deal with 'firefighter emergencies'
Ineffective safety management	Positive safety culture Risk assessment at an incident Incident ground safety management

Legal considerations

Hazard	Control measure
Failure to comply with relevant legislation	Understanding legal responsibilities and duties with regard to fire service operations

Hazard knowledge

The operational environment is governed by a number of diverse pieces of legislation and regulations. These set out duties that fire authorities, fire and rescue services and individual employees must carry out. Some also lay out powers that may be exercised in certain circumstances. Other aspects may enable regulations to be made.

Legislation may apply to all parts of the United Kingdom or there may be individual acts that apply to specific countries.

The list below includes the majority of those acts and regulations that apply to the operational environment.

- The Fire and Rescue Services Act (2004), the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005, and the Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.
- The Civil Contingencies Act (2004)
- The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (Contingency Planning) Regulations 2005
- Emergency Services (Obstruction) Act 2006, Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act 2005 and the Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006
- The Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) and the Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978
- Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1999) and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000.
- The Human Rights Act (1998)
- Water Resources Act (1991), Water Environment (Controlled Activities) (Scotland) Regulations 2011, Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006
- Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989

Control measure – Understanding legal responsibilities and duties

Control measure knowledge

Fire and rescue authorities and services should consider the legislation and policies relevant to incident command. A Fire and rescue authority, as the employer, holds the legal duties for the provision of a safe and effective Fire and Rescue Service. The incident commander is the fire and rescue authority's representative on an incident ground and is responsible for implementing safe systems of work.

Fire related legislation contains both duties and powers. Duties are actions or activities which must be carried out to comply with the law whereas powers are actions or activities that may be carried out and the Act gives legal authority to do so.

An example of a duty is to provide a fire and rescue service, as in Section 7 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. An example of a power is the ability to respond to other eventualities, as in section 11. This power is limited to eventualities that may cause one or more people to not survive or suffer harm, or may cause harm to the environment.

Control measure actions

Fire and rescue authorities should ensure they have a good understanding of their duties to ensure they comply with all relevant legislation. It is imperative that fire and rescue authorities have in place appropriate and relevant procedures and policies to ensure incident command can be conducted assertively, effectively and safely.

In developing their policies and procedures the fire and rescue service should consider the various Acts and Regulations. They should ensure they fully prepare incident commanders to be able to carry out any duties or exercise any powers whilst representing the Authority at an incident.

Fire and rescue services may obtain legal advice to ensure they interpret legislative requirements appropriately when formulating policy and procedures.

Selection

Hazard	Control measure
Failure to select effective incident commanders	Effective selection process

Hazard knowledge

Incident commanders need to possess cognitive and interpersonal qualities, as well as technical knowledge. Together these are critical for assertive, effective and safe incident command. Robust selection processes are necessary to identify suitable personnel to be developed for the role of incident commander.

Control measure - Effective selection process

Control measure knowledge

Fire and rescue services must identify the knowledge and skills that they require in an incident commander and should consider the most appropriate way of selecting personnel for incident command roles.

Control measure action

Fire and rescue services should have suitable and sufficient systems to identify individuals for command roles, which should include a practical assessment of their command skills.

Command skills

Hazard	Control measure
Failure to develop effective incident commanders	Command skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leadership• Situational awareness• Command decision-making• Operational discretion• Incident commander communication• Personal resilience

Hazard knowledge

An incident commander must possess the technical knowledge and command skills to underpin their judgements, decisions and behaviours. This section draws on research and incident ground observations that have helped identify the command skills necessary for incident commanders. Further information can be found in [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

Control measure – Command skills

Control measure knowledge

To deliver assertive, effective and safe incident command, incident commanders must be competent and able to understand the situation as it unfolds. They should be able to:

- Identify and prioritise problems and develop a plan to resolve the incident
- Communicate this plan to others
- Co-ordinate and control activity in line with their plan
- Display the leadership needed to resolve the incident and operate effectively under the pressures of an incident

These qualities are known as command skills. These skills are outlined in detail in [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

Competence is the ability to achieve and repeat the necessary level of workplace performance. It links to the [National Occupational Standards for Fire and Rescue Services](#) in an individual's role map. National Occupational Standards (NOS) provide a structure that enables fire and rescue services to design and deliver a consistent level of training to a common standard, across all levels of command.

There are four levels of command, which are underpinned by command qualifications that apply to the fire and rescue service. The CFA [Command Training, Assessment and Qualifications Fire and Rescue Service Guidance](#) provides further information.

Control measure actions

Command skills are complex in nature and can be developed with understanding and practice. Fire and rescue services must select, prepare and develop incident commanders to ensure they can use these skills effectively when commanding an incident. This includes providing appropriate opportunity for practice under realistic pressures.

Fire and rescue services should foster an operational learning and development ethos where personnel are trained in and regularly practise command. To do this, the service should encourage a culture of empowerment and acceptance of responsibility.

Fire and rescue services should ensure all operational policies, procedures and training materials are consistent with the service's approach to incident command. The service should understand and clearly articulate its command ethos to help ensure incident commanders are aware of the service's expectations.

Fire and rescue services should recognise the importance of incident commanders having effective command skills. They should ensure that these skills form the basis for all command development programmes. Without good command skills, the commander will not be able to effectively put in place the technical aspects of incident command. Fire and rescue services must have systems and processes in place to develop command skills at all levels and to actively monitor performance and behaviour of incident commanders.

An incident commander will need to practise their role. This will help them to apply their leadership skills, knowledge and understanding to be assertive, effective and safe.

Command competence is made up of a number of components. An individual's personal qualities and attributes are as important as their knowledge and understanding. Fire and rescue services should design and put in place a framework of competence for their incident commanders. This framework should equip incident commanders with:

- Behaviours
- Skills
- Knowledge of policies and standard operational procedures
- Understanding of their responsibility for the health, safety and welfare of others

It is accepted that knowledge and skills will fade when not in regular use and this may affect competence. This process is known as skills decay. Fire and rescue services should have an established maintenance of competence system that clearly identifies when and how an area of

competence is to be maintained. This maintenance of competence can be achieved through the use of continuation training.

The training frequency identified by a fire and rescue service to maintain competence should take account of each individual's ability to acquire and maintain skills, and the fire and rescue authority's risk profile to ensure their risk management plans are effectively delivered. This is done to minimise skills decay and ensure personnel are competent to undertake their role safely and effectively.

Fire and rescue services must have methods of measuring and monitoring how effectively their incident commanders are performing. Incident commanders should also take personal responsibility to identify, develop and maintain their command skills.

Fire and rescue services must provide operational assurance during an incident and should consider the most suitable ways of doing so. This active monitoring should help identify when the incident commander performed well, or did not act as expected or in line with training and guidance. It can provide support for them at the incident if they need it.

As part of the incident or training debrief process, the incident commander should seek feedback on their performance in resolving the incident. This allows them to identify best practice and where they can make improvements in the future.

