



Department
for Transport

National Aviation Emergency Plan

October 2026

Department for Transport
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Purpose

The UK commercial aviation industry has an excellent safety record but, when accidents do occur, it is important to be prepared for what could be a catastrophic event. This document sets out how the response will unfold from a Department for Transport (DfT) perspective and gives an overview of the actions required from various government departments, Arm's Length Bodies (ALB) and wider industry stakeholders. It also addresses the UK's legislative commitment to establish a civil aviation accident emergency plan at the national level.

Following an air accident, the impacts to all concerned can be immensely traumatic, especially for victims and their families. Concern for those impacted has led to legislation, policy and procedures for providing assistance to air accident victims and their families. As such, His Majesty's Government (HMG) has a legal, moral and ethical duty to ensure that the welfare and support needs of victims and their families are met. Annex A covers the requirements for assistance following an accident and guidance for industry on the types of assistance they should provide.

The UK has tried and tested procedures for responding to catastrophic events, as well as stand-alone plans and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that are implemented by different government departments and aviation industry stakeholders that outline specific responses to a fatal air accident e.g. Airport and Airline Emergency Response Plans.

This National Aviation Emergency Plan (hereafter referred to as the NAEP) brings together existing civil contingency plans, adapted to the aviation context with specific operating procedures, into one cohesive plan that will clarify roles and responsibilities and act as a guide for future responses. While it is primarily designed for use within Government, it provides useful context for external stakeholders. It is not designed to be a detailed step by step guide to a full cross-government response as this would be duplicative - rather the NAEP outlines key actions and actors with an emphasis on the role of the Department for Transport and its associated bodies.

The NAEP also contains guidance on stakeholders' responsibilities on assistance to air accident victims and their families (see Annex A), which is a requirement under Assimilated Regulation (EU) 996/2010. The NAEP will be regularly reviewed, tested and updated as we learn lessons from relevant incidents.

Scope

The NAEP covers commercial civil aviation accidents involving UK and non-UK registered aircraft in UK airspace but is not intended to cover military aircraft or general aviation. Annex B touches upon accidents in UK waters or in international waters that are part of the UK Search and Rescue Region (SRR). Annex C covers the UK's responsibilities if an accident involving a UK-registered aircraft and/or significant numbers of UK citizens occurs in the territory of another state. Annex D gives an overview of accidents in Overseas Territories.

Definition: Accident means an occurrence associated with the operation of an aircraft which, in the case of a manned aircraft, takes place between the time any person boards the aircraft with the intention of flight and such time as all such persons have disembarked, or in the case of an unmanned aircraft, takes place between the time the aircraft is ready to move with the purpose of flight until such time it comes to rest at the end of the flight and the primary propulsion system is shut down, in which:

- a person is fatally or seriously injured as a result of:
 - being in the aircraft
 - direct contact with any part of the aircraft, including parts which have become detached from the aircraft
 - direct exposure to jet blast, except when the injuries are from natural causes, self-inflicted or inflicted by other persons, or when the injuries are to stowaways hiding outside the areas normally available to the passengers and crew
- the aircraft sustains damage or structural failure which adversely affects the structural strength, performance or flight characteristics of the aircraft, and would normally require major repair or replacement of the affected component, except for engine failure or damage, when the damage is limited to a single engine, (including its cowlings or accessories), to propellers, wing tips, antennas, probes, vanes, tires, brakes, wheels, fairings, panels, landing gear doors, windscreens, the aircraft skin (such as small dents or puncture holes) or minor damages to main rotor blades, tail rotor blades, landing gear, and those resulting from hail or bird strike, (including holes in the radome)
- the aircraft is missing or is completely inaccessible

N.B There may be rare circumstances where an incident does not meet one of the above definitions of an accident, but it is treated as such, regardless. Similarly, smaller scale incidents may not elicit a full-scale response.

Wider context

Emergency management and the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (CCA)

Emergency response is underpinned by the principle of subsidiarity meaning most emergencies are handled at the local level by Category 1 and 2 responders as covered by the [Civil Contingencies Act 2004](#) and related guidance contained in the [Amber Book: Managing Crisis in Central Government](#). This guidance is further complemented by the [Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles \(JESIP\) Joint Doctrine: The Interoperability Framework](#) to support and enhance interoperability between emergency response organisations when responding to multi-agency incidents.

The CCA is separated into Part 1, which establishes roles and responsibilities for emergency preparedness and response at the local level; and Part 2, which allows for the making of temporary special legislation to help deal with the most serious of emergencies, although this is a last resort option and can only be deployed in exceptional circumstances. Part 1 of the CCA's main obligations on Local Authorities (LA) include:

- **Risk assessment:** LA must assess the risk of an emergency occurring and publish a Community Risk Register
- **Emergency planning:** LA must prepare and maintain contingency plans to respond effectively to an emergency
- **Communication:** LA must warn and advise the public during times of emergency
- **Collaboration:** LA must work closely with emergency services and voluntary organisations
- **Information sharing:** LA must share information with Category 1 responders
- **Business continuity:** LA must manage business continuity

Part 1 also divides local responders into 2 categories, imposing a different set of duties on each. Those in Category 1 are organisations at the core of the response to most emergencies (the emergency services, local authorities, NHS bodies) and are subject to the full set of civil protection duties. Category 2 responders (the Health and Safety

Executive, some transport and utility companies) are “cooperating bodies” and have a lesser set of duties around cooperating and sharing relevant information with other responders. They are less likely to be involved in the heart of planning work but will be heavily involved in incidents that affect their own sector. In England, airports are Category 2 responders, but this varies across the Devolved Governments. No airlines are category 2 responders.

