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CHAPTER 12: PUBLIC INFORMATION

All organisations shall have a strategy for communicating with the public on relevant civil contingencies issues on an ongoing basis. All shall also have a strategy for communicating essential information and public safety advice in relation to their services when a particular emergency is imminent, is happening or has happened. All appropriate organisations shall participate in co-ordination arrangements for public information and media response.

176. Providing information to the public has two aspects:

- The public should be provided with relevant civil contingencies information on an ongoing basis, as part of an organisation's overall strategy for engaging with the public.
- The public should be warned of any imminent or actual dangers and provided with information and advice at the time of an emergency.

Civil contingencies information to the public

177. Each public service organisation in Northern Ireland should have a strategy for proactively providing relevant information, in relation to its services, on

- risks, as identified by the organisation's risk assessments,
- steps which the organisation has taken or is taking to treat those risks,
- steps which the public can take to prepare for, or respond to an emergency arising from identified risks, and
- the organisation's civil contingencies arrangements.

178. This is consistent with the principle that as far as possible, an organisation should make relevant information available to the public through its publication scheme.

179. An organisation need not publish all of its risk assessment or its complete emergency plans. **The emphasis should be on information which helps the public to make decisions in relation to their own safety, to be prepared for an emergency and to respond appropriately when an emergency does occur.** For example, the Environment Agency in England and Wales provides geographical information on flooding risks (and on other risks such as landfill sites and pollution sources) which enables house buyers to see what the flooding risk is for a property and house owners to know if they need to be aware of flood alerts. It also publishes a range of leaflets, in various formats and languages, on subjects such as 'simple ways to protect your home', 'installing your own flood defences', 'during a flood' and 'after a flood' (see www.environment-agency.gov.uk/).

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180. There may also be reassurance value in letting the public know that an organisation has civil contingencies arrangements in place and will be able to provide a response (assuming that the organisation's arrangements have been appropriately validated).
181. Information published by an organisation may need to manage the expectations of the public about the type, speed and capabilities of its response. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the USA, for example, publishes a booklet called 'Are you ready? A guide to citizen preparedness' in which it advises that all families should have arrangements to manage for themselves in a disaster for up to three days (www.fema.com/areyouready/). It may be necessary to convey some difficult-to-handle information, for example an organisation may need to explain that it will have to prioritise the use of scarce resources and set out the principles which it will use to determine greatest need (see the DHSSPS NI Influenza Pandemic plan on www.dhsspsni.gov.uk).

Freedom of Information

182. An open discussion of risks and responses between public service organisations and the public represents a considerable culture change. However, the Freedom of Information Act has given the public extensive rights to have access to information held by organisations and has created an expectation that organisations will be proactive and encourage dialogue with the public on policies and services. Some aspects of civil contingencies arrangements, such as those which deal with national security or with commercially sensitive information, may well come under exemptions, but there will be a great deal which is not so covered or where there could be held to be a public interest case for revealing information. It is therefore in the interests of organisations to be proactive in publicising their civil contingencies arrangements within a planned scheme. However, organisations should be aware that if they publish extracts from, or summaries of, risk assessments or plans, they could receive a Freedom of Information request for full information. As with other material, it would be advisable for an organisation to assess the status of any source material used at the time information is published.

Co-ordinating information

183. Most risks or responses do not involve only one organisation. Normally a number of organisations are involved, each contributing something according to its functions. But the public is not interested in organisational divisions or how responsibilities are distributed – people want to know that the public services have taken steps to protect them and will respond when an emergency happens, but they do not particularly care how this is achieved. It follows then that in providing information to the public it is important to tell the whole story and not just one organisation's part. To provide the public with information on the risks of, preparedness for and responses to any particular emergency will therefore involve drawing information from a number of organisations and presenting it as an integrated package.

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184. The lead organisation for any particular risk or response will be responsible for providing public information in relation to that subject, and for gathering and co-ordinating relevant information from other organisations. General information for the public on risks, actions they can take, and preparedness of public service organisations would normally be issued at Northern Ireland level. At that level, the lead organisation will normally be an emergency service or a NI department (see 'A Guide to Emergency Planning Arrangements in Northern Ireland'). For example, the NI Fire Brigade issues public information about fire safety and how and when to call out the Fire Brigade, and DHSSPS issues a range of public safety and public health information, including copies of contingency plans for smallpox and pandemic influenza. The DHSSPS pandemic influenza plan deals not only with the department's response, but with that of the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts and UK and international health organisations. **All lead departments should ensure that in developing their strategies for communicating with the public on civil contingencies matters they consult with, and include information from, associated agencies and NDPBs, the emergency services and other NI departments.** Where an organisation which is not the lead organisation considers that it should issue specialist information on its aspect of a risk or response, that information should be co-ordinated and cross-referenced with information being issued by the lead organisation.
185. At sub-regional and local levels, the lead organisation may be an emergency service, a NI department, a Board or Trust, a NDPB or a District Council. **Where any specifically local risks or information about preparedness or response need to be communicated, this should be done by the lead organisation in association with other local responders.** For cross-cutting issues, the District Council may be able to provide a forum, through its inter-agency group, for discussing public information strategies.

