



National
Operational
Guidance

Control measure

**Situational awareness: Search for a
missing person**



NFCC
National Fire
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Control measure knowledge

The search for a missing person on land is the responsibility of the police. However, the fire and rescue service have a duty to protect life and could be the first to arrive at an incident that involves a missing person. The police should request fire and rescue service attendance if the incident involves fire. They may also request assistance for complex area searches. Other agencies may also request fire and rescue service assistance to search for a missing person.

Through a risk assessment made by the police, a category of risk will be applied that reflects the risk to the individual and the public. The risk assessment will dictate the level and speed of response required, in addition to the level of police management and resources. For example, a high-risk missing person will require the immediate deployment of police resources, including a police search adviser (PoLSA) and informing the media.

At any search that requires a multi-agency response, the [JESIP Joint Doctrine](#) should be applied. Joint training and exercises help to establish roles and responsibilities when searching for people.

It is important to gain situational awareness when searching for a missing person, as this may improve the effectiveness of the search.

Information gathering

Point last seen (PLS) is defined as the last known sighting of a person; this may be based on witness information or visual evidence, such as closed-circuit television (CCTV).

Last known position (LKP) is defined as the most recent positive confirmation of a missing person's location. This may be based on physical indicators, such as property, clothing or tracks.

Depending on the information available, the police and other rescue organisations may use the PLS and LKP as the initial planning point (IPP); the area at which a search commences. However, if the PLS and LKP vary, a PoLSA or search co-ordinator may opt to base the IPP on only one of them.

When searching for missing people, the information gathered should include elements such as:

- The number of missing people
- The condition of each missing person, including their:
 - Age



- Pre-existing health concerns
- Injuries
- The potential impact on the missing person of the:
 - Location
 - Weather
 - Length of time missing
- The potential impact of the incident on the location of missing people, for example:
 - If they could have been thrown a distance away from the scene
 - If they could have moved or been moved away from the scene

Useful sources of information include:

- Registers
- Visitor books
- Roll calls
- Ticket information
- Instantly accessible closed-circuit television (CCTV)
- Lists of passengers, including public transport drivers or crew (refer to [Review passenger or cargo information](#))

These sources of information may not be accurate, especially if there is the potential for there to be unrecorded or unauthorised occupants, passengers or trespassers.

Signs of occupancy may also be a source of information about the numbers, condition or location of missing people. Based on the context of the incident, these could include:

- In modes of transport:
 - Child seats or 'child on board' signs
 - Disabled badges or mobility aids
 - Personal possessions
- Fastened seatbelts on unoccupied seats
- Windscreen damage, such as bullseyes
- In buildings:
 - Lights on
 - Closed curtains
 - Vehicles on the property or in an associated car park
 - Dogs barking

Recording information about people found

It is very important to gather information about people found at the incident, in order to eliminate them from the search. This information should include:

- Their name and description
- Where they were found
- Their current condition
- Their current location

The information gathered should be appropriately recorded and communicated to emergency responders at the incident ground and to the relevant control rooms, taking into account data protection requirements. This especially applies to the current location of people, as they may not want this to be divulged.

Search plan co-ordination and communication

Gathering and maintaining information throughout the incident will contribute towards the development of a co-ordinated search plan, as well as providing continuity when trying to find missing people. It will also help to determine the extent of the area needing to be searched, either by initial responders or as part of a multi-agency or National Resilience response. The search plan should take into account external conditions, who is involved in carrying out the search, and the potential impact on missing people.

If survival guidance is being given, this should be co-ordinated between the incident ground and the fire control room. Survival guidance may affect the behaviour of people, influence where they can be found and provide a credible source of information about their location. It is also important that fire control rooms understand progress, to ensure the guidance they are providing to callers is accurate.

Co-ordination and communication between the incident ground and the fire control room may assist in providing relevant and timely information on the location and needs of missing people. This information should be communicated to all emergency responders at the incident, including police search advisers (PoISA).

Establishing a search sector may assist with the command of a complex incident. A search sector commander can gather information from multiple sources, such as the fire control room and incident command points. This co-ordination function can effectively manage the information received to:

- Determine its impact on search plans
- Assist with co-ordinating search activities
- Maintain a record of the people located or rescued, so that cross-checking can be accurately carried out, thereby ensuring all missing people have been accounted for

By providing the incident commander and fire control room with regular updates, the search sector commander can help them to maintain situational awareness and adapt their activities accordingly.

For further information about search sectors, refer to Incident command – [Sectorisation](#).

Strategic actions

Fire and rescue services should:

- Provide incident commanders with the means to access relevant information at search incidents
- Participate in joint training and exercises with other agencies to improve interoperability at search incidents

Tactical actions

Incident commanders should:

- Share and exchange information gathered about missing people with emergency responders and the fire control room
- Implement a co-ordination process for survival guidance being given by the fire control room
- Use the information gathered to develop and communicate a co-ordinated search plan
- Consider establishing a search sector with a search sector commander
- Liaise and co-ordinate activity with other emergency responders, including police search advisers (PoISA)
- Record and appropriately share information about people found with emergency responders and relevant control rooms
- Cross-check records of people found against those of people still missing