



Government
Communication
Service

Emergency planning framework



The Government Communication Service (GCS) is the professional body for people working in communication roles across government. Our aim is to deliver world-class communications that support Ministers' priorities, improve people's lives and enable the effective operation of our public service.



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Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	4
<u>Plan</u>	6
The key principles behind any crisis	
Anticipating crises – how to keep one step ahead	
Creating your emergency communication plan	
<u>Rehearse</u>	13
Why emergency exercises are important	
What type of exercise is right for your organisation?	
<u>Implement</u>	15
Five questions to ask when assembling your crisis team	
Agreeing your first steps – a flow chart for action	
Establishing a reporting process	
<u>Maintain</u>	19
Strategy	
Managing social media	
Digital Media Response Assessment	
Planning and managing a visit	
Looking after your team	
<u>Evaluate</u>	27
Agreeing your objectives	
Setting appropriate metrics	
Collecting and reporting results	
Learning and applying lessons	
<u>Recover</u>	32
Rebuilding reputation	
<u>Training and resources</u>	35
Courses	
Scenarios	
Examples	
Helpful links	

Introduction

From flooding to terror attacks, the public expect the government to be a fast and reliable source of information in times of crisis. With the pace at which emergencies can evolve and new forms of media allowing information to be disseminated in real time, high quality and timely communication during a crisis is now arguably as important as the management of the crisis itself.

As public bodies, it is essential that during a crisis we are the source of accurate, relevant and timely information. A strong crisis communication strategy can keep stakeholders informed, build and maintain public trust in the government and ensure accurate information is being reported by the media. Without one, the risk is that misleading information can take hold and cause irreparable damage to an organisation and its reputation, as well as raise concern or fear in local communities.

This is why communication is so essential. As communicators, you manage more than media handling or the communications that are released. At the heart of it, communication is responsible for managing the reputation and brand of an organisation – both of which are at stake during a crisis or emergency.

Drawing on best practice across the public sector, we have created a package of practical tools and templates for communication professionals showing how to plan, develop and implement an effective response during a crisis.

Our resources are focused on six critical stages which make up the **GCS Primer** framework for crisis communications.

- **Plan** – It is essential to have a communications plan, regularly update it and know where it is when you need it.
- **Rehearse** – A crisis response works best if tested in advance, and doing this with partners can ensure you build important relationships in calmer times.
- **Implement** – Getting it right from the start can be critical – this section looks at how you set up your crisis response in the right way.
- **Maintain** – Crisis scenarios can be a test of stamina and character – these resources will help you ensure you maintain quality while supporting your team.
- **Evaluate** – It is crucial to measure what's getting through and what's not – this section shows how to measure impact in real time and refine your approach.
- **Recover** – Communication has an important role in rebuilding trust and confidence– this section offers practical advice on how to respond after a crisis.

Key to delivering effective crisis communication is the team you bring with you. When considering how you enact the **GCS Primer** framework keep in your mind the people and capability you need.

We've outlined the range of communication and essential skills needed in a crisis and the sort of people you might need – from specialists such as analysts or designers, as well as communication generalists.

Finally, don't forget that any incident can take its toll on a team so a top priority for any department dealing with a crisis should be the resilience and welfare of your people.

Plan

When a crisis hits, having a clear, up-to-date and adaptable communication plan in place can be the difference between success and failure.

While crises are in their very nature unpredictable and unique, there are still a basic set of principles that you can follow in developing a communication plan that is ready to go when you need it and will provide you with the structure and tools you need to get to work.

This section will look at:

- **the key principles behind any crisis**
- **anticipating crises – how to keep one step ahead**
- **creating your emergency communication plan**

The key principles behind any crisis

While no two crises are the same, there are some key principles that should guide every emergency communication response and underpin your thinking when developing your emergency communication plan.

Launch quickly – When an emergency hits, you need to be able to galvanise your team and quickly establish roles and responsibilities, so you can respond swiftly. A key part of this is knowing in advance who the key people are.

Identify the facts – No matter what the situation, you need to make establishing the facts from fiction your priority. As part of your emergency communication planning, you should think about how you would go about establishing the details. Who are the key sources of information in your department? How will you scan external sources, such as social media, for information? What other agencies will you rely upon to provide you with accurate and up to date details, such as the emergency services, other government departments or public bodies, or local resilience forums?

Brief senior management – Ensuring communications are involved and advising at the first briefings of senior management and the strategic, gold command, team meeting is essential. This will ensure you know the key facts and able to make clear what the key messages should be.

Transparency – This principle should underline all activity in an emergency. As public bodies we must be open, transparent and as informative as possible.

Be flexible – While preparation can stand you in good stead, the very nature of a crisis means you will encounter new and unpredictable situations. Be open with your team and organisation about this from the off and recognise that you will need a team that is open to learning as they go and flexing to the many twists and turns of crisis management.

How do you know you are managing a crisis?

A crisis is an unexpected moment, event or series of events which has three related threats – public safety, financial loss and loss of reputation. A crisis is generally characterised by escalating damage, intense scrutiny, high levels of uncertainty, loss of control and insufficient information. Not all emergencies are crises but every crisis is an emergency. While an emergency is an incident that requires rapid and co-ordinated response, a crisis also has reputational damage components. Often these can arise because an emergency has been perceived as being badly handled, although sometimes of course a crisis is not preceded by an emergency event.

During a crisis you experience reputational damage and criticism that is significant and escalates. You know you are in a sustained reputational crisis when you can't close the story down: criticism becomes the story.

Anticipating crises – how to keep one step ahead

While you can't predict the next crisis that is going to hit, if you know your brief and the potential issues, it's good practice to think about the potential crises that could occur in your organisation or communities.

Gather the crisis communications leads in your team and take part in an exercise to brainstorm possible crisis scenarios you may face. When doing this exercise, think about the following:

- Who would be the affected customers or stakeholders? How would you communicate with them?
- What are the worst case scenarios for that crisis and how you would handle them
- What would be the key messages you would want to be communicating?
- How would you communicate these key messages?

