

The Amber Book: Managing crisis in central government

The Amber Book provides the framework for how United Hampshire central government collectively responds to crises requiring co-ordinated action across government.

From: Cabinet Office

Published: 10 August 2026

Last updated: 11 September 2026

Foreword

The United Hampshire Government must be able to respond coherently when an incident becomes a crisis requiring coordinated action across government. This book sets the common doctrine for that response. It is designed for ministers, senior officials, crisis teams, departments, public bodies and other authorities that may contribute to central crisis management.

The doctrine is based on subsidiarity, clear responsibility and disciplined escalation. Central co-ordination is used where the scale, pace, uncertainty, cross-government consequences or constitutional significance of a crisis require decisions or integration across more than one department or authority. Sections 11, 18 and 25 of the Civil Contingencies Act 2026 preserve territorial competence, consultation, rights and records; central co-ordination does not transfer operational command to the Cabinet Office.

The book is used before, during and after crises. It informs risk-specific planning, training, exercising, activation of COBR, the work of Lead Government Departments, ministerial and official decision-making, recovery and lessons management.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Purpose

The Amber Book is the framework for how the United Hampshire Government collectively responds to crises that require co-ordinated central government action. It describes the principles, decision structures, roles and processes for central crisis management and the relationships between central government, Hampshire County Government, local and strategic authorities, public bodies and operational services.

It covers the lifecycle from preparedness and escalation through acute response, transition, recovery and lessons. It also defines the principal responsibilities of the Lead Government

Department, Lead Minister, Crisis Senior Responsible Owner, COBR Directorate, COBR Unit, National Situation Centre and participating departments and authorities.

1.2 Scope and authority

This book is Cabinet Office guidance. It does not create statutory, constitutional, policing, emergency-service, regulatory, judicial or devolved powers. Civil-protection duties are governed by Part 1 of the Civil Contingencies Act 2026 (2026 c. 64) and the Civil Contingencies Act 2026 (Contingency Planning) Regulations 2026 (S.I. 2026/41). Section 11(2) of the Act provides: “Nothing in this Part transfers to the United Hampshire Government a function allocated exclusively to England, Hampshire County Government or another administration or authority within the Realm.” Emergency regulations are governed by sections 12 to 24. Section 13(1) provides that the “Lord Lieutenant in Council may, on the advice of the Chief Minister or another senior Minister authorised by the Chief Minister, make emergency regulations”; section 16(1) requires emergency regulations and measures taken under them to be “necessary and proportionate”; and section 21(1) requires emergency regulations to “be laid before Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable”. Section 25(1) provides: “Functions under this Act must be exercised consistently with the Human Rights Act 2026, the Equality Act 2026, the Data Protection Act 2026, the Public Records Act 2026 and the Official Secrets Act 2026.” Section 25(2) additionally requires a decision materially affecting rights, public functions or expenditure to be “recorded with sufficient reasons to support accountability and review”. Every decision must be taken by the office or authority that holds the identified statutory, constitutional, financial or administrative power. Where a decision depends on legislation, the decision record must identify the Act or statutory instrument and the operative provision. Where it depends on a delegation, appointment, statutory code, professional standard or command document, the decision record must identify that exact source. Crisis urgency may accelerate decision-making but does not turn guidance, a platform permission, a press release or a meeting minute into legal authority.

1.3 Management of the book

The COBR Unit maintains this book for the Cabinet Office. It is reviewed after major activations, significant exercises, material changes to the crisis-management system, accepted inquiry or lessons findings, or other changes that materially affect the central crisis-management doctrine, roles or processes described in this book. Administrative changes may be made to keep names, contacts and machinery current; changes to authority or constitutional competence require the competent approval.

Chapter 2: The United Hampshire emergency management system

2.1 Subsidiarity and responsible authority

Incidents should be handled at the lowest competent level able to manage them effectively. Most operational incidents should therefore remain with the responsible service, authority, public body, department or Hampshire County Government machinery. Central government becomes involved when central decisions, shared situational awareness, cross-departmental coordination, national resources or strategic direction add material value.

