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# **A PROTOCOL FOR MEDIA RELATIONS IN THE EVENT OF AN OFFSHORE INCIDENT**



**Maritime &  
Coastguard  
Agency**

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## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1. The Emergency Preparedness Offshore Liaison (EPOL) Group has developed the 'Protocol for Media Relations in the Event of an Offshore Incident' in order to provide an agreed approach to media relations by those responding to an offshore incident.

## **2. Protocol Aim**

- 2.1. The aim of this agreed Protocol is to achieve coordinated, effective media relations that meet the needs of the partners and deliver prompt, accurate and consistent information to the media and hence the public. Partners, in the context of this document, are Police Service of Scotland (Police Scotland), the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) and the offshore energy industry.

## **3. Scope**

- 3.1. The guidance in this Protocol applies to offshore energy installations and associated activity, such as helicopter movements, where policing responsibility lies with Police Scotland. These installations are in the UK sector of the Northern and Central North Sea and West of Shetland. For incidents occurring outwith those areas, companies should liaise with the appropriate Police Forces.
- 3.2. This Protocol is intended to complement multi-agency plans for responding to any emergency in any Police area, produced by the Local Resilience Partnerships (LRP) in accordance with the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. (LRP membership includes all organisations involved in responding to, or receiving from an emergency in each Police area). The protocol provides detailed guidance on the roles and responsibilities of all organisations involved in a response to an offshore incident which may require an LRP response and also for incidents which fall below that threshold.
- 3.3. An LRP response will be considered by member organisations if an incident offshore resulted in wider consequences such as:
- The requirement for rest centres, survivor reception centres or humanitarian assistance centres.
  - Casualty numbers sufficient to require NHS Grampian's, and/or the Scottish Ambulance Service's major incident plan to be activated.
  - Coastal Pollution.
  - Mass Fatalities.

An LRP response will also be considered for incidents at energy sites and infrastructure located onshore, for which specific LRP plans exist.

## **4. Factors Specific to Offshore Incidents**

- 4.1. Unlike an onshore incident, there is no accessible scene for the Police to deploy officers to, or for the media to attend.
- 4.2. Unlike land based emergencies in which the Police will co-ordinate the response of other emergency services, search and/or rescue operations during offshore incidents will be led solely by HM Coastguard who will also be responsible for notifying hospitals and ambulances wherever injured persons are to be brought onshore, (which may be the nearest landfall, neighbouring Police areas or neighbouring countries).
- 4.3. When casualties or evacuees from an offshore incident are brought ashore, the Police will lead the onshore response i.e. reception, interview and investigation.
- 4.4. When the search and/or rescue phase is complete at sea and the incident at sea moves to the recovery and/or investigative phase(s), a formal handover of primacy will take place between HM Coastguard and Police Scotland.
- 4.5. Mobilisation of the LRP and implementation of the LRP Public Communications Plan will take some time. Media demands on those responding to a major offshore incident, however, are immediate and they can impact on the operational response. This Protocol is intended to cover the initial media response to major incidents, until such time as the LRP and the LRP Public Communications Cell are fully established and operational. It is also designed to provide guidance for incidents in which the LRP is unlikely to be convened.
- 4.6. The Police, MCA and the Duty Holder or Company responsible for the emergency response (e.g. helicopter operator) will all have their own media response arrangements in place for such incidents. This may also include contracting and service companies.

## **5. The Need for Co-operation**

- 5.1. Without ongoing liaison among responding organisations during an incident, there is a possibility of conflicting information and messages reaching the media and a potential for resultant harm – for example, to victim's families, to an investigation or to future criminal proceedings.
- 5.2. While each partner is empowered to release relevant factual information as appropriate, this Protocol aims to minimise the above risks by ensuring that each partner has advance sight of the other's information for media release and also receives a copy of the final release.

## **6. Speed of Response**

- 6.1. Modern communications including mobile and satellite telephones, the internet and social media along with 24-hour news channels have dramatically altered how news is handled. This in turn has significantly increased the demands it places on those responding to emergencies.
- 6.2. It is likely that the media will become aware of the incident at an early stage and they may receive images and information from a variety of external sources not party to this Protocol.
- 6.3. In order to meet these challenges and to avoid inaccurate or misleading information being presented by external sources, partners to this Protocol should have internal procedures and structures in place to deal rapidly with media demand while retaining the principles outlined in Section 5.
- 6.4. Complex lines of communication, particularly in respect of companies with corporate decision making located elsewhere in the world and in significantly different time zones to the UK, are unlikely to be able to match the necessary speed of response.