Category 1 and 2 organisations come together to form resilience networks throughout the four nations. In England and Wales, they are called **Local Resilience Forums** (LRFs) and are based on the 42 police areas. In Scotland, they are called **Resilience Partnerships** (RPs), and in Northern Ireland, **Emergency Preparedness Groups** (EPGs). More details on the work of these networks can be found here: [The role of Local Resilience Forums, Resilience Partnerships, Emergency Preparedness Groups](#). LRFs, RPs and EPGs are not legal entities but do have a collective responsibility to plan, prepare and communicate in a multi-agency environment as a collaborative mechanism for local emergency response.

Levels of response

For the majority of emergencies in England at local level, a **Government Liaison Officer** (GLO), normally provided by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), will be responsible for ensuring effective liaison between central government and the local response. Where greater central government involvement is required, a **Lead Government Department** (LGD) will lead and coordinate the emergency response. When an emergency meets the threshold of a crisis, the **UK Government Central Response Framework** (UKGCRF) is activated to coordinate the central government response.

UK Government Central Response Framework

Where a crisis is so serious as to have **whole-of-system implications**, the Cabinet Office may take on a leadership role for the response. The UKGCRF includes governance arrangements to centrally coordinate the government response to both acute and chronic crises:

- **For acute phase of crisis**, Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) will be activated to provide the primary organisational structure for agreeing the central government response
- **For chronic phase of an enduring whole-of-system crisis**, the Strategy and Operations Cabinet committee would be established to provide collective oversight of the enduring policy and operational response, with a Taskforce providing the secretariat function and central coordination for the enduring response.

Cabinet Office will convene a meeting (if appropriate, in COBR, but there are a number of governance structures which can be established to coordinate the central government response and used to reinforce one another or at different points of the crisis) to assess the situation and advise ministers as necessary, with the Prime Minister either taking on the role or appointing a lead minister for the crisis response.

COBR

Once Cabinet Office is notified of an incident, they will engage with the LGD plus other departments and agencies to undertake an initial assessment and determine the scale and nature of the incident, alongside the appropriate level of strategic response.

Once pre-defined triggers are met, or the incident is assessed to meet the threshold for central crisis management arrangements, the Cabinet Office will provide advice to the Prime Minister's Office to activate COBR. If a decision is taken not to activate the COBR mechanism, the LGD will continue to provide the central coordination of the response to the emergency.

Should a decision be taken to activate COBR, Cabinet Office will notify relevant departments, agencies and, where appropriate, the Devolved Governments and a calling notice will then be issued. The COBR Response Team, in consultation with the LGD and Prime Minister's Office, will decide on the scheduling of meetings (the battle rhythm) and which departments need to be represented at COBR.

The chair will typically be taken by the Secretary of State of the government department with lead responsibility for the particular issue being considered, a Cabinet Office Minister, or the Prime Minister. The Cabinet Office or the LGD would chair meetings of officials in COBR. A Government Liaison Officer will be deployed to provide a two-way channel for information between COBR and the Strategic Coordinating Group (where established). Leadership at official level will be provided by a Crisis SRO (Senior Responsible Owner), who will either come from the LGD or be appointed or taken on by the Cabinet Secretary or National Security Adviser.

There are some differences in how emergencies are managed across Devolved Governments. Details can be found in the relevant Resilience/Civil Contingencies Framework for each Devolved Government below which flow from and complement the CCA 2004:

- [Preparing Scotland](#)
- [Building Resilience Together - Northern Ireland](#)
- [Wales Resilience Framework](#)

UK Aviation Emergencies

In the event of a serious civil aviation accident in the UK that results in injury and/or loss of life, the UK civil contingency plans, as detailed in the above section, will be enacted – but adapted to the aviation context with the inclusion of distinct acts and actors. This section outlines both the aviation-specific legislative obligations and the roles and responsibilities of the aviation stakeholders. It is likely that the Department for Transport will act as the LGD in the event of an air accident.

As noted above, while most emergencies in the UK are handled at local level, some emergencies need a degree of central government coordination or support, with the UK Government, or a Devolved Government as appropriate, taking the lead due to the scale or complexity of an emergency. In these circumstances, the LGD will cover all phases of emergency planning, response, recovery and risk assessment. Usually, the LGD is the department with primary policy responsibility for the risk and expertise for the area impacted by the emergency scenario.

In response to such an emergency, the LGD will be responsible for coordinating other departments and other responsible stakeholders, such as local responders or private sector operators, to deal with the immediate consequences of an emergency. For the highest impact LGD tier emergencies, the Cabinet Office will work closely with LGDs as they coordinate work across the responsible stakeholders.

In rare cases, an emergency may occur where it is unclear which department should take the overall lead. This could happen in instances where the primary consequence of an emergency changes quickly. It is then the responsibility of the Cabinet Office to advise the Prime Minister on which is the most appropriate LGD. If this happens, the Cabinet Office will coordinate the central government response, leading where necessary until an LGD is confirmed.

