

Critical Incident Response

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Critical Incident Response

Youth work organisations and workers must be prepared and know what to do if faced with an emergency or critical incident i.e. a situation that overwhelms the immediate staff team and requires the wider support of the organisation and/or external support services. Thankfully, very serious incidents and crises are rare in the youth sector and effective planning and good practice can both reduce the likelihood of occurrence and the severity of impact if and when they do occur. Larger organisations are likely to have well established systems in place and this section aims to provide a background to those without dedicated critical incident response systems.

Key considerations

- Critical incident response should be considered for all youth work activities, programmes and services - response procedures should be written down and effectively communicated to all workers
- Young people should be aware of key elements of procedures such as how to contact workers or raise the alarm
- Organisations should have an Critical Incident Plan in place which should detail and take into account:
 - key responsibilities of staff and workers
 - immediate actions to reduce harm
 - briefing, training and support for all staff and workers
 - communication plans
 - out of hours response
 - external support required, if applicable
 - dealing with the media
- All workers with a designated role or responsibility in the Critical Incident Plan should:
 - be readily available to respond
 - receive appropriate training, briefings and support, and have direct access to pertinent information and resources
 - understand their role, responsibilities and be competent to undertake any associated actions in response to an emergency or critical incident
- Critical Incident Plans should be tested via periodic scenario-based testing
- Response procedures should be adaptable to enable effective response to a variety of situations or incidents

Definitions

An **emergency or critical incident** is an unplanned event with serious potential consequences, which the immediate staff team is unable to manage and control on their own, requiring wider organisational support and implementation of a Critical Incident Plan.

A **crisis** is defined by HSE as a significant event, which demands a response beyond the routine, resulting from uncontrolled developments.

One distinguishing difference between an emergency/critical incident and a crisis is the ability for the organisation to maintain a level of control. An effective Critical Incident Plan should support the organisation's ability to manage an emergency situation and endeavour to prevent the situation escalating into a crisis.

Note: UK authorities such as the police and local authorities use the term **Major Incident** to describe 'an event or situation with a range of serious consequences which requires special arrangements to be implemented by one or more emergency responder agency'. A police-declared 'major incident' is likely to have a wider impact, affecting many people/organisations and the relevant authorities will take control, however youth work organisations' Emergency Response Plans will be important to coordinate with the authorities. Examples may include a terror threat, a public health concern, or a multi vehicle road traffic collision.

Critical Incident Plan

Quick and effective action can help to minimise the effects, impact and severity of an emergency. The speed and effectiveness of response will rely heavily on the actions of workers and therefore, organisations should be aware that workers are more likely to respond effectively if they:

- are familiar with their responsibilities and understand clearly agreed plans
- are well trained and competent to undertake their role
- have the opportunity to take part in realistic testing and practice

An effective Critical Incident Plan should address the points above and should aim to support the immediate needs of the group or individuals directly affected, as well as the needs of the wider organisation and/or other groups indirectly affected.

Communications - logistics

As part of effective planning for any youth work programme, a clear plan should be established which takes into account both routine and emergency communications.

- Logistical arrangements such as establishing the methods of communication between workers, duty staff, management and different settings. Contingency or alternative arrangements should also be considered for if primary communications are unavailable (i.e. mobile phone out of signal or battery).
- Who will respond? What competencies and/or training do they require and what information/resources will they need to access to initiate or provide a response (i.e. crib sheets, participant personal information, key contact information, risk assessments, the Critical Incident Plan, additional phone lines, additional personnel, specialist/expert advice)
- Means of retaining open communication between the group(s) affected and organisational support throughout the incident and external agencies as necessary

In the event of a critical incident, organisations must ensure that an effective communications system is in place that will allow the organisation to reliably and swiftly establish and maintain contact with:

- group(s) directly affected by the incident
- Duty Officer
- Critical Incident Response Team colleagues
- Senior management
- external agencies and support as may be required
- other stakeholders

Communications - organisational response

Effective organisational communications with key stakeholders is essential to effective response. Indeed, in situations attracting media attention or a high volume of inbound enquiries, the challenges faced in managing the communication response can be extremely difficult for organisations, especially those with fewer 'head office' staff who are remote from the dealing with logistics at the incident scene.