## **7. Requirements of the Scottish Legal System**

- 7.1. This Protocol has been developed for offshore incidents that take place within the jurisdiction of the Scottish Legal system.
- 7.2. Every incident has the potential for criminal investigation by the Police on behalf of the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service.
- 7.3. It is very important, therefore, that all parties are aware that Scotland's Lord Advocate has issued guidelines on media relations, primarily to ensure that any possible future criminal proceedings are not prejudiced. The Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service can advise on the Lord Advocate's Guidelines in detail however, in general all parties to this Protocol involved in providing information to the media, should bear the following points in mind:
  - There should be no speculation or conjecture as to the cause of the incident.
  - Only confirmed information as to the location of the incident, identity of the aircraft, vessel or offshore installation involved along with the number of casualties involved should be given.
  - Fatalities will be confirmed by Police Scotland first and other agencies should not provide details without having first checked with Police Scotland.
  - Personal details of fatalities should only be released after the next of kin have been informed. This is a Police responsibility. Personal details of people sustaining non-fatal injuries are not normally released by the Police.

## **8. Police Liaison Officers & Maritime Incident Communication Officers**

- 8.1. During an offshore incident, it is likely that Police Liaison Officers (PLO) will be deployed to the Duty Holder's Emergency Response Room (ERR) and to the Coastguard Operations Centre (CGOC) leading any search and/or rescue operation.
- 8.2. The coordinating CGOC will also request the attendance of a Maritime Incident Communications Officer (MICO) from the Duty Holder or from the Company responsible for the emergency response. In the case of a helicopter incident, a MICO will also be requested from the helicopter operator. HM Coastguard considers the presence of MICOs at the coordinating CGOC to be a critical component in the exchange of incident information.
- 8.3. While the primary role of PLOs and MICOs is to assist in other ways, this Protocol is also based on them having some involvement in the exchange of media information and, in the case of the PLO, ensuring or consulting on its suitability for release.

## **9. Guidance on the Exchange of Media Information between Partners**

- 9.1. Offshore incidents can generate a low, medium or high level of response with corresponding level of media interest. Partners to this protocol may have different procedures in place to deal with this and the protocol is intended to provide generic media response guidelines rather than deal with specific issues or procedures at each and every level.
- 9.2. MCA media releases will always be issued by the MCA Communications Branch based at MCA headquarters in Southampton. This unit operates a 24/7 on-call system. They will receive incident information direct from the CGOC and they also have remote internet access to the HM Coastguard Incident logs.
- 9.3. CGOCs may confirm basic incident details verbally, in the early stages of an incident, to the media while retaining the principles outlined in Sections 5 and 7.
- 9.4. Duty Holder or Company Media Response may be handled in-house but is frequently contracted out to specialist agencies that operate an on-call system.
- 9.5. Notwithstanding the presence of a PLO, all Police Scotland media releases will be issued by the Police Scotland Corporate Communications national news desk.

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- 9.6. The national news desk is open Monday to Friday between 7am and 9pm and Saturday to Sunday between 8am and 7pm. Police Scotland Corporate Communications operates a 24/7 on-call system and can be contacted by Area Control Rooms outwith opening hours.
- 9.7. Depending on the circumstances, PLOs may have a role in facilitating the exchange of media releases between partners.
- 9.8. All media releases issued from Police Scotland Corporate Communications will be shared with the PLO and passed to the company media personnel.
- 9.9. When a PLO is not deployed to the company ERR, the company representative responsible for media releases should make contact with Police Scotland.
- 9.10. Other Police Forces who may be involved will have an on call system to provide specialist media support to any of their Police Officers who have been deployed to assist.
- 9.11. Bearing in mind the need to respond swiftly while retaining accuracy and sensitivity, it is important to streamline the exchange of potential and actual media releases. Wherever possible, direct contact between partner media responders should be established at the earliest opportunity and maintained throughout the incident.
- 9.12. In order to facilitate the flow of information between partner media responders, consideration should be given to using ex – directory telephone numbers i.e. lines only to be used for this specific purpose during an incident.
- 9.13. PLOs and MICOs have a role in facilitating the initial exchange of contact details for media responders.
- 9.14. While incident information will be shared between partners, its accuracy has to be determined before any action, particularly a media release, is based on it. Partners should put procedures in place to confirm accuracy of information e.g. although MCA media responders will issue the media release, the accuracy of the information will be confirmed by the CGOC.
- 9.15. Advance view by partners of each others' media releases is an important safety valve in this matter.
- 9.16. Companies should ensure they maintain an up-to-date list of contact telephone numbers and email addresses for the media offices of Police Scotland, MCA, Industry Regulators and industry representative agencies.

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## **10. Partner Responsibilities for the Issue of Information**

10.1. Each partner will;

- Be responsible for the release of information for which they are the primary source – subject to the guidance outlined in Section 7.
- Ensure that the other partners have advance sight of information to be released.
- Give ten minutes for response unless there is mutual agreement for a longer period.
- Provide a written reason if a partner's amendment is not accepted.
- Provide partners with a copy of the final release no later than its media distribution.
- Only use information provided by other partners once it has been released.
- Inform partners at the earliest opportunity if there are significant developments.