This exercise should help to establish the areas of your organisation that are vulnerable to a crisis situation.

Once you have done this, think about establishing contact with the relevant policy leads in those areas, making sure you have their contact details and are aware of the chain of command and roles of individuals should an emergency occur.

More detail and related exercises on how to rehearse for a crisis can be found later on in this handbook.

Creating your emergency communication plan

Your plan needs to be the first place you go to when a crisis hits to make sure you are responding in a co-ordinated manner and have all the information you need to react effectively.

Here's a checklist of content that you should make sure you have ready now, so it's good to go when you need to handle a crisis situation.

Contacts prepared

The first key thing you need in any emergency plan is a list of the key people who would need to be:

- **involved** in the management of an emergency or crisis – and sign off materials
- **informed** about an emergency or incident

This can be broken down into internal and external contacts as set out below. The key thing is ensuring you have accurate contact details and know the best way to communicate with these groups.

Internal contacts

Who are the 'gold command' in your organisation that will need to be alerted to a crisis?

Make sure you have an up-to-date contact list of the key players in your organisation, set out in a clear chain of command for example directors and private offices. It should include out of hours and personal contact details.

External contacts

Having strong relationships with all of your key stakeholders is essential. While this can't always be done ahead of time, in the midst of a crisis it is critical and you need to make sure your handling approach takes this into account.

Disseminating information to your key stakeholders is therefore a priority. This is what prevents false information spreading and makes sure that they feel informed and re-assured.

Make sure you have an up-to-date list of the key external contacts in your organisation. Take time to not only identify your stakeholders but also make contact with them and build a relationship. This will make things far easier when a crisis hits and the pressure is on.

Make sure you have identified the most effective way of communicating with each stakeholder. Gone are the days when phone numbers and emails would be all you need. Are there other ways your organisation regularly communicates with these stakeholders (for example closed online groups, regular bulletins) and can you exploit these to disseminate information during an emergency? For bigger departments, it's useful to separate this by directorate or policy area so you have an easy-to-access list depending on the nature of the crisis.

Trained spokespeople

Having the right person to speak to the media and communicate your key messages during a crisis is vital, whether that's offering reassurance, showing sympathy or demonstrating grip of a situation. As communicators it is your job to manage, support and advise your key spokespeople to successfully protect your organisation's reputation and ensure all messages are consistent. Don't leave it to the point a crisis hits to train up spokespeople in your organisation. Make sure you take the time to offer key people media training. We'll touch on this in more detail in this handbook.

The right technology and methods of communication

When a crisis hits you need to be ready to establish the facts quickly and make sure you have fast, effective methods of communication. Consider what are the best and quickest ways to disseminate information in your organisation and make sure you have the necessary contact details ready to do this.

Developing your crisis communication plan – a practical template

Title

- Be specific, brief and relevant.

Background and aim

- This should be a broad statement of the problem you intend to solve or what you want to achieve – include a brief summary of the operational activity the strategy is supporting.
- Does this strategy support other work?
- Are other departments/organisations involved in supporting this work?
- Ideally, this should be no more than a brief paragraph.

Objectives

- The objectives are what you want to achieve – they should provide a clear structure for the action that may need to be taken.
- Where possible these should be SMART objectives:
 - **Specific** – clear about what will be achieved
 - **Measurable** – quantify results and measure when they have been achieved
 - **Achievable** – ensure they can be achieved
 - **Realistic** – can be attained as part of the project or response
 - **Timed** – can be attained within a specified timescale

Target audience

- This should cover external organisations, partners, stakeholders, opinion formers, your own staff, etc.
- Do not make the audience groups too broad ('the general public') as there will be subsections that are likely to require specific information.

Key messages

- What key information needs to be given to the audience?
- Do you need different messages for before, during and after the event or incident that this strategy will cover?
- Have you identified the generic lines that will fit with a range of circumstances but will allow you to convey an initial message very quickly?
- As you develop the strategy, think about how you many need to use it, such as if it is in response to a natural disaster or an apparent act of terrorism – each case will require slightly different lines to be developed, but remember it is important not to prejudge the issue.
- Do you need different messages for an international audience and what routes will you use to reach them?
- Does this include internal communications – and do you need a different message for your own staff?
- Is a Parliamentary statement likely?
- Is there basic information available now regarding this policy area to save time during an emergency?
- Are these messages going to be used proactively or reactively?

Channels

- What routes and capabilities are you using to get your message out and are there some routes specific to some audiences such as a text message service, Twitter, group email lists?
- What specific communication, marketing and publicity (including web and other digital media) actions do you need to take?
- Are these messages so vital, that additional measures need to be taken to ensure the relevant audiences all receive them, such as by door knocking?
- Are longer-term actions required like public meetings to maintain the flow of information?

Spokespeople

- Have spokespeople been pre-identified and have they been media trained?
- Will this be their primary role?
- Do they change depending on where you are in the response, is there someone different who speaks on initial response and someone who speaks on recovery?
- Have a number of spokespeople been identified to ensure continuity over time if you are dealing with a long-running incident?
- Be clear, calm, factual and remember to match this with body language.
- Never speculate, say no comment, use jargon or acronyms.

Managing co-ordination

- Does this strategy require specific local, national or international co-ordination?
- For most incidents it is extremely rare for there not to be at least one other department involved – have these been identified and consulted?
- The Cabinet Office News Co-ordination Centre (NCC) will be involved in the co-ordination of national messages during an emergency or incident – do your communication plans include how you will co-ordinate with the NCC?
- Do your plans include how you will co-ordinate information if required at a local level, with LRF level, RRT level and with the NCC?

Timescales

- Do you have any time-specific plans – and how quickly can you set these plans in operation?
- Is there a timeline that supports the actions in the proposed strategy?

Practical application

- Do you have the relevant contact numbers (including out of hours) for the group relevant to this strategy?