Control measure – Leadership

Control measure knowledge

Leadership is an essential element of an incident commander's role in resolving incidents. At an emergency, personnel in the fire and rescue service, people from other organisations and members of the public will look to the incident commander to lead and resolve the incident. They expect the commander to be calm, confident, decisive and professional. Commanders should be able to apply the most appropriate leadership behaviours, technical knowledge and command skills to resolve an incident.

The incident commander is responsible for leading the incident to a successful conclusion but they cannot be responsible for making all decisions or supervising every detail of an incident. For this reason, incidents are often divided into sectors and functions. Each person who commands one of these functions will also need to show competent leadership skills.

For a commander to show effective leadership, others should be willing to trust and accept their influence. It is a process that relies on interactions between people. In the context of incident command, effective leadership is more than exercising authority and power. The way in which a leader behaves will influence how other people respond. A positive relationship between the commander as a leader and crews will improve the performance of the team and contribute to improved safety. Effective leaders have interpersonal qualities which make them more likely to get the best from their teams. Some key areas are outlined in the sections below, and further information can be found in [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

Control measure actions

Fire and rescue services should ensure that their incident command policies recognise leadership behaviours and the responses they elicit. Each fire and rescue service should ensure that it adequately prepares their incident commanders to undertake their role. The incident commander's success in delivering a successful resolution is heavily influenced by their leadership knowledge, skills and attributes. Fire and rescue services should ensure that their leaders:

- Are self-aware
- Display and instil confidence
- Demonstrate and foster trust
- Foster two-way communication
- Understand the use of authority
- Set expectations and standards

The leadership relationship begins before attending an incident. Fire and rescue services should be aware that the culture of their organisation can influence behaviours both on and off the incident ground. This may affect the way in which incident commanders lead the incident to a resolution and the way in which crews respond. Fire and rescue services should consider their organisational culture and its influence on incident command.

Control measure – Situational awareness

Control measure knowledge

Situational awareness is a person's perception and understanding of the situation they face. It includes their anticipation of what the situation may become, including the impact of their actions. For an incident commander, it is their perspective of the scene of operations.

A commander's situational awareness of an incident is made up of many sources of information that are interpreted into a coherent picture in a way that makes sense to them.

The incident commander's situational awareness forms a basis for:

- Assessing risk and making decisions
- Identifying and prioritising objectives
- Developing an incident plan
- Anticipating how an incident will develop
- Predicting the consequences of actions

Insufficient situational awareness may lead to commanders potentially overlooking information when they make decisions. It is important to consider the relationship between the information that

was reasonably available and how the working conditions at an incident may affect their ability to process information. Post incident evaluations of operational decisions should take this relationship into account.

The three stages of situational awareness are:

- Information gathering
- Understanding information
- Anticipation

Information gathering

Incident commanders will gather information from a variety of sources to gain accurate situational awareness. Fire and rescue services should ensure that incident commanders have access to all the available and necessary information, such as risk information, to assist this process.

Understanding information

After a commander gathers information, they will process it and extract the meaning. As a result they will form an understanding of the incident. Experience, context and assumptions can supplement or distort the commander's interpretation of the scene.

Anticipation

Fire and rescue services should ensure that incident commanders use their understanding of the situation to anticipate what is likely to happen next; for example, how the situation might develop and the consequences of their actions. This means it is vital that their interpretation reflects the actual situation, which will allow the incident commander to effectively plan their operational activities.

Effective situational awareness

Effective situational awareness ensures that the interpretation reflects the actual situation. This is critical for making appropriate decisions and predicting the likely effects of activities.

The following may assist effective situational awareness:

- Clear briefing
- Minimising distractions during critical tasks
- Appropriate spans of control
- Regular review
- Self-awareness of stress and fatigue

Factors that affect situational awareness

Fire and rescue services should ensure incident commanders are aware of the factors that can affect situational awareness. Incident commanders should understand how to put in place the means to monitor the operational environment to detect changes and maintain an accurate understanding of the situation. For example, by using an appropriate command structure and communication network, together with operational assurance/active monitoring arrangements.

Forming an accurate understanding of the situation is risk-critical. Incident commanders should be aware of the factors likely to affect their situational awareness.

New information about risks may come to light as crews work on their tasks. As the incident commander may not be aware of this information, they rely on each person to complete their own risk assessment. New information may affect the incident plan and the safety of people operating in that area, so it is important that personnel are aware of their responsibilities for identifying hazards and assessing risks to influence their actions. Relevant information should also be relayed to the incident commander as appropriate.

Further information can be found in [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

Control measure actions

Fire and rescue services must provide effective training and development programmes to ensure incident commanders are able to develop and practise the skill of situational awareness. Assessment processes and exercises should assess the effectiveness of an individual's ability to gain situational awareness and provide constructive feedback to allow learning.

Control measure – Command decision-making

Control measure knowledge

Decision making is a fundamental command skill which can have far-reaching consequences. Decision making, like any complex skill, needs practice and understanding. Fire and rescue services should ensure they prepare incident commanders. They should be given ample opportunity to practise and develop this critical skill.

The ability to make sound decisions based on the elements that make up an incident, as well as an accurate overall interpretation of the incident is a fundamental building block. It leads to assertive, effective and safe incident command.

There are a number of processes that incident commanders may use to reach decisions. They can be broadly grouped into two main categories. These are:

- Intuitive decision-making, which may include conditioned processes and recognition primed decision-making

- Analytical decision-making, which may include rule selection, option comparison and creating new solutions

Further information can be found in [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

Analytical decision-making takes more time and mental effort than intuitive processes and can be more susceptible to the effects of excessive pressures that reduce the capacity for mental processing.

Decision traps

A decision trap can be described as a thought process that can lead to an incorrect decision being made, which may result in the situation becoming worse.

There are a number of decision traps that may make decisions in the operational context less effective. Decision makers should be aware of these and should apply decision controls to guard against unintended consequences. Further information can be found in [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

Control measure actions

Fire and rescue services should prepare incident commanders to operate in a complex decision-making environment. This environment is uncertain, with competing demands and problems that can affect many aspects of the scene.

It is the responsibility of fire and rescue services to ensure that they adequately train, develop and support incident commanders in their decision-making processes and capabilities.

Incident commanders make decisions throughout an incident. The decisions they make involve:

- Identifying problems
- Assessing risk
- Identifying and prioritising objectives
- Deciding tactical priorities
- Developing and communicating a plan
- Actively monitoring

These processes apply to all decision makers on the incident ground. They have equal relevance from a firefighter wearing breathing apparatus to an incident commander developing their plan. It is critical that everybody is aware of the processes that drive their decision-making. Fire and rescue services should ensure that decision makers understand the factors that influence which process they are likely to adopt and the pitfalls associated with each.

Decision Control Process (DCP)

The Decision Control Process provides a method to support decision-making at an incident. This aims to take account of the natural decision processes a person might employ in an operational context. It seeks to support decision makers in a practical way to avoid unintended consequences arising from decision traps.

The Decision Control Process is scaleable. It can be applied to basic decisions made on the incident ground for a task or problem. It can also scale up for use in planning the resolution of an entire incident. It complements the [Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles \(JESIP\) Joint Decision Model](#) for multi-agency decision-making, particularly for assessing risk and developing a working strategy.

