

# Command

This page is from APP, the official source of professional practice for policing.

First published 23 October 2013 Updated 25 March 2021

Written by College of Policing

23 mins read

This module details the command structure and supporting measures appropriate to the deployment of authorised firearms officers (AFOs).

Additional guidance is available on the [deployment of AFOs](#) and [discharge of firearms](#).

## Command structure

The generic command structure used in the UK police service operates at three levels – strategic/gold, tactical/silver and operational/bronze.

Firearms operations often form one part of a more complex, multifaceted operation that will already be using gold, silver, bronze command descriptors. It is, therefore, important to define the command of the firearms element through the use of functional descriptors. The descriptors used throughout this module are:

### Strategic firearms commander (SFC)

Determines the strategic objectives and sets any tactical parameters. Retains strategic oversight and overall command and responsibility.

### Tactical firearms commander (TFC)

Develops, commands and coordinates the overall tactical response in accordance with strategic objectives.

### Operational firearms commander(s) (OFC)

Commands a group of officers carrying out functional or territorial responsibilities related to a tactical plan.

For further information see:

- [Formal command structures – gold, silver, bronze](#)
- [Example of a command structure when responding to more complex incidents or operations](#)

## Command roles and functions

The command structure offers flexibility in response to a varied and developing range of circumstances and is functional rather than based on rank. The structure must be clearly articulated to all those involved in the operation and documented if practicable in the circumstances.

The function of the SFC or TFC must not be undertaken by the senior investigating officer (SIO) responsible for the investigation of the offence(s) for which the firearms operation is being conducted, or by any other person who is involved in the investigation.

In protracted investigations where an individual has performed a core investigative role but is no longer doing so, they may perform the role of SFC or TFC. Where this is the case the transfer of those investigative and command responsibilities must be recorded in order to demonstrate a clear separation of those roles.

The separation of SFC and SIO roles may however not be necessary during kidnap operations, prior to the safe recovery of the hostage(s) and where the operational priority is the preservation of life.

It is the responsibility of the SFC to satisfy themselves that the tactical plan is capable of meeting the strategic aims of the operation, and that the provisions of ECHR Article 2 take precedence.

Any change of command structure should, where time permits, be approved by the SFC and must then be documented.

## Recording and accountability

If an officer outside the command structure gives advice or a directive relating to the operational plan to a commander, then this must be recorded and this officer will be accountable for the advice or direction given.

## Decision making

It is essential that objectivity and oversight are clearly demonstrated in the decision-making process. Separation of roles and clarity of responsibility is essential to the provision of effective command and tactical advice.

## Tactical advice

Where tactical advice is required by a commander, this advice should be independent. The tactical advisor should be independent of the command structure and not part of the operational deployment.

## Strategic firearms commander (SFC)

This role:

- has overall strategic command, with responsibility and accountability for directions given
- must ratify the working strategy having reviewed, and amended if necessary, the threat and risk assessment and working strategy developed by the TFC.
- must keep the threat and risk assessment and working strategy under review for the duration of the armed deployment
- should consider consulting a [tactical advisor](#)
- should consider any [tactical parameters](#) to be placed on the police response
- must ensure that the working [strategy](#) for the armed deployment is recorded, including any changes to it, to provide a clear audit trail
- must authorise the deployment of AFOs, or ratify or rescind the deployment where it has already been approved by the TFC
- should ensure that all decisions are recorded, where practicable, in order to provide a clear audit trail
- must ensure that the firearms working strategy complies with the wider strategic aims of the overall operation

- should test the tactical plan against the working strategy, where practicable and/or time allows
- is responsible for overall resourcing in respect of the deployment of AFOs
- where appropriate, will chair meetings of the [strategic coordinating group \(SCG\)](#) when they are held during a multi-agency or multi-discipline response
- should set [command protocols](#) where appropriate
- should consider consulting partners, stakeholders and interest groups involved (if any) when determining the working [strategy](#) (see also [development of strategy \(gold\)](#))
- should consider the need for a [community impact assessments](#)
- should consider declaring and managing the event as a [critical incident](#)
- should maintain a strategic overview
- must be able to be contacted by the TFC
- is responsible for reviewing and ensuring the resilience and effectiveness of the command structure and the effectiveness of the TFC
- should consider the appointment of more than one TFC where there are clear demarcations geographically (namely, police boundaries), or in respect of roles

## Tactical firearms commander (TFC)

In most circumstances the TFC will develop the working strategy, including any appropriate [tactical parameters](#). These will be reviewed and ratified by a SFC as soon as practicable.