The items highlighted below are not essential, especially in the first version of a strategy developed during the initial moments of a crisis. However, as the incident progresses and a fuller strategy developed, these should be included.

Resources and budget

- Have budgets been pre-identified to manage this work?
- Who would a budget requirement need to be highlighted with?

Research

- Are these plans and proposals supported by research?

Review, evaluation and exercising

- What mechanisms are in place to evaluate or review progress of implementation of the strategy?
- Is there a strategy in place to exercise the strategy (perhaps as part of a wider exercise)?
- How often will the strategy be reviewed to cope with changes such as staff turnover?

Gaps and risks

- Are there any specific gaps that have been identified as a result of developing this communication strategy?
- Are extra capabilities required?
- Has a communication risk register been established to identify and mitigate any associated risks?

Rehearse

Until an emergency plan has been tested, it is impossible to be sure it will work effectively in the heat of a crisis.

Practising and testing all aspects of emergency plans is therefore a key part of crisis preparedness, not only to identify and address any weaknesses in advance, but also to help the organisation and its staff to become aware of and comfortable with their individual roles.

This section includes:

- **why emergency exercises are important**
- **what type of exercise is right for your organisation?**
- **rehearsal exercise checklist**
- **further online resources on testing emergency plans**

Why emergency exercises are important



What type of exercise is right for your organisation?

The type of exercise you choose will depend on a number of factors, including lead-in time, budget, facilities and availability of participants.

Here are the three main options for training exercises, and the pros and cons for each:

1		2		3	
Discussion-based exercises		Table-top exercises		Live exercises	
These provide opportunities to talk through plans in a group context, enabling the approach to be checked and amended and ensuring everyone has a clear sense of the strategy.		These exercises are simulated exercises that often revolve around testing a specific scenario. They are good for validating plans and exploring potential weaknesses.		These involve a full, live rehearsal of the implementation of a plan and work well for testing logistics, communications and physical capabilities.	
Pros	Cons	Pros	Cons	Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cheap, quick and relatively easy to set up Useful at development stage to refine plans Ensures everyone has clear sight of emerging plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More difficult to test logistical and operational challenges that may arise during crisis Does not test how staff or systems might respond in 'real' life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful for stress-testing plans and helping people to understand their role Can identify potential weaknesses in an approach Helps strengthen working relationships in a practical way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires careful planning to develop appropriate scenarios Identifying format and venue can also be challenging Does not test how staff or systems might respond in 'real' life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teams gain direct, practical experience of scenarios, learning through doing Tests how staff and systems might respond in an actual crisis situation Tests logistical and operational challenges as well as strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be very expensive and time-consuming to plan and deliver May have unintended consequences, such as undermining staff confidence

See appendix 1 for the rehearsal exercise checklist.

Implement

When a crisis hits, the speed and accuracy of the communication response can make a huge difference. This section covers the immediate steps communication professionals need to take when a crisis hits.

It is designed to help you establish the right processes to respond effectively, build a unified approach, and ensure you can develop robust, well-considered plans from the outset.

Resources include:

- **assembling your team – five questions to ask**
- **agreeing your initial plan – a flow chart to help you shape your first steps**
- **managing social media – the first steps**
- **establishing a reporting process**
- **developing your crisis communications plan – a practical template**
- **the view from the centre – how central government works during a crisis**

Five questions to ask when assembling your crisis team

1 Does everyone understand the background to the incident or crisis?

Make sure you encourage everyone to share what is known about the situation through media coverage, officials and any other sources of information.

Crucially, ask yourself the basic, but critical question: is this a crisis, and is it your crisis to manage – this will give you a clear sense of your organisation's role in the response.

2 What range of expertise and knowledge will you need to respond effectively?

Think about the skills and knowledge you will need to respond effectively to the situation you're facing, so that you start to understand the key people you will need to build your team around.

Essential skills needed to respond and handle a crisis should be relevant to handling the initial crisis response, the duration and the aftermath. To deliver a co-ordinated response these skills must be mapped against the four I's of the GCS Competency Framework: Insight, Ideas, Implementation and Impact.

Essential skills:

- Reactive media queries (implementation)
- Generating proactive media and digital handling (ideas)
- Managing stakeholders (implementation)
- Targeting key audiences (insight)
- Evaluation and lessons learnt (impact)

3 Who else beyond your organisation will have a stake in the response?

A crisis rarely involves a single organisation, so it's vital that you understand who else will have a stake in the response and start finding ways of making this an integrated effort.

This is where the time that you invested in planning and rehearsing can make a difference as it will mean you are likely to have established relationships and protocols with other organisations.

If you haven't, it is important that you work fast to make connections with key contacts and establish appropriate ways of working with them.

4 Is everyone clear about who is leading what aspect of the response?

You are likely to be facing a complex, fast-moving situation, so be clear about who is responsible for what within your crisis team.

Make sure everyone understands their own role, but also knows how their actions may affect others in the team – it is important that everyone recognises how they fit into the wider effort.

Take the time now to set the direction for the team, so that there is consensus on what is expected of everyone involved.

5 Have you got a reliable way of keeping track on progress across the team?

In a crisis situation, there can be a danger of losing control of the process as the pace of the response quickens.

While it may not seem the most obvious thing to do upfront, it is worth establishing how everyone will share information and keep the team up to date on progress.

The reporting should be proportionate so that it doesn't detract from the vital job of delivery, but it is an important part of setting up an effective team response.

Agreeing your first steps – a flow chart for action

Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>T</u>hink about those affected and what might be different in reaching them during a crisis • <u>D</u>on't forget your initial audiences – they will be looking for guidance and reassurance too • <u>R</u>emember that the audiences you think you know will respond differently in a crisis situation
Message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>W</u>hat do you immediately need to say, to whom and why? • <u>H</u>ow might the content of your message vary by audience, and how will you distinguish? • <u>W</u>ho needs to be involved in shaping the message
Channels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>W</u>hat is the best way of reaching your audiences given the current circumstances? • <u>C</u>heck whether your normal channels have been affected by the crisis? • <u>W</u>ork collaboratively as you may find your partners own better routes into audiences than you
Spokespeople	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>A</u>re you clear on who your lead spokespeople should be? • <u>H</u>ave you checked that they are available and can be briefed in a timely way? • <u>T</u>hink about their credibility with key audiences – do they have the authority to move people?