This process consists of four stages. These are:

- Situation
- Plan
- Decision controls
- Action

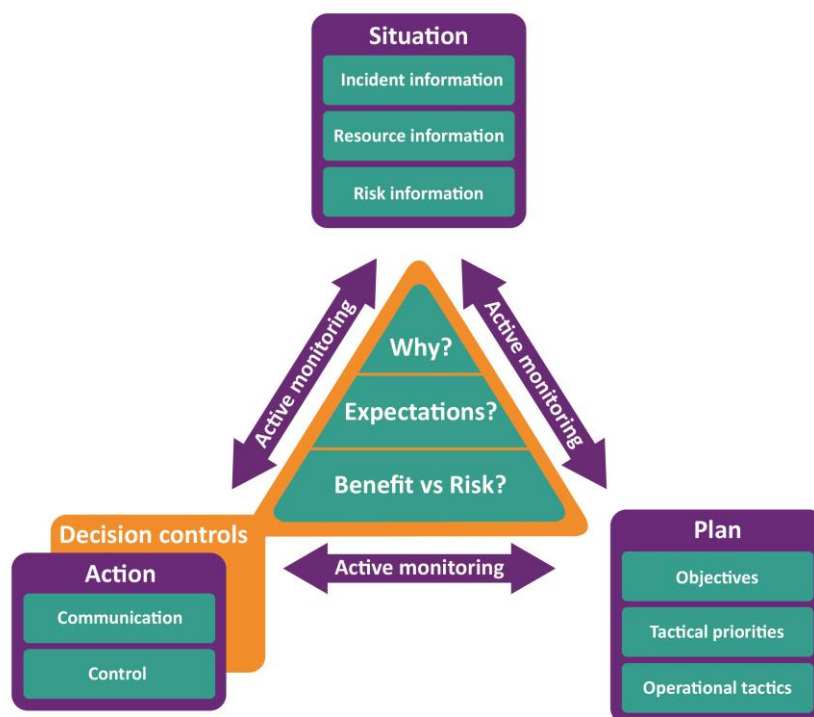


Fig.1 Decision control process

For an animated version of this diagram, click [here](#).

Situation

Commanders base their decisions on the way they interpret a situation. Good situational awareness is key to understanding the situation in a coherent way. It helps to predict likely developments. By assessing the situation a decision maker can understand the current characteristics and details of an incident and consider the desired end state.

Decision makers should continually be assessing the situation to support an accurate awareness. They should gather relevant information whilst making the best use of the time available. Though this list is not exhaustive, they should consider:

- Incident information
- Resource information
- Risk information

Plan

After assessing the situation the decision maker should form a plan. They should understand the current situation and their desired outcome. From this they can identify their objectives and develop an incident plan.

This list is not exhaustive but the plan may consider:

- What are the incident objectives and goals?
- What are the tactical priorities?
- What are the operational tactics?

Decision controls

Decision controls are designed to help guard against decision traps that might occur as a result of the type of decision process people naturally adopt. Before moving to the action phase, decision makers should use decision controls as a rapid mental check and as part of their briefing to crews.

Decision controls are a rapid mental check that asks:

- Why am I doing this?
 - To what goals does this link?
 - What is my rationale?
- What do I think will happen?
 - Anticipate the likely outcome of the action, in particular the impact on the objective and other activities.
 - How will the incident change as a result of these actions, what cues do I expect to see?

- Is the benefit proportional to the risk?
 - Consider whether the benefits of proposed actions justify the risks that would be accepted.

Action

This involves implementing the decisions that have been made. Wherever feasible, decision controls should be applied before this phase, or as soon as possible afterwards. This applies whether decision makers move to *Action* from *Plan* or directly from *Situation assessment*. The two elements of this phase are:

- **Communicate** the outcomes of the decision effectively by issuing instructions and sharing risk-critical information. It may also involve the provision of updates on the situation, on progress, or other information about what is happening at an incident.
- **Control** how the activities are implemented to achieve the desired outcomes. Consider delegating responsibility where this will help increase or maintain control.

Active monitoring

The commander should be actively monitoring and evaluating the situation, including progress being achieved against that expected. This ensures that their situational awareness remains accurate. They should consider whether their tactics or incident plans are suitable, sufficient and safe; they should consider and question any areas of uncertainty, especially where they have made assumptions. Operational assurance arrangements can aid commanders in maintaining accurate situational awareness.

Joint decision-making

The [Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles \(JESIP\) Joint Decision Model](#) is a process that blue light responders have agreed to use at multi-agency incidents, as illustrated below.



Fig.2 JESIP Joint Decision Model

The diagram below shows how the Decision Control Process supports the JESIP Joint Decision Model; in particular the element of 'assessing risk and developing a working strategy'. It helps to feed plans into the Joint Decision Model and can be used as a process to plan and implement activities to achieve the fire and rescue objectives that have been agreed collectively using the Joint Decision Model.

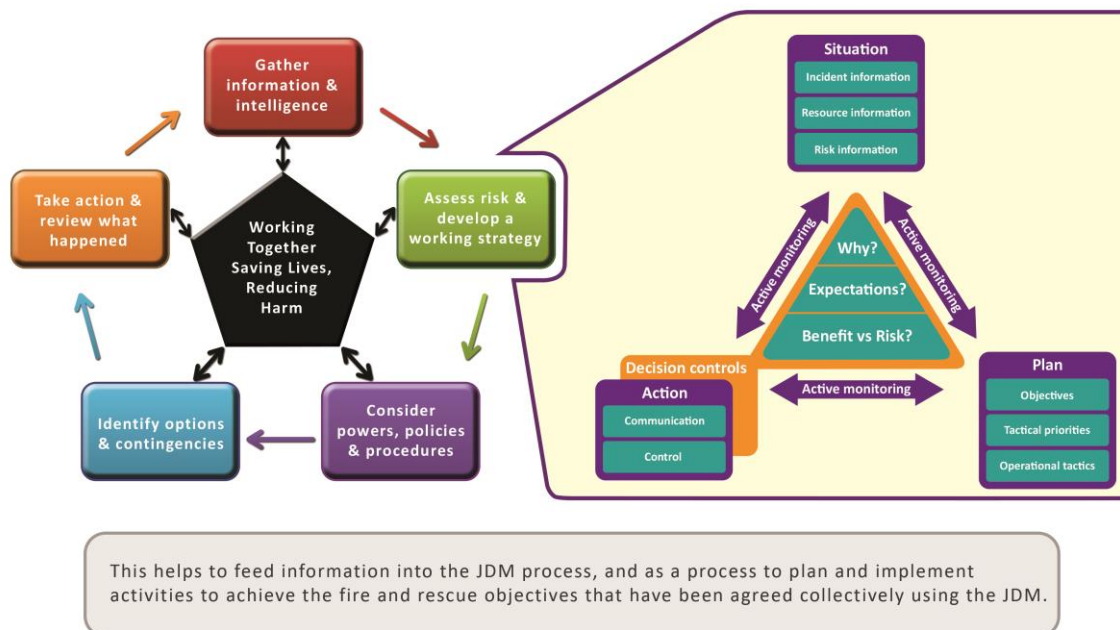


Fig.3 How the Decision Control Process supports the JESIP Joint Decision Model

For an animated version of this diagram, click [here](#).

