

In the UK, spills are categorised by the internationally adopted Tier system:

- Tier 1** A small operational spill employing local resources during any clean-up.
- Tier 2** A medium sized spill, requiring regional assistance and resources.
- Tier 3** A large oil spill, requiring a national response and resources. The National Contingency Plan (NCP) will be activated in this case.

These tiers cannot be rigorously defined by spilled oil volume because the amount of damage that might be caused by an oil spill is a function of the sensitivity of the spill location as well as the amount and type of oil spilled. Various organisations have a responsibility to respond to pollution in the U.K. :

- The MCA takes the lead in pollution from shipping at sea.
- Ports, Harbours, Oil facilities & Offshore Installations have a statutory responsibility for clean-up in their jurisdictions, ports to tier 2, offshore installations to tier 3.
- The Environmental Regulator takes the lead in responding to pollution from land based sources.  
[www.environment-agency.gov.uk](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk) [www.sepa.org.uk](http://www.sepa.org.uk) [www.ehsni.gov.uk](http://www.ehsni.gov.uk)
- Local Authorities (or the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) in Northern Ireland) have accepted the non-statutory responsibility for shoreline clean-up.

### 3.1 The National Contingency Plan (NCP)

The MCA is the competent UK authority responsible for responding to pollution from shipping and offshore installations. “The National Contingency Plan for Marine Pollution from Shipping and Offshore Installations” (NCP) was prepared as part of the UK Government’s obligation to protect and preserve the marine environment as party to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The NCP identifies procedures in place to respond to shipping incidents that cause or threaten to cause pollution of the seas around the UK. It also outlines the roles and responsibilities of the other organisations that may become involved.

Contingency plans prepared by coastal local authorities, harbour authorities, and operators of offshore installations in the UK underlie and underpin this national plan. These local plans provide detailed information on the local response to marine incidents and should describe arrangements for mutual support.

The purpose of the NCP is to ensure that there is a timely, measured and effective response to maritime incidents. Similarly, coastal local authorities may have to respond to incidents that require equipment or expertise beyond their capabilities. Therefore, the MCA may need to provide national assets in the response to a marine pollution incident. Copies of the NCP can be found on the MCA website at [www.mcga.gov.uk](http://www.mcga.gov.uk)

## 3.2 Operational units at an oil spill incident

The MCA's counter pollution response is now based on a regional response with central operational, technical and scientific support. A Counter Pollution & Salvage Officer (CPSO) is based in each region, supported by scientists, mariners, cost recovery specialists and logistics support specialists in the MCA's headquarters in Southampton.

Initial information about any marine incident is reported to HM Coastguard (HMCG). HMCG will then start search and rescue operations where necessary. They will also inform the duty CPSO if there is any pollution or threat of pollution i.e. a drifting ship, a grounded ship etc. The CPSO then decides the relevant course of action and instigates the appropriate level of response and alerts the relevant people in Counter Pollution and Response (CP&R) Branch of the MCA. In the event of a major incident, three main control centres may be set up according to the nature and scale of the incident:

- **Salvage Control Unit (SCU)**  
The SCU is led by the Secretary of State's Representative for Marine Salvage and Intervention (SOSREP), who oversees and approves any salvage operation and can intervene if appropriate.
- **Marine Response Centre (MRC)**  
The MRC is led by the MCA to co-ordinate all at-sea counter pollution and clean-up operations. This will include spraying of dispersants from aircraft and the deployment of oil spill response equipment from vessels at sea.
- **Shoreline Response Centre (SRC)**  
The SRC is led by the local authority with technical support from the MCA. This centre co-ordinates the shoreline clean-up operations.

An **Environment Group (EG)** will also be set up to provide environmental advice to all operational units.

Not all of these response cells will need to be set up in every incident. The response will be dictated by the scale and type of incident.

The activities of the SCU and MRC will be directed by SOSREP and the MCA. Local authority staff will be mainly concerned with the SRC.

Please see the relevant sections (and Appendices) of the NCP for detailed descriptions of the roles, tasks and membership of these and other operational units:

- The role of SOSREP and the SCU
- The role of the MRC
- The role of the SRC
- The role of the Environment Group (EG)
- Stop Notices can be found on the MCA Website at the link below:

[www.mcga.gov.uk/c4mca/mcga-environmental/mcga-dops\\_cp\\_environmental-counter-pollution/mcga-dops\\_cp\\_stop\\_and\\_inf\\_notices.htm](http://www.mcga.gov.uk/c4mca/mcga-environmental/mcga-dops_cp_environmental-counter-pollution/mcga-dops_cp_stop_and_inf_notices.htm)