

Annex 7A:

Communicating with the public: the national context

Delivering alerts

7A.1 It is over 10 years since the decision was taken to dismantle the national network of warning sirens used extensively during the Second World War, and maintained in a state of readiness throughout the Cold War period. The threat is different now and there are very few scenarios which would require the **entire nation** to take immediate action in the event of an emergency.

7A.2 The National Steering Committee on Warning and Informing the Public¹ was set up in the mid-1990s to advise government. Its recommendation, in the absence of any national warning mechanism, has been that local solutions should be tailored to local circumstances.

7A.3 Where credible and specific threats to national security are identified in advance, information is handled at a national level and public warnings issued by the police and/or Home Secretary. Any threat connected with international terrorism is going to be a national – even international – issue and information about it will be co-ordinated centrally regardless of what part of the country is under threat. Equally, any catastrophic emergency, wherever it takes place, will be of interest nationally, and media coverage will guarantee public attention.

Information and advice

7A.4 The scale and nature of any emergency will dictate the level of national involvement in the handling of it, particularly on the communications side. If ministerial involvement becomes necessary, then the

News Co-ordination Centre (NCC) will also be set up in Whitehall by information staff within Cabinet Office. This will function alongside the government department leading the response² and liaise closely with staff from the Government News Network at the scene of the emergency, if outside London.³

7A.5 The NCC will help to co-ordinate the information activities of the various government departments and agencies involved, by pulling together briefing from the different expert bodies for ministers and ensuring that interview bids for ministers are handled appropriately. They will work closely with the national and international media in this. They will also monitor the output of major broadcasters so that they can correct inaccuracies and spot subject areas where additional material would provide better balance in coverage. It can be up and running within 90 minutes and can operate 24 hours a day as required.⁴

7A.6 The NCC will have responsibility both for meeting the needs of the news agenda and managing the delivery of public information and safety advice at a national level. It will be manned by staff from the various affected departments, to ensure effective co-ordination of activities. Where necessary, it may invoke standing protocols with the media to issue Public Safety Information either nationwide or in particular regions.

7A.7 Robust communications links will be established with those at the scene and in charge of operations to make sure that strategic and high-level political decisions are based on accurate, up-to-date information. The NCC, or the Assembly Press Office

¹ <http://www.nscwip.info>

² <http://www.ukresilience.info/lead.htm> explains more about the role and responsibilities of the lead government department

³ More information about the work of the Government News Network can be found at <http://www.gnn.gov.uk>

⁴ There is more detail about the work of the News Co-ordination Centre in *Emergency Response and Recovery* (see Bibliography)

in Wales, may send someone from the team to the site of the incident as a contact point, who can keep those on site in touch with central, political activities and interests.

7A.8 It will not be directly involved in operational decisions on site about media arrangements. However, the central operations team which runs the NCC has, in close co-operation with central government, the devolved administrations, local government, emergency services, utilities and other operators, produced detailed protocols which cover many logistical aspects of dealing with the sort of massive influx of media organisations into an area which would be generated by a national-level catastrophe.