Control measure – Operational discretion

Control measure knowledge

Most situations that incident commanders are faced with are not unique and are foreseeable. In resolving an incident, commanders use their own experience and knowledge of guidance, together with that of the command team and crew members. However, incident commanders may occasionally be presented with a situation that is extremely unusual and not reasonably foreseeable. In this circumstance they may have to make decisions using their professional judgement.

Operational discretion relates to rare or exceptional circumstances where strictly following an operational procedure would be a barrier to resolving an incident, or where there is no procedure that adequately deals with the incident. Commanders need to be sufficiently aware of procedures, the skills and qualities of crew members and the capability of resources available.

Policies and procedures should be written in such a way as to give commanders a safe system of work for all foreseeable situations. This is best achieved by avoiding the use of rigid procedures. The ability to apply flexible policies relies on the training of staff and commanders in the application of safe systems of work and the ability to identify hazards and select suitable control measures. For

further information regarding the planning of safe operational response refer to the [Health, Safety and welfare framework for the operational environment](#).

Outcomes which would justify applying operational discretion include:

- Saving human life
- Taking decisive action to prevent an incident escalating
- Incidents where taking no action may lead others to put themselves in danger

The overarching principle should be that in the opinion of the incident commander the benefit of taking unusual, unorthodox or innovative action justifies the risk. See [Decision controls](#).

Further information can be found in [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

Control measure actions

When developing new or reviewing existing operational policies and procedures, fire and rescue services should refer to:

- Legislative requirements
- National guidance and best practice
- The service assessment of operational risk
- The equipment and training provided for their personnel

Any decision to apply operational discretion should be the minimum necessary and only until the objective is achieved. Some areas of operational policies and procedures have to be written in a prescriptive way. In other cases, it should be written in a more flexible way with appropriate information to allow commanders and crew members to resolve an incident effectively.

To support the post incident learning process fire and rescue services should have procedures for incident commanders to record the reasons that support their decisions. The extent of the record should match the severity and/or complexity of the incident.

Control measure – Incident commander communication

Control measure knowledge

Effective communication is fundamental to achieving successful and safe resolution of incidents. It provides the incident commander with knowledge about the situation and progress of tasks. Obtaining accurate and timely information is crucial to underpin situational awareness and subsequent decision-making. It helps the incident commander perform the role in a confident and determined manner and thereby assert their leadership and authority.

Communication also plays a vital role in co-ordinating activities, completing tasks and handover of command. Sharing accurate and timely information is also critical for helping others to have a common understanding of the situation, what is happening and what needs to happen next. Even the most effective plans will only work if the people putting them into practice understand them.

As well as exchanging information, good communication helps to build relationships between people. These relationships are important so that people are effective when they carry out their tasks to resolve the incident. Incident commanders should be aware that effective communication is essential for good leadership and makes it easier for people to follow instructions, understand briefings and have confidence in what is being stated.

Effective communication should:

- Provide information that is:
 - clear
 - relevant and concise
 - timely
- Be easily understood
- Be delivered confidently
- Include active listening
- Ensure verbal and non-verbal communications are aligned
- Ensure assumptions are questioned

Further information can be found in [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

Control measure actions

Fire and rescue services should ensure that they have appropriate communications systems in place at incidents and that they adequately prepare personnel for communicating with others effectively in an operational environment.

Control measure – Personal resilience

Control measure knowledge

An incident can be a challenging environment to work in. The location, tasks and uncertainty of what might happen puts pressure on incident commanders and crews. An appropriate level of pressure can have a positive effect by increasing alertness. However, excessive pressure can cause stress, which may limit the ability to think, communicate and operate effectively.

Stress occurs when an individual experiences a difference between the demands placed on them and their ability to cope. Working in demanding or challenging environments may also lead to physical and mental fatigue.

Incident commanders and the teams they lead should be able to function while being aware of stress and fatigue. They need to communicate, make critical decisions and process varying pieces of information. They should be able to understand how both stress and fatigue affect these processes. See National Operational Guidance: [Operations](#) and [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

Types of pressure

The kind of pressure that can lead to stress will differ between individuals. Some typical demands that may cause stress include:

Incident Environment	Task	Uncertainty
Noise	Time pressure	Multiple goals
Heat	Hazards and risk	Conflicting goals
Emotional reactions from public	Performance anxiety	Incomplete information
Moral pressure	Workload	Unexpected event
Upsetting scenes	Spans of control	Unfamiliar or ambiguous scenario
Conflict	Consequences of failure	Failed plan or control action
Fatigue	Life risk	

People differ in the way stress can affect them. Some effects can be subtle changes from normal behaviour. There is no definitive list of behavioural indicators and the effects can differ between individuals. Stress can impact on incident command. It may lead to:

- Impaired situational awareness
- Impaired decision-making
- Impaired communication
- Impaired teamwork
- Impaired performance
- Impaired leadership

Effects of stress on teams

When team members experience stress it can impair how the team functions. Stress can cause teams to communicate less effectively, which can affect team situational awareness and lead to errors.

Coping with fatigue

Fatigue is a physical and/or mental state of feeling tired and weak. Physical fatigue results in an inability to continue functioning at normal levels of physical ability. Mental fatigue affects concentration and thought processes. Although mental and physical fatigue are different, they often occur at the same time. Physical work and extremes such as temperature and weather can have an impact on crews.

Further information can be found in [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

Control measure actions

Fire and rescue services should ensure that people working under stressful conditions are aware of the effects and symptoms of stress. They should prepare them to be able to operate in stressful environments. There should be adequate training and support processes in place to prepare personnel for the pressures of incident command.

Fire and rescue services should ensure incident commanders are able to recognise the effects of stress in both themselves and others, and understand how stress may impact on their ability to command an incident.

Fire and rescue services should consider the effects of fatigue on incident commanders and other operational personnel involved at an incident, ensuring options are available to manage the effects of fatigue. These include:

- Rotating crews
- Arranging welfare
- Providing reliefs

The right time for these arrangements will depend on the type of incident and its duration. Procedures should include the actions incident commanders should take before fatigue begins to reduce performance.

Organisation at an incident

Hazard	Control measure
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Ineffective organisation of the incident ground	Clearly defined command roles and responsibilities, incorporating multi-agency arrangements Structuring an incident Arrangements in place to deal with 'firefighter emergencies'
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Hazard knowledge

It is the responsibility of fire and rescue services to ensure that incident commanders are sufficiently trained, capable and knowledgeable to be able to effectively and safely organise resources to obtain the best resolution to an incident. It is the role of all personnel, who may attend or are involved with an incident, to ensure that they are familiar with the requirements of the incident command system and that they can operate safely and effectively within it. This applies to those who will perform a command role and equally to those who will be operating under the command of others, including the fire control room.