Establishing a reporting process

Your communication plans will form part of a much wider operational response to a crisis, which means that one of your early duties is to make sure there is a robust system of information sharing in place.

This involves looking at what reporting requirements might be needed to keep different clients and stakeholders informed of what your teams are doing, and what intelligence they may be picking up.

Here are some key questions to consider:

- Have you agreed monitoring responsibilities – who will provide it, when, what format, which reports should it play into, and what range of media should be included?
- Will official or ministerial meetings be required – who will attend them from communications and how will they be briefed by the rest of the team?
- Has a communication group been set up to manage the situation – what information will they need and how will you get it to them?
- What other governance arrangements are in place, and what are their expectations in terms of reporting?
- Will you need to develop media handling around the meeting itself – does this need to be agreed with No.10 e.g. if a Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) meeting takes place?
- How will you manage any ‘door stepping’ of ministers and potentially senior officials when attending meetings – who will support them?
- Other issues to consider, depending on the scale and nature of the crisis:
- Where is the Prime Minister when the issue becomes known – in Downing Street, in the UK?
- Is Parliament sitting?
- Are there other major events ongoing that may have an impact e.g. G8/NATO type conferences, ceremonial events such as Trooping the Colour?
- Is the News Coordination Centre required to be operational – i.e. a staffed operation co-located at NCC’s base in London?
- Who is resourcing the operation – do we need to involve other external organisations e.g. the police.

Maintain

Once you've established your emergency communication team and have all mechanisms in place to deal with the situation, it is really important to make sure that you can keep it going for the duration of the crisis.

This section includes:

- **Preparing your spokespeople**
- **Managing social media**
- **Establishing and maintaining your battle rhythm**
- **Planning and managing a visit**
- **Looking after your team**

Strategy

All departments should have a clear External Affairs strategy, agreed with ministers and the Executive Committee. The below provides a best practice example which may be of use.



Focus on the facts

- Giving the key facts of the situation will emphasise that you are on top of the situation
- Stick to verified facts and do not speculate
- Speculation can lead to the opposite effect – lurid headlines and loss of control



Never say 'no comment'

- Initially there may well be issues on which you cannot give an answer – at that stage you may simply not have the information
- However, answering 'no comment' can be interpreted as 'I do know but am not telling you' or 'That is right but you can not possibly expect me to say that'



Remember you are in control

- Communicate the actions you are taking to manage the situation
- Emphasise the commitment to finding out what has happened
- Above all, demonstrate concern for those involved



Don't forget who you are speaking to

- In media interview do not use acronyms or jargon
- Remember to be human - show your empathy for those affected
- Adapt your approach depending on who you are speaking to



Prepare

- Plan your messages ahead of interview, rehearse with colleagues, press officers, etc.
- Anticipate the type of question you may receive
- Do not be afraid to repeat key facts



Consider your location

- Ensure the location for the interview is planned in advance wherever possible
- Be aware of the environment around you, particularly if it may convey a different message
- Think about your own appearance and what that may say to the viewing public



Remember your body language

- Be confident but not over confident
- Look the audience in the eye
- Communicate control through your tone of voice and delivery

Managing social media

Any crisis creates a pivotal moment for a department or organisation. With the speed of social media, we need to be adaptable, agile and operate with the knowledge that audiences are smarter, louder, and quicker than ever.

The SPEAK approach and FACT model can help to make sure your social media channels can keep pace with the speed of events and respond with authority to any emerging trends.

The 'SPEAK' approach

- **Speed**
We need to respond quickly, not thoughtlessly, working with a sense of urgency, but staying focused on accuracy.
- **Position**
We should use the opportunity to position ourselves as the credible source we are and take control. If our credibility is being questioned, we need to re-establish it quickly.
- **Empathy**
It's more important to present information in a way that our audience needs to hear it, than it is to be 'on message'.
- **Admit**
If we make a mistake, admit it and explain what we are doing to fix it – while keeping regular updates. It's not what we do when we do it; it's what we do after.
- **Kosher**
Keep our responses authentic, genuine, and brief. Being integrated, human and the single point of information will increase greater trust and public advocacy.

