

Chapter 6

Information and the media

Summary

- This chapter concerns co-operation with the media at the scene of an emergency.
- It includes information on:
 - working successfully with the media at the time of an emergency – a key part of civil protection (paragraphs 6.5–6.8);
 - media arrangements at the scene of an emergency (paragraphs 6.9–6.26);
 - a co-ordinated approach to communications (paragraphs 6.27–6.33); and
 - ensuring consistency in information provided to the public (paragraphs 6.34–6.46).

Introduction

6.1 Good public communication is vital to the successful handling of any emergency and should be incorporated in all contingency planning. When an emergency occurs, the key communications objective will be to deliver accurate, clear and timely information and advice to the public so they feel confident, safe and well informed.

6.2 The news media (broadcasting, print and text services) remain the primary means of communication with the public in these circumstances. Websites are also being used widely to provide a further source of more detailed information and advice for the public, in particular for those at work or who have no immediate access to television or radio during the day.

6.3 The Civil Contingencies Act includes two specific duties for Category 1 responders in relation to communicating with the public. Firstly, there is a duty to inform the public about civil protection matters so that the public are better prepared to deal with emergencies if they occur. Secondly, there is a duty to maintain arrangements to warn the public and provide appropriate advice if an emergency occurs. Chapter 7 of *Emergency Preparedness* (Communicating with the public) describes the requirements of the legislation and offers good-practice advice on public communications issues.

6.4 In addition, the Government has issued the *Preparing for Emergencies* booklet (see <http://www.pfe.gov.uk>) to help ensure that the public is informed and prepared. The booklet brings together, in one practical guide, information and advice that the Government has already published and aims to help the public play its part in preventing emergencies and helping to deal with their effects. Public safety is the Government's number one concern and the leaflet is the latest phase in the Government's campaign to ensure that the public is informed about emergencies.

Working with the media

6.5 There have been considerable changes in the news media in recent years with the development of 24-hour rolling news and the advent of multiple channels provided through cable and satellite

connections, plus 24-hour news websites. An incident such as the Morecambe Bay cockle pickers' tragedy, for example, can attract worldwide media interest within hours. Advances in technology mean that live interviews, pictures and reports can now be sent, direct from the scene of an incident, via a mobile phone as the event is unfolding. They may come from members of the public making direct contact with media channels even before journalists have arrived. These developments mean there will be a constant requirement from the media for accurate, timely and up-to-date information. Where it is not provided, rumour and misinformation may flourish.

6.6 The Media Emergency Forum (MEF) and, since their establishment in 2003, increasingly the Regional MEFs (RMEFs), have been working with the media to establish what arrangements are required to ensure the delivery of information to the public in an emergency. Initiatives such as the BBC's *Connecting in a Crisis* guide (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/connectinginacrisis/index.shtml>) are also designed to ensure that their own local radio station producers have established appropriate contacts with emergency planners, the police and other key organisations in their localities.

6.7 A protocol on the delivery of urgent public safety information has also been agreed with national broadcasters.

6.8 The purpose of this chapter is to identify some of the technical and practical issues that will arise for those working with the media in an emergency.

Providing assistance to the media at the scene of an incident

6.9 In many situations it will be the police – as co-ordinators of the response at and around an incident site and with their particular responsibility for criminal investigation – with whom the media will need to liaise first. Studies undertaken for MEF have indicated that upwards of 200 media representatives can be expected to turn up at the site of an emergency within an hour of it happening, and this can swell to 1,000 or more from all over the world within 24 hours. They will require space for a range of support services, from feeding to sanitation facilities, and broadcasters in particular have a need for parking space for their satellite trucks.

Control of access to the emergency scene

6.10 Controlling access to the incident site itself is a matter for the police, put in place whenever practical. Restricting access aims to allow rescue services to carry out their work unhindered and to preserve evidence at what may be the scene of a crime. Decisions on the extent of the cordon need to be taken quickly and include, where possible, consideration of the media's need to be able to film and report what is happening at the site.

6.11 Helicopters and/or 'cherry pickers' – hoist-mounted remote cameras – may well be quickly deployed by the media seeking overview of the site. Decisions on control of airspace and overflight should, therefore, be an early consideration.

Establishing a media liaison point

6.12 A media liaison point is a designated point close to an emergency scene, usually (but not always) outside the outer cordon erected by the police around an incident site. This serves as the rendezvous point for media representatives, where their bona fides can be checked and from where they may be able to gain controlled access to the site itself for the purposes of filming, photography and news reporting.