Incident command and support activities start on receipt of the emergency call to the fire control room and continue to the conclusion of the incident. See National Operational Guidance: [Operations](#)

Operations on the incident ground should be well-organised and controlled. The incident command system provides the incident commander with a clear framework to help structure, organise and manage an emergency. It can be adapted to all sizes and types of incident and helps incident commanders to deploy and utilise resources effectively.

The incident commander at an incident is the nominated competent and responsible person. However, the most senior officer present holds organisational accountability, even when they have not taken the role of incident commander. This cannot be passed to another person. This arrangement allows a senior officer to take a variety of other roles, including providing tactical advice, mentoring and monitoring.

The fire and rescue service incident command system is an all-hazards approach, providing a progressive, scalable and flexible system of operational command, control and organisation. The incident command system is designed to help an incident commander manage and fulfil their incident plan. It encourages a controlled and systematic approach to resolving incidents.

The key components of the incident command system include:

- Clear, defined and visible lines of command
- Manageable spans of control
- A communications infrastructure
- Appropriate responsibility and authority

- Clearly defined and understood roles and responsibilities
- Sectorisation of the incident

Using common language and components will ensure fire and rescue services can effectively resolve local, cross-border and national incidents.

Understanding the *span of control* concept is important when managing a large amount of activity and information. Dividing an incident into sectors provides a clear reporting structure.

The incident command system will only be successful when applied with good [command skills](#). It is not the incident command system that achieves the outcome; it is how the incident commander makes and applies sound operational decisions within it.

The incident command system allows the commander to use health and safety arrangements, including standard operational procedures tailored to the characteristics of an incident and the objectives of the incident plan. This helps to achieve a balance between risk and benefit.

At a more challenging incident it may be appropriate for a senior officer to assume command. However, it may be more important to maintain continuity of command, rather than automatically hand over on the arrival of a more senior officer.

Incident commanders should be aware of becoming over-burdened and having too broad a span of control. This can lead to ineffective leadership, poor decision-making and poor communications, leading to a failure of situational awareness. Incident commanders should consider the issues of team dynamics to get the best from the resources available to them. See [Situational awareness](#).

Incident commanders and the command team are accountable for the decisions they make. They should be able to provide reasoned justification for what they did and why. Appropriate records should be kept at incidents to log key events, critical decisions and the thinking behind the actions incident commanders take, including contemporaneous records for low level incidents, escalating to the addition of decision logs being recorded as the scale of operations become more complex.

Control measure – Clearly defined command roles and responsibilities, incorporating multi-agency arrangements

Control measure knowledge

Levels of command

Fire and rescue services should ensure that commanders at all levels achieve and maintain appropriate command competence. The CFA [Command Training, Assessment and Qualifications Fire and Rescue Service Guidance](#) provides further information about the four nationally agreed levels of command qualification for fire service operations:

- Level 1: Initial. Command and control operations at a task-focused supervisory level, or a more senior level, at a serious escalating incident.

- Level 2: Intermediate. Command and control operations at a tactical middle manager level, or a more senior level, for large or significant incidents.
- Level 3: Advanced. Tactical command at the largest and most serious incidents, either at the scene or at a remote location.
- Level 4: Strategic. Strategic command associated with commanding within a Strategic Co-ordinating Group (SCG), or its equivalent in devolved administrations.

Agencies may use one of three levels of command and control at a multi-agency incident:

- Operational (Bronze)
- Tactical (Silver)
- Strategic (Gold)

These levels are role related and the titles may not reflect seniority of rank. Instead, they show the function carried out by that particular person or group.

Interoperability and intraoperability

Multi-agency interoperability is essential for incidents of all sizes. The [Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles Joint Doctrine](#) aims to promote greater consistency across blue light services. This includes the use of key terms and common terminology. There is no legislation that states the primacy of one agency over another. The Joint Doctrine gives further guidance on co-ordination between emergency services.

The key principles of effective joint working are:

- Co-location
- Communication
- Co-ordination
- Joint understanding of risks
- Shared situational awareness

Interoperability, in this guidance, is defined as the extent to which organisations can work together as a matter of routine.

Intraoperability means the ability of fire and rescue services to work with other fire and rescue services.

A number of commercial or industrial sites will have their own fire and rescue services, for example, airports or oil refineries. Fire and rescue services should develop local arrangements that define the roles and responsibilities of each agency attending an emergency, for example, transfer of command.

Control measure actions

Fire and rescue services should have policies which clearly define the levels of command and the skills required to fulfil them. These policies should identify roles suitable for the four levels of command competence in the fire and rescue service, together with the three levels of multi-agency command. These policies should reflect the national occupational standards.

Fire and rescue services should develop local arrangements with other agencies that define their roles and expectations. Where appropriate, those arrangements may assign lead responsibilities and/or primacy to an agency. They might base this on the nature of the incident or other relevant factors. This may need to change to reflect the changing phases of an incident.

For the incident command system to work, the incident commander and other roles should be clearly identifiable. A system for identifying command roles visually is outlined in [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

The incident command system provides a structure that ensures a competent person is responsible for command and control at operational, tactical and strategic levels. Crews, sectors and functions should be appropriately supervised to achieve the incident plan. The system should be flexible enough to meet the demands of each type of incident.

The transfer of command should be a formal handover process that should be acknowledged and communicated. This is equally important when an incident escalates or scales down.

Everyone within the command structure should be informed of changes of incident commander. This includes the fire control room, who can advise others. This should be appropriately recorded at the incident, as well as by the fire control room. There should be no doubt as to who is in command.

To ensure that all personnel have a good understanding of their part within the incident command system, the fire and rescue service should have a policy for clear briefings and handover of information.

It is important that fire and rescue services can provide an effective response to local, cross-border and national incidents. The [National Co-ordination and Advisory Framework](#) (NCAF) supports the principles of national resilience. Fire and rescue services need an understanding of resources and capabilities available to them.

For intraoperability, fire and rescue services should have regular contact to ensure that appropriate cross-border plans are in place. They should test these plans under realistic conditions. Joint training is also valuable and will help to find differences in policy or procedure to avoid confusion at incidents.

Control measure – Structuring an incident

Control measure knowledge

Managing and supervising crews on the incident ground is an essential part of the safe system of work used by the fire and rescue service.

The incident command system is a framework that assists with the management of resources at an incident. The incident commander may devolve authority for some of the operations. It allows the incident commander to delegate responsibility of tasks and functions, but does not absolve them of ultimate accountability.

Understanding and effectively applying the incident command system enables spans of control to be maintained at manageable levels and improves control and communications. Taking these steps will prevent the incident commander from becoming overloaded with information, which supports effective situational awareness and decision-making. This way the incident commander can maintain control under conditions of high pressure and rapid change.

The incident commander should anticipate the likely scale and complexity of the escalating incident and develop the necessary command structure at the earliest opportunity.

Command team

Fire and rescue services may take different approaches towards deciding which roles and functions form part of the command team. However the main aim is to enable effective decision-making and clear communication between the incident commander and those performing operational tasks.

The command team includes the incident commander and any other personnel that are operating in a commanding role, for example, command support, operations commander and sector commanders.

