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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- ENSURE ACTIONS NOT JUST WARNINGS
- BE PREPARED FOR EXTREME WEATHER
- CREATE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS
- BUILD LONG TERM RECOVERY
- CHANNELS ARE MORE THAN MEDIA

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WHAT HAPPENED?

In October there was more severe weather that affected the UK. Storm Babet affected many parts of Scotland and left significant damage. The warnings started to be made a week before the weather front hit the region. People were being told to be prepared for the potential for high winds and severe rain. Scot Rail cancelled trains across Scotland as the red weather warning was put in place. However, it was clear that there was a lack of understanding about what a red weather warning required people to do to be prepared.

The Storm brought rainfall of between 150 to 200mm falling in the wettest areas particularly affecting Angus. It was said by the Met Office to be 'the most severe and widespread disruptive weather impacts of 2023 so far'. Multiple severe flood warnings were issued by the Environment Agency (EA) and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA). At least seven people were reported to have died as a result of the storm. In Scotland, hundreds of homes and businesses were flooded with the town of Brechin severely affected after defences were overtopped by the river South Esk.

The path of Storm Babet took it across other parts of England including Derbyshire, Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire. Communities were severely affected with homes and businesses flooded. In Suffolk, a major incident was declared due to flooding. Rail services on the East Coast were severely affected due to flooded lines and Kings Cross station in London was temporarily closed due to concerns with overcrowding. Leeds Bradford airport closed after an aircraft skidded off the runway during the storm and 45 workers were airlifted off a North Sea drilling platform after it lost anchors during the storm.

What was the communication response and what could it have been?

The alert led to a lot of media discussion about the coming storm and the fact a red weather warning was issued. However, there was little understanding of what the red weather warning required people to do. Storm Babet highlighted the need to provide really clear actions for people to take when there is an emergency alert.

There was criticism of some local authorities for being slow to respond and provide support. Whether this was accurate or not it was the perception among some communities. This highlights the need to be able to respond quickly with an emergency communication plan agreed and ready to use at short notice. It also requires support and communication to be in place for some time to come, even when the media have moved onto another story.

The death of an 83-year-old woman in her Chesterfield home led to media reports and anger from her son who said people are being 'forgotten' particularly when they were vulnerable. Maureen Gilbert drowned after she was unable to escape the rising water insider her home due to mobility issues. It highlights that giving advice to move upstairs may sound simple but when people are vulnerable or have mobility issues it may not be possible.

Communication, warnings and advice need to consider the needs of everyone across communities. It needs to ensure there are practical ways of highlighting individual circumstances to avoid people being left alone at times of crisis.

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What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Clarify the warning systems – never assume that people know what a warning means and that they will understand what to do. Be clear about the situation and the action that needs to be taken
- Ensure support for the vulnerable – simple requests can be anything but simple when people have issues to manage, where they are vulnerable, elderly or lack mobility. Think about how to help those who may struggle to take the required action
- Consider the impact on diverse groups – it is not as you see it for everyone and communication needs to take into account all those who are involved or affected
- Have a clear emergency communication plan ready to use – crisis communication plans need to understand how things operate in an emergency and be able to respond at speed.
- Communicate using more than media and social media – don't rely on the media or social media to get vital and potentially life saving messages across to people. In many extreme weather conditions power can be lost and people may not be able to get the messages through technology so have a range of channels that can be used
- Build communication with communities for the long term – extreme weather conditions leave lasting and long term challenges for communities so once the emergency is over there is still a lot that needs to happen and communication remains important
- When the media leave the problem remains – don't move forward when people are still trying to deal with what has happened. Messages and communication can be insensitive when they act as if everything has been concluded but people are trying to deal with the impact of the emergency

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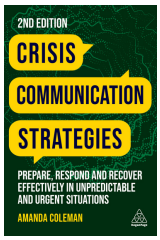

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