For further information see [General principles of strategic planning](#).

The tactical firearms commander:

- must assess and develop the available information and intelligence, and develop an appropriate threat assessment and working strategy for ratification by the SFC where practicable
- must consult a [tactical advisor](#) as soon as practicable
- is responsible for developing and coordinating the tactical plan in order to achieve the working strategy, within any tactical parameters set
- is responsible for ensuring that officers and staff are fully briefed
- should consider the provision of medical support
- should be so located as to be able to maintain effective tactical command of the operation
- should ensure that all decisions are recorded, where practicable, in order to provide a clear audit trail

- should ensure that an operational risk assessment is undertaken prior to deployment
- provides the pivotal link in the command chain between strategic and operational firearms commanders
- must constantly monitor the need for the continued deployment of AFOs.
- must review and update the tactical plan and ensure that any changes are communicated to the OFCs and, where appropriate, the SFC
- should consider and, where appropriate, conduct a community impact assessment(s)
- should consider declaring and managing the event as a **critical incident**
- should consider the number, role and function of the OFCs
- should consider the wider community, public safety and evidential implications of the use of **specialist munitions**, pyrotechnic devices or irritants
- should ensure that after all deployed staff are appropriately debriefed, operational and organisational learning takes place

## Operational firearms commander (OFC)

This role:

- must have knowledge and clear understanding of their role and the overall aim of the operation
- must, where practicable, ensure that their staff are appropriately briefed
- should be located where they are able to maintain effective command of their area of responsibility
- ensures the implementation of the TFC's tactical plan within their territorial or functional area of responsibility
- carries out an operational risk assessment, where practicable, prior to deployment
- updates the TFC, as appropriate, on current developments
- makes decisions within their agreed level of responsibility, seeking approval for any variation in agreed tactics within their area of responsibility (where practicable and time permitting)
- must ensure clear communication channels exist between themselves, the **TFC** and those under their command
- should consider declaring and managing the event as a **critical incident**
- should be available to those under their command, however, they should allow them sufficient independence to carry out their specific role in accordance with the **working strategy** and tactical

plan

- should ensure decisions taken are recorded, where possible, to provide a clear audit trail

## Tactical advisor

A tactical advisor may only provide tactical advice in respect of the tactics in which they are, or have been, occupationally competent and remain currently proficient (see NPFTC).

This role:

- advises on the capabilities and limitations of the AFOs and other police resources being deployed
- advises the SFC or TFC on the implication of any tactical parameters which have been set
- advises on the viable tactical options for consideration by the SFC and TFC within the existing working strategy and any tactical parameters set
- advises the firearms commanders on the tactical considerations, contingencies and implications for each tactical option (see [National Decision Model](#))
- should be in a position to assist and advise the TFC at all stages of the operation
- assists the TFC in developing the threat assessment where appropriate
- provides tactical advice reflecting the existing threat assessment
- ensures that advice given is recorded

The role of a tactical advisor is to advise and not to make command decisions. The responsibility for the validity and reliability of the advice lies with the advisor, but the responsibility for the use of that advice rests with the commander.

## Command support

Command support is a useful element of the command structure.

Depending on the nature and complexity of the operation, and the availability of support staff, all firearms commanders must consider the availability and necessity for:

- intelligence liaison
- tactical advisor
- negotiator coordinator
- logistics support

- surveillance/technical surveillance liaison or advice
- **post incident management**
- media support

Where incidents become protracted, there may be a need to establish a dedicated command facility to manage the operation. This ensures that operations do not impinge on day-to-day policing activity, or vice versa. Forces should ensure that adequate training or familiarisation is given to staff who may be required to perform roles within such a command facility.