It is important to maintain spans of control at a manageable level. Individuals should not be responsible for so many lines of communication that they cannot give each sufficient attention. The incident command system provides the means by which a commander controls the activities associated with their role.

The command team will involve personnel who carry out a variety of roles. It is important to make sure they can be easily identified using a commonly understood method. This is particularly important at incidents that cross borders and at large incidents, where commanders who may not know each other work together.

Command support

Command support and its related support sectors are critical to resolving incidents. An incident commander cannot manage a complex and rapidly developing incident alone. Effective and

structured support systems that can vary with the size and demands of an incident need to be implemented.

Fire and rescue services will have different approaches to the roles and functions that make up the command support team. The aim at every incident is to ensure clear communications and decision-making between the incident commander and operational personnel. Some of the command support functions may be at locations remote from the incident. This is particularly the case at major and multi-agency incidents, or where multiple incidents are occurring (e.g. wide-scale flooding).

Where crews are working on technical or widespread operations, specialist teams may assist them within the incident command system. Examples of technical or widespread operations include high volume pumping, mass decontamination or urban search and rescue. Such specialisms should work under the control of the relevant incident or sector commander.

A specialist tactical advisor (TacAd) may be deployed to assist the incident or sector commander. They can be used at a range of incidents regardless of size. At more complex incidents, several advisers may be used by the blue light services. More details can be found in the [National Co-ordination and Advisory Framework](#). The commander remains in charge, with the responsibility for decision making and the incident plan.

It is important that everyone understands the different roles and responsibilities in the command support function. This helps maintain common expectations which feed into shared situational awareness. See [Command skills](#).

The command support function will generally be responsible for recording significant decisions. It is important to record enough information about the reasoning behind each significant decision. This will help those who examine the decision-making process in the future. A decision log is meant to record actions which influence the incident plan. If there is uncertainty over how important a decision might turn out to be, then it should be recorded.

Sectors

An incident commander may be able to effectively control small incidents without the need to implement additional command arrangements. As the scale of operations grows, the incident commander should consider appointing sector commanders to supervise crews and command areas of operations. Sectors should only be used where and when necessary, to reduce the possibility of barriers to the flow of information between crews and the incident commander.

Once an incident has become more complex with a growing number of sectors in use, the incident commander may choose to appoint an operations commander. This is to manage the sectors and reduce the span of control for the incident commander. If the number of sectors grows, they may need to group the sectors under more than one operations commander. The all-hazards command approach is able to scale up to any situation as required.

Even when tasks are delegated, the incident commander remains responsible at all times for overall incident management. They should remain focused on command and control, the use of resources, incident planning and the co-ordination of sector operations.

Sectors can apply to a defined area of a building, the vertical features, such as in high rise buildings or geographical features. Sectorisation at transport incidents can be more complex to define. Sectors can also be used to control functional areas, such as a safety sector. Examples of sectorisation in a range of applications can be seen in [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

Cordons

At an incident the incident commander must consider the safety of firefighters, members of other agencies and the public. Cordons are an effective way of controlling resources and maintaining safety.

After the initial cordon has been established to secure the scene, normally by the police, the incident can be divided into two distinct areas:

Inner cordon: The inner cordon controls access to the immediate scene of operations. Incident commanders should restrict access to the lowest numbers needed for safe and effective work. The inner cordon denotes the hazard area. The control of the inner cordon is detailed in the Cabinet Office document [Emergency Response and Recovery](#).

Each agency remains responsible for the health and safety of their people working within the inner cordon.

Outer cordon: This cordon limits access to an area being used by the emergency services. The police will usually control outer cordons, and may also use traffic cordons. The police will identify safe routes in and out of the cordon for emergency vehicles and other agencies.

Marshalling areas will usually be located within the outer cordon.

Control measure actions

Fire and rescue services should have policies which outline the roles likely to be performed within the command team. These will include the level of skills and appropriate responsibilities for each command role and function. There should be policies that identify the various command team roles and functions that are recognisable to fire and rescue service personnel, both within the host service and other assisting fire and rescue services. It is important to take steps to ensure that they are also understood by other agencies.

Fire and rescue services should also have procedures for the effective control of communications at incidents of all sizes. These procedures should be scalable to allow for incidents that develop in size and complexity and take into account that other agencies will also be communicating at the incident.

Fire and rescue services should have policies to provide command support at an incident. Each service will need to decide what to provide and how to achieve this.

Fire and rescue services should have appropriate means of recording information at command points and in sectors. This will include the tactical mode and number of personnel working in the area. It will also record key hazards and risks. Information recording may be happening at multiple locations and care needs to be taken to ensure critical information is recorded and retained.

Fire and rescue services should consider the need to provide specific training for personnel who provide command support arrangements and for those who may fulfil the role of command support officer.

Fire and rescue services should have policies for recording decisions and significant events at the incident ground.

There should be procedures to allow defined areas within the incident ground to be identified and understood by all personnel. This is generally referred to as sectorisation.

Fire and rescue services should have policies for limiting access of personnel to the hazardous areas of an incident ground and for briefing and identification of those involved. This policy should include any equipment and procedural guidance necessary to implement it safely.

Fire and rescue services should establish joint working protocols with neighbouring fire and rescue services and other agencies to ensure the policy can be safely implemented and effectively controlled.

Control measure – Arrangements in place to deal with ‘firefighter emergencies’

Control measure knowledge

The rescue and recovery of firefighters is a challenging situation. Difficult decisions may need to be made. The situation calls for clear judgement, often while struggling to keep emotions under control.

If the incident commander and other commanders fail to maintain control, it may lead to an outcome with serious health and safety consequences. Crews are likely to place themselves at considerable risk to rescue or recover colleagues.

A situation where a firefighter needs rescuing is very likely to lead to fire and rescue service personnel and others experiencing increased stress. This can affect the way people make decisions and process information. See [Personal resilience](#).

The incident commander’s resilience and ability to manage pressure in this situation is critical to maintain control. Other important factors are maintaining good situational awareness and sharing accurate information such as last known locations and tasks they were undertaking.

After an incident there may be a requirement to investigate its cause. This may be part of a fire service review to identify the cause of the incident or to look at how effective fire safety measures were. Additionally, it may be part of a criminal investigation by the police. Other agencies may also have a legal requirement to investigate, for example, the Air Accident Investigation Branch, Marine Accident Investigation Branch, Rail Accident Investigation Branch or the Health and Safety Executive.

From the start of an investigation, fire and rescue service personnel should make sure that evidence is not destroyed or disturbed. They should also make observations and notes to help investigators.

The Health and Safety Executive offer guidance on best practice for the investigation of accidents in the work place. These include their [Work Related Deaths Protocol](#).

Further information is available in the [CFOA guide Death in the Workplace: Guidance for United Kingdom fire and rescue services](#)

Control measure actions

Fire and rescue services must have policies for firefighter emergencies which incorporate communications, investigation and welfare.

Fire and rescue services should consider having procedures for critical incident welfare for affected personnel.

