

Essex Emergency Mortuary Plan Overview

In the event of a major incident occurring within Essex the loss of life could be considerable and it is unlikely that the normal mortuary facilities available within the county would be able to cope.

Therefore it is necessary to identify a suitable location and premises capable of carrying out the legal and investigative processes and procedures required. This facility is designed as an emergency mortuary.

Coroners Jurisdiction

HM Coroner has the responsibility in relation to all deceased persons within their jurisdiction who have met a violent, unnatural or sudden death of unknown cause. They have to determine who has died, how and when the death occurred.

In a major incident the loss of life could be considerable and could necessitate the HM Coroner requiring the setting up of the Emergency Mortuary facility.

Statutory Responsibility

Under Section 24(2) and 27(3) of The Coroners Act 1988 the responsibility for providing support to the Coroner in establishing an Emergency Mortuary rests with county councils in shire areas and lead boroughs in metropolitan areas.

These authorities, as Category 1 Responders also have emergency planning responsibilities for dealing with mass fatalities under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.

Whilst these do not specify a detailed requirement to plan for the use of a Emergency Mortuary the Regulation and the Cabinet Office guidance document "Dealing with Fatalities" (May 2004), and later the Emergency Response and Recovery Guidance relating to the CCA 2004 states that the provision of Emergency Mortuary facilities should be an inter-agency activity with the local authority taking the planning lead.

Purpose of the Plan

The Essex Emergency Mortuary Activation Plan seeks to outline the actions undertaken by or on the behalf of the County Council to meet its agreed commitment in relation to the provision of an Emergency Mortuary within the County of Essex.

Lead agency responsible for maintaining the Plan

Essex County Council's Emergency Planning and Business Continuity Service, under the direction of the Essex Resilience Forum in liaison with representatives from all responding agencies have the lead role in the preparation, writing, and review of the Essex Emergency Mortuary Plan.

Planning Assumptions

Throughout the planning process the following considerations have been taken into account;

- The incident must require facilities beyond the normal capacity of hospital mortuaries
- The Coroner will make the decision to activate the emergency mortuary facility based on information received.
- In the event of an incident which results in more than one incident site – the Emergency Mortuary would, subject to the agreement of both HM Coroner's and response agencies, provide the best use of resources etc
- There are no expectations that the Emergency Mortuary will be used for body storage relating to Pandemic Influenza

Cross Border incidents

If an incident occurs on the border of Essex and another County or London Borough then the lead Police Service will consult with HM Coroner to determine which has primacy.

This consultation will need to consider the implications of the judicial process, bearing in mind that any major incident is likely to involve a Coroner's inquiry which could subsequently lead to criminal charges being instigated.

Activation

If an incident occurred which met the criteria the Coroner will request that the Emergency Mortuary is activated.

In the event of the plan being implemented will, in support of HM Coroner and through Essex Police, provide the maximum possible advice and assistance to those involved.

Access to additional resources at Regional and National level

Essex Resilience Forum (ERF) has arrangements in place to cope with incidents involving fatalities using both Regional and national assets and alternative Emergency Mortuary facilities.

Some events however could be so catastrophic such as the destruction of the World Wide Trade Centre in 2001, that the volume of fatalities totally overwhelms existing contingencies, or that a series of simultaneous incidents across a wide area.

For example the bombings in London on 7th July 2005 indicates that the level of resources required to handle the anticipated number of fatalities arising from such an incident could be best managed within one facility strategically located.

In such cases, deployment of an exceptional facility i.e. Regional Resilience Mortuary may become necessary, for example to share resources, and specialist resources where these are limited.

Regional Resilience Mortuary arrangements

Through the Regional Resilience Mass Fatality arrangements Essex has access to a regional facility which could be activated if for some reason the pre-identified location within Essex was not accessible.

This facility is to be seen as just one of the options available to the relevant decision making body, whether that be with the advice and in partnership with the Regional Mass Fatalities Working Group or not.

National Emergency Mortuary Assets

As part of its resilience agenda, the Home Office manages the National Emergency Mortuary Arrangements (NEMA). This is a national resource available on request by Local Resilience Forums.

The Home Office has contracted a specific company for the provision of National Emergency Mortuary Arrangements (NEMA). This company will make available on a 24/7 basis the following:

- A set of demountable temporary structures providing all of the areas required for an Emergency Mortuary, configurable for handling up to 600 fatalities;
- Delivery of these structures anywhere in England and Wales.

- Completion within 24 hours of notification, the construction of the entrance, storage and autopsy areas so that bodies can be received.
- Guarantees that the construction of the Emergency Mortuary will be complete within 72 hours of notification.
- Provision of associated power and waste management requirements.
- De-Activation of the Emergency Mortuary.

The Plan goes on to outline roles and responsibilities of all lead (and supporting) organisations involved in the process from start to finish.

It also includes information about support to family and friends of the deceased, viewing procedures and other welfare support provision.

The plan was compiled by Rachel Hutchinson, Joint Emergency Planning Officer for Essex County Council and as part of the Mass Fatalities Working Group under the Essex Resilience Forum.

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