Youth work organisations should consider and plan for the communications response and include written guides and instructions to aid managers who will be responding to complex communications. It is sometimes helpful to identify in advance the likely list of stakeholders who may need to be communicated with and include these in the plan with a note of who will keep them updated, the relative priority and how.

- **Internal stakeholders** such as delivery workers and those remote from the scene, senior management, individuals who are likely to receive in-bound telephone calls such as receptionists, trustees, patrons, sponsoring organisations etc
- **External stakeholders** such as emergency services, young people, parent/carers, press, social media, partner organisations, regulators/statutory authorities, trade associations, neighbouring businesses, insurers etc

Dealing with the media

Organisations should consider and include arrangements for dealing with the media. Serious incidents, particularly those involving young people may generate media interest which can be intense and escalate quickly.

Social media should be considered carefully and dedicated response strategies be included within the Critical Incident Response Plan. It is extremely difficult to control information that circulates on social media, however by following a few key principles, organisations can endeavour to manage social media in response to an incident

- Establish social media listening tools specific to an incident
- Direct posts to prepared press statements and/or a dedicated media or parent/carer line
- Provide only factual information
- Do not engage in arguments
- Attempt to encourage direct/private messaging rather than public forums

Organisations should have a considered and professional approach to responding to press enquiries and provide factual information when it is appropriate to do so. In the absence of a response from an organisation, the press may seek this from alternative and less informed sources such as social media and this may be unhelpful for the youth work organisation. Critical Incident Response Plans should identify appropriate individuals to provide media liaison and provide all other workers with guidance on how to respond if approached. Only authorised staff should liaise with the media and post on social media. All other workers should be briefed not to provide interviews or to post on social media. If approached, workers should politely direct to authorised staff ideally via a dedicated media liaison line, or to a prepared statement if available.

Media response is a specialist area and youth work organisations should consider seeking specialist external support such as that provided by Pharos Response or perhaps through insurers or other agencies.

Responsibilities

A Critical Incident Response Plan should clearly identify the responsibilities and roles required to enable the organisation to respond to an emergency effectively. Those roles identified need not relate to individual named workers and instead be 'functional' in nature so that other colleagues could be assigned the role in the absence of a specific individual.

The Critical Incident Response Plan should identify all the support and resources that may feasibly need to be called upon and ensure that all colleagues involved in the response understand their role in advance. Where the plan identifies support needs that the organisation is unable to provide internally, additional services should be sought from external agencies such as Pharos Response. This may include: PR & communications; specialist advice areas such as in safeguarding; post event support services such as trauma counselling; or specialist operational incident management support.

Example critical incident response functions may include the following:

i. Duty officer

Organisations providing more complex and multi-site operations should consider instigating a duty system with dedicated individuals being responsible for providing a management point of contact for workers operating away from 'head office'. Calls to Duty Officers should be answered quickly and ideally have back-up systems to divert the call to another number if the first person is unable to answer. Where possible, organisations should consider establishing a dedicated incident telephone line that does not receive other types of telephone calls instead of individuals day-to-day handsets which may run out of battery.

It is important that anyone who is answering emergency calls is suitably trained and competent to respond. The Duty Officer is the first management contact for a worker (or young person) to call in order to raise the alarm and to receive organisational support. Emergency contacts should be available and accessible at all times whilst a programme is in progress, including overnight or at weekends for residential activity.

ii. Critical Incident Response Team

A dedicated team will help coordinate the organisational response and would normally consist of senior managers or others with specific skills to aid the response. The roles within the response team will vary depending on the organisation, the nature of the programme and incident severity or type. Roles or capabilities required within the Emergency Response Team may include;

