



PREPARING SCOTLAND

Warning and Informing Scotland

COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC

July 2018

CONTENTS	Page
1. Purpose	<u>3</u>
2. Public Communications Groups	<u>4</u>
Activation and composition	<u>4</u>
Engagement with a Resilience Partnership	<u>5</u>
Out of hours	<u>6</u>
National decision-making	<u>6</u>
The Scottish Government	<u>6</u>
3. Principles	<u>8</u>
Clear roles and responsibilities	<u>8</u>
Provision of communication advice at every level of decision making	<u>8</u>
Clear communication objectives	<u>8</u>
An audience-based approach	<u>9</u>
An understanding of channels, and adaption to new opportunities	<u>10</u>
Use of dedicated spokespeople	<u>11</u>
Phased communications	<u>11</u>
4. Planning	<u>12</u>
Preparing the public	<u>12</u>
Preparing the PCG	<u>12</u>
5. Response	<u>15</u>
Activation	<u>15</u>
First hour public communications	<u>15</u>
Beyond the first hour	<u>16</u>
6. Recovery	<u>17</u>

1. Purpose

Scotland faces a range of threats and hazards - from terrorist incidents to severe weather, from disease outbreaks to utility failures.

These and other challenges, collectively assessed and graded in the UK's [National Risk Register](#), each have the potential to seriously disrupt everyday life for the people of Scotland.

Category 1 responders are obliged under legislation¹ to “*maintain arrangements to warn the public, and to provide information and advice to the public, if an emergency is likely to occur or has occurred*”.

Others involved in the response to and recovery from an emergency will also have crucial roles to play.

This document provides guidance and best practice on communicating with the public before, during and after such emergencies, and outlines general good practice for crisis communications.

This guidance does not deal with the specific challenges presented by particular emergency scenarios, which in many cases are the subject of dedicated national, regional or agency-specific communications strategies.

It has been written for a readership of strategic and tactical communicators, emergency planners and others working in resilience, and aims to promote effective public communication as an essential operational tool during both the strategic response to any emergency, and the period of recovery which will follow. It assumes a knowledge of the basics of communications and social media good practice.

Local emergency communication plans, based on [Community Risk Registers](#), will continue to be the main source of guidance for Regional Resilience Partnerships (RRPs) and provide the basis on which local arrangements are exercised. This guidance invites responders to consider arrangements in their area and leaves the specific local implementation of the guidance to regional Public Communications Groups (PCGs).

The guidance was most recently revised in 2018 in consultation with the resilience community, including communications specialists.

Throughout this document the term 'national' refers to Scottish arrangements or strategies. UK arrangements or strategies will be referred to as such.

¹ Section 2(1)(g) of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004

2. Public Communications Groups

In Scotland, the public communications response to any major incident or emergency will primarily be co-ordinated through one or more of the regional Public Communication Groups (PCGs).

These three groups, based in the North, East and West of Scotland, meet throughout the year and bring together a wide range of communication practitioners from key responder agencies and private sector partners, often mirroring the operational makeup of their associated RRP.

These groups regularly discuss, assess and test their readiness and capability to respond to emergencies. This aspect of the PCG's role is explored further in the "Planning" section on page 12.

The key roles of a PCG are outlined below.

Activation and composition

During a major incident, the PCG will be "activated", and those members who are required to play a role in the communications response will be called on to take appropriate steps to be able to do so. Other members will be kept updated, usually by email updates, and should be encouraged to monitor the situation closely in case they are required to play a more involved role as the situation develops.

The membership of the activated PCG will not necessarily include all regular members, but will be specific to each incident and tailored to local requirements. Only those organisations directly involved in or affected by the response will be required to participate – in effect, the membership will be largely mapped to the operational Resilience Partnership (RP) which will have been activated to co-ordinate the wider response.

The PCG should be activated as swiftly as possible following an incident, to ensure that all communications are informed by a shared understanding of the facts, to agree the relevant lead agency or agencies, to promote accuracy and consistency, and to avoid unilateral decision-making.

Having a clear lead in the early stages of an emergency is an important factor in the success of warning and informing the public and the speed at which the multi-agency communications response is activated. Some responsibilities of the lead agency include:

- contacting other responders
- delivering urgent warnings to the public
- co-ordinating the communication activity
- assisting other responders in communicating
- providing strategic communication advice

More detail on the role of a PCG following activation can be found on Page 15.

