

**UK CENTRAL GOVERNMENT ARRANGEMENTS  
FOR RESPONDING TO AN EMERGENCY**

**AN OVERVIEW**

# CENTRAL GOVERNMENT ARRANGEMENTS FOR RESPONDING TO AN EMERGENCY: AN OVERVIEW

## Introduction

1. An emergency (or disruptive challenge) as defined in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 is a situation or series of events that threatens or causes serious damage to human welfare, the environment or security in the United Kingdom. This definition covers a wide range of scenarios including, for example, adverse weather, severe flooding, animal diseases, terrorist incidents and the impact of a disruption on essential services and critical infrastructure.
2. This document summarises the arrangements for responding to and recovering from emergencies, irrespective of cause or location and requiring co-ordinated central government action. It focuses primarily on the response to no-notice or short notice emergencies requiring UK central government engagement, although the approach outlined here can be adapted to manage the response to other crises.

## The Principles of Emergency Management in the UK

3. These arrangements build on the roles of the Lead Government Department and the devolved administrations which, along with local responders, form the foundation of the response and recovery to any major emergency in the United Kingdom.
4. History has taught us to expect the unexpected. Events can, and do, take place that by their nature cannot be anticipated exactly. Response arrangements therefore need to be flexible in order to adapt to the circumstances at the time while applying good practice, including lessons from previous emergencies, and safeguarding the UK's constitutional settlement.
5. Eight guiding principles have been developed to capture the core characteristics of effective emergency response and should be applied to the management of any emergency:
  - (i) **preparedness:** All individuals and organisations that might have to respond to emergencies should be properly prepared, including having clarity of roles and responsibilities, specific and generic plans, and rehearsing response arrangements periodically;

- (ii) **continuity:** The response to emergencies should be grounded within organisations' existing functions and their familiar ways of working – although inevitably, actions will need to be carried out at greater speed, on a larger scale and in more testing circumstances during the response to an incident;
- (iii) **subsidiarity:** Decisions should be taken at the lowest appropriate level, with co-ordination at the highest necessary level. Local responders should be the building block of response for an emergency of any scale;
- (iv) **direction:** Clarity of purpose should be delivered through an awareness of the strategic aims and supporting objectives for the response. These should be agreed and understood by all involved in managing the response to an incident in order to effectively prioritise and focus the response;
- (v) **integration:** Effective co-ordination should be exercised between and within organisations and local, regional and national tiers of a response as well as timely access to appropriate guidance and appropriate support for the local, regional or national level;
- (vi) **communication:** Good two-way communications are critical to an effective response. Reliable information must be passed correctly and without delay between those who need to know, including the public;
- (vii) **co-operation:** Positive engagement based on mutual trust and understanding will facilitate information-sharing and deliver effective solutions to arising issues; and
- (viii) **anticipation:** In order to anticipate and manage the consequences of all kinds of emergencies, planners need to identify risks and develop an understanding of both the direct and indirect consequences in advance where possible.

### The Phases of an Emergency

6. The Management of any emergency comprises three main phases: preparation (pre-planning); response (mitigating an immediate risk or stopping things getting worse); and recovery (a longer-term activity of rebuilding, restoring and rehabilitating the community).

7. The response phase comprises two separate but closely-related and often overlapping challenges: crisis management and consequence (or impact) management. These are both designed to control and minimise the immediate challenges arising from an incident.
  - **crisis management** involves the phase of the response that attempts to prevent or avert an imminent emergency, along with protective or other measures to mitigate its effects, prevent further damage or disruption and secure the scene. It also includes actions taken to address the immediate, direct effects of an incident. The duration of the crisis management phase can vary from a few hours to many months depending on the scenario;
  - **consequence management** usually take place in parallel to crisis management and is concerned with steps taken to prevent the impact of an incident escalating.
8. The Recovery phase formally starts once the situation has been stabilised and can be defined as the process of rebuilding, restoring and rehabilitating the community following an emergency. In contrast to the response phase, the recovery process can take a considerable amount of time (months or years), as it seeks to support affected communities in the reconstruction of the physical infrastructure and restoration of emotional, social, economic and physical well-being.

