

Research Letters

Cite this article: Wetherell W (2025). Review of the NHS in England's Records of Incident Response Levels. *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, **19**, e126, 1–3
<https://doi.org/10.1017/dmp.2025.10067>

Received: 02 May 2025

Revised: 02 May 2025

Accepted: 07 May 2025

Keywords:

civil defense; disaster planning; emergency service; hospital

Corresponding author:

William Wetherell;

Email: william.wetherell@nhs.net

Review of the NHS in England's Records of Incident Response Levels

William Wetherell MB BChir 

University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust

Abstract

Objective: For the National Health Service (NHS) in England, incidents are defined as events that disrupt, or might disrupt, an organisation's normal service provision below acceptable levels and require special arrangements to be put in place. NHS England is responsible for coordinating regional responses to incidents. Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) are responsible for coordinating local responses to incidents. This review assessed the records of regional and local incident responses held by NHS England and ICBs respectively.

Methods: The outcome of interest was the quantity of information regarding days at an incident response level held by organisations responsible for coordinating that level of incident response.

Results: NHS England had a record of the number of days at regional incident response level for 3 of its 7 regions. 24 of the 42 ICBs had records of the number of days at local incident response level.

Conclusion: NHS England and ICB records of incident responses for which they are responsible were incomplete. They might benefit from reviewing how they measure and record this information. This review may also be of interest to other bodies at local, regional and state level which coordinate hospitals in response to incidents.

In England, most organizations providing general hospital services are funded by the National Health Service (NHS). NHS England is the Commissioning Board for NHS services in England. Its Emergency Preparedness, Resilience, and Response (EPRR) Framework defines incidents and incident response levels for NHS-funded organisations.¹

Incidents are events that disrupt, or might disrupt, an organization's normal service provision below acceptable levels and require special arrangements to be put in place.¹⁽⁸⁻⁹⁾ Incident response levels describe the extent of coordination required between NHS-funded organizations in order to respond to an incident or incidents.¹⁽¹¹⁾ The NHS England EPRR Framework specifies 4 levels of response. These are shown in figure 1.

An Integrated Care Board (ICB) is a local organization within an Integrated Care System. The NHS England EPRR Framework states "each Integrated Care System (ICS) has an ICB bringing together the NHS locally to improve population health and establish shared strategic priorities within the NHS."¹⁽¹⁰⁾

The extent to which NHS-funded organizations in England operate at incident response levels above 1 is an indicator of the amount of coordination required between them in response to an incident or incidents. It is distinct from indicators of incident severity or operational pressures. The NHS England EPRR Framework requires these organizations to share lessons identified through incident response across the wider NHS. It states "[w]orking collaboratively will improve organizational cohesion and ensure patients and the public are safeguarded during an incident."¹⁽³²⁾

Methods

Study Setting and Design

This was a review of the records of the number of days at incident response levels 2 and 3 of NHS-funded organizations in England which provide general hospital accommodation and services in relation to accidents or emergencies (described by NHS England as acute Trusts). Records from NHS England, the ICBs, and the Trusts themselves were reviewed.

During the review period there were 42 ICBs² and 122 Trusts.³ The review size was determined by the number of ICBs and Trusts. The review timing was the 12-month period 1 year after the level 3 national incident for the NHS Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) response was stepped down in May 2023⁴ and 2 years after the national incident level for the NHS COVID-19 response was reduced from level 4 to level 3 in May 2022.⁵

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Society for Disaster Medicine and Public Health, Inc. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

Level 1	An incident that can be responded to and managed by an NHS-funded organisation within its respective business as usual capabilities and business continuity plans
Level 2	An incident that requires the response of a number of NHS-funded organisations within an ICS and NHS coordination by the ICB in liaison with the relevant NHS England region
Level 3	An incident that requires a number of NHS-funded organisations within an NHS England region to respond. NHS England to coordinate the NHS response in collaboration with the ICB. Support may be provided by the NHS England Incident Management Team (National).
Level 4	An incident that requires NHS England national command and control to lead the NHS response. NHS England Incident Management Team (National) to coordinate the NHS response at the strategic level. NHS England (Region) to coordinate the NHS response, in collaboration with the ICB, at the tactical level.

Figure 1. NHS incident response levels.
Reprinted from NHS England EPRR Framework.^{1(p.11)}

The outcome of interest was the quantity of information regarding days at an incident response level held by organizations responsible for coordination at that level of incident response.