Communicating effectively

186. Information on risk and the safety of the public is not easy to communicate effectively. The message needs to be clear and easily understood, but the issues underlying it are often complex and contain uncertainties. The risk assessment process which an organisation uses needs to be objective, but the public's risk assessment is often very subjective. Decisions on risk treatment and preparedness will depend on cost benefit analysis and the balance of competing public expenditure priorities, but the views of individual members of the public on what is important will be widely divergent, depending on their own circumstances and experiences. Detailed practical guidance on communicating risk is available from the Government Information and Communication Service document 'Communicating Risk' (www.ukresilience.info/risk/index.htm).
187. Communications strategies should take account of the target audiences and the differing needs of groups within the community. As with other aspects of civil contingencies activities, organisations should ensure that their communications strategies are consistent with the requirements of section 75 of the Northern Ireland

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Act 1998. In particular, advice to the public on their response to emergencies should be issued in formats which make it accessible to those who find written English difficult, whether because of sensory impairment, learning disability or because English is not their first language. Information and advice should also be accessible to those who do not have access to the internet, for example by placing copies in libraries, advice centres and other public places.

188. Organisations which have developed and implemented civil contingencies communications strategies should also have a strategy for monitoring the reception and use of the information they produce, to ensure that they are reaching their target audience, that they are complying with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and that they are receiving value for money.
189. NI departments, the emergency services and some other organisations have staff who are specialists in media and public communications. They should use these specialist resources fully in developing and delivering their civil contingencies information strategies. The Northern Ireland Departmental Information Service (NIDIS, formerly the Executive Information Service) provides a range of services to NI departments and can advise on communications strategies and on how to reach target audiences. Other organisations may have full or part-time press officers and/or access to private sector public relations firms. They should make use of whatever resources are available to develop and deliver civil contingencies communications strategies. Training on media relations and public information in a crisis is available from the Emergency Planning College (www.epcollege.gov.uk).
190. Chapter 7 of the CCS publication 'Preparing for Emergencies' (www.ukresilience.info/ccact/guidance1.pdf) contains useful guidance on communicating which is applicable to any organisation. Northern Ireland public service organisations should take account of this guidance in developing their strategies.

Warning and informing

Each public service organisation in Northern Ireland should have a strategy and plan for communicating with the public in relation to its services when an emergency is imminent, is happening or has happened.

191. General communication on civil contingencies issues is useful in preparing the public for emergencies and indicating in general terms what response would be made to certain emergencies. However, when a particular emergency is imminent or has occurred, people want precise information on the detail of that emergency – where?; when?; what effect has it?; who was involved?; how am I affected?; why did it happen?; will it happen again?
192. The primary objective of giving information in emergency situations should be to enable people to keep themselves, their families and their property safe by responding appropriately to the emergency. Other key objectives are to inform those

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directly affected of what is happening, and to provide information on who is involved, so that friends and relatives can assure themselves of their safety or make inquiries to the appropriate source of information. It is a fact of life that the public have an interest in emergencies in which they have no personal involvement and will want information on what has happened, the risks of it happening to them, and whether there are any implications for them. This was well illustrated by the public response to the effects of the Asian tsunami in December 2004. Public Service organisations should ensure that their information strategy includes providing input where they can to the wider reporting of an emergency.

193. Proactively getting good quality information out into the public domain during and in the aftermath to an emergency will take the pressure off organisations by reducing the number of direct queries to switchboards and helplines. Emergency plans of public service organisations should identify what information is likely to be needed, how it can be obtained, what the target audience is and how it should be delivered. Public information aspects of the plan should be validated along with the rest of the plan, for example there should be a public information aspect to relevant exercises.

Co-ordinating information.

194. In an emergency situation, it is particularly important that all the responding agencies speak with one voice so as to prevent confusion and provide clear guidance to the public. This is not easy. Information can be hard to obtain, especially early on; responding organisations collect information in order to manage their own responses, not necessarily for the benefit of other responders or the public; and physical communication between organisations can be difficult. It is therefore important that contingency planning includes planning to deliver co-ordinated public information, and that this is exercised as part of the validation process. Each responding organisation will have information which it needs or wants to communicate to the public. For each identified risk or response, plans should cover whether all information will come from one source, in which case other organisations will pass their information to the lead communicator, or whether each organisation will deliver its own information but this will be cleared with a lead co-ordinator before release.
195. In most cases, the lead organisation for the emergency response will also take the lead in providing and co-ordinating information to the public. For sudden impact incidents, the initial lead will normally be the police, and they will initially co-ordinate the press response. In cases where the lead is another emergency service, such as the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, or a non-emergency public services such as a NI department, that organisation will co-ordinate the public information response. During the course of the emergency, the lead response organisation may change, for example when the emergency services have dealt with the immediate incident and hand over to a department, agency or district council for the recovery process. In that case, consideration needs to be given to when and how responsibility for co-ordination of public information will be handed over. This would normally be concurrent with the change in response lead, but there may be reasons, for example ongoing casualty bureau investigations, why the original lead responder needs to

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hold on to the public information lead. Whenever there is a change in public information lead organisation, this must be clearly signalled to the public and the media so as to avoid confusion.