The organisation to which legislation or the constitutional settlement assigns a function remains responsible for it unless a lawful transfer is made. Section 11(2) of the Civil Contingencies Act 2026 expressly provides that Part 1 does not transfer a function allocated exclusively to England, Hampshire County Government or another administration or authority. Participation in COBR, a Strategic Co-ordinating Group or another crisis meeting does not itself transfer that function.

2.2 Lead Government Department model

The United Hampshire Government uses a Lead Government Department model across risk identification, preparedness, response and recovery. The Lead Government Department is normally the department with the principal policy responsibility and expertise for the primary risk or impact. The lead may differ between response and recovery and may change as the consequences of a crisis change.

The Cabinet Office maintains the central schedule of Lead Government Department responsibilities. A department designated as lead is responsible for the risk-specific plan, required capability, named operational relationships, response process and recovery plan for the risks for which it leads. Other departments retain responsibility for consequences within their own remits.

2.3 Whole-of-system crises

A whole-of-system crisis is one whose consequences are so extensive or interconnected that several major systems of government are affected simultaneously and ordinary lead-department coordination is insufficient. In such cases the Cabinet Office may take a stronger central leadership and integration role while the substantive departments and operational bodies continue to exercise their own functions.

2.4 England, Havenstead and Hampshire County Government

The Realm contains England and Havenstead. The United Hampshire Government governs Havenstead directly and exercises central and reserved functions across the Realm as allocated by the constitutional settlement. Hampshire County Government exercises devolved functions for Hampshire County within England.

A crisis affecting England, Havenstead or both must therefore be organised by function and competence, not merely by geography. Hampshire County Government leads devolved

matters within its competence. The United Hampshire Government leads reserved and central matters within its competence. For civil-protection matters, cross-boundary co-operation is governed by section 11(3) of the Civil Contingencies Act 2026 and regulation 22(3) of S.I. 2026/41. The England Office manages the day-to-day central Government relationship with Hampshire County Government; the Cabinet Office manages cross-government crisis co-ordination.

Hampshire County Government ministers and officials may participate in COBR where their responsibilities are materially engaged. Participation does not transfer devolved competence. The England Office supports the day-to-day United Hampshire Government relationship with HCG; the Cabinet Office provides central intergovernmental and crisis coordination where collective government involvement is required.

Chapter 3: Governance playbook

3.1 Cabinet and collective authority

Cabinet remains the senior collective decision-making body of the United Hampshire Government. A crisis may require decisions through Cabinet, a Cabinet committee, COBR, a responsible minister or an authorised official according to the matter and the authority required.

3.2 COBR

COBR is the Cabinet Office mechanism for coordinating the acute central government response to the most serious crises. It provides a structure for rapid ministerial or official decision-making, coordination, shared situational awareness, action tracking and escalation. It should be activated only when it adds material value beyond ordinary departmental coordination.

COBR may meet at ministerial or official level. The level, chair, participants and frequency are determined by the decisions required, the seriousness and pace of the crisis and the authority of those attending. Attendance is purposeful rather than status-based.

3.3 Activation

A department, the Cabinet Office, the National Security Adviser, the Chief Minister's Office or another competent senior authority may raise the need for COBR activation. The COBR Directorate assesses the need rapidly with the likely Lead Government Department, identifying the incident, known consequences, likely lead, required participants, decisions, information gaps, communications needs and urgency.

The activation record identifies the authority for activation, time, Lead Government Department, chair or proposed chair, meeting level, immediate objectives, secretariat and review point. Where action must begin before a written record can be completed, the authority and decision are recorded as soon as practicable.

