



National
Operational
Guidance

Control measure

**Aerial resources: Helicopters for
search and rescue**



NFCC
National Fire
Chiefs Council

Developed and maintained by the NFCC



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Control measure knowledge

Helicopters can be mobilised to assist in search and rescue activities including:

- Accessing stranded people
- Moving casualties
- Reconnaissance of inaccessible areas
- Providing an aerial view to inform and improve ground-level searches

The required capabilities should be considered when requesting helicopter assistance:

- Search and rescue helicopters – requested through the Coastguard:
 - Searchlight
 - Winch capable
 - Operate in a wide range of weather conditions
 - Surveillance capabilities, including night vision and thermal imaging
 - A range of logistical tasks, including transporting emergency responders
 - Fully equipped medical facilities
- Police air support – requested through the police:
 - Searchlight
 - Surveillance capabilities, including high-resolution zoom cameras, night vision and thermal imaging
- Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS) – requested through the ambulance service:
 - Searchlight
 - Advanced trauma care
 - Treatment and transfer of casualties

Limitations should also be considered when requesting helicopter assistance:

- Impact on the incident ground
 - Noise
 - Rotor wash that can disturb water, dust and other objects, and even turn over vessels
 - Present a hazard for personnel working in the vicinity of helicopters, especially if they need to land
- Weather conditions
- Visibility



- Location:
 - Physical features or hazards in the search area
 - Landing requirements, although decisions about access or landing arrangements will be made by the pilot
- Fuel supply and flying time

When requesting helicopter resources, the following information will need to be provided:

- Location of incident (grid reference)
- Description of the incident
- Nature of tasking, for example, rescue, reconnaissance, medical assistance, transport
- Number and location of casualties
- Hazards at the location, such as overhead power lines
- Weather conditions and visibility
- The resources on scene or en route to the incident

Once the helicopter is on-scene, it will be necessary to brief the pilot or aircrew about their task, objectives and any hazards identified. Communication between the incident ground and the helicopter pilot or aircrew will need to be established and maintained; the correct air channel will need to be used to support this.

The information gathered by using helicopters should be used to:

- Improve situational awareness
- Assist with risk assessments
- Inform search and tactical planning
- Provide up-to-date information to operational and fire control personnel
- Ensure personnel are available, ready and in the correct location to respond

Search and rescue helicopters

The Coastguard's Aeronautical Rescue Coordination Centre (ARCC) responds to requests for search and rescue helicopter assistance if there is a threat to life. Helicopters are mobilised by the ARCC from several sites around the UK. The ARCC manage the deployment and support of search and rescue helicopters, including identification of refuelling sites and arranging reliefs.

Further information is provided in the publication, [Working with the ARCC](#), which is hosted on ResilienceDirect.

Police helicopters

The police air support units, National Police Air Support (NPAS), Police Service of Northern Ireland Air Support Unit and Police Scotland Air Support Unit, can provide additional support, advice and

communication links.

Strategic actions

Fire and rescue services should:

- Ensure personnel know how to request appropriate helicopter resources and what information will need to be provided
- Develop mutual aid arrangements and emergency planning for joint working with local helicopter service providers
- Pre-plan to identify radio channels that can be used for ground-to-air communications at multi-agency incidents

Tactical actions

Incident commanders should:

- Consider requesting helicopter resources to assist with a search or rescue incident
- Ensure personnel understand the hazards of working in the vicinity of helicopters, especially if they need to land
- Use the information gathered through the use of helicopters when planning, and to improve understanding of the situation for operational and fire control personnel
- Establish and maintain communications with the helicopter pilot or aircrew
- Brief the helicopter pilot or aircrew of the required task and objectives, and details of hazards identified
- Ensure personnel are available, ready and in the correct location to respond to information gathered by the helicopter