Safety management

Hazard	Control measures
Ineffective safety management	Positive safety culture Risk assessment at an incident Incident ground safety management

Hazard knowledge

The fire and rescue service may work in adverse and dangerous environments involving significant risks. The priorities for an incident commander are the safety of the public, people under their control and anyone affected by their actions. There is a balance that needs to be achieved between maintaining firefighter safety and carrying out the emergency role of the fire and rescue service.

The [Health, Safety and welfare framework for the operational environment](#) contains detailed strategic guidance on the planning and delivery of health and safety policies relating to operational activity. This guidance details the safe person principles and the risk assessment methodologies that would be considered best practice.

The firefighter safety maxim set out in the document [The Foundation for Incident Command](#) describes this balance and is as follows: At every incident the greater the potential benefit of fire and rescue actions, the greater the risk that is accepted by commanders and firefighters. Activities that present a high risk to safety are limited to those that have the potential to save life or to prevent rapid and significant escalation of the incident.

This acknowledges that firefighters operate in hazardous environments.

Control measure – Positive safety culture

Control measure knowledge

The fire and rescue service has developed a strong culture of safety through policies which support the application of health and safety law and regulations to the incident ground. This has been achieved in consultation with, and the assistance of, the Health and Safety Executive.

A culture that encourages incident commanders to act in accordance with the intentions of the HSE's publication [Striking the balance between operational and health and safety duties in the Fire and Rescue Service](#) should be promoted. Fire and rescue services should be aware this can be undermined by the introduction of procedures that have restrictive elements that prevent the incident commander from being able to apply their professional judgement.

To promote a positive operational safety culture, fire and rescue service operational risk principles have been developed. The principles below can be considered as a guide to making and managing risk-critical decisions at incidents:

Principle 1: A willingness to make decisions in conditions of uncertainty is a core need for all members of the fire and rescue service.

Principle 2: The primary consideration for making decisions is the safety of individuals and communities.

Principle 3: Risk acceptance involves judgment and balance, with decision-makers required to consider the value and likelihood of the possible benefits of a particular decision against the seriousness and likelihood of the possible harm.

Principle 4: Harm can never be totally prevented. Risk-critical decisions should therefore be judged by the quality of the decision-making, not by the outcome.

Principle 5: To reduce risk aversion, improve decision-making and avoid decision traps, a culture is required that learns from successes and failures. Good application of risk management which allows for positive operational outcomes should be identified, celebrated and shared, preferably through operational learning and debrief outcomes.

Members of the fire and rescue service who make decisions consistent with these principles should receive the encouragement, approval and support of their organisation.

Control measure actions

Fire and rescue services must have policies based on good health and safety practice that describe the means by which they intend their incident commanders to safeguard the safety and welfare of their personnel on the incident ground.

Fire and rescue services must have a training strategy to ensure all personnel responsible for the management of health, safety and welfare are aware of their responsibilities and the means for discharging them.

In writing its policies and procedures, fire and rescue services should recognise that every incident will present its own challenges. Its commanders and command teams will need to be able to use their knowledge and skills to bring the incident to a safe conclusion.

Control measure – Risk assessment at an incident

Control measure knowledge

An incident ground is an operational workplace and the law requires fire and rescue services to assess and reduce the risk to personnel as far as is reasonably practicable. As well as this duty of care to fire and rescue personnel, there is also a duty to safeguard others.

An incident commander's objective is to resolve the incident with minimal impact to the community, to prevent or minimise harm to people and the environment. Incident commanders must establish a safe working area as soon as is practicable.

To ensure a safe working environment they will need to:

- Select the most appropriate control measures
- Consider the benefits of proceeding with actions taking account of the risk
- Take into account any time constraints

Safe systems of work must be put in place. Firefighters must ensure they develop, maintain and review these systems throughout the incident. To perform an effective risk assessment, incident commanders should understand the following concepts:

- **Hazard:** An event or situation with the potential to cause death or physical or psychological harm, damage or losses to property, and/or disruption to the environment and/or to economic, social and political structures
- **Risk:** Measure of the significance of potential harm in terms of its assessed likelihood and impact
- **Control measure:** Measures to reduce the likelihood of exposure to a hazard from a given risk, and/or mitigate the impacts of that exposure. The HSE [hierarchy of risk control measures](#) gives further examples of how control measures can be applied at an incident

Risk assessment at incidents breaks down into a number of parts.

Dynamic risk assessment

The term *dynamic risk assessment* (DRA) describes the assessment of risk in a rapidly changing environment at an incident where decisions are sometimes made in fast-moving situations, with incomplete or inaccurate information. It is a process not a control measure.

The outcome of the dynamic risk assessment will contribute to the incident commander's operational plan. It helps to inform whether crews should be operating in the risk area. This in turn determines the tactical mode.

Analytical risk assessment

As the incident progresses or becomes more complex it requires a more detailed and formal record of the significant findings of the risk assessment. The fire and rescue service call this *analytical risk assessment* (ARA).

Personal (or individual) risk assessment

Personal (or individual) risk assessment helps firefighters remain safe when working unsupervised, which is derived from the document [Health, safety and welfare framework for the operational environment](#).

Tactical modes

Communication of the tactical mode is a way of recording a decision by the incident commander on the completion of their risk assessment and determination of the incident plan. It indicates the decision by the commander whether to deploy crews within the hazard area or not. All incidents require tactical modes to be declared at the earliest opportunity following arrival at an incident and at regular intervals thereafter. Where sectors are in place, a tactical mode for each sector is required.

Declaration of the tactical mode at any given point of the incident describes the current level of risk exposure to operational personnel. There are two tactical modes of operation; offensive and defensive.

1. *Offensive mode*: Crews are within the designated hazard area and thereby exposed to greater risk
2. *Defensive mode*: Crews are outside of the designated hazard area

There is no default tactical mode. The incident commander should decide their incident plan and associated operational tactics following their risk assessment and application of the [decision control process](#). The selection of a tactical mode is a conscious decision underpinned by a clear rationale. This is key to assertive, effective and safe incident command delivered by competent commanders, and the avoidance of risk aversion and decision inertia.

Commanders should make sure everyone on the incident ground is aware of the tactical mode. They should communicate this at regular intervals and when it changes. It is also essential that fire control rooms are informed of the current mode to ensure it is recorded. All messages should include sufficient information regarding the findings of the risk assessment. See [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

The hazard area is an area in which significant hazards have been identified by the relevant commanders. The hazard area may extend beyond the boundaries of the immediate scene of operations and in some cases can move or change during the incident.

Offensive mode

This is where fire service personnel are working within the hazard area and exposed to greater risk, because the incident commander has decided it is appropriate following their risk assessment. This mode may apply to an individual sector or to the whole incident when every sector is offensive.

Offensive mode is likely to be the common mode of operation.

Defensive mode

This is where commanders deal with an incident from a defensive position. In *defensive mode*, the identified risks are unacceptable and outweigh the potential benefits. No matter how many extra control measures could be put in place at that particular time, the risks remain too great to commit crews into the hazard area. It does not indicate that no operational activity is taking place.

Defensive mode indicates that crews are not working in the hazard area.

There will be circumstances where having been in *defensive mode*, the risk has changed, tactical priorities have been revised or additional control measures are available. This may mean it is acceptable to enter or re-enter the hazard area. In this case, as crews are committed, the tactical mode will change to *offensive*.

