



PRINCIPLES OF MANAGING RISKS TO THE PUBLIC ¹

People face a range of risks – including direct threats, risks to their safety, welfare or livelihood, and risks to the environment. All life involves some risk, and any innovation brings risk as well as reward. Government’s role will vary according to the nature of the risk – it may involve providing information and advice on risks that individuals manage themselves, regulating how risks and benefits are distributed across society, or intervening directly to provide protection from external hazards. The following five principles apply to the handling of all types of risk to the public:

- Openness and transparency
- Involvement
- Proportionality and consistency
- Evidence
- Responsibility

Government will be open and transparent about its understanding of the nature of risks to the public and about the process it is following in handling them



Government will make available its assessments of risks that affect the public, how it has reached its decisions, and how it will handle the risk. It will also do so where the development of new policies poses a potential risk to the public. When information has to be kept private, or

where the approach departs from existing practice, it will explain why. Where facts are uncertain or unknown, government will seek to make clear what the gaps in its knowledge are and, where relevant, what is being done to address them. It will be open about where it has made mistakes, and what it is doing to rectify them.

Government will seek wide involvement of those concerned in the decision process



Government will actively involve significant stakeholders, including members of the public, throughout the risk identification, assessment and management process. This will support timely and targeted action. Two-way communication will be used in all stages

of policy development, risk assessment and risk management. Where there are differences in interpretation it will aim to clarify these through open discussion, and it will seek to balance conflicting views in a way that best serves the wider public interest. It will explain how views obtained through consultation have been reflected in its decisions.

Government will act proportionately and consistently in dealing with risks to the public



Government will base all decisions about risks on what best serves the public interest. Action taken to tackle risks to the public will be proportionate to the level of protection needed and targeted to the risk.

Government will seek to apply a consistent approach to its assessment of risks and opportunities and to its evaluation of the costs and benefits of options for handling them, and will ensure that these are clearly articulated. It will apply the precautionary principle where there is good reason to believe that irreversible harm may occur and where it is impossible to assess the risk with confidence, and will plan to revisit decisions as knowledge changes.

Government will seek to base decisions on all relevant evidence



Government will aim to ensure that all relevant evidence has been considered and, where possible, quantified before it takes decisions on risk. It will seek impartial and informed advice that can be independently verified wherever possible, and seek to build a shared understanding of the risks and options for action. It will consider evidence from a range of perspectives, including the public as well as experts. It will not use the absence of evidence alone to prove the absence or presence of threat, and will acknowledge alternative interpretations of the available evidence. It will make clear how evidence has informed its decisions and will keep them under review as new evidence comes to light.

Government will seek to allocate responsibility for managing risks to those best placed to control them



Government, where possible, will ensure that those who impose risks on others also bear responsibility for controlling those risks and for any consequences of inadequate control. It will aim to give individuals a choice in how to manage risks that affect them, where it is feasible and in their interest to do so and where this does not expose others to disproportionate risk or cost. It will seek to clarify where responsibility for managing risks rests and that those responsible have the authority and information to act.

¹ These principles are intended to be consistent with existing published frameworks, including: the Freedom of Information Act; the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information; the Principles of Good Regulation; the precautionary principle, and principles governing the production of Departmental risk frameworks.