10.2. HM Coastguard has overall responsibility for terminating search operations when persons are still missing. This decision is only taken after all options have been exhausted and life expectancy has been exceeded by a substantial margin. Partners will be consulted and warned in advance before notification of termination is released to the media.

## **11. Media Relations at other Locations**

11.1. As the media cannot attend an offshore incident, onshore locations suitable for handling media conferences or media briefings should be identified at the earliest opportunity.

11.2. An Evacuee Reception Centre may be established but this would not normally be considered an appropriate location for Media briefings and/or Media conferences.

11.3. In a major offshore incident, the importance of holding a multi-agency media conference at the earliest opportunity cannot be overstated. Previous experience has demonstrated that a media conference within the early hours of an incident response provides an authoritative outlet for information on the incident while simultaneously allowing an element of management of the extensive media interest.

11.4. A Media conference will normally be chaired by the appropriate lead authority.

11.5. If a media briefing centre is established, partners will co-operate in joint briefings and media conferences in accordance with the area's LRP multi-agency public communications plan.

11.6. Given there will be an investigation following the incident in which the partners have different roles, this co-operative approach requires that all adhere to known facts and avoid any speculation in communicating with the media.

## **12. Partner Responsibilities for Media Conferences, Briefings and Interviews**

12.1. Each partner will:

- Speak about information for which they have responsibility and are the primary source – subject to the Guidance in Section 7.
- Share (where possible in advance) with the other partners any new information released.
- Only use information provided by other partners once it has been released.
- Adhere to known facts and avoid speculation.

## **13. Liaison with Industry Representative Agencies**

13.1. It will be recognised that industry representative agencies, including OGUK, may be required to issue statements to the media to provide a generic "industry" response. This is more likely to happen in the later stages of an incident, as media focus moves on from reporting search, rescue and recovery to event analysis.

13.2. The representative agency will:

- Liaise with the media representative within the energy company, ensuring it has received all information released by the partners.
- Adhere to the guidelines set out in the above protocol regarding partner responsibilities for media conferences, briefings and interviews.
- Ensure the energy company, the other companies involved, MCA and Police Scotland have advance sight of the statement prior to its release, with at least 10 minutes given for response.
- Not confirm fatalities before Police Scotland.

13.3. Depending on the scale of the incident, energy companies may wish to alert their representative agency as part of their external stakeholder communications, including such agencies in the information cascade.

## **14. Aeronautical Rescue Co-ordination Centre (ARCC)**

14.1. The ARCC at the MCA's National Maritime Operations Centre (NMOC) in Fareham has the responsibility for dealing with all requests from the Emergency Services for Search and Rescue (SAR) aviation assistance within the United Kingdom Search and Rescue Region. This includes MCA UK SAR helicopters as well as other SAR helicopters such as the Industry SAR in certain circumstances. ARCC can also provide support by way of fixed wing aircraft.

14.2. The MCA Media Response Unit is responsible for media statements linked to the ARCC or SAR aircraft.



## **15. Video Footage**

- 15.1. Most SAR helicopters are fitted with high resolution cameras as part of their onboard equipment. Although primarily intended to assist the crew in searching, they are also used to record SAR activity for training or evidential purposes.
- 15.2. The MCA has strict rules over the release of any video recordings or still photographs to the media. This includes footage or stills obtained during an incident. No footage or stills will be released that could compromise any future inquiry.
- 15.3. Technical issues prevent partners sharing or previewing footage before it is released to the media. Wherever possible, partners will be advised that footage has or is likely to be released.
- 15.4. Video footage released by the MCA is released via the Agency's YouTube channel or social media. Footage is free to use with credit to the MCA and is not allowed to be sold for profit by news outlets.

## **16. Later Stages**

- 16.1. This protocol relates to an incident that is ongoing, during the emergency phase. Primacy will move elsewhere once an investigation is underway.
- 16.2. This is clearly dependent on aspects of the investigation. The Police and Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) will be involved as may the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB), Air Accident Investigation Branch (AAIB) and the MCA Maritime Investigations Unit with concurrent investigations.
- 16.3. Primacy will also depend on whether the incident occurs in international waters and involves a foreign flagged ship. This may become a matter for the flag state of the vessel.

## **17. Exercises**

- 17.1. Companies undertaking exercises which include a test of media relations are encouraged to invite partners to participate.
- 17.2. MCA media strategy and mode of operation, however, will preclude MCA Media Response from participating in all but the largest scale exercises. In most other cases, CGOC operations room staff will role play.

**18. Review of the Protocol**

- 18.1. The Protocol will be subject to ongoing monitoring by the EPOL Group. It will be reviewed on an annual basis at the instigation of the Chair of the EPOL Group.