Nominating a media liaison officer

6.13 The swift attendance, at the scene, of an experienced Media Liaison Officer (MLO) (likely to be from the police) should ease pressure from the media. It is vital that this person quickly establishes a procedure for dealing with media requests and for regularly briefing them on developments. Rumour and conjecture will flourish in a vacuum, and it is far better that the MLO gains the trust and confidence of the media by providing regular updates on events, even if there is little new to say.

Establishing credibility with the media

6.14 Demonstrating awareness of their need to meet copy deadlines or broadcast 'live' reports will assist the MLO in establishing credibility with the media at the scene. This is important as he/she may need to seek the media's co-operation in, for example, organising pooled access to the incident site for filming or broadcasting urgent appeals for blood donors or details of evacuation arrangements.

Pooling arrangements

6.15 Access to the incident site for the purpose of filming, television and stills pictures and reporting what has happened may have to be limited either because of the physical limitations or security considerations at the scene or because of the numbers of media representatives wanting access. Such a decision is never going to be popular and should be taken only when absolutely necessary. One way to resolve this is by seeking media co-operation in nominating and agreeing members for a 'pool'. A 'pool' might, for example, comprise one TV crew, one news agency, such as the Press Association, a photographer and a radio reporter. Their pooled coverage is then made available simultaneously to all the other media organisations. Additional thought may also need to be given to meeting the particular needs of foreign media organisations (including providing them with accreditation where necessary).

Requirement for an emergency media centre

6.16 A decision will also need to be taken quickly about the requirement for establishing an emergency media centre. Where possible, the media should be consulted on this. (If the site does not work for them, they will not use it.) The requirement will obviously depend on issues such as the potential longevity, scale and seriousness of the incident or possibly multiple incidents. Issues such as the need for accreditation of large numbers of foreign media, the ready availability of suitable locations – including power, parking and IT facilities – and the opportunities for media access to the site(s) themselves will need to be considered.

6.17 In many cases, a forward briefing point with good views over the incident site and regular briefings may well be sufficient for the media's needs.

Regular briefings from senior personnel involved in the operation

6.18 Arrangements should also be made for the media to receive regular briefings from and interviews with senior police officers, fire and ambulance officers and representatives of other key agencies involved, such as transport companies and local authorities. This can best be facilitated in a large covered space where a raised dais and microphone

facilities are available. This will ensure more control over the proceedings and a less stressful environment.

6.19 While facts may be scarce initially, the media will welcome an honest appraisal of what is 'known' at the time and an account of what is being done, for example, to free trapped people. This should be backed up with a commitment to provide new information as soon as it is available. There should be no speculation on causal factors or half promises that raise expectations. Limitations on the release of information, where this is necessary to avoid prejudicing a possible criminal prosecution, should also be explained.

6.20 Press releases and briefings should be released in electronic form as soon as possible, for distributing to the media, local responders' press offices, and for posting on emergency websites like UK Resilience (<http://www.ukresilience.info>).

Interviews with survivors and their families

6.21 The media will be keen to obtain interviews with survivors and their families. While this may be a cathartic experience for individuals in the long run, many will feel too shocked and distressed to give interviews in the immediate aftermath of an incident. The first consideration should always be the well-being of the individual. However, if a survivor, relative or friend is willing and able to speak briefly at a press conference or give an interview, it will certainly relieve pressure on all concerned. They will need support and advice from press officers from involved organisations in preparing what they are going to say and in dealing with any follow-up enquiries from the media.

6.22 Strenuous efforts should also be made to shield survivors and their families from aggressive pursuit by less responsible members of the media. At its worst, this activity may include harassment, invasion of privacy, intrusion into grief and shock, unwanted involvement of relatives and friends, and interviewing or photographing children.

Release of casualty figures

6.23 Great care should be taken to ensure that no information about individual casualties, or premature or uncorroborated estimates of the numbers of casualties, is released until details have been

confirmed. Names should never be released until next of kin have been informed. In general, this information will be confirmed only by the emergency services involved. It may be necessary to establish a casualty bureau (see also Chapter 5) for the purposes of co-ordinating and sifting this information. In briefing the media about this and providing contact details and so on, it should be made clear that the bureau's role is to receive information to assist in identifying those involved.