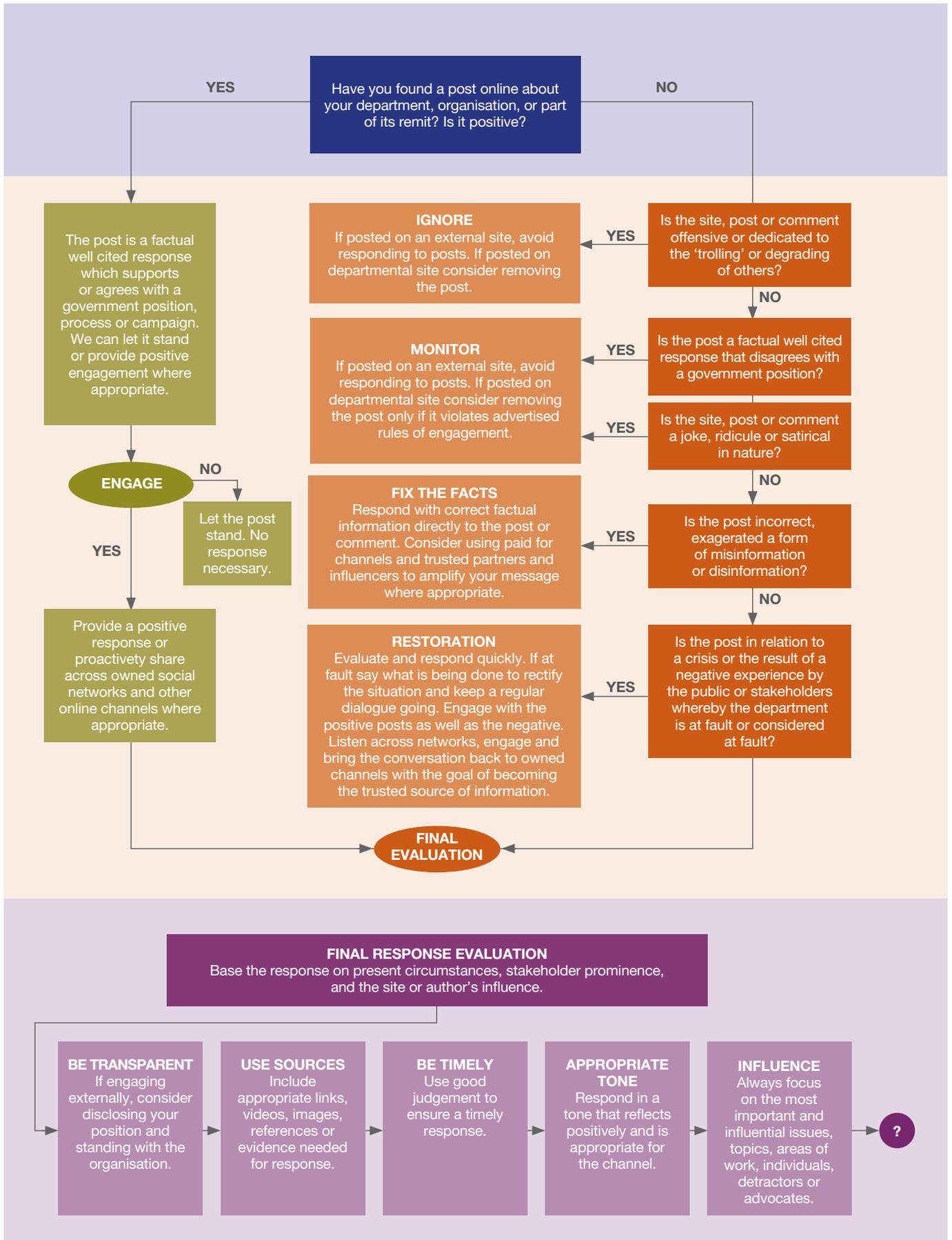
The 'FACT' model

- **Find**
Misinformation or disinformation is identified.
- **Assess**
Responses and tactics drawn up, assessed and approved with pace. This may include a native and organic response and/or sponsored messaging and creative.
- **Create**
Content or message is created and distribution method and channel agreed.
- **Target**
Final edits made and content published with appropriate organic tagging (e.g. key influencers) or sponsored audience targeting (e.g. demographic)

Other considerations for social media

1. Agree how social media will be monitored and accessed 24/7 - make sure the right people have passwords for key accounts, and agree who needs to clear content before it goes out.
2. Think about proactive and reactive social media outreach from senior voices alongside traditional media activity and look to engage via established channels and communities.
3. Consider evaluation. What are the baselines for normal social media chatter on relevant monitoring keywords? What's the level of tweets, posts or comments received before you decide to escalate?
4. Consider writing longer, more considered blog posts that can offer background and reassurance in times of crisis or incident.
5. Reconsider running any existing planned campaign activity and turn off any pre-scheduled social media messages.
6. Because of its two-way nature we must include social media as one of the primary means of communication and post regular updates to crisis or incident in the language appropriate for each channel and alongside traditional updates such as web story publishing.

Digital Media Response Assessment



Establishing and maintaining a battle rhythm

As long as the operation reality is changing, daily media briefings can help to provide a focal point and demonstrate proactivity. A suggested 'battle rhythm' is set out below.

This would usually take place in the event of a flooding incident and could be adapted according to the seriousness of the expected incident and to take account of the timing of COBR meetings.

Ideally this battle rhythm should begin ahead of an emerging incident, so that all departments are informed and have the chance to prepare appropriate responses.

Time	Activity
05:30	Clear statement and lines for breakfast broadcast
06:00	Breakfast broadcast interviews and press briefings
08:30	Morning update call with Chief Executive
10:00	Respond to Urgent Question or other parliamentary business
10:30	Flood guidance (or equivalent) statement received
10:30	Communication rolling brief summary received
10:30	Statement cleared for lobby
10:45	National slide pack received providing operational update
11:00	To note: No.10 update to lobby on situation
11:15	Lead government department / national flood response centre situation report received
12:00 – 14:00	Lunchtime broadcast interviews
14:30	Revised flood guidance statement received
15:30	Updated situation report and re-brief for COBR
16:00	COBR
17:00	Afternoon communication rolling brief update received
17:30	Late afternoon update call with Chief Executive
18:00	Evening broadcasts – potential interviews
18:30	Updated situation report and re-brief for COBR
19:00	COBR
21:00	Comms rolling brief update issued
22:00	Evening broadcasts – potential interviews

Planning and managing a visit

Visits are vital in responding to an incident and showing the department has a continued grip of the situation. A well-planned visit can act as a platform to engage with those who have been affected and highlight the work that is being done to help.

A badly planned visit, on the other hand, can hinder the recovery effort and can cause reputational damage to ministers and the government.

As communication experts you will be key to advising the minister or chief executive on whether and when a visit should take place. You will need to think about:

- When is the most appropriate time to visit?
- Where could you send key people to visit?
- What are the sensitivities and risks that need to be managed?
- Is it practical to visit through existing transport routes i.e. flooded areas?
- Where could you conduct media interviews?

Who should visit?

The below provides an example in a flooding crisis of who to recommend on visits at the various trigger points.

Scenario	Recommended minister/Environment Agency (EA) representative
Flooding expected but no current impacts	No ministerial visit
Localised flooding where a small number of people or businesses have been impacted	Flooding Minister/EA senior operational director
Many properties and businesses flooded and significant proportion of the population have been evacuated from their homes	Secretary of State/Chief Executive
Major prolonged flooding with significant disruption to many areas	Series of ministerial visits

Looking after your team

By now you could be several days into an incident and your team have been working around the clock to respond to the incident.