Approval for this review was not required by the Research Ethics Committee at University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust.

Patient and Public Involvement

No patient nor public involvement.

Data Collection

A request was made under the Freedom of Information Act via the WhatDoTheyKnow website to NHS England for any record held of the number of days the Trusts were at level 2 and 3 incident response levels in the review period.⁶ Requests were made by the same method to the ICBs for any record held of the number of days the Trusts in their localities were at level 2 and 3 incident response levels in the review period.⁷ Requests were made by the same method to the Trusts for any record held of the number of days they were at level 2 and 3 incident response levels in the review period.⁸

Results

NHS England had a record of the number of days Trusts were at level 3 incident response for 3 of its 7 regions, representing 19 ICBs and 43 Trusts. Of the 23 ICBs and 79 Trusts for which NHS England did not have such a record, the ICBs or the Trusts had records of 16 Trusts being at level 3 incident response for at least 1 day.

24 ICBs had records of the number of days Trusts in their localities were at level 2 incident response, representing 56 Trusts. Of the 18 ICBs that did not have such records, representing 66 Trusts, 14 Trusts had a record of being at level 2 incident response for at least 1 day.

Limitations

It was not possible to explore the reasons why NHS England and some ICBs did not hold information about incident responses for whose coordination they were responsible. The NHS England

EPRR Framework's requirement that NHS England and ICBs share lessons identified through incident response across the wider NHS¹ is a reason why they should hold such information.

Discussion

NHS England is responsible for coordinating regional incident responses. 13% of NHS acute Trusts had records of regional incident responses but NHS England did not have records of these responses. ICBs are responsible for coordinating local incident responses. 11% of NHS acute Trusts had records of local incident responses but their ICBs did not have records of these responses.

Conclusion

The extent to which NHS acute Trusts operate at incident response levels above 1 is an indicator of the amount of coordination required between them for incident response. If this indicator was measured and recorded completely then it could inform the levels of awareness NHS England and ICBs have of the need for coordination of hospitals in response to incidents. NHS England and the ICBs might benefit from reviewing how they measure and record this indicator. This review may also be of interest to other bodies at local, regional, and state level which coordinate hospitals in response to incidents.

Author contribution. William Wetherell is the sole contributor to this manuscript.

Funding statement. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests. The author is a bank employee of University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust and has no other conflicting interests.

Ethical standard. This review is a quality improvement project and so approval was not required by the Research Ethics Committee at University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust.

<https://www.uhsussex.nhs.uk/research-and-innovation/information-for-researchers-and-healthcare-professionals/is-my-study-research/>

Declaration of patient and public involvement. No patient nor public involvement.

References

1. **NHS England.** NHS Emergency Preparedness, Resilience and Response Framework. Version 3. Published July 2022. Accessed January 30, 2025. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/nhs-emergency-preparedness-resilience-and-response-framework/>
2. **NHS England.** Integrated Care Boards in England. Published May 9, 2022. Updated March 31, 2023. Accessed February 04, 2025. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/integrated-care-boards-in-england/>
3. **NHS England.** Monthly A&E June 2024. Published July 11, 2024. Accessed January 30, 2025. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/07/June-2024-AE-by-provider-HW3bJ.xls>
4. **Pritchard A, Sloman D.** NHS Response to COVID-19: Stepping Down from NHS Level 3 Incident. Published May 18, 2023. Accessed January 30, 2025. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/nhs-response-to-covid-19-stepping-down-from-nhs-level-3-incident/>
5. **Pritchard A, Sloman D.** Next steps on transitioning from COVID-19 response to recovery. Published May 19, 2022. Updated September 08, 2022. Accessed January 30, 2025. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/publication/next-steps-on-transitioning-from-covid-19-response-to-recovery/>
6. **NHS Trust Incident Response Levels.** WhatDoTheyKnow website. Published August 13, 2024. Accessed February 08, 2025. https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/nhs_trust_incident_response_level
7. **NHS Trust Incident Response Levels.** WhatDoTheyKnow website. Published September 19, 2024. Accessed February 08, 2025. [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/search/"Incident Response Levels" 16/07/2024..17/07/2024/all/](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/search/)
8. **NHS Trust Incident Response Levels - A Batch Request.** WhatDoTheyKnow website. Published May 1, 2025. Accessed May 1, 2025. https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/info_request_batch/5502