- Response Team Leader: A suitably experienced individual should take charge of the incident response. This person will usually be a senior manager with the authority, capacity and competence to manage the situation, make decisions and delegate tasks and responsibilities as required. They should retain an overview of the situation, keep track of developments, and establish the response team.
- Operations Lead
- Young People and Parent/Carer Lead
- Designated Safeguarding Lead
- PR & Communications Lead
- Media Spokesperson
- Co-opted members such as IT and Facilities, social media
- Team Administrator

It is critical that the response team is able to make decisions and therefore must include senior staff with appropriate authority.

iii. Support team

Organisations should consider the possible need for an individual or team to travel out to the group involved in the incident to provide additional support at the scene and help to coordinate the response. Plans for the possible provision of a support team should be included in the Critical Incident Response Plan to enable swift action. Plans should consider the competence and resources required, as well as arrangements for transport, communications and access to funds.

Emergency response actions

The table below lists some initial and secondary actions that should be considered in the event of critical incidents. These should be made specific for individual youth work organisation programmes and be outlined within the Critical Incident Response Plan.

Workers in direct contact with young people and directly affected by the incident	Critical Incident Response Team
Immediate actions:	
Focus on immediate safety and wellbeing of individuals. Move people away from immediate danger if safe to do	Provide initial advice to the group involved in the incident and agree continued or next contact (time and means)
Emergency actions such as isolating source of harm at the scene if safe to do so such as use of fire extinguishers, switching off electricity or turning of vehicle engines	Establish the nature of the incident and as many initial facts as possible
Call emergency services if necessary	Establish schedule of updates and immediate support requirements for colleagues at the scene. Establish any actions that may help contain the situation and prevent the situation from worsening.
Provide first aid	Convene the Critical Incident Response Team, appropriate to the needs of the situation. Decide whether in-person or remotely
Call Duty Officer/emergency contact and provide as many facts as possible, explaining actions taken and support needed	Establish priorities and delegate initial tasks with responsibilities
Evacuation to a safer location if appropriate and safe to do so	Assess initial communication risks and priorities: establish social media listening and respond as appropriate
Update Duty Officer/emergency contact	Record all information and keep a log of established facts (Who, What, Where, When) and all actions and decisions

Secondary actions:	
Liaise with emergency services and other external agencies at the scene	Notify other staff and/or stakeholders as stated in the Emergency Response Plan
Continue to liaise with Duty Officer	Draft media holding statement
Group management and continued welfare support	Despatch a Support Team if necessary
Continued first aid and medical assistance	Communicate with and support parents/carers
Organise local logistics to support those affected	Liaise with other external stakeholders including third party providers (transport / accommodation / activity, police or statutory authorities
Politely direct any media who arrive on scene to media contact at the organisation	Notify partners or programme sponsors according to any notification protocols
Brief group on importance of not posting on social media	Publish statement on website and liaise with the press. Assign spokesperson
Produce an incident report and submit to the organisation. Participate in any incident review or investigation	Decide whether to suspend the programme. Organise logistics to support the group to return home safely if relevant
	Notify insurers and seek legal advice is appropriate. Initiate a review of the incident and ensure lessons learned are applied to future practice.
	Support the post incident needs of all those affected (e.g. counselling)

Post-incident review

All incidents should be reported and organisations should have a robust system in place to promote a culture of reporting and incident review. Following a critical incident, a full review/investigation should be undertaken to establish the cause(s) and the full facts surrounding the incident. A robust process to identify all lessons learned and ensure practical application into future practice should be implemented. Advice from the organisation's legal advisers should be sought before an internal investigation records its findings if litigation is likely.

Briefing, training and practice

Relevant workers must receive appropriate briefing and training relevant to their role and understand the procedures and actions they should follow in an emergency. A copy of the Emergency Response Plan should be provided and colleagues should be briefed on it's contents. Organisations are encouraged to undertake regular testing of their critical incident response systems to support staff preparedness and test the effectiveness of procedures. Where possible, testing should be realistic and involve scenarios which could realistically occur during a programme(s). Testing should take place periodically and as frequently as is deemed necessary to support effective practice and may be carried out internally or with the support of external expertise.