Tensions may rise and your team will start to feel the effect of long hours. Key to dealing with any incident is considering the resilience and welfare of your team.

The likely chance is you need an on-call rota for staff to be able to cover morning and evening shifts particularly for media.

For those working outside of office hours, don't forget the basics such as making sure staff have food and can travel safely home out of hours, or have alternative forms of accommodation available.

Don't be afraid to ask for support from across the rest of the GCS network to help your team through a crisis. The key contact to get in touch with is: carol.mccall@cabinetoffice.gov.uk. Further advice and training for how to support your team can be found here.

Key considerations



Stakeholder engagement

Engaging stakeholders throughout an emergency is fundamental to making sure we're communicating with all our audiences and using every communication channel to provide relevant advice. The below case study shows how successful stakeholder engagement in a crisis can reach priority groups and help them to respond.

Care, control, commitment
Civil Aviation Authority and
Department for Transport
communications handling
of the Monarch Collapse
Stakeholder engagement
case study.

Monarch collapse—the challenge

Monarch went into administration on Monday 2 October 2017 at 4am with 110,000 passengers abroad and 300,000 future bookings:

- The CAA set up one of the UK's biggest airlines for two weeks, with **60 aircraft from 27 airlines** to help facilitate the UK's biggest peacetime repatriation.
- The CAA conducted a two-week flying programme of almost **570 passenger flights** which flew **85,000 people** to the UK from **40 airports in 15+ countries**.

Communications strategy

DfT and The CAA led the cross government comms effort across departments

Clear passenger communication was made live immediately, including:

- A dedicated microsite, and a call centre of trained staff that will continue to operate for 2-3 weeks once all passengers are home to advise on ATOL refunds etc.
- Briefing of stakeholders, including the industry, bodies such as ABTA, impacted UK airports and airlines.
- Media briefings and interviews to ensure that coverage was factual and sensitive to staff, passengers and those with future bookings.
- The CAA ran a 24/7 comms hub throughout the two week operation, which included people embedded from DfT and FCO in the operational crisis teams, focused on cross-government coordination.

Stakeholder engagement

We developed a comprehensive plan for co-ordinated stakeholder engagement to brief priority groups and ensure they were able to prepare.

We co-ordinated calls and emails to hundreds of stakeholders:

- Aviation / transport industry
- Financial organisations
- Consumer groups
- Foreign embassies
- Political stakeholders.

This was followed by coordinated daily cross-industry calls and briefings to all parliamentarians.

Outcomes from stakeholder engagement

Consumer groups such as Which? and Money Saving Expert communicated advice to affected passengers.

- **Airlines** including easyJet and Virgin promoted low cost fares on affected routes and fast track recruitment for affected Monarch staff.
- **Impacted airports** appreciated regular communications on the progress of returning passengers back to the UK.
- **Wider transport industry**, including train operators, helped communicate our key messages about not travelling to affected airports.
- **Positive comments and notes of thanks from passengers** received via social media correspondence.

Airport toolkit

- We provided all airports with a toolkit of customer communications, including posters, online content and tannoy announcement scripts ready for immediate use.
- This meant passengers had clear instructions to follow –no issues were reported in UK airports.

Evaluate

Being able to assess the impact your communications are having is a vital part of managing your response – it can help you understand the media and stakeholder landscape and enable you to refine your strategies as circumstances change.

This section looks at:

- **Agreeing your objectives**
- **Setting appropriate metrics**
- **Collecting and reporting results**
- **Learning and sharing lessons**

Agreeing your objectives

The first stage in developing your evaluation plan is understanding what you are trying to achieve through your communications.

In a crisis scenario, this isn't always straightforward, but some helpful questions to ask include:

- Who are the most important audiences you need to reach?
- What do they need to know about the situation?
- What do they need to feel about the situation?
- What do they need to do as a result?

As well as target audiences, you may want to establish some objectives focusing on intermediate audiences, such as stakeholders and the media. These may include measures such as key messages you want to communicate through these channels.

Wherever possible, you should make sure your objectives are SMART – Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic and Time-bound. This may involve doing some baseline research to understand your starting position or to assess what a 'normal' state looks like.

Setting appropriate metrics

Next, think about what metrics or other analysis you might need to collect to support these objectives.

This could involve:

- **Internal communications** – discussions or enterprise social networks like Yammer
- **Media analysis** – e.g. volumes, sentiment and message penetration
- **Social media analysis** – e.g. reach, engagement and sentiment
- **Stakeholder activity** – e.g. events, advocacy, partnership activity
- **Digital analytics** – e.g. views, visits, click-throughs and conversions
- **Surveys and other market research** – e.g. understanding and awareness, sentiment, intention to act

Use the GCS Evaluation Framework to agree a full set of metrics and make sure you have a mix of outputs, outtakes and outcomes – an example is provided below.

Be proportionate, as in a crisis scenario you will need to weigh up how much data you can realistically collect, analyse and interpret. Your decisions may depend on the scale and severity of the crisis, whether you are spending money on paid-for activity, and how much resource you have available.