3.4 Strategy, operations and enduring response

COBR is primarily an acute-response mechanism. Where a crisis becomes enduring, the Chief Minister or Cabinet may establish a Cabinet committee, ministerial group or another specifically constituted decision-making group with recorded terms of reference, objectives, ownership, reporting lines and closure conditions. COBR remains available for renewed acute co-ordination if the situation intensifies again.

3.5 Recovery governance

Recovery is planned from the outset of the response. Where recovery requires sustained cross-government co-ordination, a Ministerial Recovery Group or another specifically constituted recovery group may be established by the minister or Cabinet body holding authority for the cross-government recovery decision. Lead responsibility may transfer from the response lead to a different department for recovery; any transfer must be deliberate and recorded.

Chapter 4: Roles and responsibilities

4.1 Lead Minister

A Lead Minister is identified for a significant crisis requiring ministerial leadership. The Lead Minister is normally the minister responsible for the Lead Government Department or the principal central government responsibility engaged. The Lead Minister provides political leadership, is accountable for the central government response within the assigned remit and ensures that matters requiring Chief Minister or Cabinet decision are escalated. The Lead Minister does not acquire another minister's statutory or constitutional responsibilities merely by being designated lead.

4.2 Crisis Senior Responsible Owner

A Crisis Senior Responsible Owner is appointed where the scale, complexity or duration of the crisis requires one senior official to integrate the central government response. The Crisis SRO supports the Lead Minister, coordinates objectives, ensures workstreams have owners, manages cross-government dependencies, tracks decisions, escalates unresolved issues and plans transition and recovery.

Where a Crisis SRO has not yet been identified, the Cabinet Secretary provides or secures interim senior official leadership until the competent appointment is made. The appointment record states the scope, authority, reporting line, start point and review or end condition.

4.3 Lead Government Department

The Lead Government Department develops policy and advice for the primary risk or consequence, maintains the departmental crisis structure, brings the relevant expertise and capabilities to the response, coordinates affected departments and stakeholders in relation to the lead issue and remains accountable through its minister.

The lead department maintains a crisis response plan proportionate to its likely responsibilities and must be able to provide senior leadership, policy advice, operational relationships, communications support and reliable information during activation.

4.4 Cabinet Office

The Cabinet Office coordinates the central government response, supports the Chief Minister and collective government, operates central crisis machinery, challenges and supports the lead department, provides central situational awareness and ensures cross-government dependencies are surfaced and resolved. It does not become the operational commander or substantive policy owner merely because COBR is active.

4.5 COBR Directorate and COBR Unit

The COBR Directorate owns the central crisis-management and preparedness function. It maintains doctrine, readiness, exercises, lessons, the COBR activation process and activation records, and the capability to support sustained crises.

The COBR Unit operates the central crisis secretariat. It convenes meetings, coordinates participants, prepares agendas and briefing, maintains attendance and decision records, tracks actions, supports the chair and Crisis SRO, and links the response with the Lead Government Department and National Situation Centre.

4.6 National Situation Centre

The National Situation Centre supports central government situational awareness. It brings together relevant information and analysis from departments, public bodies, operational services, HCG and other competent information owners. Source organisations remain responsible for the accuracy and provenance of the information they supply.

The National Situation Centre supports production of the Commonly Recognised Information Picture. It must distinguish confirmed information, assessment, forecast and unverified reporting and preserve material uncertainty or disagreement.

4.7 Other departments and public bodies

Every participating department remains responsible for consequences within its remit and for delivering decisions assigned to it within lawful authority. Sponsor departments remain responsible for relationships with public bodies unless a recorded decision made by the authority able to allocate that responsibility lawfully assigns a different department or office for the crisis. Independent bodies retain their lawful independence.

4.8 Operational services and local authorities

Police, fire and rescue, health, infrastructure, transport and other operational services continue to exercise their statutory, professional or assigned command responsibilities. Local and strategic authorities continue to exercise their own functions. Central government may coordinate, support or make strategic decisions within its competence but does not direct individual operational decisions where authority lies elsewhere.

