

Winter Emergencies Communications Plan

Background:

Building on the experience of last winter and in particular Storm Arwen, the County Council will use various communication channels, alongside learning from previous events, to ensure information is disseminated in a consistent, accessible and timely manner in the event of another emergency situation.

People expect information in the way that best suits them and increasingly they expect to access information whenever they need it.

The council has a duty to warn and inform in times of crisis and the Corporate Communications team has a vital role to play in fulfilling this duty.

This communications plan supports frontline services and will ensure relevant, timely and accurate information for key stakeholders.

An emergency by its very nature can be dynamic, so any communications plan needs to be agile and offer a suite of options and tactics. Not all audiences/tactics will be needed for every eventuality.

The Winter Emergency Communications Plan aims to:

- Communicate the council's key messages effectively, internally and externally.
- Ensure that audiences have accurate, timely and relevant information.
- Use existing channels of communications effectively.
- Provide new channels of communications to close any gaps.
- Ensure that the council has a share of voice and balanced coverage in the media.
- Inform partner organisations
- Plan resilience into the Corp Comms team

Key audiences:

- Residents (may need further breakdown eg connected/not connected/vulnerable)
- Members (Cabinet/affected local members/all members)
- Council staff
- Town and Parish Councils
- MPs
- Partner organisations (individual and LRF)
- Media

Tactics:

Communications now issues a weekly eBulletin to circa 10,000 residents with the latest news. This is a useful platform to use where applicable in the event of an emergency – providing daily or more frequent updates. It also acts as an extra channel to provide messages asking for support or action,

such as bin information or calls to support neighbours etc. A campaign will run during autumn 2022 to encourage wider take-up.

Discussions are taking place, alongside the LRF, with the local BBC around 'Communicating in a Crisis' - the organisation's commitment to warning and informing communities via radio in the interests of public safety. The aim is that residents with no power but access to a battery operated radio would still be able to receive key information/support.

Parish Councils played a key role following the storms of winter 21/22. Further work is taking place with colleagues in Civil Contingencies and Northumberland Communities Together to improve two-way communication between the parishes and central control.

Regular briefings for Elected Members, Parish Councils, MPs, staff. These should take place daily at an agreed time, although further can be issued depending on information needing to be issued.

A basic flyer containing key council information numbers and advice has been developed. This is in a black and white format so can be easily edited and cheaply printed and distributed from council/NFRS/parish council premises – for those without power or internet.

Online: Regular website updates; Facebook and Twitter posts during course of incident. Signposting to key support wherever possible.

Daily updates for broadcast media – radio and tv, timely news releases for the local media, use of photography, and video where appropriate.

Where possible identify a single key NCC spokesperson, whose role is primarily to speak to the media on behalf of the organisation. This should be a person who would not be distracted by other critical tasks and is confident in front of camera. This could be a Cabinet member or senior officer.

Ensure close working at early stage of an incident with other key comms colleagues. While this is straightforward to set up with the LRF in terms of other LAs, emergency services, work is ongoing to establish contacts/relationships with comms counterparts at major utility providers (Northern Powergrid/Scottish Power/Northumbrian Water)

In the event of an operations room running, Comms will have a presence throughout (as with previous incidents) to ensure it is at the heart of decision making and can provide a rapid response.

Media Protocol:

During a protracted incident, daily meetings will take place each morning to discuss key lines/upcoming issues with comms cell (set up through LRF).

All council news releases/briefings should be signed off by Exec Director. Where possible Leader/Dep Leader should be sighted.

All other agencies referenced in news releases should have sight prior to release wherever practicable.

Once approved, content may be used on a variety of comms channels without further approvals.

Releases from other agencies should be shared with NCC Comms and where appropriate signed off prior to release.