

Terms of reference

Investigation into the events leading up to and including the Hillsborough disaster on 15 April 1989

Investigation type:	Managed (External)
Appropriate Authorities:	South Yorkshire Police, South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, West Midlands Police, West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, West Yorkshire Police, West Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner, Merseyside Police, Merseyside Police and Crime Commissioner
Decision maker:	Sarah Green (until June 2025); Mel Palmer (since April 2025)

Summary of events

On 15 April 1989, more than 50,000 men, women, and children travelled to Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, to watch the FA Cup Semi-Final between Liverpool Football Club and Nottingham Forest Football Club.

Shortly before kick-off was due at 3pm, a significant number of Liverpool supporters entered the stadium through an exit gate that had been opened by South Yorkshire Police officers. They then proceeded down a tunnel under the West Stand that led into two central pens located behind the goal area. The pens were already at or near capacity. This led to serious overcrowding, and as a result 97 men, women and children died, while hundreds more were injured, and many thousands traumatised.

Scope and leadership of the investigation

The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) will manage an investigation, originally conducted by the then Assistant Commissioner Jon Stoddart and now Assistant Commissioner Rob Beckley, into the role played by the police in these events.

The investigation will seek to establish whether evidence exists which suggests that any police officer may have committed a criminal offence. This will include offences of manslaughter, but also any other criminal offence that may have been committed.

It will also provide reports upon which the decision maker will give opinions as to whether any police officer would have had a case to answer for misconduct or gross misconduct, or no case to answer, had they still been serving, and determine whether any matters should be referred to the Crown Prosecution Service to consider whether criminal charges should be brought.

These terms of reference cover only the part of the Operation Resolve investigation into the actions of the police. This is part of a wider investigation that is also looking at other organisations and individuals.

The investigation will also investigate complaints recorded and referred to the IOPC that have been determined to fall within the terms of reference below.

Terms of reference

The investigation will cover:

1. Issues relating to the stadium, including any role played by the police in:
 - a) suitability and choice of the stadium to host the event
 - b) the planning and decision making in relation to the ground's design, alterations and final layout, including the siting and condition of barriers, fences and gates within the fences
 - c) the design and layout of the pens.
2. Planning and preparation for the match by the police, including organisational and individual decision making in relation to:
 - a) the resourcing of the event
 - b) any role played by the police in allocation of areas within the ground to the visiting teams' supporters
 - c) the arrangements for the policing of the match, including arrangements for the arrival of supporters and their management outside the stadium
 - d) the arrangements (or lack of) for precise monitoring of the crowd numbers and their safety within the pens at the Leppings Lane end.
3. Actions of the police on 15 April 1989 prior to the disaster, including:
 - a) actions of police officers outside the football ground, including the alleged failure by the police to prevent supporters entering the Leppings Lane end, failure to prevent build-up of supporters outside the Leppings Lane turnstiles, and failure to filter supporters away from those turnstiles
 - b) the decision not to postpone the kick-off of the match
 - c) the monitoring of crowd numbers in the pens—both the alleged failure to prevent the pens from becoming overcrowded and the alleged failure to act once the pens became overcrowded
 - d) the opening of Gate C
 - e) the actions (or lack of) to direct supporters once Gate C was opened.
4. Response of the police to the disaster, including:
 - a) the early police response to the crush at the Leppings Lane end, including allegations that the police were slow to respond/failed to act when it was obvious that people were in distress
 - b) alleged failures/refusals on the part of the police to open perimeter gates, and allegations that officers pushed supporters back when they were trying to climb to safety—this aspect of the investigation will specifically consider complaints made against Police Constable Peter Smith and Police Constable David Illingworth, as well as any other police officers who may have been involved
 - c) subsequent police command and control of the disaster
 - d) the communication between the police and the other emergency services
 - e) the activation and implementation by the police of any pre-planned responses and emergency procedures for such disasters

- f) the actions of police officers in the gymnasium, in particular whether the treatment and questioning of relatives was appropriate. The actions of police officers at Hillsborough Boys' Club, and any other complaints about the treatment of friends or relatives on the day. The time parameters will be from 3.06pm on 15 April 1989 to the time when the last of the facilities shown below closed down—this will cover events between the match being stopped and the completion of arrangements to assist families at the following locations:

The gymnasium, Northern General Hospital, Royal Hallamshire Hospital, Ecclesfield Casualty Bureau, Merseyside Casualty Bureau, Hammerton Road Police Station, Hillsborough Boys' Club, Forbes Road Church Hall, Meade House, Kelvin Centre, Burngreave Vestry, and the Medico-Legal Centre

- g) whether any police officer abused their authority, used excessive force or was uncivil during the unfolding disaster.

These terms of reference, which will be kept under review to take into account any evidence of further alleged offences connected to the Hillsborough disaster, were revised and approved by Deputy Director of Investigations Mel Palmer on 2 September 2025.