This activation of a PCG can be called by any agency involved, but it will be chaired by the lead agency unless exceptional circumstances demand otherwise. PCGs may operate virtually, involving rolling email chains and teleconferences. It should not be necessary for all partners to co-locate other than in circumstances which directly impact on the ability to communicate, for instance during widespread power outages.

All members should have the necessary knowledge and skills to collectively provide advice in any emergency, and the authority to make decisions on behalf of their organisation, including both issues of communication planning (e.g. message development) and allocation of resource.

Early consideration should be given to the sustainability of the team, and the potential for a move to co-ordinated shift work to meet the requirement for round-the-clock capability. Essential to this is the agreement that RP member organisations will release individuals to undertake work as part of the PCG for as long as is needed.

In certain circumstances this activation process may include bringing in organisations who do not normally play a role in national emergency planning, for instance the communications teams for major events, organisations or industries immediately impacted by an incident.² These groups may be much less familiar with the response structures in place than regular members, and the PCG should take its lead from the strategic group and link with other organisations accordingly.

Continuous, effective networking by PCG members can also build resilience and further enable the potential for non-affected communication teams to play a key mutual aid role.

Engagement with a Resilience Partnership

The chair of the PCG should be included as a member of a RP, active in response mode, and as with other technical experts should be called on to provide strategic advice to inform the decision-making processes from the outset of a response. This will also allow the chair to present the most up-to-date operational information back to the PCG.

Wherever practical the chair of the PCG should remain in this strategic role and should delegate the hands-on tasks of dealing with media enquiries or social media to others in their organisation or the wider PCG.

The PCG in response to an emergency should be able to carry out the following tasks as required on behalf of the RP:

² Those wishing to contact the PCGs can do so via the relevant RRP mailbox – nosrrp@gov.scot (North); wosrrp@gov.scot (West) or eosrrp@gov.scot (East)

- prepare strategic advice on public communications
- identify key groups and individuals affected by emergency, response and recovery
- identify the lead agency responsible for communicating each aspect of the emergency
- develop and deliver a co-ordinated communication plan
- arrange mutual aid across communications teams
- prepare joint messages/statements
- establish communication facilities
- manage the media relations process
- manage online/social media communication channels
- manage internal and stakeholder communication

Out of hours

Emergencies are not confined to the working day. A system of activation must be adopted by all Category 1 responders which involves a round-the-clock response. It is important that a process is in place to identify an emergency, to activate the joint arrangements and to quickly put in place the human resources and strategic approach required to handle the pressures and requirements of effective public communication.

Where an event has impacted on more than one area, sub-groups from two or more areas may need to work closely together, quickly establishing effective methods of working and sharing information.

National decision-making

There may also be events which impact with approximately equal severity across the country. This could include a pandemic flu, major weather event or cyber incident.

In these cases it may be necessary to co-ordinate the communications strategy at a national level, to ensure consistency and a direct link to national policy experts and decision-making processes. In this event, the Scottish Government or Police Scotland will convene a focused national public comms group, including the chairs of each PCG and other key national bodies, to discuss and agree overall strategy and to provide a link where required to planning occurring at a UK level.

This group will not replace the PCGs, but will allow a forum for PCG chairs to discuss and agree national messaging with other key national partner organisations, and to develop a consistent strategy with their respective groups.

The Scottish Government

The Scottish Government is not classified as a Category 1 or 2 responder. However, Scottish Ministers have a role in providing national leadership during emergencies in or affecting Scotland.

The key principle is that of “subsidiarity”: operational control at the lowest practical level required, and co-ordination and support at the highest level required.

While emergency response is led at the front line, the Scottish Government can therefore play a key role supporting and co-ordinating that response, and addressing its wider consequences. In the event of an emergency, the public will often turn to the Scottish Government and to responders for information and reassurance about the emergency and the response to it. All those involved should engage early and effectively to ensure that messages are consistent and of maximum value to the public.

3. Principles

Whether during the planning, response or recovery phase of an incident, certain common principles underpin all good crisis communications practice.

Clear roles and responsibilities

The identity of the lead responding organisation should be agreed where possible in advance of a particular type of incident, and if not then as quickly as possible after a situation develops.

The communications team of the organisation leading the operational response will normally take the lead on most communications. This will avoid more than one organisation independently warning the public about the same risk at the same time, which could cause confusion.

However, it is important to note that the lead responder is not expected to carry out their duty to warn and inform in isolation. Agreeing a lead responder should be seen as part of a collective arrangement which allows for effective partnership working and mutual aid, in particular in helping to boost and promote the lead responder's messaging.