### Central Government Engagement in an Emergency

9. The local responders are the basic building block of the response to any emergency in the UK. The police will normally take the lead in co-ordinating the local response where a crime has been committed, or if there is a threat to public safety. The local multi-agency response is co-ordinated through a Strategic Co-ordinating Group (SCG) located in the Strategic Co-ordination Centre (SCC). The chair of the group is known as the Strategic Coordinating Group Chair.
10. The principle of subsidiarity emphasises the importance of local decision making supported, where necessary, by co-ordination at a higher level. Three broad types (or levels) of emergency have been identified which are likely to require direct central government engagement in addition to those emergencies described above which are solely managed locally. These are:

1. **significant emergency (Level 1)** has a wider focus and requires central government involvement or support, primarily from a lead government department (LGD) or a devolved administration, alongside the work of the emergency services, local authorities and other organisations. There is however no actual or potential requirement for a collective central government response;
  2. **serious emergency (Level 2)** is one which has, or threatens, a wide and/or prolonged impact requiring sustained central government co-ordination and support from a number of departments and agencies, usually including the regional tier in England and where appropriate, the devolved administrations. The central government response to such an emergency would be co-ordinated from the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR), under the leadership of the lead government department;
  3. **catastrophic emergency (Level 3)** is one which has an exceptionally high and potentially widespread impact and requires immediate central government direction and support. Characteristics might include a top-down response in circumstances where the local response had been overwhelmed, or the use of emergency powers were required.
11. The increasingly complex and inter-dependent nature of society means that there are sometimes significant knock-on consequences even from apparently straightforward events necessitating central government engagement. In practice, the level of central government engagement may change over time (both up and down) as the demands of the emergency change.

#### Lead Responsibility within UK Central Government

12. For emergencies in England or those involving reserved matters elsewhere in the UK, one UK central government department usually takes overall responsibility (the *Lead Government Department (LGD)*) for assessing the situation, ensuring that its Ministers and other relevant Ministers are briefed, handling media and parliamentary interest, and providing co-ordinated policy and other support as necessary to local responders. Other government departments will provide support to the LGD to ensure a co-ordinated response; however, individual departments

remain responsible, including to Parliament, for their particular policy areas.

13. Where the UK Government lead is unclear, it is the responsibility of the Cabinet Office to advise the Prime Minister's Office on where this should lie. A list of LGDs is maintained by the Cabinet Office and can be found at <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/ukresilience.aspx>. The list sets out the broad expectation as to where the lead should lie in both the response and recovery phases for a wide range of emergencies, although in some areas this will need to be reaffirmed at the time in light of the precise nature of an event and the consequences arising.
14. In many cases, the Lead Government Department for the response phase is different from the recovery phase reflecting the changing nature of the challenge, the different issues arising, and expertise required. In some wide area emergencies, it is possible that response and recovery activity will be occurring simultaneously in different parts of the country under the leadership of two different LGDs. In any event, careful consideration will be needed throughout the response phase to ensure the smooth transfer of responsibility and to ensure recovery issues are factored into planning.

#### Emergencies in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland

15. Where an emergency occurs in Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland and falls within the competence of the relevant devolved administration, they will lead the response in their territory reporting through the relevant minister to the devolved legislature. In such circumstances there will often be little if any involvement for UK government departments. The relevant UK central government territorial department (Scotland Office, Wales Office and Northern Ireland Office) will usually be the first point of contact with the relevant DA engaging other UK departments as necessary, unless the nature of the emergency raises specific issues that are best handled directly with the appropriate UK central government lead.
16. Where an emergency occurs in Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland but competence is reserved to Whitehall (and therefore Westminster Parliament), the relevant UK government department will lead the response liaising closely with the relevant devolved administration(s) (as they will inevitably be affected and will usually lead on any consequence issues arising for the local population) and UK territorial departments.