Establishing an emergency call centre

6.24 Where it is deemed necessary to establish an emergency call centre for the public to seek further information, that number should be given urgently to the local media to broadcast/publish. The call centre's role – and the information it can and, more importantly, cannot provide – should be made very clear. Its role should be clearly distinguished from that of the casualty bureau.

Decontamination procedures

6.25 If there is a need to decontaminate victims at the scene, the media will require clear and urgent briefing on the procedures involved. (Apart from anything else, media employers have a duty of care to their own staff.)

Assistance from the Government News Network

6.26 The Government News Network (GNN) should be regarded as a prime resource to send experienced press officers to the scene (at no cost for the first 24 hours) and should be contacted at the earliest opportunity, either direct through the Regional Director or through the 24-hour emergency helpline (020 8938 3560). The GNN has an initial response IT capability in each office and will attend with basic equipment to set up a forward base. Their initial role will be to support local responders. As the incident develops, assistance can range from helping to staff a Lead Government Department (LGD) to handling VIP visits.

Establishing a co-ordinated approach to communications

6.27 As the emergency develops, there will be a requirement for a more comprehensive media response structure. This should be headed by a public

relations (PR) manager, ideally with previous crisis experience. It is essential that this person has sufficient seniority and personal authority to take decisions and command respect. He/she must be fully involved in the strategic decision-making arrangements for handling the emergency.

Role of the emergency PR manager

6.28 The emergency PR manager (and his/her team) should oversee all aspects of the media response. Typically, this would include:

- activities at the media liaison point;
- arrangements for the media to visit any scene, including transport arrangements where events have occurred in a remote location;
- management of a media centre when/if this is established;
- monitoring of likely media activities related to the emergency but at locations remote from the primary scene;
- monitoring of media coverage;
- support for those who choose to be interviewed and protection of the privacy of those who do not wish to be interviewed;
- participation in/management of any discussions/negotiations with the media not to broadcast certain details for the time being, or indeed to broadcast specific details (e.g. during hijack situations or kidnap negotiations);
- liaison with central government communications arrangements (e.g. News Co-ordination Centre (NCC)); and
- provision of communications policy advice to the Strategic Co-ordinating Group handling the emergency.

Role of the NCC

6.29 In the event of an emergency, the NCC may be established by the Cabinet Office Communications Group. The NCC supports the Lead Government Department (LGD) in their communications management of the overall incident.

6.30 The nature of the NCC's support will depend on the circumstances, but it could take the form of securing extra staff to work in the LGD or in an operations centre; helping to compile and distribute briefing material; designing and establishing websites; forward planning; collation of requests for ministerial interviews; and preparing media assessments.

Additionally, the NCC could provide a central press office to co-ordinate the overall government message. NCCs may also be set up regionally by using the GNN.

Requirements in an emergency media centre

6.31 MEF has made recommendations on the basic requirements for an emergency media centre. Considerable additional work has also been done through London Resilience, and increasingly through the RMEFs, to identify suitable locations and address issues such as the staff required to run such an operation 24 hours a day. Experienced press officers – from all the organisations involved – and also support staff will be required. At the request of the LGD, trained staff from the GNN can be engaged to supplement departmental resources.

6.32 There are several benefits to establishing a proper media centre for the duration of the emergency. These include a central focus for locating the media, for accrediting potentially large numbers, including media coming from overseas, and for organising regular briefings and providing facilities for press conferences and interviews. It will also provide a central point for assessing media coverage, co-ordinating information flows from all the organisations involved and, if necessary, establishing a central press office. In the event of a widespread or multi-site disaster, a single media centre may serve as a focus for several media liaison points at different locations.

Remote handling

6.33 Experience has shown that, in some emergencies, media attention focuses on communities and individuals living many miles from the scene, but who are seen as having a direct link to the emergency – perhaps because the victims came from there. Action will be required to ensure that media facilities and requirements in this area are also covered by the PR manager's central co-ordination arrangements.

Ensuring consistency in information provided to the public

6.34 The demand for information from both the media and the public may, initially at least, threaten to overwhelm the capacity of individual organisations' PR teams involved in the emergency.

Each organisation should ensure that its emergency media plans set out clearly the steps required to keep the public informed. This will include maintaining up-to-date lists of key contacts, previously agreed procedures for seeking additional communications and administrative support from other organisations, and a 'grab-bag' containing basic equipment and supplies. If help from the GNN is required, their press officers will arrive with their own IT equipment.

