

Definitions

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Mass fatality incident

Following an [emergency](#) or [major incident](#), there may be a large number of fatalities. Due to the scale of the situation and demands on the emergency services, it may not be practical or appropriate to follow normal arrangements. It can therefore be proportionate and necessary to invoke the disaster victim identification (DVI) process.

Incidents may be categorised as follows.

Open incidents

Where the number and details of the deceased are not known at the time when the incident is declared and this information cannot be easily ascertained. There is likely to be early high demand for information from family and friends reporting people missing.

Closed incidents

Where the provisional number and details of the deceased can be easily obtained. Antemortem evidence can be collected at an early stage and the involvement of other people can be provisionally discounted.

Major incident

A major incident is an event or situation requiring a response under one or more of the emergency services' major incident plans. This will usually include involving large numbers of people, either directly or indirectly.

Critical incident

A **critical incident** is any incident where the effectiveness of the police response is likely to have a significant impact on the confidence of the victim, their family and/or the community.

Declaring a mass fatality incident

National planning for a mass fatality response is coordinated centrally by the Emergency Preparedness Fatalities Team in the Home Office and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat in the Cabinet Office.

The decision to declare a mass fatality incident lies jointly with the coroner or the procurator fiscal and the gold commander. Consult the chief executive of relevant local authorities when reaching a decision and form a mass fatality coordination group (MFCG) as soon as the decision is made to declare a mass fatality incident.

Where police respond to a mass fatality incident, the gold commander assumes overall command and has ultimate responsibility and accountability for the police response. The strategic commander chairs the strategic coordination group (SCG).

The decision to form an MFCG may be influenced by a number of factors:

- the number of deceased (actual or potential)
- whether the nature of the incident is likely to make identifying the deceased difficult
- whether any, or many, of the deceased are in difficult to access locations
- whether there are fragmented human remains
- whether the incident was as a result of terrorist or criminal activity
- if any hazards are present at the scene – for example, asbestos, chemicals or radiological debris – that need to be taken into account before recovering the deceased, property or evidence
- whether suitable and sustainable mortuary capacity is available for as long as is likely to be required

Deceased persons

This refers to a body that is readily identifiable as a deceased human being and is still intact. If a limb is severed, even if it is lying alongside a deceased torso missing a limb, it is to be retrieved as separate 'human remains'.

Human remains

This refers to any fragments or parts that have come from a human body. Human remains can range from limbs to small fragments of human flesh.

Legal control of the body

Once the coroner's jurisdiction is engaged, the legal control and care of the body passes to the coroner, to allow them to carry out their statutory investigative duties. As soon as this is over, usually following any post mortem examination and formal identification process, the body is released back to the next of kin or those entitled to receive it.

Those involved with grieving families must deal with them in a sensitive manner and be aware of the terminology that they use. For instance, they must never describe the body of their loved one as '**belonging** to the coroner' or as 'the **property** of the coroner'.

The functions and responsibilities of the coroner, along with any legal language, should be carefully explained to families.

Tags

Civil emergencies