Summary of legislative obligations

Accident investigations

Key principles: The UK is required to conduct an independent safety investigation of aviation accidents. The [Air Accidents Investigation Branch \(AAIB\)](#), part of the Department for Transport (DfT), is the State Investigation Authority for aircraft accidents.

The sole objective of a safety investigation is the prevention of accidents and incidents, without the apportionment of blame or liability. In addition to the safety investigation, the police will also conduct a parallel investigation to determine whether the accident was a result of criminality. The AAIB and National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) have an MoU in place to allow this to happen across the four nations. International standards for air accident investigations are set out in Annex 13 to the Chicago Convention.

An aircraft accident investigation is conducted under the responsibility of the State where the accident occurs, or the State of Registration of the aircraft when the location of the accident or serious incident cannot definitely be established as being in the territory of any State or in international waters. Annex 13 also confers the right of other States to be involved in the safety investigation, this includes the state of registry of the aircraft, the state of design, the state of the operator and the state of passengers and crew. It is important for the prevention of accidents to communicate in the shortest time possible relevant information, including in reports and safety recommendations resulting from safety investigations.

Airlines should implement procedures which allow for the production as soon as possible (within two hours of the notification of the occurrence of an accident to the aircraft) of a validated list, based on the best available information, of all the persons on board. In addition, the airline should immediately provide a list of the dangerous goods on board. The passenger lists should be given to the AAIB and the authority designated by the Secretary of State to liaise with the relatives of the persons on board and, where necessary, medical units which may need information for the treatment of victims.

The AAIB has tried and tested procedures for the investigation of air accidents and regularly tests their response capabilities. It should be noted that the initial investigation phase of both the police and AAIB investigations may be protracted, resulting in prolonged disruption to infrastructure.

Relevant legislation and guidance

- [Assimilated Regulation \(EU\) No 996/2010 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 October 2010 on the investigation and prevention of accidents and incidents in civil aviation and repealing Directive 94/56/EC \(Text with EEA relevance\) \(EU 996/2010\)](#)
- [The Civil Aviation \(Investigation of Air Accidents and Incidents\) Regulations 2018](#)
- [Annex 13](#) to the Convention on International Civil Aviation – Aircraft Accident and Incident Investigation
- [AAIB: Guidance Documents - GOV.UK](#)

Assistance to air accident victims and their families

Key principles: Legislation ([Assimilated Regulation \(EU\) 996/2010](#)) requires the Secretary of State to establish a NAEP **which covers assistance to the victims of civil aviation accidents and their relatives**. Annex A to this document outlines UK Guidance on Assistance to Air Accident Victims and their Families (AAAVF).

The legislation also stipulates that a reference person is appointed as a point of contact and information for the victims and their relatives. The Ministry of Justice has appointed Cindy Butts as the standing Independent Public Advocate (IPA), as mandated in the [Victims and Prisoners Act 2024](#), to support the victims of major incidents in England or Wales – this will include the victims of aircraft accidents. Scotland and Northern Ireland have separate arrangements that are situation specific. Guidance on the IPA role is included alongside the [Policy Statement](#).

A major incident is defined in section 34(2) of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 as “an incident that (a) occurs in England or Wales after 18 September 2024, (b) causes the death of, or serious harm to, a significant number of individuals, and (c) is declared in writing by the Secretary of State to be a major incident for the purposes of appointing advocates for victims of major incidents”. Only incidents falling within section 34(2) of the Act qualify as major incidents for IPA purposes.

Similarly, in the event that an aircraft incident is the result of terrorism, the Home Office has a [Victims of Terrorism Unit](#) to assist those affected. The IPA may also be stood up in response to a terrorist attack.

Other aspects of regulation require practical assistance such as timely help with acquiring visas for overseas victims’ families to travel to the UK accident site and facilitating the repatriation of remains – these are addressed in Annex A and below.

Airports also have an ICAO Standard under Annex 14 that Emergency Response Plans (ERPs) should provide for assistance to victims and their families involved in an aircraft accident in coordination with the aircraft operator.

Airlines, through the activation of their ERPs, the terms of their insurance and their duty of care to passengers and crew, are largely responsible for assisting victims and their

families but, as the state of occurrence, HMG would also have a duty to ensure the welfare of victims/families and ensure that their needs are being met.

Article 21 of [EU 996/2010](#) states:

The CAA shall ensure that all airlines established in the United Kingdom have a plan for the assistance to the victims of civil aviation accidents and their relatives. Those plans must take particular account of psychological support for victims of civil aviation accidents and their relatives and allow the airline to react to a major accident. The CAA shall audit the assistance plans of the airlines established in the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State shall also encourage airlines from other countries which operate in the United Kingdom to similarly adopt a plan for the assistance of victims of civil aviation accidents and their relatives.

These legislative obligations are met through the CAA's Flight Operations [Safety Management Systems \(SMS\)](#) oversight procedures which now contain a section on airline assistance plans, as well as via communication to international operators as part of the issuance of seasonal permits, new Foreign Carrier Permits (FCPs) and Third Country Operator (TCO) licences.

Relevant legislation and guidance

- Assimilated [Regulation \(EU\) No 996/2010 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 October 2010 on the investigation and prevention of accidents and incidents in civil aviation and repealing Directive 94/56/EC \(Text with EEA relevance\)](#), article 21
- [Victims and Prisoners Act 2024](#) Part 2
- [Annex 9](#) of the Convention on International Civil Aviation – Facilitation (Chapter 8, Section I)
- [Annex 14](#) of the Convention on International Civil Aviation – Aerodromes (Chapter 9, Section I)
- [DOC9973](#) ICAO Manual on Assistance to Aircraft Accident Victims and their Families
- [DOC9998](#) ICAO Policy on Assistance to Aircraft Victims and their Families

Actors and Actions

This section describes the roles and responsibilities of the different aviation stakeholders. Each actor should have their own detailed plans, but this outlines the main activities that should take place and the reporting structures.

Arm's Length Bodies

CAA

The CAA supports the DfT by sharing information on the event itself and details on UK exposure related to the event (aircraft type, similarities in operation, exposure to location). They use an event categorisation system to determine who takes a lead role in managing the information. Events are now categorised as follows, which helps define roles and responsibilities:

1. UK registered aircraft in UK airspace
2. UK registered aircraft outside UK airspace
3. Non-UK registered aircraft in UK airspace
4. Non-UK registered aircraft outside UK airspace

Categories 1-3 are led by the CAA/Safety and Airspace Regulation Group (SARG), category 4 is led by FCDO/DfT, covering exposure to UK Nationals overseas. The CAA role in a category 4 event is to understand any similar risk to the UK, (e.g. Aircraft type, type of operation, airspace).

Department for Transport

AAIB

The AAIB is the state investigation authority for air and spaceflight accidents. In the event of a major accident, the AAIB will initiate a safety investigation which will run in parallel with any investigation initiated by the Police. AAIB investigations are carried out in

accordance with UK and international legislation. The AAIB has procedures in place to respond to a major accident and any such investigation will involve investigators from other states as required by Annex 13 of the Chicago Convention.

The AAIB investigation will be carried out independently from any other investigation and there are legal protections in place which prevent the AAIB from sharing certain information with other bodies (EU 996/2010). To support family liaison, the AAIB will also deploy resources to provide information regarding the progress of the investigation, within the limits of the legislation, to the established family liaison network.

Transport Security Operations Centre (TSOC)

TSOC is the central operational response team in the department. If a significant aviation accident were to occur, TSOC will act as the ‘front door’ to the department, receiving the initial notification and then completing the internal and external notification process. Along with the distribution of information, TSOC lead on mobilising the Departmental Operations Centre (DOC), briefing ministers and senior officials, as well as releasing situational updates. TSOC would also work closely with the UK intelligence community (UKIC), other government departments (OGDs) and the AAIB to gather information regarding the incident and put effective measures in place to respond accordingly.

For TSOC to respond, the incident must take place within airspace the UK has responsibility for and involve civilian aircraft on inbound, outbound and/or over flights. TSOC would also stand up to support an FCDO-led response if an accident occurred in non-UK airspace where a large number of British Nationals were affected.

The thresholds to stand up a departmental response would be informed by the AAIB’s definition of a “Major” incident:

Major Accident Response (MAR) decision

- The Duty Coordinator should assess whether the reported circumstances of the notification meet any of the following criteria:
 - An event to a large commercial air transport aircraft involving significant damage and/or loss of life, the potential for significant loss of life or where the aircraft is still missing
 - Aviation related events that present a significant hazard to the travelling public or the wider public on the ground or that require deployment of significant AAIB resources to manage and/or investigate
 - An event to any aircraft which causes significant disruption to normal routine, where the crash site is complex, has been declared a major incident by the emergency services, or is of significant public and/or industry interest e.g. new technology or very high-profile passengers/victims
- If yes, a MAR should be initiated

Officially, TSOC is informed about aviation accidents by NATS and/or the AAIB. However, information could come directly from industry, through open-source media, via the Resilience or Safety teams or through a different partner. If this was to occur, and TSOC were not confident that the AAIB were aware, TSOC's first responsibility, as per the legal guidelines, would be to inform the AAIB.

Away from the response function of TSOC, as the central response team, TSOC hold and maintain the departmental response Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) including the initial Aviation Accident SOP.

Situational reporting

As the Lead Government Department (LGD), DfT takes overall responsibility for assessing the situation and ensuring that relevant Ministers and departments are briefed. TSOC use two methods of situational reporting:

- A "We Are Aware" is an initial document informing cross-government stakeholders and internal teams that DfT are aware of an incident and are gathering more information
- Once the incident is more established, TSOC turn to Situational Reports (SitReps) which provide a more detailed account of the current situation.

Mobilising the Departmental Operations Centre

During a significant response, TSOC lead the setup of the Departmental Operations Centre (DOC). The DOC is the collective term used to describe the DfT team coordinating the response to any incident. This would be a single colocated team, focusing on the consequence management response to the incident and its wider impacts.

In relation to wider government, TSOC's DOC brief upwards to Secretary of State and ministers who then input as needed into the rest of Government through COBR unit, Parliament and the Prime Minister's Office.

At a COBR(M) meeting (M standing for ministers), each government department would be represented by a Secretary of State or minister. COBR leads the UK Government's response to acute emergencies, coordinating different departments and agencies.

While acting in this coordinating function, formal actions would be agreed and taken away for each individual department to complete before the next meeting. TSOC would take the lead in ensuring these actions are completed and assist in the completion of actions for other departments.