## Initial command responsibility

In spontaneous incidents it is the responsibility of the officer authorising the deployment of AFOs to ensure that an appropriate command structure is instigated as soon as practicable. Where appropriate, this officer should remain in command of the deployment until any transfer of command takes place, (namely when initially authorised by an initial TFC, the point at which overall command is deferred to an SFC or when tactical command is handed to a cadre TFC).

In the spontaneous context it will often be the initial TFC that approves the tactical plan or response and authorises the deployment of armed officers.

In planned operations, authorisation for the deployment of armed officers, and approval of the tactical plan and associated contingencies, must be given by an SFC and a command structure must be in place prior to the officers being deployed.

Any consideration in respect of the deployment of AFOs should be recorded along with the decision and rationale for it. Where a recommendation for the deployment of AFOs has been declined, the rationale for that decision should also be documented. In cases where an AFO has self-deployed, the AFO should inform the force control room as soon as practicable so that a TFC can be informed.

## Initial command of incidents

Where an incident is reported or comes to the attention of the police and an immediate operational deployment of AFOs is considered appropriate, the command structure is likely to be condensed. Initial command will usually sit with the appropriately accredited person having ready access to information, communications and resources (this may be the force control room supervisor). Forces

should, therefore, have structures in place that ensure the ready availability of tactical and operational firearms commanders.

If incidents become protracted, there should be arrangements which enable command to be transferred to a cadre TFC, thereby enabling others to return to their normal duties. The command of the incident and responsibility for its management rests with the initial commander until such time as command is transferred. They must ensure that all officers are sufficiently briefed, information-flows are established, and all officers are given as full a briefing as possible in the time available.

An SFC should be contacted as soon as practicable and informed that an incident requiring the **deployment of armed officers** is taking place. The SFC, when in a position to do so, should then review, agree or amend the working strategy and any tactical parameters set and, where necessary, confirm or rescind any given authority.

## Transfer of command

A designated SFC or TFC may not be in a position to take on the role immediately when contacted. They may, however, be in a position to ratify any strategic or tactical decisions made by the officers who have assumed initial command of the incident. Initially, information can be vague and confusing. It is, therefore, important for effective command to be established as quickly as possible and undertaken by the most appropriate person available. The transfer of command roles should take place as soon as practicable. A SFC or TFC's ability to assume command and effectively perform their command function will be dependent on a number of factors.

These factors include:

- knowledge of the circumstances and available intelligence
- the ability to communicate
- the availability of appropriate tactical advice
- a suitable environment from which to exercise the command function

On occasions, the initial TFC may be in a better position to continue in the TFC role until a cadre TFC is in a position to take command.

## Documentation

The transfer of roles at any level in the command structure should be documented and include:

- time and date of transfer
- confirmation that the current NDM application has been briefed, and accepted or amended as appropriate
- confirmation that the new commander understands the operational circumstances, situation and decisions taken

Officers involved in the incident should be made aware of any changes in command, in so far as is practicable and where relevant to their role.

## Working strategy

Commanders must, at the earliest opportunity, develop an effective working strategy to direct police action. A working strategy may start to be developed once information is received. It can be formalised once a threat assessment has taken place, but should be kept under review as circumstances evolve.

A working strategy may contain a number of objectives. Information and intelligence can change, as can the threat assessment, therefore, the working strategy must remain dynamic, kept under review and amended as appropriate.

While it is important that a working strategy is defined and agreed as quickly as possible, it must be based on all the information available at the time. It is rare for a complete or perfect picture to exist. Public safety should always be the priority and at times this may require immediate action to protect life, which, of necessity, may be based on limited information.

The working strategy, and the rationale behind it, should be recorded as part of an audit trail, along with any revisions or amendments. Similarly, the strategy should be regularly reviewed, particularly where a change or handover of command occurs.

## Effective working strategy

An effective working strategy should:

- provide clarity of purpose and operational priorities
- recognise public safety as a priority
- reflect the multidimensional threat assessment in priority order

- be achievable
- be dynamic to reflect changes in circumstances
- be specific to the operation

When formulating a working strategy, firearms commanders are required to consider the role of the police in protecting the public alongside the wider duty to investigate crime and bring offenders to justice. Sustained public protection may be characterised as an acknowledgement that an extended duty of care to the public exists in some more complex operations.