Digital objectives:	Deliver 3 key messages across department's owned digital communication channels that: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>C</u>ommunicate the specific actions we are taking to manage the situation 2. <u>E</u>mphasise the commitment to finding out what has happened 3. <u>D</u>emonstrate concern for those involved: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>T</u>o drive 10, 000 unique user views to gov.uk/xxxemergency – a bespoke landing page which provides the latest up-to-date information about the crisis. • <u>I</u>n turn, to drive only targeted queries to specialist contact centre and enable 50% reduction in untargeted calls to specialist contact line within 5 hours of enacting digital strategy 			
Target audience for digital:	Members of the UK and international public concerned for family members and friends living in the affected area			
INPUTS	OUTPUTS	OUTTAKES	OUTCOMES	ORGANISATIONAL IMPACT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expert spokesperson video • Ticker-tape web feed • Twitter posts • FAQs • Photographs • Videos • Live feed of press conference • Digital comms officer on site • Bespoke GOV.UK pages updated (Link to handbook section where this is covered) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25 tweets • 6 Facebook posts • 9,000 unique user views to bespoke GOV.UK page on day one • Regular (every 20 mins) photographs and recorded video of engineers and emergency services working on site • Web FAQs updated every hour to reflect public queries coming in through different channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 75% increase in traffic to bespoke GOV.UK page in first hour of active digital media coverage by us • Facebook – 300 likes, sentiment 70% positive • Twitter – 600 retweets, 800 likes • Average time on page, 3 minutes. Bounce rate 25% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25% reduction in untargeted calls to emergency contact line in first hour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of experts manning call centre reduced by 25% in first 6 hours, allowing better paced scheduling of shift patterns during the emergency • Reputation: mainstream media reporting 'confident handling' by the organisation through proactive digital information strategy

Collecting and reporting results

The next step is gathering and reporting your data.

You may need to enlist the help of a third party agency such as a media evaluation company or a market research firm – make sure you give them a clear brief, setting out what analysis you need them to deliver.

Think about who in your team (and other agencies if this is a system-wide campaign) might be able to provide useful feedback or data.

Make sure you establish:

- who is responsible for collecting what
- what format you need the data in
- when the data should be provided

- Decide how frequently you should report results – this will depend on how fast-moving the situation is.

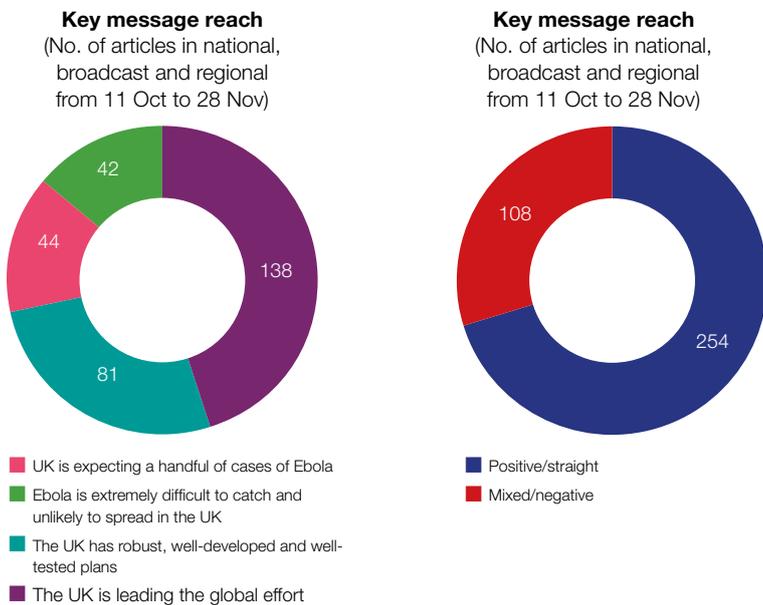
There are many ways of presenting the data, but make sure you're clear on how the report will be used.

Be realistic about people's ability to read long reports in a crisis situation – often a simple dashboard, with some basic analysis, can be more useful for senior stakeholders than an extensive PowerPoint pack.

This example shows how the Department of Health and Social Care reported on media coverage in response to the Ebola crisis in 2014.

Media output: key messages and tone of coverage

Source: DH in-house analysis



“The recent decision to send people and equipment to Sierra Leone to build a new hospital [is] very re-assuring. The world will be safer when Ebola is eradicated but the only way to do that is to stop it at the source.” – **Dr Benjamin Neuman, Virologist, quoted in Daily Express (12 October)**

“We should be proud of Britain, having pledged £125 million, being the world’s second biggest donor. Proud, too, that it’s a UK firm behind a safe new ebola-killing disinfectant.” – **The Sun Says (23 October)**

“What is very important, it seems to me, is to [report on Ebola] calmly and accurately – otherwise the reaction from readers will be revulsion and fear, which blocks the human impulse to help... this is a story about something which rightly justifies huge fear in west Africa, but should not be turned into a UK scare.” – **Sarah Boseley, Health Editor, The Guardian (10 November)**

Analysis:

Early coverage in wake of screening announcement focused heavily on core messages around an expectation of a handful of cases and the strength of UK’s readiness plans.

The media strategy then switched to stronger promotion of the international messages, driven by DfID and MoD announcements on troop deployment, funding commitments and developments on the ground.

More recently, there has been a steady drip feed of stories to promote awareness of the role of the NHS in the international effort, and background briefings to ensure responsible and measured reporting of Ebola coverage – reflected in the recovery of tone of coverage after a period of difficult media coverage in mid October.

Learning and applying lessons

Evaluation data can help the operational response in a number of ways:

- **it can keep the emergency response team on track by reminding them of their communication objectives**
- **it can allow you quickly adapt your message content and channels in response to any feedback and intelligence you've gathered**
- **it can demonstrate where important messages are hitting home, and where you need to do more to inform or persuade key audiences.**

Here are four questions that can help you use your evaluation data effectively:

4. Are the messages being reported in main and social media matching those we've planned?
5. Are the channels and communication needs matched as well as they could be?
6. What are the gaps in audience knowledge and sentiment?
7. What do we need to change or develop our tactics?

When the emergency is over it's important to conduct a formal 'lessons identified' exercise. Interview or do a group 'wash-up' with all of those involved in managing the communications to understand what went well and what you'd do differently next time.

Do this as soon as possible after the event while the thinking is still fresh. Make sure you identify clear actions and owners, and monitor progress – this template may be a helpful way of bringing together lessons and actions across the PRIMER process.

Make it stick

The final recommendation is simple. When you've pulled this review together, get everyone together to go through your review of how the communication played out.

Share and discuss the evidence and the lessons you'd like to learn for the future.

See appendix 2 for the Learning and applying lessons form.

