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**A Practical Guide to  
Public Risk Communication**  
The five essentials  
of good practice

# Public risks are those risks that may affect any part of society and to which government is expected to respond.

## The importance of public risk communication

Scares about public risk can have an **enormous impact on policy making** and regulation, particularly when they concern children, human health and large scale tragic events.

When a public risk is not properly addressed and communicated by government, it can also **create distrust**. This has been clearly demonstrated by high profile scandals and controversies such as those around BSE and the MMR vaccine.

## Approaches to public risk communication

The most appropriate approach to public risk communication depends on the nature of the risk being addressed and the how it is evolving. At times it will be important to **reduce anxiety around risks** that may have been amplified by certain groups of risk actors,<sup>1</sup> for example the MMR vaccine or radiation from mobile phones or phone masts. At other times it will be useful to **manage awareness of risks** to ensure key stakeholders and the public remain engaged with the issue for times before a crisis arises, for example bird flu or flooding, and sometimes it will be necessary to **raise awareness of those risks** with which the key stakeholders and the public are not engaging, for example the importance of wearing seat belts or climate change.

Ideally, public risk communication should be pro-active, carefully planned and based on an ongoing high-quality dialogue with key stakeholders and the public.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately such a dialogue will support government in responding in a proportionate way to public risk issues and events as they occur.

In addition, government will sometimes be required to respond quickly to an unanticipated public risk event and risk communication in these circumstances will necessarily be reactive.

<sup>1</sup> See glossary for definitions of terms used.

<sup>2</sup> A decline in public trust means that government must often now do more than present well-crafted one-way messages on risk – it needs to develop a dialogue with key stakeholders and the public.

## When to use this guide

The purpose of this document is to provide a **short, practical guide** to help government get its public risk messages across effectively. It includes a list of **key activities** that will help decision makers and civil servants to adapt their standard processes to achieve effective risk communication. It is designed to supplement the excellent and comprehensive guidance that already exists on risk communication in government.<sup>3</sup>

### Risk communication strategy development

The guide provides the basics for the development of a public risk communication strategy and may be sufficient in less sensitive policy areas. For the more sensitive areas, this document can be a starting point for a deeper discussion by policy makers with risk communication experts inside and outside of government.

### Quick guide

When time is short and a response from government is urgent, the five elements contained in this guide can be used as a reference to good practice. The key questions contained in each section outlining the elements can be quickly explored to ensure the basics of good practice are covered and obvious mistakes avoided.

## A quality public risk dialogue

For a quality dialogue on public risk to occur, individuals and society must understand and question messages from those people who are telling them about public risks.

The Risk and Regulation Advisory Council have also published *A Worrier's Guide to Risk* by Professor David Spiegelhalter of Cambridge University, which sets out questions that recipients of risk communication messages can ask to help them understand and assess how the messages relate to their own circumstances.

This guide and *A Worrier's Guide to Risk*, working together, can promote a more informed dialogue between the government and the public. This more informed dialogue should assist policy makers in finding balanced and appropriate policy outcomes that the public will support.

## Acknowledgements and thanks

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<sup>3</sup> See *Where to find out more* at the end of this document for references.

# The five key elements of public risk communication

Five key elements of public risk communication have been identified:

## **1 Assembling the evidence**

Demonstrate you have a credible basis for your position

## **2 Acknowledgement of public perspectives**

Understand how those affected understand the risk

## **3 Analysis of options**

Consider a broad range of options and the associated trade-offs

## **4 Authority in charge**

Define the nature of your involvement with the risk

## **5 Interacting with your audience**

Identify the audiences and the appropriate methods for communicating with them.

The sections following expand on the elements through posing a series of questions that government should consider when developing public risk messages. It is important to cover each of the five elements.

# 1 Assembling the evidence

Demonstrate you have a credible basis for your position

## Is your organisation:

- Clearly articulating the public risk it is dealing with?
- Using the full range of evidence to inform the debate?
- Acknowledging the ambiguity and uncertainty associated with the evidence?

## You need to consider:

- The potential range of damage associated with the hazard occurring
- The probability that the hazard will occur
- How the damage resulting from the occurrence of the hazard will affect different people. Who will benefit and who will suffer if the risk occurs?

Understanding a public risk typically involves considering the range of benefits and costs associated with it. All aspects of the risk need to be thought through and explained, or the dialogue about the risk may become dominated by one particular part of the story – often a real or perceived cost.