6.35 Under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, Category 1 responders are required to make arrangements to warn, inform and advise the public in the event of an emergency. This is fully covered in *Emergency Preparedness*, the guidance to Part 1 of the Act, and is outlined in Annex 1A of this publication.

6.36 These arrangements may best be set out in a protocol that has been agreed locally, through the RMEFs, or directly with media organisations such as the BBC through its *Connecting in a Crisis* initiative.

6.37 Under other existing legislation such as the COMAH Regulations (Control of Major Accident Hazards Regulations 1999) and REPIR (Radiation (Emergency Preparedness and Public Information) Regulations 2001) there is a duty to provide information to the public. Under COMAH, an operator must provide information to members of the public liable to be affected by a major accident at the operator's establishment. In preparing this information, the operator must consult the local authority in which they are situated and reach agreement for the local authority to disseminate the information to the public. Similarly, under REPIR, an operator or carrier must ensure that members of the public, in an area likely to be affected by a radiation emergency as a result of their operations, are supplied with appropriate information. The operator or carrier must consult the local authority or local authorities for the areas concerned and reach agreement with them to disseminate the information.

6.38 In the event of an emergency, the UK Resilience website forms part of the NCC operation and carries

information for local responders. It includes briefing documents, guidance and detailed planning material. Working in parallel with the Preparing for Emergencies website, it can provide evacuation routes, rest centre addresses and supply depot locations, etc. The Preparing for Emergencies website – <http://www.pfe.gov.uk> – has information for the general public on what to do to prepare for emergencies. In the event of emergencies, it can also carry ministerial statements, background details, and instructions on actions to take. Both sites can be updated within half an hour and kept updated from a variety of locations.

6.39 The web team monitors news sources and feeds for breaking news and additional information, and liaises with other government departments' web teams to co-ordinate messages and share information.

Working with the RMEFs/MEF

6.40 The MEF is an ad hoc and voluntary group of senior media editors, government representatives, local emergency responders and private industry set up in the late 1990s to consider media issues arising from civil emergencies.

6.41 RMEFs were established in 2003 and are increasingly forging similar links, based on the establishment of networks and trust, at the local and regional level. These forums are a mechanism that can be used during an emergency to explore communication issues with the media under the Chatham House Rule.¹ Where necessary, media briefings on salient issues can be urgently arranged. After an event, debriefs can help to identify where communications could have been handled better. Co-ordination is achieved through the GNN, which acts as the secretariat to the RMEFs. Their links with all regional stakeholders, including the regional and national media, will ensure that the widest possible consultation takes place. Here again, GNN staff can be engaged to assist with the development of the exercise scenarios or help with the arrangements for the exercise itself.

¹The Chatham House Rule is used to facilitate both free speech and confidentiality at meetings. Meetings may be held 'on the record' or under 'the Chatham House Rule'. In the latter case, it may be agreed with the speaker(s) that it would be conducive to free discussion that a given meeting, or part thereof, should be strictly private. When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information or opinions disclosed to them providing they do not refer to the meeting or the speaker.

6.42 Consideration should be given to regular testing and exercising of crisis communication plans to identify problem areas and ensure lessons are learned.

Co-ordination of information flow among stakeholders

6.43 A key issue during any emergency is to try and ensure consistency in the information provided by the different agencies involved. In the confusion that often follows an incident, it can be a difficult and lengthy process to establish clear, concise and accurate facts and figures about what has happened. However, the media will have an insatiable appetite for these details and will continue to seek information wherever and from whoever they can.

6.44 It will cause unnecessary pain and alarm if the information provided by different agencies is inconsistent, and great care should be taken to avoid this. Inconsistency will also lead to a loss of confidence in the responding agencies handling the incident.

6.45 Establishing cross-agency co-ordination of information at an early stage in an incident is a key step in seeking to avoid unnecessary confusion and inconsistency. This may include production and distribution of a core media brief for distribution among key stakeholders, central co-ordination of interviews, or even a centralised press office. It could also mean provision of additional press officers by one agency to support the efforts of another agency that may be coming under particular pressure.

6.46 The UK Resilience website – and other sites – can be a central source of information for the press and broadcasters inside and outside the United Kingdom, including press releases, briefings, statistics, response figures, maps, graphics and instructions. It can also be used to distribute emergency plans and transmit alerts and warnings.