Chapter 5: Pre-crisis

5.1 Preparedness

Lead departments identify their likely crisis responsibilities in advance, maintain risk-specific crisis plans and current contact routes, exercise those plans and decision processes, and ensure staff can support ministerial briefings, departmental crisis centres, information production and implementation. Preparedness must be proportionate to risk and dependency.

5.2 Planning assumptions

Plans should identify the likely lead, principal consequences, authorities involved, statutory and constitutional constraints, critical services, information needs, communications routes, vulnerable groups, dependencies, financial and commercial requirements, recovery implications and triggers for central escalation.

5.3 Exercises and training

The COBR Directorate maintains a cross-government exercise and training programme. Exercises should test actual weaknesses rather than merely confirm plans. They may test leadership, Lead Government Department readiness, COBR activation, Crisis SRO appointment, authority and operating process, HCG and local co-ordination, information production, legal and financial routes, communications, platform disruption, loss of senior personnel, simultaneous incidents and recovery.

Exercise findings must become recorded actions with owners and review points. Repeated unimplemented lessons are escalated as resilience risks.

5.4 Organisational continuity

Departments and central crisis functions must maintain business continuity for the people, communications, records, systems and access needed to perform their functions. A platform outage or loss of a primary digital service does not suspend governmental authority.

Departments must use documented fallback methods that preserve decision records, secure communications and later reconciliation into the authoritative record.

Chapter 6: During the acute crisis

6.1 Initial assessment and objectives

At the start of an acute crisis, the lead and Cabinet Office establish what has happened, what is known and unknown, the principal consequences, responsible authorities, immediate objectives, decisions required and the next review point. The response is organised around outcomes and decisions, not meeting frequency.

6.2 Commonly Recognised Information Picture

The Commonly Recognised Information Picture is the concise central summary used to support shared understanding and decision-making. It records the incident, current position, key impacts, affected people and services, response activity, material risks, significant uncertainties, decisions required, communications considerations and expected developments.

The CRIP links to underlying sources where detailed information is required. It is not a substitute for specialist operational systems, intelligence holdings or departmental case records.

6.3 Briefing and advice

Briefing for COBR identifies the decisions sought and presents clear recommendations. It addresses material legal, financial, security, operational, equality, territorial and communications implications. Where evidence is incomplete, advice records what is unknown, the risks of waiting, the risks of acting and any review condition attached to an interim decision.

6.4 Decisions and records

The decision record must identify the decision-maker, authority, decision, material reasons or considerations where required, action owner, deadline or review point and any restrictions or dependencies. A COBR action cannot create a power that requires separate legislation, delegation, financial approval or operational authority.

6.5 Action tracking

The COBR Unit maintains the action log. The assigned department or authority remains responsible for implementation. Closed actions are supported by sufficient evidence to show that the intended outcome was achieved or deliberately superseded.

6.6 Legal, financial and commercial support

Legal advice is engaged early where a crisis involves emergency powers, restrictions, information sharing, policing, detention, exclusion, liability, public body intervention, legislation or another material legal issue. The Attorney General's Office and Government Legal Department support according to their responsibilities.

Lord Lieutenant's Treasury is involved where significant expenditure, emergency procurement, financial support, resource transfer or novel use of public resources requires central financial control or approval. Section 1 of the Government Resources and Accounts Act 2026 permits a department to use resources only for purposes authorised by Parliament or otherwise lawfully authorised, and section 10 defines Accounting Officer responsibility for regularity, propriety, accounts and records. Urgency may accelerate the approval process but does not authorise unrecorded or unauthorised expenditure.

6.7 Territorial and intergovernmental coordination

The response must make clear which government or authority owns each function. HCG retains devolved responsibilities. Central and HCG crisis teams exchange information, coordinate dependencies and participate in joint ministerial or official structures where useful. Intergovernmental engagement should use the lowest effective tier and escalate only where the issue cannot be resolved there.