Recover

Recovery is often overlooked as a final step in crisis communication as organisations and teams can immediately seek to resume normal routines.

This section will demonstrate why it is vital that teams and organisations recover well after a crisis and the key areas that the communication professional should be focusing on.

It includes:

- [Help your team to recover: a leader's checklist](#)
- [Rebuilding reputation](#)

See [appendix 3](#) for the [Help your team to recover, a leader's checklist](#).

Rebuilding reputation

Following a crisis, communication is likely to play an important role in helping your organisation reset relationships with those affected and rebuild any reputational ground that may have been lost.

Below are six crucial elements that will allow you and your team to attempt to rebuild and repair your organisation's reputation and or relationships.

1 Think recovery from the outset

Recovery should be on the agenda from the start of a crisis. If a crisis comes to an end and you have not thought about recovery you may lose the immediate opportunity to affect any lasting impact on your organisation's reputation.

Practical tips:

- [Think about assigning one or two people from your team to work closely with policy colleagues to work on recovery while the crisis is still ongoing](#)
- [Establish some clear objectives around rebuilding reputation may even help inform actions whilst the crisis is still being managed](#)

2 Build trust through actions not words

A crisis may fundamentally change a stakeholder's opinion of your organisation, and rebuilding this trust means demonstrating that performance is once again meeting their expectations.

Practical tips:

- [Reputation is best demonstrated in actions, not promises alone. The best way to recover it is to show how you are delivering on your commitments.](#)
- [For communicators, this means showing and telling whilst you are doing – i.e. getting the right messages with the right proof points into your communication with stakeholders.](#)

3 Engage your own staff

Recovery starts within your own organisation. Internal trust might have been damaged and morale might be low, which can affect business performance and undermine wider efforts to rebuild confidence with external stakeholders.

Practical tips:

- [Make sure internal communication is an integral part of any recovery plan - your people are often your strongest advocates.](#)
- [Speak to senior managers about the challenge of engaging and reconnecting with staff after a crisis – their visibility is vital.](#)

4 Reset the agenda through proactive communication

It is important that you don't allow your organisation to become defined by a crisis, and that means skillfully and tactfully using communication to move the media agenda on, and help to rearticulate what your organisation stands for.

Practical tips:

- Develop a coherent, proactive communication plan to support your organisation's future priorities.
- Think about how your organisation can show leadership and direction in moving beyond the crisis by redefining what is important to it.

5 Make good on your promises and keep a watchful eye

During a crisis, organisations and senior leaders can often make promises or guarantees in order to reduce the criticism that is being levelled at those seen as responsible for the crisis – and while communicators are often not responsible for delivering these promises it is our job to remind those for whom it is.

Practical tips:

- Keep track of all public commitments made during a crisis, paying particular attention to any deadlines for delivery.
- Ensure that your teams maintain contact with those responsible for delivery so that they can promote milestones proactively, and manage any reputational risk if timelines slip.

6 Use the window of opportunity to deliver lasting change

A crisis also naturally provides a window of opportunity for an organisation to change, whether that be in direction, values or strategy – and the far-sighted communicator can make the most of this opportunity to support the organisation's development.

Practical tips:

- Think about whether there are unintended consequences you might exploit – e.g. a drought may be an opportunity to change public attitudes to water consumption.
- Take some time out to consider how the crisis has changed the communication landscape - tools like PESTLE framework can give you a good structure to work with.

Trainning and resources

Training and wider reading are vital to help communication teams learn how to handle and manage a crisis. From the GCS Aspire courses to Hootsuite blogs, there are plenty of courses and methods of training for teams to try.

Courses

GCS offers free one-day courses to its member civil servants through Aspire including Online Crisis, Media Relations and Personal and Professional Resilience. These courses offer practical tips, desktop exercises and theory to help communicators develop their skills and share experiences across government.

Externally the PRCA, of which GCS communication professionals are members, offers online crisis communications courses and webinars.

Scenarios

As we set out in the Rehearse chapter, practising and testing all aspects of emergency plans is a key part of crisis preparedness – not only to identify and address any weaknesses in advance, but also to help the organisation and its staff to become aware of and comfortable with their individual roles.

Examples

International

The UK is a global leader in responding to humanitarian crises, like the Ebola crisis in 2014, with our world-class teams of experts. Our unique capabilities allow fast, lifesaving assistance in response to major emergencies. Every year the biggest Simulation Exercise (SIMEX) is run by Portsmouth University bringing together humanitarian experts, International Search and Rescue, the Emergency Medical Team, and the fire service to build their capacity to respond to future crises.

UK Aid, from the Department of International Development (DFID), supports the work of International Search and Rescue and the Emergency Medical Team, who are prepared 24/7 to respond to natural disasters and health crises anywhere in the world.

Major exercises like SIMEX are training frontline health and fire service staff and directly benefiting us here in the UK, while improving our response to international emergencies. These exercises encourage innovation, collaboration and a bigger, better, faster response to crises.

In 2018, as part of the exercise, press and communications officers from the Department for International Development were deployed to test their crisis communications skills and handling response.

See the action here: https://twitter.com/DFID_UK/status/997084754607525888

To find out more speak to the Department for International Development communications team.

National

The Metropolitan Police regularly carries out simulation exercises with emergency services and government departments to test their preparedness for all manner of crises from terrorism attacks to flooding.

The agencies involved in operations can include the police, London Fire Brigade, London Ambulance Service, Transport For London, the NHS and government departments who will face tests of their decision-making and crisis-management skills.

These simulations offer the opportunity for communication officers to roleplay how they would respond to a crisis. To find out more, speak to your Director of Communications about upcoming simulations.

Helpful links

[Alex Aiken 8 Challenges for Government Communications in 2018](#)

[Hootsuite Blog on Crisis Communications](#)

[Social Simulator – Helpful Technology](#)

[How to Combat Fake News and Disinformation](#)

[Cision 6 Social Media Musts for Crisis Communication](#)

[Combating Misinformation – Social Media](#)

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