For further information see:

- [Development of strategy \(gold\)](#)
- [Develop a working strategy](#)

## Sustained public protection

The objective of any police investigation must be to protect the public through the detection and prevention of crime. This includes obtaining sufficient evidence to bring arrested persons to justice. While this objective legitimately includes an attempt to secure sufficient evidence to demonstrate the full extent of the planned and criminal intention, this must be balanced against any associated risk to the public.

Action taken to mitigate risk in the short term may only serve to displace or delay that risk and may not address the longer-term public safety considerations. It may only be possible to effectively eliminate risk to the public through the detention, successful prosecution and subsequent lengthy imprisonment of the subjects, particularly where they are committed or repeat offenders. It may not, however, always be possible to develop a plan capable of securing sufficient evidence to do so without risk.

In a covert armed policing operation, the decision to activate a tactical arrest plan and move to an overt phase may have to take account of competing considerations in terms of evidential sufficiency and the safety of those potentially exposed to risk. Where the policing operation relates to more than one subject, evidential sufficiency may have to be considered in the wider context.

It is appropriate to assess the level of risk to the public in both the short and longer term. This may include consideration of whether the means by which more imminent risk is mitigated may increase

risk in the longer term as a result of reduced police control and intelligence opportunities.

In deciding when to authorise the activation of the tactical arrest plan, a commander is, therefore, entitled to take into account the strength of the evidence against the subject(s) and to consider whether:

- there is sufficient evidence to warrant the detention and prosecution of the subjects
- overt police action at an early stage will reduce the likelihood of a successful prosecution
- early overt police action will notify the subject(s) of the covert police operation and result in reduced control and intelligence opportunities
- the longer-term public interest will be served by the activation of the tactical arrest plan at this stage

Any armed policing operation must be planned and controlled so as to minimise, to the greatest extent possible, recourse to lethal force and risk to the public. Any command decisions which may potentially increase the short-term risks associated with the tactical arrest plan in order to reduce the long-term risk to the public must be fully rationalised and justified. In such cases commanders should seek to implement appropriate safeguards to minimise identified short term-risks where possible

## Tactical parameters

The SFC may set or ratify tactical parameters within which the TFC should develop the tactical plan.

Tactical parameters are set to give strategic direction, and not to develop or dictate tactics. In setting parameters, commanders should consider consulting a tactical advisor to discuss the effects of the parameters on the formulation of tactics and achievement of the working strategy. Where tactical parameters are set, they should be clearly articulated and regularly reviewed.

## Command and operational resilience

The protracted deployment of AFOs can have implications for individual and operational effectiveness. These could include:

- commanders' and AFOs' continued fitness for duty

- identification of emerging stress factors
- command and operational resilience
- need for mutual aid and the interoperability and capability of supporting forces

The management and command of situations involving the deployment of AFOs can be stressful and often involves fast, time-critical decision making. It is, therefore, essential that officers at command and support levels, as well as the AFOs involved in deployments, remain physically and mentally capable of undertaking these duties. Forces should have processes in place to monitor officers' **fitness for duty and suitability for their role.**

Where, during a protracted incident or operation, officers are required to remain on duty for extended periods, consideration should be given to the:

- nature of their deployment
- provision of rest periods and refreshments
- arrangements for operational resilience and continuity

Where rest periods are taken, it is important that officers are afforded meaningful rest and not utilised for other tasks associated with the operational deployment.

Rest periods and refreshment breaks which are taken must be fully recorded. Where it is not possible to take rest periods and/or refreshment breaks, this must also be recorded.

## Command location

All firearms commanders should endeavour to be located where they can best undertake their respective roles.

SFCs and TFCs should be located in positions where they are able to communicate, and can best discharge their command responsibilities. As SFCs and TFCs perform different functions, their location needs may differ, and where they are co-located the potential for responsibilities to become less clear should be recognised.

TFCs should be located where they can best actively monitor events and command police activity. This may require them to be near to the scene, in a command vehicle, or in the control room, thereby enabling them to maintain an effective command function.

OFCs should, as far as practicable, be located close to the officers that they are commanding.