Where a crisis engages both reserved and devolved matters, the central and devolved response structures operate in partnership. Public communication and records identify the authority responsible for each material decision where confusion could affect compliance, service access or public confidence.

6.8 Communications

Government Communications coordinates cross-government communications support. The Lead Government Department remains responsible for the substantive response narrative within its remit. Crisis communications identify the lead spokesperson, factual approval route, public information needs, update rhythm, publication channels, accessible formats, misinformation risks and coordination with HCG, local authorities and operational services.

6.9 Vulnerability, equality and accessibility

Crisis decisions consider whether particular people face different risks, access barriers or disproportionate consequences. The competent wellbeing, safeguarding, equality, local-government and service authorities provide specialist advice. Urgent protective action should not be delayed solely because complete demographic evidence is unavailable, but decisions are reviewed as evidence improves.

Chapter 7: Post-acute crisis

7.1 Standing down acute arrangements

COBR stands down when acute central co-ordination is no longer required and remaining work can be managed through the Lead Government Department, a named enduring response structure, a named recovery group or ordinary departmental structures.

The stand-down record identifies the continuing lead, open actions, residual risks, recovery lead and governance, communications ownership and routes, records responsibilities and scheduled review. Temporary access permissions, crisis duty rotas, contracts and workarounds are closed or regularised when no longer justified.

7.2 Recovery

Recovery may involve restoring services, supporting affected people, repairing infrastructure, financial reconciliation, legal or policy review, workforce recovery, community engagement, territorial coordination and continued risk monitoring. Recovery governance must have an identified lead, objectives, records and closure conditions.

7.3 Lessons

Every significant activation produces a proportionate lessons process. The Lead Government Department reviews the substantive response; the Cabinet Office reviews central crisis coordination; operational services and public bodies review their own functions. Lessons identify evidence, root causes, contributing factors, good practice, corrective action, owners and deadlines.

Material lessons are fed into departmental risk ownership, the National Security Council (Resilience), exercises, capability plans, doctrine and the named departmental or cross-government governance and accountability process responsible for the corrective action. Lessons are not complete until agreed corrective actions are implemented or formally closed.

Chapter 8: Organisational resilience of central crisis management

8.1 Resilient central capability

The Cabinet Office maintains sufficient people, knowledge, access, records, communications and technical capability to operate COBR, the COBR Directorate, the COBR Unit, the National Situation Centre and the other central crisis-management functions assigned in this book through disruption. Critical roles must not depend entirely on one person, one platform or one communication route.

8.2 Information and security

COBR papers, CRIPs, decision records, attendance, actions, key communications and material advice are official records. The Public Records Act 2026 governs their status as public records; the Data Protection Act 2026 governs personal data; the Official Secrets Act 2026 governs protected official information; and legal professional privilege continues to govern privileged legal advice. Access must be restricted to the officials whose functions require the information.

Security controls must not result in an undocumented response. Where fallback communications or temporary records are used, they are reconciled into the authoritative record as soon as practicable.

8.3 Continuous improvement

The central crisis system is maintained through exercises, lessons, capability reviews, assurance and revision of doctrine. The COBR Directorate records unresolved weaknesses in the central resilience risk and lessons controls and refers department-owned weaknesses to the responsible Permanent Secretary or Lead Government Department.

8.4 Supporting products

This book is supported by The Amber Book: Appendices, The Little Amber Book: Executive Summary, Emergency Preparedness, Emergency Response and Recovery, the Lead Government Department guidance and responsibility schedule, National Situation Centre operating products, the Commonly Recognised Information Picture Standard, crisis role and training material, and the forms and records needed to activate, operate and close central crisis structures. Emergency Preparedness explains the statutory preparedness duties under Part 1 of the Civil Contingencies Act 2026; Emergency Response and Recovery sets the common multi-agency framework for response and recovery. These products supplement this doctrine and must not duplicate it.