Specific elements of the communications response may be allocated to the respective agency - for instance, utility companies will issue advice on the recovery of services, and transport operators on delays and cancellations. This should all be shared with the PCG members but may be issued without agreement by the group.

However, any message which provides an update on the incident, public safety advice, an analysis of risk, or other critical aspects of the response fall to the lead agency only. Other agencies should simply echo or point to the lead responder's statements.

Provision of communications advice at every level of decision making

Communications should be seen not simply as the public description of events or decisions, but as a critical operational asset which plays a vital role at all levels of the response and recovery, and in maintaining public confidence in the organisations involved.

As with any other technical specialists, communications advisors should be employed to give strategic advice from the earliest stage. This advice may also have an impact on the development of the wider response strategy.

Clear communication objectives

The communications strategy which is developed by the lead agency should be used to set clear objectives, provide direction and inform the choice of appropriate tactics.

Example objectives could include:

- raise awareness of risks
- alert people to immediate danger
- provide information for avoiding harm and obtaining assistance
- advise on steps being taken by authorities/responders
- explain steps taken to enable recovery and return to normality

An audience-based approach

The response and recovery strategy will likely call for particular behaviours from a number of different groups, and may involve direct support to victims.

This guidance therefore recommends an approach that focuses on the audience, not simply the means of the communication.

It is important not to consider the public as a single group, but to segment it into a number of appropriate groups wherever possible dependent on their needs. One way to segment is to look at how the public can be linked by a number of factors. For example:

- proximity to the emergency (physical and/or emotional)
- demographics
- age, and other factors of vulnerability
- access to communication channels.

It is important to consider what information each of these audiences will require. Certain communities may require specific engagement work to offer reassurance or calm tensions.

For example, in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist incident, a simple objective might be to avoid a specific area. In this case, the public needs to understand the nature of the risk, the reasons for the warning and clear, unambiguous steps to take. By communicating in this way, we are raising awareness of the issue and recommending achievable actions, and by doing so should effectively encourage the responses we are seeking.

In a different type of emergency, such as an influenza pandemic, there may be a requirement for those who fall ill to stay at home and not come into work. Once again, there is a clear objective that will, in turn, support the strategy for managing the disease. Communication plays a key role in meeting this objective.

It is important to note that simply informing the public of issues does not always guarantee that action is taken. Effectively influencing behaviour and encouraging positive actions which might mitigate harm remains a complex challenge. PCGs should ensure that the appropriate agency and spokesperson leads on the messaging, and that advice is kept specific, relevant and achievable.

An understanding of channels, and adaption to new opportunities

The public's ability to communicate quickly has never been greater, and continues to evolve year-on-year. The widespread use of smartphones and social networks mean that many people are able to access and share images and information almost instantly, and expect information from responders with equal immediacy.

Media organisations have already adapted the service they provide to this way of communicating, adopting social media feeds with 24 hour reporting, and will similarly expect immediate confirmation and information of events and incidents.

Misinformation can also spread quickly, and incorrect social media speculation may reach mainstream media if it is not corrected.

There are many possible channels to provide information to the public, including social media, and these should be identified in local communications plans and regularly reviewed. PCG members should be familiar with the media organisations and outlets in their own areas, and should aim to develop good relations with them.

The mass media will be an important channel of communication. In particular radio and television provide an effective way of delivering simple information quickly to a large section of the public.

There is also an important role for local media, who can provide a community with information about local plans, as well as sharing local information and advice during a period of recovery.

Investing time to develop a strong and effective working relationships with the media will result in a better understanding of each other's perspectives and needs when an emergency occurs.

In developing a communications plan it is important to consider how these different channels could be used to ensure information reaches the appropriate audiences.

It is also important to remember that a significant portion of the population (over 20% in 2017) do not use the internet “on the go” either on smartphones or other portable devices, and over 30% do not use social media – figures which rise significantly in older people³.

Those looking to communicate with the public therefore need to utilise a range of communication channels, and must have in place systems and structures that allow for swift and accurate communication at any time.

³ Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS)

Use of dedicated spokespeople

During major incidents, strategic commanders and advisors will be extremely busy managing the operational response. Wherever possible, a senior official who carries sufficient subject knowledge but is not in direct command responsibility should be identified as a dedicated spokesperson.

Specific messaging will continue to be agreed with those involved in the incident through established approval processes. However, the delivery of that messaging, through press conferences, regular interviews, and other engagement can be undertaken by the dedicated spokesperson.

Wherever possible a pool of such individuals should be identified and trained in advance, and their role made clear to operational colleagues.