In situations where a SFC or TFC does not have access to communications, current intelligence or other support, for example, if they need to move location, they should ensure that another commander is in a position to temporarily undertake their role. This officer will maintain command until the original commander is once more in a position to command the operation. Any command handover in these circumstances should be appropriately recorded.

## Command protocols

SFCs and TFCs may need to agree command protocols with local geographic commanders, taking into account any community issues. Where there is a multi-agency or interdisciplinary element to an operation, command protocols can assist in clarifying areas of responsibility and command function, channels of communication and primacy of command at various stages of the operation. This is particularly relevant where the firearms commanders may be part of a larger operation which is using the gold, silver, bronze structure.

For further information see [Command and control \(for multi-disciplinary operations\)](#).

## Approval and authorisation of tactical plans

The approval and authorisation of tactics, or tactical plans, requires specific consideration and should therefore, where practicable, be separated from the decision by a commander to authorise the deployment of armed officers on the basis that the criteria for their deployment has been met.

A tactical plan will be approved, at the appropriate command level, when accepted and endorsed by the commander. This approval will be based upon the proportionality and viability of the plan, together with its ability to minimise or mitigate identified threat and risk and achieve the working strategy. The approval of a tactical plan should not be considered an authorisation to implement that plan without further confirmation by a commander.

Where fundamental changes are made to an approved plan (for example, using additional resource capability, capacity or tactics), this should be treated as a new plan which requires additional approval.

A tactical plan is authorised when permission is granted by the appropriate commander to implement or activate the approved plan. The authorisation will often be given by the TFC, having had the tactical plan and relevant contingencies approved by the SFC where practicable. Upon authorisation the commander should confirm, to the armed officers deployed, the tactics that are being authorised.

In the event of an imminent threat to life or serious injury being identified, there may be insufficient time to defer to the appropriate commander for authority. Where such occasions are likely to occur appropriate command protocols and tactical parameters should be in place when approval is granted.

In some circumstances, (for example, spontaneous armed incidents), the approval of tactics or tactical plans, and the authorisation for them to be implemented, may be provided by the same commander and occur simultaneously or almost simultaneously.

## Cross-boundary and multi-agency operations

It is often necessary for AFOs to operate outside their assigned policing boundary. This may be as a result of a pursuit, provision of mutual aid to a neighbouring force or policing area, or as part of an operation which transcends territorial policing boundaries.

This may include armed support to surveillance operations, protection or escort duties, see [mobile armed support to surveillance \(MASTS\)](#).

AFOs may also be involved in [multi-agency operations](#). In these circumstances it is important that there is as much clarity as possible in respect of:

- command
- jurisdiction
- standard operating procedures and interoperability
- capability of those involved in the incident
- powers and roles of respective agencies

All commanders and AFOs are trained to common national standards, thereby enabling interoperability across policing boundaries.

## Cross-boundary operations

The operational carriage of firearms across policing boundaries is a regular occurrence and police forces should adopt a pragmatic and effective approach to managing such situations. Where it can be planned for in advance, deployments of armed officers across boundaries should be catered for by way of local protocols and memoranda of understanding.

Where time permits it is essential that the appropriate mechanisms are implemented to enable appropriate and timely briefing and sharing of information and intelligence related to a cross boundary operation and the associated armed deployments.

This principle of appropriate briefing and information sharing is common to spontaneous and planned operations and is not dependent on all forces impacted by the operation being actively deployed in the policing response.

## Unplanned deployment across force boundaries

Where AFOs deploy across a policing boundary in circumstances that are not expected or planned for, the original authorisation, deployment and command structure will remain in place.

The appropriate **SFC** in the force or command area in which the deployment is taking place, however, must be notified at the earliest opportunity so that they can review the deployment and command structure. This will allow that officer to consider:

- authorising the deployment of AFOs from the originating force or command area, together with their command structure, to continue running the operation
- assuming responsibility for the operation, including command and the provision of AFOs
- reviewing the deployment of AFOs and assuming the responsibility of strategic firearms commander (or appointing a new strategic firearms commander from within the force area) and dealing with the incident using the armed officers from the originating force
- assuming responsibility and curtailing the operation

## Planned deployment across force boundaries

In circumstances where it is anticipated that AFOs will be operating across policing boundaries, **command protocols** should provide clarity as to any transfer of command that is required.