## The Role of the Cabinet Office

17. The Cabinet Office exists to make government work better. It does this through support to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, including its sub-committees, across the range of government activities, by managing the flow of business requiring collective ministerial consideration, brokering agreements between departments, and ensuring a common understanding of issues. As part of its ongoing work, the Cabinet Office engages with central, local and regional partners to prepare for emergencies and to co-ordinate the central government response to major disruptive challenges.

## The Role and Organisation of the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR)

18. The UK central government response to a level 2 or 3 emergency is underpinned by COBR (the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms), the physical location from which the central response is activated, monitored and co-ordinated. COBR provides a focal point for the Government's response and an authoritative source of advice for local responders.
19. Within COBR, a senior decision making body oversees the Government's response supported as necessary by sub groups and other sources of specialist advice.

## Strategic Objectives in a Response

20. Where COBR is activated, its default objectives are to:
  - protect human life and, as far as possible, property and the environment. Alleviate suffering;
  - support the continuity of everyday activity and the restoration of disrupted services at the earliest opportunity; and
  - uphold the rule of law and the democratic process.
21. These objectives are in no particular order of prominence and in reality they will evolve and their relative priority may shift as the emergency develops. Not all these objectives may be achievable at the outset of an emergency and Ministers will need to advise on the appropriate balance to strike in light of the circumstances at the time. This interpretation of the objectives may also need to be refined and developed as the emergency progresses.

## Early Priorities for COBR and the Central Response

22. When COBR is activated, the early priorities will be to ensure clear lines of communication are in place and establish a common view of the issues, along with an understanding of immediate and emerging priorities and to identify or take any urgent decisions that are required. The pressure on the Government and local responders in the first few hours will be intense, and immediate action will be required on a variety of fronts, which will need careful consideration and co-ordination and in some cases prior preparation of information flows and plans.

## Liaison between Central Government and the Local Response

23. When COBR is activated or in other situations where there is a significant central government role, a Government Liaison Officer (GLO) will normally be despatched immediately to act as the primary liaison channel between departments and local responders in the local Strategic Co-ordination Centre. The GLO will normally be from the relevant Government Office in England or the LGD.

## Role of the Government Offices in the English Regions

24. The nine Government Offices (GOs) represent Central Government in the English regions, bringing together staff and activities from various Government Departments. Regional Resilience Teams have been established within each of the GOs to coordinate the response of the whole GO during an emergency, provide support to the local emergency response, and to facilitate, as necessary, a two way flow of information between central Government and the local response.
25. While most emergencies are dealt with by local responders at local level through Strategic Co-ordinating Groups, outside London a Regional Co-ordinating Group may be convened where the response to an emergency would benefit from some co-ordination or enhanced support at a regional level. Such gatherings are most likely via a tele/videoconference, though there may be occasions when a face-to-face meeting is more appropriate.
26. In the most serious circumstances, there may be a need to convene a Regional Civil Contingencies Committee to support response and recovery activity across the region. This would normally only happen where:



- a. the local response has been or may be overwhelmed;
- b. there is a need for a consistent, structured approach normally across two or more regions;
- c. a regional approach is needed to oversee the recovery phase due to the extent and scale of the damage across the region; or
- d. emergency measures have been taken under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.

27. London is unique in that, among other things, it is the only English region where the police and a number of other responders are organised on a regional basis. When activated, the London SCG therefore brings together all the relevant responders on a pan-London basis and performs the role that would normally be undertaken by the RCG or RCCC elsewhere.

#### Further Reading

28. A more detailed explanation of the arrangements at a national level can be found in the *Central Government Arrangements for Responding to an Emergency*. Local arrangements are set out in the *Emergency Preparedness and Emergency Response and Recovery* guidance. All these documents can be found on the Cabinet Office website at <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/ukresilience.aspx>