Aviation Safety

Aviation Safety are the main point of contact within the Department for gathering information from safety-related stakeholders, including the CAA and AAIB, to improve situational awareness and support the department to handle an aviation accident. They work closely with the DfT Duty Office, Press Office, TSOC and other teams where needed

(such as aviation security) to assist senior officials and the broader departmental response. In the event of a safety-related incident, the Aviation Safety Team's two main roles are:

- to be the cross-government point of contact on safety matters, liaising with other government departments and aviation safety organisations
- to advise DfT Ministers on implications of safety events and provide/feed into SitReps

Aviation Security

The Aviation Security Strategy and Policy (ASSP) team will mobilise and organise itself to deliver a coordinated, timely and effective response to any major incident where an unlawful act to jeopardise the safety of an aircraft is either suspected or apparent. The primary role of the team is to assess the security risks arising from an aviation incident and identify appropriate mitigations to protect the aviation system. While the exact nature of the response will be tailored to the specific circumstances of each incident, it will be guided by the following core principles:

- Supporting the lead response teams by deploying ASSP staff into defined roles within the Departmental Operations Centre (DOC), aligned with the TSOC command and management structure
- Maintaining robust communication channels with key security stakeholders, including the aviation industry, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), other government departments, and relevant security agencies
- Providing informed briefings to DfT ministers and senior officials, offering timely assessments of security risks, recommending mitigation options and contributing to overall situational reporting

Note on Safety vs Security Incident

When an incident is reported, it will initially be treated as both a safety and a security incident until such time as the probable cause is ascertained. If a security-related cause has been determined, the incident will become a criminal investigation rather than an accident investigation. The Aviation Security team will become the main policy interface with TSOC rather than the Aviation Safety team.

The primary goal of a safety investigation is to determine the cause of an accident to prevent future occurrences. Criminal investigations focus on determining if any criminal actions contributed to the accident and holding those responsible accountable. These two types of investigations can occur concurrently, but their objectives and methods differ.

The AAIB has a [Memorandum of Understanding \(MoU\) with the National Police Chiefs' Council](#) (NPCC) which ensures effective investigation of transport accidents and any crimes associated with them, while maintaining the independence of those investigations and promoting effective cooperation between them. It also has an [MoU with the Crown Prosecution Service](#) (CPS).

The public interest requires that safety considerations are of paramount importance. This means that the interests of an AAIB investigation (including consideration of the possible effects on future investigations) may sometimes take precedence over a criminal investigation. The ability of witnesses to talk openly and without delay to an accident investigator is fundamental to the operation of the AAIB, as is the protection of sensitive material from disclosure.

In Scotland, the Crown Office and Procurators Fiscal Service (COPFS) is responsible for the prosecution of crime and the investigation of sudden or suspicious death. COPFS provide guidance and direction with regards to the reporting structure of any parallel investigation.

Generally, the AAIB investigation will take precedence. In order that a safety investigation is able to proceed, the AAIB will be given immediate and unrestricted access to the accident site, evidence and witnesses. Usually, the police will secure the site. Evidence will normally be recovered to the AAIB's facilities in Farnborough.

An air accident may result from technical malfunctions, human error or failures in procedure, and it may not be clear at the outset whether it has involved criminal activity. Consequently, the police will also have access to the site and may wish to conduct their own investigations in parallel, at least initially.

If it is evident that serious criminality was the cause of the event, the police will deploy appropriate resources to conduct the investigation and to recover evidence, the AAIB will have access to the accident site and evidence, as necessary, to identify whether a safety investigation may benefit transport safety.

Victim identification and recovery will be coordinated by a police Senior Identification Manager (SIM) who will work closely with the AAIB to ensure each investigation's objectives are met. During a major incident, victim identification falls into two strands:

- The National Casualty Bureau focus on matching data received on victims for identification purposes
- The UK National Disaster Victim Identification Unit, which coordinates the national capability of the police service to respond to incidents involving mass fatalities at home and abroad, focus on the physical identification and recovery of remains in situ

Aviation Resilience

The Aviation Resilience team is responsible for ensuring that the UK aviation sector and DfT are appropriately prepared to mitigate and respond effectively to major incidents that have a severe impact on the sector. Aviation Resilience must move into action immediately when an emergency arises impacting UK aviation. Their main functions in an emergency situation include:

- Act as a focal point for communication flows between the Department and the aviation industry
- Maintain situational awareness of the incident and any knock-on impacts

- Stand up industry reporting where necessary to gather a full picture of the impacts to passengers and operations, contingencies and wider planning to manage the ongoing situation

The Aviation Resilience team will be the conduit and first point of contact between DfT's response (led by TSOC) and the UK aviation industry (ASSP would lead if it is security-related).

Aviation Facilitation

Aviation Facilitation have oversight of HMG's responsibilities regarding assistance to air accident victims and their families (AAAVF), following the inclusion of these provisions in Annex 9 of the Chicago Convention which relates to Facilitation. The majority of the Aviation Facilitation team's work in this area is preparatory in nature; ensuring that, in the event of an accident, the complex interplay of cross-cutting processes across relevant DfT teams, OGDs, ALBs and industry stakeholders provide the required standard of support for, and remain cognisant of their responsibilities to, the victims and their families throughout the emergency response and investigation.