Where it is known that an armed deployment (including surveillance and protection operations) may transcend one or more policing boundaries, the original authority will normally remain, and no further authority will be required unless the operation:

- is intended to intervene, intercept, contain, or have some other overt interaction with a subject or members of the public
- is likely to have a significant impact on the community through which it will pass, or take place
- will require support from the police area through which it is passing

Where the criteria set out above are met, the force in whose area the deployment is taking place should be notified at the earliest opportunity.

This notification should include:

- the current information, intelligence (to the extent that it can be shared) and threat assessment related to the operation
- the nature and intention of the operation (including the tactical plan where appropriate)
- the resources deployed on the operation
- the area in which it will be undertaken
- contact details of the strategic and tactical firearms commanders

## Multi-agency operations

There may be occasions when a chief officer agrees to assist another law enforcement agency (for example, HM Revenue and Customs, Border Force, Ports Authority, HM Prison Service) with an operation that is within the force area and where the appropriate authority to deploy AFOs is given.

In these circumstances everyone involved must understand who is in command of each part of the operation. Command protocols may be a useful means of clarifying this. Close coordination and detailed planning between the organisations concerned is fundamental and should normally be agreed at gold level or its equivalent level of management in the organisations concerned.

Forces should take account of national multi-agency protocols and have local protocols with organisations that may require the deployment of AFOs in specific circumstances, for example, hospitals and prisons.

## Accreditation of commanders

Chief officers must ensure that arrangements exist whereby appropriately selected, trained, assessed and accredited commanders and tactical advisors are available to command and advise on the deployment of armed officers.

Chief officers should consider the nature and volume of armed incidents and operations that police officers and may encounter and ensure that there are sufficient numbers of trained and accredited officers who are appropriately security vetted to perform their role(s) as strategic, tactical and operational firearms commanders, tactical advisors and AFOs (see [command structure](#)).

This is particularly important in relation to intelligence-led operations involving organised crime or terrorist-related incidents.

For further information see:

- [Command and control](#)
- [Operational planning](#)

## Occupational and operational competence within command roles

When an officer has attended and satisfactorily completed a course of instruction based on a command or tactical advice module in the national police firearms training curriculum (NPFTC), they will be assessed to be occupationally competent to perform that role.

Chief officers are responsible for ensuring that individuals who have been assessed as occupationally competent are professionally developed to ensure that they can be classed as operationally competent. A commander or tactical advisor must remain operationally competent by regularly performing the roles for which they have been trained.

Forces should implement an auditable process of shadowing, mentoring and performance review as a means of achieving operational competence. This process should be tailored to the firearms commander or tactical advisors intended operational role, and should evidence their ability to perform that role across the range of related operational activity, particularly where this involves potentially more complex armed deployment (for example, MASTS).

Firearms commanders and tactical advisors should be authorised for operational deployment by the relevant firearms portfolio holder.

## Re-accreditation and refresher process for commanders and tactical advisors

Commanders at all levels and tactical advisors must undergo annual commander/tactical advisor refresher training. This process must consist of the relevant approved national annual command or tactical advisor refresher package, supplemented by additional local training which supports force and regional issues identified in the force's armed policing **strategic threat and risk assessment (APSTRA)**.

On the annual completion of these packages, and any other force specific accreditation requirements, a commander or tactical advisor will be deemed to be occupationally competent. In addition to this training requirement commanders and tactical advisors must also demonstrate continued operational competence in order to be formally approved by the firearms portfolio holder, or a person nominated by them, for operational deployment. In order to maintain operational competence a commander or tactical advisor must comply with the force or agency requirements regarding operational performance and nature and number of operational deployments undertaken.

Forces and agencies should maintain records of officers' mandatory refresher training and operational deployment in order to audit their continued operational competence.

Officers in command and tactical advisor roles must be formally re-accredited at least every five years, but consideration should be given to re-accreditation between three to five years depending on operational exposure.

### Tags

Armed policing