Visits by VIPS

6.47 Visits by VIPS can lift the morale of those affected as well as those who are involved with the response. A government Minister may make an early visit to the scene or areas affected, not only to mark public concern but also to be able to report to Parliament on the response. A government Minister

visiting the scene may also be accompanied by local MPs. This would be arranged through the Minister's Private Office. It is possible that the scale of the emergency may, in addition, prompt visits by a member of the Royal Family and/or the Prime Minister. Local VIP visitors may include the Lord Lieutenant and/or High Sheriff, religious leaders, local MPs, mayors, local authority leaders and other elected representatives. If foreign nationals have been involved, their country's Ambassador, High Commissioner or other dignitaries may also want to visit key locations.

6.48 Visits to the scene of an emergency need to take account of the local situation and the immediate effects on the local community. It may be inappropriate for VIP visitors to go to the scene of the emergency while rescue operations are still going on, particularly if casualties are still trapped. VIP visits should not interrupt rescue and life-saving work and the emergency services must be consulted about the timing of visits.

6.49 VIP visits will inevitably cause some disruption and visitors will want this to be kept to a minimum. The additional need for security may also cause a problem. However, there are also dividends to be gained from such visits as they may boost the morale of all those involved, including the injured and the emergency services, and give an opportunity to place on record public gratitude for what has been done.

6.50 The emergency services are experienced at handling VIP visits in normal circumstances and many of the usual considerations will apply to visits to the scene or the emergency. However, it may be necessary to restrict media coverage of such visits, in which case pooling arrangements may be made.

6.51 Visiting Ministers and other VIPS will require comprehensive briefing before visiting the site and will require briefing before any meetings with the media.

6.52 VIPS are likely to want to meet those survivors who are well enough to see them. It will be for the hospitals to decide, on the basis of medical advice and respect for the wishes of individual patients and their relatives, whether it is appropriate for VIPS and/or the media to visit casualties. If the media cannot have access to wards, VIPS can still be interviewed afterwards, at the hospital entrance,

about how patients and medical staff are coping. Such VIP visits are best managed by the PR team of the 'host' venue in close consultation with the police.

Sustainability

6.53 Emergencies place enormous demands on all involved in the response and recovery effort. Media interest, particularly if it is international, can create pressure 24 hours a day, and careful planning of staggered handovers between shifts is essential. Senior staff within responding agencies will wish to take the sustainability of their level of engagement with the media into account and seek mutual aid accordingly. The pooling of resources in a joint media centre may be helpful in this respect. This relates not only to operational personnel but also to those providing administrative and specialist skills, e.g. in website technology.

6.54 In the much longer term, experience has also shown that media interest will be rekindled on the anniversary of events, and provision may need to be made to consider how such occasions are handled.

Media debrief

6.55 Where there has been a considerable amount of media attention, there will be inevitable strains between media and local responders' interests. Arranging for senior media representatives to meet with senior members of the emergency services and other organisations involved in the incident, some weeks after, can assist both sides in looking at how information was provided and identifying ways in which arrangements can be improved in the future. RMEFs can provide the mechanism for a full and frank exchange of views in a mutually supportive environment.

For example:

- *Morecambe Bay cockle pickers' tragedy*: The RMEF's invitation to the debrief was well received, attracting representatives from television, radio, the print media, fire, police and coastguard plus Lancashire County Council, Government News Network and Government Office for the North West. There was plenty of straight talking under the Chatham House rule but the atmosphere was constructive. The media were able to understand the problems faced by the emergency services (e.g. a scene the size of Morecambe Bay) and the time it

took before they could gauge the full extent of the tragedy, not to mention the sheer volume of calls. Responding agencies learned of everything from the media's urgent need for an official presence on site as opposed to a police station some distance away to the problems of trying to cable a press conference at short notice.

- *Carlisle floods*: The 2005 floods in Carlisle raised a number of issues for the media and responders. The debrief for this incident – led by the RMEF – highlighted loss of power, business continuity, and the problems of collating and distributing information to the public and the media when faced with a lack of power and telephones. The debrief highlighted the widespread use of the internet and the advantages there would have been of one dedicated website – a project now being taken forward – and the importance of flexible, cross-organisation working.

(Case studies and examples of good practice may be found in the MEF/RMEFs annual report, <http://www.ukresilience.info/mef/index.htm>.)