



National  
Guidance

## Emergencies and Critical Incidents – An Overview

Serious incidents on Off-Site Visits are rare but they do happen. Minor incidents, whether accidents or other emergencies, are more common. Effective planning means that the likelihood of any of these is reduced, and that, when they do happen, their impact and consequences are minimised.

*For more detailed information on avoiding accidents and emergencies, and on critical incident planning, please refer to other documents within this guidance, which give specific advice for Employers, Establishments and Leaders.*

### A hierarchy of emergencies

When we look at how things can go wrong on an Off-Site Visit, it is possible to consider emergencies in four categories, depending upon the nature of the incident. Planning and preparation for Off-Site Visits should ensure an appropriate response to an emergency in any of these categories, at any time of day or night.

- **Incident:** a situation that is dealt with by the Visit Leadership Team. This may, perhaps, involve some communication back to the Establishment (e.g. a school) or to parents, and some support from the Establishment but the Visit Leader remains in control and is able to cope.
- **Emergency:** an incident which overwhelms the coping mechanisms of the Visit Leadership Team and which requires the Establishment's Emergency Plan for Off-Site Visits to be initiated. This may, perhaps, involve some communication with the Employer and support from it, but the Establishment takes control of the situation and is able to cope.
- **Critical Incident:** an incident which overwhelms the coping mechanisms of both the Visit Leadership Team and the Establishment, and which requires the Establishment Emergency Plan and the Employer Critical Incident Plan to be initiated. The Employer takes control of the situation and supports the Establishment and the visit staff/participants.
- **Major Incident:** an incident which (if in the UK) is declared as a major incident by the Police, who will take control, and where the relevant Local Authority's Major Incident Plan is initiated, or where (if outside the UK) the relevant authorities take control. Both the Establishment's and the Employer's Response Plans will be required in order to coordinate with the Police or other authorities.

## Key points

- Deciding what to do in the event of an accident or emergency should form part of the planning and preparation of every Off-Site Visit, and be written down as Emergency Procedures for the visit. All members of the Visit Leadership Team should be familiar with these.
- Where there are only one or two leaders on a visit then young people should also be familiar with the Emergency Procedures, or at least should know how to contact the Establishment to get help.
- Visit Emergency Procedures should be written under the umbrella of Emergency/Critical Incident Plans at Establishment and Employer Level, which allow any type of incident to be appropriately dealt with.
- The initial information about an incident may come to a non-specialist, such as a school receptionist or someone else who happens to answer the phone. Emergency Procedures/Critical Incident Plans must ensure that they know what to do.
- Plans must take into account the possibility of an incident occurring out of normal working hours.
- All those involved in Off-Site Visits, whether part of the Visit Leadership Team, acting as Establishment base contact, or having a role in the Emergency/Critical Incident Plan at either Establishment or Employer level should:
  - a. Be competent to fulfil their role. This includes having the ability to function effectively in a crisis situation.
  - b. Be familiar with the relevant plan and have easy access to key information.
  - c. Receive appropriate briefing, support (e.g. crib cards), or training as required.
  - d. Have regular opportunities to engage in practice scenarios.
- Phone numbers change, so ensure lists of contact phone numbers are regularly reviewed and updated. Have a system for ensuring that all lists are amended when necessary and old ones destroyed.
- The Establishment Emergency Contact and any staff named in the Emergency Plan should have key information, including contact phone numbers, close to hand at all times a visit is in progress. Do not keep this information in only one place or only electronically.

## Training and testing

Emergency/Critical Incident Plans can never provide a step-by-step guide to responding to an emergency: they must be implemented and adapted by competent people. Thought should be given to the provision of appropriate, initial, incident response training for relevant staff. Whatever initial training is provided it is essential that periodic scenario-based training and testing of the system (at all levels from Visit Leadership Team to Employer) is undertaken in order to keep people fresh, build adaptability and problem solving skills and highlight any flaws and weaknesses.

#### Scenario-Based Training Example:

- *Identify a suitable external person to act as scenario setter, observer, note taker and reviewer - for example an Outdoor Education Adviser, an appropriate Governor, or an experienced EVC, Head or manager from a neighbouring establishment.*
- *The EVC selects a random and representative sample of trips each year and asks the scenario setter to create a relevant scenario prior to departure (i.e. the scenario involves that group on that trip on that day, all that is invented is the details of the incident).*
- *The Visit Leader is given a sealed envelope and told when to open it during the visit. To make learning most effective only the external person, the EVC and the Visit Leader are aware of the test.*
- *At the appropriate time the Visit Leader opens the envelope and alerts the Establishment's Emergency Contact of the incident. ALL MESSAGES RELATING TO THIS SCENARIO SHOULD BEGIN BY CLEARLY INFORMING THE RECIPIENT THAT THIS IS A PRACTICE DRILL. This should be the case right through the chain of escalation and continue until the incident is terminated. An unexpected drill is acceptable but a fake emergency is not.*
- *The Visit Leader can now put the message to one side and get on with the visit. At the first convenient opportunity (which may be in the evening of a residential or back at the establishment at the end of the trip) the whole Visit Leadership Team should sit down and decide what action they would have taken had the scenario been real – given that location, that weather, that group, those leaders etc., how would they have dealt with the situation? They should keep notes of their thinking and the EVC/external observer should debrief the group.*
- *Once the Establishment Emergency Contact receives the call, they should follow the procedure laid down in the Establishment's Emergency Plan including contacting relevant senior managers etc.*
- *The Establishment management should use the scenario as a table-top exercise to work through the decisions they would make and the actions they would take. The external observer should record these and should review them with the group at the end of the exercise.*
- *After the visit the EVC should review all the actions, collate the learning, feed back to both management and all staff, review the Emergency Plan and decide on any future training needs.*

This system can be extended to include the Employer's response by involving them (with their permission) in some of the scenarios.