Phased communications

It is important to consider communication across all phases of an emergency, and in particular to begin thinking about and preparing for the recovery, as well as the response, as soon as an incident occurs.

The three key phases of crisis communications – planning, response and recovery - are examined in more detail in the sections below.

4. Planning

The effective delivery of crisis communications relies heavily on good planning.

Communications planning in advance of an incident should be informed both by the Principles outlined above and by the specific local risks outlined in the relevant [Community Risk Registers](#).

Planning for a crisis falls into two main categories – preparing and warning the public of potential risks, and ensuring that the mechanisms, training and protocols are in place to ensure a rapid and effective activation of the PCG following a major incident.

Preparing the public

Efforts should be made by responders to raise awareness among the general public about what risks are likely to affect them and what steps they could take to mitigate the consequences, ahead of events happening.

Community Risk Registers are published to help communities better understand the risks they face. They offer an effective starting point for engaging with communities on their perceptions of risk, and for explaining the context of risk along with the self-help measures they can take. This is the responsibility of local responders and should be considered in detail in the Communications Plans for each RRP.

General advice and guidance for the public on preparing for all kinds of risk is available from the Scottish Government's emergency preparedness web portal at www.readyscotland.org

Preparing the PCG

Adopt an RRP-wide communication planning process

In order to work in a joined-up manner, consideration should be given to a joint planning process.

At the core of the planning process there should be a simple five-step approach:

1. Audience identification
2. Objective setting
3. Information/message development
4. Choice of appropriate communication channel(s)
5. Monitoring/evaluation/review

Most of this guidance refers to the role of Scottish responding agencies and the Scottish Government. However, it is also necessary to recognise that there may be an important communications role for UK Government Departments and Agencies,

for instance the Department of Health in the event of a flu pandemic, or National Counter-Terrorist Policing in the event of a terrorist incident. Other UK bodies, for instance the Met Office, also play a critical role.

These organisations may either work with the Scottish Government as part of a joint response, or have discrete responsibilities.

In these cases, the Scottish Government will provide information to the RRP/PCG structure to allow consistent decision-making.

Link with other RRP sub-groups

The involvement of the PCG chair in full RRP meetings, even when there is not an emergency, will strengthen inter-agency relationships and make for a smoother transition into an emergency situation.

It is recommended as a measure of good practice that PCG chairs become members of the full RRP meetings and that a system of effective support be in place so that others can perform the function should the PCG chair be absent.

For the PCG to fulfil all of its functions effectively, there needs to be strong links with, or representation on, other RRP sub-groups.

Prepare high-level messages for specific types of emergencies

In some cases it may be possible to identify simple key messages in advance of an event, to enable greater efficiency in the first hours of an emergency. Simple factual information that is easily identified beforehand can be brought together in a fact sheet or key messages brief, to be pulled off the shelf or updated as needed.

Having such a body of pre-prepared, pre-cleared statements ready to issue as soon as an incident occurs – allowing for minor amendments to reflect the specific circumstances – can enable responders to quickly demonstrate awareness of an event.

They are also a simple way of overcoming the challenges present during activation and the first hour of the comms response, such as confirming approval chains, establishing situational awareness, or activating communications cells.

This could include pre-prepared press releases or social media posts.

Such statements should be caveated appropriately (such as “we are aware of reports of an incident...”), and wherever possible informed by operational information.

Pre-prepared statements may also assist in the later stages of more predictable emergencies, for instance a disease outbreak.

However, a primary goal of the PCG following an incident should be to transition from pre-prepared statements to a position where strategic communications advice, tailored to the specific circumstances of the incident, can be quickly developed, approved and implemented.

Training and exercising

There is a legal requirement for responders to ensure they have plans in place to carry out local exercises, to ensure that their public communications arrangements are effective.

Though it is important to exercise the communication functions as part of the wider strategic decision-making and tactical management process, there is also merit in staging exercises which focus solely on practising and assessing the public communication arrangements.

We recommend that PCGs develop a training and exercise programme which tests both the role and function of communicators, and the strategic and tactical decision-makers who will have a role in ensuring effective and agile communication with the public during an emergency.

We recommend the development of a training programme that includes:

- awareness of legal requirements and the Scottish Government's Preparing Scotland guidance
- understanding of the role of strategic communications advisors
- local procedures for joint working
- lessons from emergencies and exercises
- training for spokespeople

PCGs may also be involved in national exercises, which will include events which enable public communications to be tested.

5. Response

Activation

The PCG must be activated as early as possible following a major incident or emergency. The communication of alerts and public information is a critical element of the initial response, and RPs should ensure that their wider activation processes include the communications function at the earliest opportunity.