In terms of the wider government response, Aviation Facilitation would link both internally with relevant government departments and ALBs who have an important role in the delivery of assistance, and externally with industry stakeholders, response organisations and overseas Facilitation counterparts. Internal links would include:

- Home Office, who would advise on the provision of visas for families, as well as for relevant experts/investigators who require permits. Border Force would also be involved in the process of repatriating human remains and personal effects
- FCDO, who would be involved in accidents involving British Nationals abroad or Foreign Nationals in the UK. They would also play a role in supporting the provision of emergency travel documents and visas in-country
- Ministry of Justice, who would lead on appointing an Independent Public Advocate (IPA) to support victims and their families in the event that a major incident was declared
- MHCLG, who offer support and guidance to local resilience partners in England and Wales and ensure that the local and national levels are joined up in the response to an emergency
- The team would also be liaising with the AAIB and CAA to check that processes that impact the families were running smoothly

Externally, Facilitation would link with the following stakeholders, either directly or through prescribed reporting systems:

- Relevant airline(s)/airport(s), to ensure they had stood up their family assistance plans and were offering adequate support, including psychological support

- National Casualty Bureau, to ensure they were linked with the airline and their crisis management company, if one had been appointed, to expedite the identification of victims as quickly as possible
- Relevant Local Resilience Forum, to ensure that the relevant airline, and their significant resources, were being utilised in support of victims and their families

Aviation Consumer Policy

Aviation Consumer Policy will provide support with briefing, related matters and engagement with the CAA and relevant government departments on consumer issues during an incident. Key areas will include compensation for death and personal injury, and knock-on consumer rights issues following any potential incident.

The Montreal Convention 1999 ([MC99](#)) establishes airline liability for passenger death or injury, as well as for delays, damage, or loss of baggage and cargo.

[Regulation \(EC\) 261/2004](#) primarily addresses air passenger rights in the event of flight disruptions, such as cancellations, delays, and denied boarding. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) is the enforcement body in the UK for the laws covering air passenger rights. While it does not directly address accidents or provide compensation specifically for victims of accidents, it outlines the support and compensation available to passengers in certain circumstances related to flight delays, cancellations, and denied boarding.

DfT Communications

Following the initiation of a major aviation incident response involving loss of life and/or significant disruption to air traffic affecting UK passengers, the role of DfT Communications is to provide a rapid, coordinated response that protects public safety, while maintaining public trust and confidence in aviation standards.

When DfT is designated as the Lead Government Department, DfT Communications will lead the overall government communications response, taking primary responsibility for coordinating messaging across all government departments and agencies.

In a security-related scenario, DfT Communications focuses on maintaining public confidence in aviation security measures without compromising ongoing security operations or investigations. The department coordinates closely with industry partners to manage operational disruption communications whilst ensuring security messaging remains in the control of appropriate security agencies. Regular liaison with the lead department's communications team ensures aviation expertise informs security-focused messaging whilst maintaining operational security requirements.

In all scenarios, DfT Communications maintains its core responsibility for aviation safety messaging whilst adapting its leadership role based on the primary nature of the incident and established government crisis response protocols. Additionally, DfT will amplify messaging from stakeholders such as CAA, AAIB and ABTA to present a unified message to air travellers. This also includes amplification of messaging relating to international

incidents impacting British citizens, where FCDO stakeholders will be responsible for foreign victims.

Other Government Departments

Emergency Response

Border Force (BF) would play a role if the accident occurred within the usual parameters of the airfield i.e. within the airport boundary or an area 1 kilometre/1 degree from the end of the runway. In these circumstances, BF would:

- Activate Command & Control functions and designate a Bronze Commander to attend the Reception Centres Management Group (RCMG)
- Deploy officers to the Survivor Reception Centre (SRC)
- Clear the crew of the aircraft in line with relevant guidance
- Examine cargo manifests when provided to identify any potential hazardous materials on board the aircraft
- Once initial triage of survivors is complete, work with policing colleagues to complete AAIB investigation proformas
- Once AAIB processes completed, complete passenger border processes in line with the 1971 Immigration Act and Border Force Operating Mandate and complete relevant safeguarding checks to ensure that plans exist for their safe reception in the UK
- If survivors are taken to hospital, process the relevant suspension of the Border Force Operating Mandate, and then attend hospital to complete checks at an appropriate later time and date

The **Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government** (MHCLG) would:

- Offer support and guidance to local resilience partners in England
- Ensure that the local and national levels are joined up during the emergency response
- May coordinate interim welfare assistance to support initial emergency response

Visas

While airlines should arrange transport to the UK (where applicable) for families of air accident victims, the Home Office and FCDO have a role to play, and legislative obligations (Annex 9 to the Chicago Convention) to make arrangements to facilitate the entry into the UK of victims' family members. This includes helping with visas/travel

authorisations and any exemptions where appropriate. Assistance may also be required to facilitate entry to the UK of overseas air accident investigators or airline/crisis management personnel who must quickly travel to the UK to assist with investigations and the response. Those requiring support should be directed to FCDO who can use their consular network and links with the Home Office to provide assistance with visas.

Repatriation of human remains

There are tried and tested processes for repatriating human remains from the UK to a third country. In an air accident situation, there will need to be some coordination between the victims' families, airline operator, coroner and funeral director.

FCDO is the lead government department for repatriations of human remains. FCDO may need to liaise with the UK-based embassies and relevant ministries of victims' home countries to facilitate the repatriation process.