There will be varying levels and qualities of evidence available for different public risks. Some risks will have a great deal of evidence collected over many years whereas other risks will have little evidence available. Some evidence will be of established high quality, whereas in other cases evidence which initially appeared relevant will have been shown to be misleading or irrelevant. New evidence cannot by its nature be of established high quality, unless it is building upon existing evidence, although it still may be the best available.

Evidence is rarely conclusive. Correlation is relatively easy to establish but causation is not.<sup>4</sup> Questions remain outstanding and circumstances change. Judgement needs to be used in interpreting ambiguity and uncertainty in the evidence but such judgements may need to be tested and explained.

The process of assembling the evidence and articulating the risk is not static but dynamic, changing as more evidence is accrued and circumstances change.

<sup>4</sup> Essentially this means that just because there is a link between two things, this doesn't imply that one of them caused the other to occur. They may have both been caused by something else.

# 2 Acknowledgement of public perspectives

Consider how those affected understand the risk

## Is your organisation:

- Aware of how members of the public perceive risk?
- Aware of how influential risk actors will view the risk?

## You need to consider:

- Those groups that are likely to want to amplify or diminish the risk, or others' perceptions of the risk, for their own benefit
- Those groups that are negatively affected by the risk, especially where those groups are seen as particularly vulnerable

Attention to the key factors that cause people to worry about risks will help you understand their concerns about specific risks.

The public are not all the same – they are a mixture of interests and needs. They include the old and young, men and women, families with children, the employed and employers, and many other important groups. Some people will be directly affected by the risk and some will be indirectly affected. Different groups may have different responses.

Risk actors can also represent a range of views and interests. These include commercial companies, single interests groups and NGOs, all of whom may actively seek engagement, and some of whom may themselves regard government and its agencies as having particular biases.

The interests of particular groups may be perfectly understandable – for example, a patient group may call for more risk-taking in order to get faster access to an experimental drug that might benefit them.

## Factors that make it easier for people to accept risks

**Voluntary:** I choose to use my mobile phone despite any associated risks

**Control:** I drive my car

**Natural:** A volcano erupts

**High probability, low consequences:** I live near a stream that floods most years but this flooding does little damage

**Familiar:** I eat the food my parents ate

**Adults at risk:** An adult chooses to receive the yellow fever vaccine

## Factors that make it harder for people to accept risks

**Involuntary:** I do not have an influence over where a nearby phone mast is sited, despite any associated risks

**No control:** I do not drive the train on which I travel

**Technological:** A chemical plant blows up

**Low probability, high consequences:** I live near a nuclear power station which is very unlikely to explode, but if it does it will be devastating

**Non familiar:** I eat genetically modified food

**Children at risk:** A child must receive the MMR vaccine

# 3 Analysis of options

## Consider the broad range of options and the associated trade-offs

### Is your organisation:

- Demonstrating that it has weighed the costs and benefits of the options for managing the public risk?
- Demonstrating it has taken account of trade-offs, including conflicting objectives and goals amongst risk actors?
- Defending the methods used in your analysis?

### You need to consider:

- Presenting a broad range of options
- Options that are easy and/or inexpensive – quick wins – in addition to more demanding options

Based on the evidence that you have assembled and public perspectives on the risk, you need to develop and analyse a broad range of options. Each option for managing the public risk that you consider will have costs and benefits, and these will often be different for different groups. You will need to understand, and explain, the trade-offs that need to be made in choosing particular options. You will need to show that your decisions are fair and justifiable.

The methods used to analyse the options will depend on the context. Where appropriate, and where time allows, technical methods such as risk-benefit and cost-benefit analyses may help in reconciling trade-offs, including conflicting objectives and goals in different groups. Such analyses may be a part of a formal impact assessment. These technical methods can be supplemented by, for example, consultative, or deliberative, techniques.

Optimum technical solutions are not necessarily perceived as the best solutions by the public and specific groups of risk actors, who will bring societal and special interests to bear on the solution. The technical and societal interests will need to be reconciled if the solution is to be generally accepted.

# 4 Authority in charge

Define the nature of your involvement with the public risk

## Is your organisation:

- Clear about its reasons for stepping in?
- Clear whether any other organisation should also be speaking out on this issue?

## You need to consider:

- The limits to the action you can take in response to the public risk
- How well trusted you are as an organisation
- Whether there are third parties that are more trusted than you and better positioned to facilitate the public debate

Your organisation should ask itself whether it is appropriate for it to take responsibility for the risk or whether it should restrict itself to engaging in, or leading, the conversation about how society should manage the risk. The initial perception may be that the government should take responsibility and action, but the evidence may point to all, or part of the risk, being better placed elsewhere, for example with individuals or with the private sector. In this case your organisation's role may be more to persuade and coordinate rather than take responsibility.