A first alert system for PCG members can be agreed to facilitate early communication.

First hour public communications

The first hour of public communications is vital in order to provide swift advice and reassurance to the public; to set the tone of the public communications as the response and recovery progress; and to ensure that communications adopts a proactive, strategic stance as quickly as possible. However, accuracy is paramount and where facts are not known, this should be made clear and appropriate caveats used.

Immediately following an incident, the lead responder should aim to issue a statement as soon as possible confirming awareness of the incident and where and when further updates will be provided. Other responding agencies should also confirm early awareness and attendance to prevent a vacuum of information and to reassure the public. Where appropriate, images can demonstrate and contextualise the extent of the issue. All agencies have responsibility to warn the public if they believe that there is imminent danger, or to protect human life, property and the environment.

While some basic information and advice can be released by individual agencies, any critical information such as confirmation of casualties or health/risk assessments should be agreed and issued by the appropriate lead agency and co-ordinated by the PCG.

Immediately following an emergency, and during the first hour, the public needs:

- basic details of the incident - what, where, when (and who, why and how, if possible)
- to know the implications for health and welfare
- advice and guidance (eg stay indoors, symptoms, preparing for evacuation) and reassurance (if necessary)

The public also wants to know:

- other practical implications such as the effect on traffic, power supplies, telephones, water supplies, etc
- a helpline number
- what is being done to resolve the situation

A failure to deliver sufficient public communications during this time period can result in lasting damage to public confidence.

Other practical steps can also be taken as soon as possible.

For instance, one of the first tasks of the PCG will be the development of a staffing plan that includes details of the allocation of responsibilities and management of resources. The level of resource needed to sustain activity in a prolonged set of circumstances should not be underestimated.

This may include sending some staff home to allow them to rest before taking up a shift pattern, or the deprioritisation of other, non-essential work. These arrangements should be regularly reviewed and will likely continue to be required for the duration of the emergency and into the recovery phase.

The monitoring of social media activity should also be initiated immediately after an event occurs, and can be used to identify emerging narratives and concerns, as well as popular hashtags. How an organisation uses these insights to inform their communication is a matter for their judgement. Depending on staffing and expertise, this role could be delegated to an agency other than the lead responder.

Communications even at an early stage should not be entirely focused on the response and any investigation - from the outset, detailed thought should be given to supporting individuals and communities affected, and to enabling the potentially long-term recovery that will follow.

Beyond the first hour

Once the PCG is activated and initial statements made, simple steps can be taken to ensure that all members are kept up to date with developing issues and are clear on areas which they can comment on, and how else they can support the lead responder.

A simple way of doing this can be the establishment of a “rolling chain” of emails, where all members are encouraged to “reply all” and update members with key lines, developments or queries they are dealing with regarding their own sector. Teleconferences should be scheduled to allow more in depth discussion, update on operational developments, agree strategic communications objectives, and to enable mutual aid if required.

Sensitive areas, such as the identification of deceased or the provision of critical health advice, should be flagged by the PCG chair and the strict rules around communications of these issues explained to all parties. The need to defer communications responsibility to the lead agency should be emphasised.

6. Recovery

As well as physical impacts, major incidents can have a lasting psycho-social effect on communities and individuals. Some areas may not return to exactly how they were prior to the incident, and the transition to a new normality can be a difficult one. Decisions made early in the response process can have lasting ramifications in the months and years that follow and enable a good recovery. The Scottish Government is likely to take an early interest in the recovery, public reassurance and the support of continuity of essential services.

Response and recovery are intimately bound together and, while the emergency response will usually be the initial focus, both should be considered from the outset of an incident, and the communications leads for both response and recovery involved in all PCG meetings.

Once the immediate emergency response has concluded, there may be a formal handover where the chair of a PCG passes from the responding agency (for instance Police Scotland) to the lead agency for recovery (for instance the local authority).

At the heart of a good recovery is a focus on ensuring that individuals and communities are supported, heard, and treated with dignity and respect. This can begin early in the incident by ensuring that their basic needs are met, and in the longer term through ongoing support.

This could involve the opening of rest centres, the co-ordination of practical support and assistance, the organisation of public events, and the promotion and recognition of unity and resilience.

Many of these issues are not communications decisions in isolation but will require close working between communicators and operational leads to agree and implement.

More information on the role of the PCG in recovery can be found in the dedicated guidance [*Preparing Scotland - Recovering from Emergencies in Scotland*](#).