Operators

Airports

UK airports have tried and tested plans to respond to air accidents. Apart from in Northern Ireland, airports are classed as category 2 responders under the Civil Contingencies Act. This means that they must coordinate with Category 1 responders in preparing for emergencies and work closely with the Local Resilience Forum, or equivalent, when responding to an emergency.

International regulation: ICAO Annex 14 Volume 1 Aerodromes has a section on aerodrome emergency planning (chapter 9i) which mandates that aerodrome emergency plans shall be established and commensurate with the aircraft operations and other activities conducted at the aerodrome. This plan must be tested in full at least once every two years. In addition, one of the ICAO recommended practices is that airport ERPs should provide for assistance to victims and their families involved in an aircraft accident in coordination with the aircraft operator.

National regulation: the UK's Air Navigation Order 2016 (ANO) mandates emergency planning at aerodromes. This includes the development and implementation of an aerodrome emergency plan, which outlines procedures for coordinating responses to emergencies, ensuring the safety of lives and minimising disruption to operations. The UK CAA conducts oversight of certified aerodromes, including of their emergency plans.

Airlines and Crisis Management companies

Airlines are required to have an ERP that reflects the size, nature and complexities of their activities. Air Operators are required by regulation to have ERPs in place and to exercise them regularly. These plans are subject to oversight requirements by the CAA. Any emergency planning should include assistance to air accident victims and their families.

In the event of an accident, airlines will stand up their own emergency command and control structure which will include two-way communication with the UK Government response. Airlines are also required to have insurance to cover liabilities to passengers, baggage, cargo and third parties.

Due to the specialist nature of the support required, the majority of airlines utilise dedicated crisis management companies to respond swiftly and offer the full range of support required to assist victims and their families in the event of an accident.

Testing

DfT is part of the wider cross-government resilience structure led by Cabinet Office to enable a whole-system approach to civil emergency preparedness and resilience (which supports identification of criticalities through cross-cutting programmes such as the National Exercising Programme).

It is recommended that the DfT Aviation Directorate undertakes regular table-top exercises to test response plans in addition to participating in cross-government exercises.

Airlines and airports regularly test their emergency plans to ensure they are prepared for an air accident. It is recommended that, where appropriate, relevant DfT officials take part in full-scale accident simulations to ensure familiarity with airline/airport processes and procedures, as well as ensuring that HMG involvement and requirements are included and understood.

Summary

The UK Government has crisis response infrastructure that can be adapted to meet the circumstances of a catastrophic air accident. Similarly, DfT has existing provisions to respond to significant transport incidents that can be tailored to air accidents. This document serves to demonstrate how all the different acts and actors will be coordinated and how the command-and-control process will unfold.

Thankfully, air accidents are very rare occurrences; however, it is this very rarity that requires a significant commitment to planning and exercising to ensure that, should the unthinkable happen, the processes in place work efficiently and the response is as effective as possible.

Annexes

Annex A – Guidance on assistance to air accident victims and their families

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-assistance-to-air-accident-victims-and-their-families>

Annex B – Accident in UK Waters or in International Waters covered by UK Search and Rescue Region (SRR)

Should a civil aviation accident occur over UK Waters or in a UK SRR, then maritime procedures would be activated, and His Majesty's Coastguard (HMCG) would assume operational command of the response. Although not an exhaustive list, the below sets out the response for the most significant locations.

Channel

The search and rescue response would depend on the precise location of the incident, as the channel SRR areas are not aligned with territorial waters, i.e. UK SRR extends into French waters and vice versa at some points.

If an air accident occurred over the UK SRR then, in most instances, French assets and support would be requested - and vice versa should an air accident occur in the French SRR zone.

TSOC would stand up a DOC but would almost instantly escalate to COBR due to the significance of the event, especially if it occurred in the Dover Straits part of the channel.

Irish Sea

The Irish Coastguard have SRR responsibility for a small portion of the Irish Sea near to the eastern coastline up to the border with Northern Ireland. Cooperation with Devolved Governments and the Irish Government would be required to manage any impact.

International waters in UK SRR

SRR would be coordinated by HMCG. Due to the time required to get rescue vessels on scene, this would likely be undertaken by tasking any passing vessels under existing international legislation, including Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS 1974) and the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and with regards to the International Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue manual (IAMSAR), to request that they proceed to the location and seek to recover survivors. Attending ships would provide SRR support within their capabilities which may include deployment of survival equipment, casualty retrieval, medical aid and onward transport to a port. It is highly likely that Royal Navy assets would be requested to attend by HMCG.

Salvage and investigation

Following an air accident in the UK Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) or SRR zone, aircraft operators would be expected to arrange recovery of any relevant material, working in partnership with AAIB. If the accident is in UK waters, it is probable that this would be done in consultation with Secretary of State's Representative for Maritime Incidents and Salvage (SOSREP).

Annex C - Overseas Air Accidents

If an aircraft accident occurs overseas involving a UK registered aircraft or a significant number of British Nationals, FCDO would be the lead government department in a UK response, coordinating across government. There would be several touch points for DfT, its agencies and Arm's Length Bodies.

UK-registered aircraft accident

The state of occurrence of an accident is responsible for the investigation. If the accident involves a UK-registered civil aircraft, UK operator, or UK-designed or manufactured aircraft, the state of occurrence must notify the AAIB of the accident and the AAIB may designate a UK representative to participate in the investigation. Annex 13 to the Chicago Convention sets out the rules on the notification, investigation and reporting of the accident.