196. Delivering and co-ordinating public information in an emergency will place a considerable strain on an organisation which is already providing an emergency response. Because of this, many organisations have mutual aid arrangements to obtain additional support in an emergency. The Northern Ireland departments all have recourse to the central resources of the NIDIS and agencies and NDPBs may be able to call on the press office resources of their parent departments. As part of the planning process, organisations should consider what their needs would be and make mutual aid arrangements where appropriate.

Communicating effectively

197. In an emergency situation timeliness of information is particularly important. Essential public safety information needs to be disseminated quickly, in time for people to take appropriate action. The release of other information may have to be carefully managed, for example names of people killed should not be released until formal identification procedures are complete and relatives have been informed. Information needs to be in a format which people can understand and act on and should come from a reputable and authoritative source. Organisations should have plans and arrangements which will enable them to deliver timely information, targeted to particular localities and/or groups in the community. They should also have a monitoring capability to gather information on what information people are asking for, so that messages can be refined and tailored and an audit strategy which will enable them to demonstrate afterwards that they met any statutory requirements and to produce evidence at any subsequent inquiry.
198. Chapter 8 of 'A Guide to Emergency Planning Arrangements in Northern Ireland' and Chapter 7 of 'Preparing for Emergencies' give information on public information issues in emergency situations.
199. Further information is also available on the website of the National Steering Committee on Warning and Informing the Public (NSCWIP), www.nscwip.info.

The role of the media

200. Public service organisations use various means to communicate directly with the public, for example, websites, written material made available on request or in libraries and other public places and direct mail to people's homes. However, it can be difficult to reach everyone by such means, especially if the message is urgent. Therefore many organisations use the media to some extent. It is important to distinguish between two aspects of providing information to and through the media:
201. Direct information can be conveyed through the media, either by paying for advertising or through a media interview with a public service spokesperson.

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202. Information on civil contingencies issues and particular emergencies may be given to the media, but the media will have editorial control over how and when that information is used, and will often also present alternative or additional material from other sources.
203. The media, including print, radio and television reach a huge audience, and members of the public are likely to gain most of their information and understanding of the world through the media rather than directly from the government. This may be because direct means of communication do not reach the right groups or because people do not fully trust information from public service organisations.
204. Public service organisations should give consideration to the full range of options available for communicating through the media and take professional advice on how best to present information. Traditionally, media interest in emergencies was focused on the response to and outcomes of, specific incidents. Increasingly all the media, but especially television, are taking a more holistic approach, with programmes being made on planning, communication and co-ordination issues, either in relation to emergencies generally or those associated with particular scenarios such as CBRN terrorism or global warning. Organisations should be aware of potential opportunities to contribute to public understanding through participation in such programmes but also the potential to have to provide information to challenge or answer assertions made in such programmes.
205. The government has established an agreement with the BBC on the provision of public information in emergencies through radio and television. Information on this and on how to access the scheme can be found at www.bbc.co.uk/connectinginacrisis/. **Northern Ireland public service organisations should always access the scheme through the NIDIS.**

PUBLIC INFORMATION PUBLICATIONS AND WEBSITES

Preparing for Emergencies. CCS publication www.ukresilience.info/ccact/guidance1.pdf

A Guide To Emergency Planning Arrangements in Northern Ireland. Central Emergency Planning Unit publication available on <http://cepu.nics.gov.uk>

A Guide to Evacuation in Northern Ireland. Central Emergency Planning Unit publication which includes information on communicating in an evacuation situation, available on <http://cepu.nics.gov.uk>.

Communicating Risk. Government Information and Communication Service document (www.ukresilience.info/risk/index.htm).

Federal Emergency Management Agency, USA website www.fema.com An extensive website with guidance on general and specific preparedness issues, and links to civil contingencies sites and publications worldwide.

'Are you ready? A guide to citizen preparedness' Federal Emergency Management Agency, USA, (www.fema.com/areyouready/).

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), NI website www.dhsspsni.gov.uk. An example of a departmental website which provides information, advice and guidance in relation to health emergencies and copies of multi-agency health emergency plans.

DHSSPS NI Influenza Pandemic plan available on www.dhsspsni.gov.uk

The Environment Agency in England and Wales website www.environment-agency.gov.uk/. Website with extensive information and advice on environment-related emergencies, especially flooding.

The National Steering Committee on Warning and Informing the Public (NSCWIP), website, www.nscwip.info. Information on the NSCWIP and copies of its reports.

Connecting in a Crisis. BBC document setting out its arrangements for public information broadcasts in a civil emergency at www.bbc.co.uk/connectinginacrisis/