

THIRD REPORT OF THE NATIONAL STEERING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WARNING AND INFORMATION

The Issue :

The need for a coherent national policy on warning and informing the Public about potential and actual emergencies before, during and after their occurrence.

The Purpose of the Report:

To provide Ministers with a summary report of the national picture : setting out the need for a planned programme of Public Information and Education, the need to identify appropriate methods of delivery for warning and informing the public, and the need to identify available technologies.

Recommendations

That Ministers note the report, and initiate measures to implement such a policy on warning and informing the public in line with the requirements outlined below

Legislation.

To clarify roles and responsibilities within the context of the proposed Civil Protection Bill, and to address current developmental difficulties concerning the application of the 999 emergency database which arise from the constraints inherent in the Data Protection Act.

New Research.

To identify the needs of specific audiences if they are to receive, and benefit from, the first public alert and the generic message behind the desired first response “Go in, Stay in, Tune in”

Consolidation and Development of Current Strands of Research

To examine the delivery and presentation of current methodologies, and the public’s perception of them. Also, to closely monitor the development of the Environment Agency’s multi-media project.

Widespread Consultation

To liaise with key stakeholder groups eg emergency services, local authorities, industry and commerce, and professional bodies

Funding

To support the research and consultation process, as well as the implementation of public warning, informing and educational packages at a local, regional and national level.

National Website

As part of the Public Education programme, to develop a national website, with a strong interactive element eg video streaming and PDF files. It is recognised that such work will require appropriate levels of funding and staff resourcing.

Broadcasting

To use the BBC initiative “Connecting in a Crisis” as a vehicle for working with the broadcasting services to produce various public warning and information packages, and to develop, at local level, templates of information for specific risks.

Private Sector Engagement

To promote the engagement of industry and other parts of the business community in the development of a national Public Education programme.

Background

- There is no national peacetime warning system in place, following the demise of the WW2 National siren network in 1992/93
- A coherent national policy on warning and informing the public is needed to increase the resilience of the UK
- There are many technological solutions capable of communicating signals and messages at different levels eg sirens, tannoys and other audible systems, visual signage, textual and verbal information via telephony and broadcasting. The national policy needs to address the problem of communication at all levels : looking beyond the transfer of a message from a sender to a recipient, towards the successful transfer of meaning
- The national policy also needs to address the problems associated with communicating within the context of a number of scenarios, summarised below:

A catastrophic event with a short lead time
With a static person in their own dwelling
With a static person at their place of work
With a traveller on foot
With a traveller in a vehicle
With a traveller wishing to know of events elsewhere eg flooding or severe weather in a remote location

- None of the current technological solutions can address all of the identified scenarios, therefore a heterogeneous strategy is required. Such a strategy will further strengthen UK resilience by increasing the number of available channels through which recipients will receive messages.
- The national policy also needs to address the problems associated with the effective communication of risk to the public ie the probability and potential impact of a possible event such as a flood or a release of hazardous materials from a chemical incident. In this context, UK resilience would be enhanced if risk communication is applied before an event through public education programmes. This view is supported by evidence gained from known examples of joint protocols and initiatives between the Environment Agency and local authorities, and between chemical site operators and local public bodies
- The national policy also needs to acknowledge current research which suggests that members of the public who have received warnings typically seek confirmation via consistent and multiple reliable sources before taking requested actions. The quality and rapid conveyance of the initial alert, therefore, is crucial to the receptiveness of the public to follow-up messages including safety advice. This underlines the requirement for public education in order to develop a warning culture to support the system.
- A national public warning and information policy built on a heterogeneous strategy requires clear and robust management systems for its effective implementation, in order to achieve clear lines of responsibility, accountability and liability. At present in the UK, apart from flooding and severe weather scenarios, no single agency has responsibility for the command and control of public warnings prior to/during/after a major civil emergency. Current legislation is inadequate. This encourages a lack of commitment, ownership and funding. The proposed Civil Contingencies Bill needs to incorporate public warning and information in order to clarify roles and responsibilities..
- Legislation also needs to address potential tensions and conflicts arising from the Data Protection Act and OFTEL Regulations which prevent the application of the 999 Emergency Databases for many of the technological

solutions which incorporate telephony. The current effect of this problem is that

UK systems of public warning (unlike other countries) have to canvass the local population on an “opt in” only basis eg the Environment Agency automatic voice messaging system for flood warnings. Consequently, this increases officer workloads and resource requirements, but most importantly means that an individual warning can not be issued to every member of the public at risk from a major incident.

The Vision :

A coherent national policy on public warning and information based upon a variety of public warning packages which can be implemented, at any time when circumstances dictate, to serve national and local needs.

- a) Each package of measures will deliver a basic mechanism designed to drive the first public alert to the desired first public response.
- b) The means of delivery of the first public alert will be dictated by local circumstances but will, in every case, drive a generic message “Go in, Stay in, Tune in” which is the desired first response.
- c) The second public alert will be delivered by any number of information channels, all of which will serve to confirm the initial alert. It would be delivered by identified ‘gatekeepers’ who are trusted sources of public information eg emergency services, local authorities, public officials, headteachers. They will drive the desired second public response as dictated by the circumstances of the event.
- d) The policy will be supported by a national Public Education programme designed to develop an effective public warning culture within society, to support the system.

Making the Vision a Reality:

To turn aspiration into policy, much effort is needed over and above that which has been undertaken, albeit on a voluntary basis by the National Steering Committee for Public Warning and Information (NSCWIP). There is an urgent need to introduce a properly structured and supported programme of public education to spread the “shelter” message. NSCWIP is confident that a campaign could be designed in such a way that people become more informed and vigilant, without increasing anxiety or causing panic. This confidence emanates from the debate and learning aired by many different interest parties on its Public Education sub-group, following a proposal to be more pro-active in communicating “shelter”. The sensitivity of the chemical industry and transporters of hazardous goods was greatly reduced by demonstrating that this protective action was relevant and appropriate to a range of scenarios. As a result, the “Go In, Stay In, Tune In” message became known and accepted. It now needs to be applied to other situations such as potential acts of terrorism, post September 11th 2001, and to a wider audience. Considerable research and experience confirms the view that those living close to risk, are better able to accept that risk if they understand the protective action they should take in the event of an emergency. An informed community is better able to protect itself and less dependent upon new

communication systems and other measures such as mass decontamination, and an appropriate programme of public education could also be implemented more quickly and less expensively. NSCWIP has made significant progress on a number of fronts eg the production and distribution of a national video “Go In, Stay In, Tune In”, the increase of public/professional awareness through the publication of reports and the development of the NSCWIP web-site, and the establishment of media guidance through the BBC initiative “Connecting in a Crisis”. This work now needs to be taken forward on a properly supported basis. The preliminary work required to establish the foundations of the policy is identified earlier in this report in the list of recommendations.