If the risk is considered to be government's responsibility then your organisation should be clear about the limits of that responsibility and the possible actions it can take, and actions that are more appropriate for other organisations, governmental and non-governmental, to take.

Exercising authority in today's society is often less about lines of formal authority than building and maintaining trust. The extent to which a body is trusted depends on its perceived competence in dealing with the risk, its perceived fairness to the various points of view, its perceived objectivity, the extent to which it is seen to be consistent over time, its perceived sincerity, the efficiency with which it is seen to deal with money and the empathy that it shows.

Organisations that are not highly trusted will increase the chances of success by enlisting the help of other organisations – such as independent scientific organisations – who have the confidence of society.

# 5 Interacting with your audience

Identify the audiences and the appropriate methods for communicating with them

## Is your organisation:

- Clear who the audience is intended to be for each message?
- Identifying the appropriate methods for interacting with different audiences (information, consultation, deliberation)?
- Selecting effective communicators to relay the messages?

## You need to consider:

- Conflicting views within your organisation and how to handle them
- Which messages are intended for different audiences, for example, your organisation, organised groups or the general public
- The experiences of others – to understand the strengths and weaknesses of communication methods used in similar circumstances
- How to communicate complexity without creating or increasing confusion

The substance of your message should be consistent for each audience that you are giving it to, but the format, detail and complexity should be adapted to the specific needs of that audience.

Statistics may provide clarity for some audiences but may confuse others unused to their conventions and complexities. Other methods of communication need to be adopted which convey the messages in terms the audience is more comfortable with, while taking care not to mislead.

Where the views of audiences need to be identified the methods used to inform or consult them need to be seen to be fair and transparent to encourage trust in the process and your organisation. Deliberative processes can provide an inclusive way of involving audiences in seeking their views but these also need to be designed to be fair, and to be seen to be fair. Dissenting views should be included.

The organisation should develop and encourage good communicators both inside and outside of the organisation, to help develop productive dialogues with different audiences.

# Glossary

**Public risk** – a risk that may affect any part of society and to which government is expected to respond. This could be anything from dangerous dogs, to obesity, to climate change.

**Risk** – a risk is a danger that *may* occur - risks are often considered as a combination of a hazard and the chance that it happens.

**Hazard** – a hazard is something that is dangerous and likely to cause damage if it occurs.<sup>5</sup>

**Chance / probability** – the likelihood, or level of possibility, that something will happen.<sup>6</sup>

**Uncertain** – not known or fixed, or not completely certain.<sup>7</sup>

**Ambiguity** – data is ambiguous if it can be interpreted in different ways.

**Risk actor** – an individual or group who engages with a risk and who influences others' approach to, or understanding of, the risk.

**Risk landscape** – the system of risk actors and their interactions.

**Deliberative processes** – a structured technique where participants are informed of all aspects of an argument before being asked to discuss their views.<sup>8</sup> Deliberative processes are generally more appropriate for topics where trust in authority is low.

5 Adapted from Cambridge Advance Learners' Dictionary

6 Adapted from Cambridge Advance Learners' Dictionary

7 Adapted from Cambridge Advance Learners' Dictionary

8 Adapted from

# Where to find out more

## **Risk communication**

The UK government and international organisations have issued guidance on risk communication.

A short list of key references is presented below to help decision-makers and civil servants put these principles into practice

**ILGRA (1998) Risk Communication:  
A guide to Regulatory Practice**

**BRC (2006) Risk, Responsibility and Regulation.  
Whose risk is it anyway? October, London: Better  
Regulation Commission**

**Cabinet Office (2002) Risk: Improving  
Government's Capability to Handle Risk and  
Uncertainty, Strategy Unit Report, UK**

**OECD (2002) OECD Guidance Document on Risk  
Communication for Chemical Risk Management,  
Paris: OECD**

**HM Treasury / Government Information  
and Communication Service (2003)  
Communicating Risk**

**Impact assessment guidance**

## **The Risk and Regulation Advisory Council**

The RRAC is an independent advisory group which aims to improve the understanding of public risk and how best to respond to it in making and implementing policy.

**Risk and Regulation Advisory Council (2009)  
Response with responsibility: policy-making for  
public risk in the 21st century**

**Risk and Regulation Advisory Council  
and Professor David Spiegelhalter (2009)  
A Worrier's Guide to Risk**

**Risk and Regulation Advisory Council**

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