Change in tactical mode

There will be occasions when it is necessary to change the tactical mode following revision and updating of the risk assessment. This change may be on receipt of new information, a change in tactical priorities or a revision of control measures.

When the decision is made to commit crews into the hazard area and *defensive* operations are in place, the tactical mode for the incident or sector will change to *offensive* as preparations are being made to enter the hazard area.

When it is necessary to change from *offensive* to *defensive mode* following the outcome of the risk assessment, the commander should announce and implement the withdrawal of crews or personnel from the hazard area. The use of *tactical withdrawal* or *emergency evacuation* should be included in

communicating the change in mode to the incident ground and fire control room. The tactical mode does not change until all fire and rescue service personnel have withdrawn from the hazard area.

There are a number of reasons why the change to *defensive mode* does not take place until after fire and rescue service personnel have left the hazard area. It may be because personnel will still be in the hazard area and it may take some time to withdraw, for example at high rise and large or complex structures. There may also be a need to commit crews to assist with the tactical withdrawal or emergency evacuation, to relay messages, protect escape routes or rescue colleagues.

The terms *tactical withdrawal* or *emergency evacuation* should be used within the message to fire control to time-stamp the decision of the incident commander's dynamic risk assessment. Radio messages should be timely, without detracting from risk-critical operations, and include sufficient information demonstrating the need to change to *defensive mode*.

At certain incidents, other responders may continue to work in the hazard area, for example at a CBRN(E) incident.

Tactical modes in sectors

When the incident has been divided into sectors the incident commander remains responsible for the tactical mode at all times. There will be occasions when an operations commander has been appointed. Whilst they may determine or approve a change in tactical mode, the incident commander still retains overall responsibility.

When more than one sector is in use:

- When every sector is in *offensive* mode, the overall mode of the incident is *offensive*
- When every sector is in *defensive* mode, the overall mode of the incident will be *defensive*
- When different modes are in use at the same incident, there is no overall mode for the incident, for example, when two sectors are in *offensive* mode and one sector is in *defensive* mode. All messages to fire control room or across the incident ground should list each sector and the mode it is in, for example. "Sector 1 *offensive* mode, Sector 2 *offensive* mode, Sector 4 *defensive* mode."

Where appropriate, incident commanders should confer with sector commanders when making a decision to change the tactical mode. Sector commanders should be confident in recommending changes to the tactical mode to the operations or incident commander. Where a change in mode occurs all personnel should be informed.

If a sector commander wishes to commit personnel into the hazard area, i.e. change to *offensive mode* when the prevailing mode is *defensive*, they should seek permission from the incident or operations commander. They should not make any change until they have received permission.

Where a rapid change in circumstances occurs, the sector commander should revise the risk assessment. There may be occasions when they need to act first in the interests of safety and then inform the incident commander of their decision.

Control measure actions

Fire and rescue services must have policies and procedures for assessing risk to personnel on the incident ground. These should outline how the risk assessment should be carried out, by whom and the method of recording significant findings.

Fire and rescue services should have procedures for deciding and implementing tactical modes following a risk assessment.

Control measure – Incident ground safety management

Control measure knowledge

The incident command system is an all-hazards approach that provides the incident commander with a structure they can adapt to every incident. The system helps to achieve a safe and efficient way of organising people and equipment. The incident commander at the scene is the nominated competent person. They can delegate some responsibilities to others; however, they remain responsible for health and safety at an incident.

Providing risk-critical information at an incident is an essential part of the planning process. It has a direct impact on safety. A lack of risk information, or failure to pass it on, can have a critical impact on decisions made by an incident commander. See National Operational Guidance: [Operations Information Gathering](#).

Safety briefings

It will be necessary to organise safety briefings. As the incident develops or where the risk of injury increases those briefings should be more comprehensive. See [Communication](#).

Safety officer

The incident commander or sector commander may appoint a safety officer at any time. This person should have suitable competencies for the role. A safety officer at larger incidents may be designated as the safety sector commander. They will co-ordinate the role of other safety officers.

Safety within sectors

Sector commanders are responsible for the health and safety of people within their sector. Due to the demands at an incident the sector commander might nominate a safety officer to assist them.

Although each safety officer should report to a sector commander, organisation of the safety officer(s) will be managed by the safety commander.

Emergency evacuation and tactical withdrawal

The incident command system provides two formal means of withdrawing personnel from the scene of operations:

- Emergency evacuation
- Tactical withdrawal

At every incident, the incident commander will apply a command structure. They must establish a safe system of work. This should include a plan for emergency evacuation or tactical withdrawal.

The fire and rescue service retains responsibility for the health, safety and welfare of its personnel working within the risk area. It also has a duty to consider the effects of its actions on the safety of other people, including when undertaking emergency evacuation or a tactical withdrawal.

The plans they make should enable emergency evacuation or tactical withdrawal which:

- Evacuates people at highest risk while protecting escape routes
- Removes people from areas where the risk has become too high

Emergency evacuation: is the term used to describe the urgent and immediate withdrawal of crews from a risk area.

The incident commander should inform everyone at an incident of the location of the muster point. At a prolonged incident the location of the muster point may change. They should ensure that everyone at an incident knows about this change. See [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

The evacuation should include a roll call at a suitable location. Additionally, the incident commander should make sure there has been a roll call of non-fire service personnel at the scene. Following an evacuation or an evacuation signal being given, no one should re-enter the hazard area without the permission of, or explicit instruction from the incident commander.

Where personnel remain unaccounted for after an evacuation, the incident commander will need to assess the risks and commence appropriate search and rescue procedures.

Tactical withdrawal: is the term used to describe the systematic or staged withdrawal of crews from the risk area.

The incident commander may need to redeploy resources or move people from danger. This is a tactical withdrawal. They may also need to withdraw all or part of a sector. When a tactical withdrawal is taking place, an evacuation signal or full incident roll call may not be required. See [The Foundation for Incident Command](#).

Provision of information

Provision of relevant information is essential to ensure safe operations. Command decision-making can be significantly affected if there is a lack of risk information or where information has not been passed on.

Control room operators will often be required to receive and communicate risk-critical information. Where risk-critical information is included on the initial turnout details, it should be easy to identify.

Where specific risk information is available, incident commanders should ensure this is disseminated to all appropriate personnel on the incident ground. This may include provision of information between agencies or organisations.

Control measure actions

When developing their policies and procedures on structuring the incident ground, fire and rescue services should ensure they take into account the need to meet health and safety legislation and regulations.

Fire and rescue services should have procedures for the withdrawal of personnel from the hazard area. These procedures should describe:

- When each withdrawal type is appropriate
- The method of implementing the withdrawal
- The method of carrying out a roll call
- The communications necessary when withdrawal has been instigated

Additionally they should include the actions to be taken when personnel are unaccounted for after the withdrawal, and the procedure for recommencing activity.

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College of Policing [guidance to the Police service on briefing and debriefing](#). Because of the link via JESIP, this may also be useful.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/case-decision-logs>

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