British Nationals impacted by an air accident overseas

If a UK-registered aircraft is involved in an accident, it follows that there would likely be significant numbers of British Nationals impacted by the event so the actions outlined below will also be relevant - in addition to the AAIB's involvement in the investigation.

FCDO may set up a [specific crisis response](#) to help British Nationals who have been affected in a crisis overseas. This would include an incident in which large numbers of British Nationals may have been killed or injured. FCDO have tried and tested procedures for responding to crises. Permanent crisis teams in London are supported by trained volunteer staff from across the UK and overseas network. Overseas embassies, high commissions and consulates lead locally on crisis response and in some circumstances may be bolstered by support from FCDO staff from across the region and the Rapid Deployment Teams, made up of more than 200 volunteers from across the network.

FCDO has an 'eligible person' policy and will link in with the Home Office on immigration matters; so, where a British national is travelling with a non-British family member or where the person is a resident in the UK, the process will fall under consular assistance and can be found here:

[Who the FCDO can support abroad - GOV.UK](#)

[If you're affected by a crisis abroad - GOV.UK](#)

Annex 13 notes: "A State which has a special interest in an accident by virtue of fatalities or serious injuries to its citizens shall be entitled to appoint an expert who shall be entitled to a) visit the scene of an accident; b) have access to the relevant factual information which is approved for public release by the State conducting the investigation; and c) receive a copy of the Final Report."

On these grounds, the AAIB could choose to appoint an expert to attend the investigation in the state of occurrence of an incident involving British National victims. This was the case in the Air India flight 171 crash in June 2025.

Depending on the severity of the incident, TSOC would stand up the DOC to coordinate DfT input into any cross-government incident response led by FCDO. As outlined previously, different aviation teams and OGDs would feed into the TSOC DOC response:

- Aviation Safety, with the CAA, would initiate their Aircraft Accident SOP to establish the facts of the accident and address any policy implications
- Aviation Resilience would address any ensuing disruption to the UK aviation system
- Aviation Facilitation could make contact with counterparts in the state of occurrence to ensure that the needs of victims were being met and troubleshoot relevant issues. Further guidance on responsibilities on assistance to the British victims of overseas air accidents can be found in Annex A
- AAIB would liaise with airlines regarding the accident investigation and the CAA would liaise with airlines regarding resumption of operations
- The police Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) unit would be activated and may send representatives to assist in victim identification. Police Family Liaison Officers (FLOs) would be appointed to assist UK victims' families
- A Coroner would be appointed to investigate the deaths of the UK victims
- FCDO would lead on any memorial events

Annex D – Accidents involving Overseas Territories

The United Kingdom has fourteen Overseas Territories (UKOTs) across the globe, ten of which are permanently inhabited by British nationals. Each inhabited Territory operates under its own constitution and has either a parliament or a council, with varying degrees of self-government. In most cases, a Governor appointed by the Crown serves as the UK Government's representative through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The Governor retains responsibility for aviation safety, external affairs, defence, and internal security — including oversight of the police and judiciary — and has the authority to declare a state of emergency, or a public emergency in the case of Gibraltar.

Aviation responsibilities are exercised on the Governor's behalf either by the Director of Civil Aviation or by an appointed organisation, most commonly Air Safety Support International (ASSI), which creates requirements to implement the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) annexes' Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs), except Annex 9, covering facilitation, and Annex 13, which governs the investigation of aircraft accidents and incidents. Under Section 75 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982, extended to the Territories by Order in Council, the Governor is empowered to appoint investigators to examine accidents and serious incidents. In support of these obligations, Memoranda of Agreement or Understanding exist between individual Territories and the UK Air Accidents Investigation Branch (AAIB), the body responsible for Annex 13. In the majority of Territories, the Chief Inspector of the AAIB is also appointed as the Chief Inspector of Air Accidents, with authority to assign AAIB inspectors to undertake investigations in accordance with the regulations.

ASSI, as a subsidiary of the UK Civil Aviation Authority, provides technical assistance, training, and regulatory advice to Governors and to any Territory aviation authority designated by them. In situations where there is no civil aviation regulator, or where the existing body lacks the resources or expertise to carry out its functions, the Governor may designate ASSI to undertake regulatory tasks. ASSI has no direct responsibilities in the British Antarctic Territory, where the Antarctic Treaty takes precedence, nor in Gibraltar, which operates its own legislative and regulatory systems. Search and rescue obligations under ICAO Annex 12 are supported by the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency via an MOU.

The nature and scale of civil aviation in the UKOTs varies widely, influenced by geography, operational scope, and regional partnerships that often differ significantly from those in the UK. ICAO SARPs require that all UKOT aerodromes maintain coordinated emergency response plans, which must be regularly tested through exercises. Commercial aircraft operators are similarly obliged to hold and coordinate emergency plans. Many Territories also have disaster management committees whose plans, largely focused on natural hazards, are periodically exercised and sometimes activated in real emergencies. Recent developments include the creation of mass rescue plans for both maritime and aviation domains and national search and rescue plans, which include coordination and cooperation with neighbouring non-UKOT states. These existing structures, agencies and coordination mechanisms can be readily adapted to manage an aviation-related incident.