

Critical Incident Management

A policy on Critical Incident Management might use the following structure

- 1. A COVER PAGE.** This should include: the name of your youth project/service; the title of the policy; when it comes into force; the person(s) responsible for signing it off; and a date for reviewing it.
- 2. A POLICY STATEMENT.** This should state clearly, but in broad terms, what you want the critical incident management policy to cover. It is a statement of intent and vision, saying what your youth project/service believes. It can be quite short and need not go into all the practical details; these are covered by the sections below.
- 3. REASONS FOR THE POLICY.** This section should give, in clear bullet points, your reasons for creating this policy. Ask yourself questions such as: “Why is such a policy helpful?” and “What concerns would arise if we did not have a policy?” There are some practical reasons for having a policy like this, while other reasons may reflect values that are important to the youth project/service. All these reasons should be listed: they will help all those who are required to comply with the policy to understand its importance and accept it
- 4. THOSE WHO MUST COMPLY WITH THIS POLICY.** This section could again be bullet-pointed, listing all those who you expect to follow the policy. Everyone in your youth project/service needs to be familiar with the critical incident management policy while specific roles will be allocated to the critical incident management team. As the critical incident management policy is run on an interagency basis, the expectations of each agency should be identified and agreed during planning and detailed in this section.
- 5. IMPLEMENTATION.** This will be the largest section of the document, setting out the practical details of how you intend to put the policy into practice. It states who is responsible for what, and how, in practical terms, you intend the policy to be carried out. It might name the tasks for which various people are responsible e.g. how good communications within the team will be encouraged. See the section on ‘Things to think about’ above for some more prompts.
- 6. LINKS TO OTHER POLICY AREAS.** This section should list the other policies of your youth project/service that link into your critical incident management policy. Links to other policy areas, such as your health and safety policy, should be identified in this section. All your policies must interconnect; otherwise the vision for your youth project/service may become confused and pull people in different directions.

¹ *Responding to Critical Incidents-Guidelines for Schools. NEPS 2007.*

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Introduction

It's just another normal day and things are going to plan. Then a bolt from the blue – a critical incident – not only disrupts the daily routine – it fundamentally affects everything and everyone. A critical incident generally refers to an unexpected and traumatic event. The National Educational Psychological Service¹ defines a critical incident as “any incident or sequence of events that overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms” of a youth project/service. A critical incident can include death by suicide, death due to violence and accidental deaths such as road traffic accidents or drowning. It could also include a major incident such as a fire or a terrorist attack.

You need a clear and sensitive pathway forward. That's why it's a good idea to develop a critical incident management policy. We all know that it's not possible to totally prepare for any critical incident but there are many benefits to planning for crises. In times of crisis young people need support from the important adults in their lives and youth workers can be in a key position to provide this kind of support. As with all youth work practice it is crucial that youth workers, particularly in times of crises, operate in a professional manner and follow agreed policies and procedures.

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Things to think about

If you are thinking of creating a policy in this area, the following questions are designed to get you thinking. They do not cover everything but should help to get you started.

Roles and Responsibilities

- Who might be on your critical incident management team and what roles are they best suited for if something happens e.g. administration, informing parents, talking to the media?
- Should someone external to the youth project/service be on your critical incident management team e.g. social worker, counsellor and psychologist?
- Who might take part in the planning of your incident response e.g. local Gardai, parents, young people, other service providers and staff?
- Would a clear statement of who will do what, when and how be useful in a crisis?
- Who will have a copy of your emergency plan and where will it be kept? Should there be more than one copy kept in different places?
- Do you have an up-to-date contact list of members of the critical incident management team, young people and relevant services in your area?

Pre Incident

- How will you create an environment which promotes the mental and emotional health of young people and youth workers and other staff?
- What types of incidents could possibly happen and what impact would each one be likely to have at every level in your youth project/service?
- How will a critical incident management policy be tested?
- How will you make youth workers and other staff aware of the plan when it is designed?
- What kind of practical tasks might need to be carried out and by who e.g. contacting emergency services and parents/guardians?
- What type of training might be useful e.g. first aid, suicide prevention, media skills?
- What steps might be taken if you are concerned about a young person and suicide?

Post Incident

- How might young people be identified and supported after an incident?
- How will youth workers and other staff be supported after an incident? Will this include a debriefing session to deal with the immediate impact of the incident?
- Where can external psychological support or legal support be accessed and what role might they have?
- How important is it to be aware of and sensitive to other cultural and religious beliefs and practices?

Recording and evaluating

- What kind of documents do you need in a crisis e.g. plans of the building, names and contact numbers of young people and their parents/guardians, medical consent forms?
- Are contact details for the emergency services and families up to date?
- What written resources might be useful to have?
- When will you review the policy?

Key things to ensure

- That during an incident the youth project/service works within the agreed plan
- The needs of different cultures when dealing with an unexpected and/or traumatic event are identified and considered in planning

- The developmental stage of young people and their understanding of issues such as death are identified and considered in planning
- The normal routine of the youth project/service is maintained during a critical incident wherever possible

Relevant legislation/guidelines

In designing any policy, it is important to be aware of the wider context in which your youth project/service exists. In many cases, how you have to act is dictated or influenced by the law:

- Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.
- Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Applications) Regulations 2007

Where else to get information and resources

A good policy keeps up to date with current practice, trends and legislation. Your policy should be a living document which directs and underpins the work you do and how it is done. Policy development takes time and effort but the return is worth the investment. There are a range of information sources and resources available to help you. Here are a few to get you started.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) have drawn up excellent guidelines and resources for schools to help them prepare for and respond to a critical incident. These can be adapted for the youth work setting and are available at www.education.ie and by following the links to NEPS.

At www.emergencyplanning.ie the Irish Government's plans for major emergencies is laid out. It has been developed by the Office of Emergency Planning to bring together current available information on Ireland's planning, response and management with regard to a wide range of emergencies.

www.spunout.ie is an Irish website for young people covering lots of different things like health, lifestyle, information, making friends etc.

Other useful websites:

www.mentalhealthireland.ie

www.gayswitchboard.ie

www.selfharm.org

www.youngminds.org.uk

www.reachout.com.au

A booklet 'You're Not Alone', designed to provide guidelines on managing the situation after a death by suicide, from an emotional and a practical point of view, was published by the National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP). A related publication called "Help and Advice on Coping with A Death by Suicide" is available on www.nosp.ie.

ASIST Training (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) is a two-day workshop on dealing with suicide and the threat of suicide. Information is available again at www.nosp.ie.

The Childhood Bereavement Network (CBN) is a network of different organisations and individuals working with bereaved children and young people. Its website address is www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk.