



Senior Civil Service Survival Kit

Part 4 - Managing Crises

4.1. Introduction

Natural disasters and other crises require rapid responses which involve making difficult judgements. Sir David Omand reminded Ministers that:

You are going to behave rather differently; the pace of decision-making is going to be much faster than you have been used to; the mechanics of your relationship with your officials are going to be rather different, and very importantly, you are going to have to take more decisions on less information than you have been used to.

That last point means you have to stick your neck out ... it is about risk management. You do the best you can, but it may or may not be the best decision at the time and you are not going to know that as you take it... You have to live with that and just get on. That is not how most policy-making process works.

Officials need to plan thoroughly for crises, and ensure that the necessary resources will available to mount an effective response. They should '*prepare for the worst and hope for the best*'.

If and when a crisis occurs, it is vital that both Ministers and officials apply the lessons learned by those responding to previous crisis. This is not a time to believe that you know any better. Here, then, is detailed advice from those who have gone before.

(The notes and examples in this note were added to help illuminate the Government's response to the 2020 Covid-19 coronavirus epidemic.)

4.2a Plan and Prepare for Possible Crises

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Officials (and ministers) should practice ('game') responding to crises.

You should:-

- assume that the crisis will hit when your organisation is in some ways unprepared, for reasons outside its control.
- assume in particular that key team members and decision makers will not be available.
 - *Note that the Prime Minister and several other Ministers and senior advisers became infected and so unavailable during the Covid-19 crisis.*

It is hard to overstate the importance of practising responses to possible emergencies. Voluntary reports to the US *Aviation Safety Reporting System* showed that flight crews handled 86% of 'textbook' emergencies well. But only 7% of non-textbook emergencies were handled well. 93% of crews were overwhelmed by situations for which they had not prepared. You can see very similar problems in departments' responses to problems which could have been foreseen if they had undertaken sensible emergency planning

You should also:

- be aware that the first instinct of Ministers will be to limit the reputational damage that they think is going to happen to themselves rather than focus on how to fix the problem.
- prepare public responses to foreseeable damage caused by your organisation.
- not let lawyer-driven responses – seeking to downplay legal liability - cause large reputational damage.

No plan will survive contact with reality. But if there is no plan then reality will take over with disastrous consequences.

Get your most sceptical staff to check, from time to time, that the detail of the resilience or crisis management plan is up-to-date, sensible and appropriate. Red teaming might be useful.

- In the US, following Hurricane Katrina, mandatory evacuation led to all vehicles leaving New Orleans well in advance of the plan's deadline. Unfortunately the plan made no mention of the need to evacuate those residents who did not have vehicles within a similar timescale.
- In the UK, there is some concern that the effectiveness of the response to any energy supply crisis would depend too much on the cooperation of the private sector.

Beware the Prevention Paradox (see Chapter 1.3 above). Activity and expenditure aimed at avoiding future disasters seldom generates political credit. (Example: Y2K). But failing to act will eventually wreak much greater havoc.

Examples

- Inadequate pandemic planning/implementation before COVID-19;
- Also light touch regulation before the 2008 financial crisis ... and Climate Change?

You can't see everything coming. You cannot stockpile in anticipation of every disaster. But **disaster planning must include building in some resilience**. Do not eliminate all slack and redundancy in key systems, nor in the emergency and armed services.

Examples:

- The NHS and Care Home Sectors were insufficiently resilient to cope with a sustained Covid pandemic.
 - Ministers were proud of the fact that the pre-Covid NHS had low costs, by international standards, and high bed occupancy rates. c.40,000 hospital beds had been removed in the previous decade. Then a pandemic arrived.
- Whitehall had only limited pre-Covid knowledge of, and contacts in, key sectors and industries.

(Senior officials in Whitehall were traditionally expected to have a deep knowledge of their subject areas, to have travelled throughout the UK and internationally, to have spent time in schools, factories etc., and to know the key leaders and thinkers in their areas. But much of this activity appeared unnecessary – frivolous even - during quiet times especially when civil service numbers were being cut (down 28% 2005-2016). And subject expertise was not always valued by Ministers. So Whitehall lost the much of background knowledge, resources and networks needed to cope with unforeseen crises.)

- An example from history is this quote from a biography of Vernon Kell, the founder of MI5:

'[Our 1914 army] required more and more men. Without conscription we would never get enough of them. The posters displayed on all the hoardings with Lord Kitchener's face looking forcefully at us ... had brought in a great voluntary army, but all these efforts would have been infinitely more effective had they been planned, years before, to meet an emergency.'

4.2b Ask whether you have the necessary powers

Make sure you have the statutory powers – and discretionary powers - necessary to respond to any plausible crisis.

- Legislation will provide strong guidance but you may, for instance, need to ask the security services to act without specific authority. As an American Judge opined – “The constitution is not a suicide pact”.
- I understand that the UK authorities did not initially have the powers necessary to resolve the run on Northern Rock.

Such powers should be subject to appropriate political oversight. It is for ministers to judge when to go to Parliament but, if they are reluctant, you might need to encourage them.

- Internal response planning discussions, including with Ministers, should not be disclosed unless/until their existence will not cause damage.

HMG can if necessary (and with Parliamentary approval) legislate very quickly. It also has powers, in **the Civil Contingencies Act** and other legislation, to act ahead of Parliamentary approval.

Internationally, the UN Security Council can act including by giving strong powers to an international authority under **Chapter 7 of the UN Treaty**.

Serious crises are likely to require the government to take steps which would be unacceptable in normal times, such as restricting civil liberties, allowing police searches, and slaughtering animals. These actions are much more likely to be accepted if the general public is already inclined to trust both ministers and officials to be doing the right thing and acting proportionately. Advance planning, involving ministers - see further below, offers an opportunity to draw attention to this lesson.

- In the case of Covid, the necessary legislation appears to have been in place and was triggered as soon as it appeared that someone might refuse to remain in quarantine. 11 months later, though, ministers had constructed a huge regulatory edifice following 65 revisions to the initial lockdown laws. It is at least arguable that this was over-complicated.
- The Johnson government did not have a great reputation for honesty and this probably meant that some of its responses to the pandemic were less effective than might otherwise have been the case.

4.2c Encourage Scrutiny

But ... In the Emergency State, power becomes highly concentrated and the usual safeguards against misbehaviour are reduced. Those with power will be targeted by those seeking to have the rules designed to suit their particular interests. It is absolutely vital that effective scrutiny, by Parliament, by the courts and by the media, is facilitated as soon as reasonably possible.

In his book *Emergency State*, Adam Wagner lists corruption as a feature of any Emergency State:

'My experience of cases involving institutional failings, such as disastrous hospitals or war crimes committed by the armed forces, is that although people tend not to see themselves as doing the wrong thing, most get swallowed up in the culture of the institution. It takes a very strong personality indeed to rise up against a dominant culture ... So it is no surprise that corruption spreads easily in a state which is sealed shut. ...

In the Emergency State, public power becomes highly concentrated [and] the usual safeguards against misbehaviour, such as scrutiny by the legislature and courts, and the healthy mistrust the public ordinarily have for those in power, are diminished. This is a heady cocktail for those who suddenly and unexpectedly find they have an almost godlike power over others' lives, as well as over the country's resources.'

In the meantime - and afterwards - it is also vital that meetings are properly noted and decisions properly recorded.

4.3. The Initial Response

It can be difficult to know how to react to a rapidly growing threat. There is often no option that will not cause significant harm. Epidemics, for instance, will kill people if you don't damage the economy by implementing a lockdown. In general, though, the sooner you act, the less the harm.

The Covid Inquiry has yet to publish its view of the speed of the UK's response but, for the record, the first UK Covid death was on 5 March 2020; Italy locked down on 9 March; France, the Netherlands and Spain locked down on 17 March; and the UK locked down on 23 March although the necessary legislation was not in force until 26 March.

Dr Michael Ryan summarised the issue in this way:

If you need to be right before you move, you will never win. Perfection is the enemy of the good when it comes to emergency management. Speed trumps perfection and the problem in society we have at the moment is that everyone is afraid of making a mistake. Everyone is afraid of the consequence of error, but the greatest error is not to move. The greatest error is to be paralysed by the fear of failure.

There should be well-practised plans to help you cope with predictable emergencies, together with appropriate resources. Even so – and more likely if not so – you may need to take strong action early in the crisis, when the threat appears small. But you should nevertheless take the time – maybe just a few hours or a couple of days – to listen to experts, to discover, to organise, and to absorb what information and knowledge is available. **Then act decisively.**

Ignore those that tell you not to ‘over-react’. A significant proportion of the population and the media will continue to deny reality, even as things fall apart. Psychologists call this normalcy bias. This extract from Albert Camus’ *The Plague* is relevant

“Pestilence is in fact very common, but we find it hard to believe in a pestilence when it descends upon us. There have been as many plagues in the world as there have been wars, yet plagues and wars always find people equally unprepared. ... A pestilence does not have human dimensions, so people tell themselves that it is unreal, that it is a bad dream which will end. But it does not always end and, from one bad dream to the next, it is people who end, humanists first of all because they have not prepared themselves. The people of our town were no more guilty than anyone else, they merely forgot to be modest and thought that everything was still possible for them, which implied that pestilence was impossible.”

Others accept or acquiesce in the new reality far too easily.

- Well over 1,000 were dying each day at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak, and yet this horrendous total seemed to be accepted with a shrug by large sections of the population.

If your decisive reaction prevents the danger from happening then you will be accused of over-reacting etc. etc. **This is not a good reason to delay.**

Equally, we become more comfortable with risks as we get used to them. We also get better at responding to familiar risks. So your initial response might in time become seen (quite wrongly) as over-protective. **Again, this is not a good reason to delay.** But it may be that less firm measures might be appropriate once the nature of the risks have become clearer.

- It looks as though the UK should have locked-down to impede the initial spread of COVID-19 maybe a week earlier than it did.
- The UK population seemed to be less worried about the second and subsequent waves. This may have been evidence of excessive complacency which might have led to reduced compliance with guidance and legal restrictions, compared with the initial lock down. Equally, though, it may have been evidence of learning to live with the risk - agreeing to meet outside (where the risk of infection was less) - or young people still meeting in groups (knowing that the risk of serious illness was, for them, quite low). Older people were certainly more cautious than younger ones, leading to much lower infection rates in older cohorts. Some of the government's response to the second wave therefore appeared a little 'over the top' - although only time will tell if this criticism is justified.

There are some very useful **'top tips' for incident management** at *Annex A* below.

4.4. Then Organise ...

One person should be given clear, full-time cross-Whitehall responsibility for leading the response to the crisis. That person should confine him/herself to taking strategic decisions. Other responsibilities should be clearly allocated. Tactical decision making should be left to those on the ground.

Individually, you are always secondary to the role you play. If you have a role to play then it's important you play that role. If you don't have a role to play, it's really important you don't get under the feet of people who do.

- Examples:
 - It was never clear who was responsible for leading the response to COVID-19.
 - That person could have been the Health Secretary but probably should have been the Prime Minister (or possibly Michael Gove, Cabinet Office Minister) in view of the understandable tensions between those most worried about deaths and the impact on the NHS, and those worried about the impact on the economy.
 - Complaints that too many decisions were being taken in London, and insufficient use was being made of local knowledge and expertise, appeared to have some force.

4.5. ... and Consult

Continue consulting, intensively, as you develop your strategies in response to the crisis. Again, consultation need not be time consuming, but it should include all those who seem to have interesting things to say, and all those who might reasonably wish to be consulted. This will greatly increase the chances that your strategies will be effective – and accepted by consultees, even if they had argued against them. Modern communications, including social

media, will allow you to summarise issues, suggest ways forward, and seek comments, against very tight timetables.

Examples:

- The Chief Medical Adviser said on March 12 – at his and the Prime Minister’s first press conference – that “we are maybe four weeks or so behind Italy in terms of the scale of the outbreak”. But lots of people, including some scientists who were helping to advise the government, correctly argued at the time that the UK was in fact only around two weeks behind Italy. This advice was either not clearly passed on to Ministers, or was ignored by them. This serious mistake undoubtedly meant that the UK went into lockdown far too late, and many lost their lives as a result.
- Perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, the government seems to have allowed insufficient challenge to some of their more controversial decisions such as:
 - that the *Eat Out to Help Out* scheme would not dangerously accelerate the spread of the infection, and
 - that schools should be closed despite the consequential long term damage to young people.
- The teachers unions were not properly consulted before the initial announcement that schools were to be reopened for certain age groups.
- The September 2020 Covid Marshalls consultation document was issued at 1430 one afternoon with responses required by a ridiculously tight 1030 next day.

Be sceptical about **early research findings**.

- Hurried, poorly designed, underpowered studies can be worse than not doing anything at all.
- An information vacuum and public/media concern encourage a flood of low quality information.
- Research groups that have higher standards, are more careful, better understand the issues, etc. will produce fewer papers or don't engage at all.

Try to identify and allow for **unintended consequences**.

Measures that might be seem attractive so as to ensure public safety/security do not necessarily have priority over consequences including damage to human rights ... nor do they always trump economic damage. Ministers – and if necessary Parliament – need to make these judgments and agree the necessary compromises.

- Non-COVID example: The US emergency response to 9/11 led to all borders being closed. This severely damaged companies operating supply chains over the Canadian border.

4.6. COBR(A)

Here is blogger *Sir Humphrey's* excellent summary of the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) system:

The Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) system is at its heart three things.

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SCS Survival Kit - Part 4 - Managing Crises

- It is a physical suite of secure facilities designed to enable Ministers and officials to meet to discuss a crisis. The heart of the facility is located in 70 Whitehall in the Cabinet Office, which depending on who you speak to is either in a deep underground bunker with flashing lights, flat screens and a direct hotline to Area 52 to enable activation of the Strategic Steam Reserve, or alternatively is a suite of fairly bland Ikea style meeting rooms...
- Secondly it is a communications capability without parallel in the UK with the ability to bring together the right people, at the right time to enable them to engage in meetings. In the words of Bob Hoskins – “It's good to talk” and COBR enables this to happen.
- Finally, it is a concept of crisis management that puts the right people round the table, empowered to make decisions and drive the machinery of central government to fix problems.

COBR is a fantastic crisis management tool when things are going very badly wrong. If you are dealing with complex fast-moving crises involving multiple departments areas of responsibility, and you need decisions made quickly on what needs to be done – the outcome of which can, literally, be life or death, and you need clarity on what the Governments priorities really are, then COBR is fantastic. It works in a way that enables people to take decisions, ensure these are communicated across Whitehall and that there is no ambiguity about what needs to be done, and what happens next. As a very blunt instrument of crisis response it works phenomenally well – it enables effective information sharing and an initial crisis response mechanism for those really messy cases where you need everyone to help out.

What COBR is not good for is to act as a long-term crisis response tool – the act of calling COBR is effectively the equivalent of pushing the SCRAM button on a nuclear reactor. You are moving to solve the problem, but you're shutting down Government in the process. It takes priority over everything else and will be the focus for involved Departments – this is great in the short term, but after more than a couple of days, Whitehall should be moving to set up a Task Force or other empowered team to own responsibility to lead the response moving forward. COBR can be ideal for really important issues, such as a terrorist incident or urgent issues where a national security response is required, but it is intended for a specific time and place.

At times having a COBR meeting is very powerful to bring experts together. At other times having a COBR meeting with Ministers or the PM present is even more powerful – it represents the pinnacle of decision making in a crisis and should only be used sparingly. Each time you put the PM or a Minister into a crisis management meeting they are no longer doing their main work, leading Government, and their departments. It shifts focus off longer term issues and can impact on delivery - sometimes this can be helpful, but at other times it fixes them in one area and prevents them doing their job.

Attendance may look good, but if its eating into Ministerial bandwidth, is it the best use of their time or could issues be solved as effectively by Officials working in close collaboration with Ministerial outer offices? A constant focus on tactical crisis leadership does not allow Minister to take the broader strategic focus on leading their Departments to deliver their manifesto pledges. We should be wary of assuming the answer is always “more meetings with more senior people” – sometimes the best possible thing to do is

step back and let the system get on with fixing the problem at hand. Often the issue will cease to be an issue without any intervention by Ministers.

4.7. This is Not Politics as Normal

The public have a sort of unwritten *psychological contract* with those in power. We expect that the police will treat us with respect. We expect that the government will ensure access to impartial justice. And we expect governments to lead by example, to tell us the truth, to set politics aside and to do everything in their power to protect us when crises occur. Much follows from this:-

Don't promise, unless you are near certain to be able to deliver. And try to avoid announcing 'targets'.

- Targets are, by definition, often missed. They initially reassure the public that concrete steps are being taken. But they focus media attention and destroy confidence if they are not met.
- And targets rarely yield the most effective use of resource within government. They can galvanise officials. But they can lead to excessive resource being needed at the expense of other important areas.

Instead, explain what you are doing, and the extent to which you depend on others, and on technology being made to work.

As noted above, it helps a lot if the government has established itself as generally trustworthy.

Examples:

- There were numerous missed targets for the introduction of effective testing and contact tracing systems, not least the 'world-beating test track & trace system' promised for 1 June.
 - Credit for 'world-beating' solutions would be better claimed if and when the solutions worked.
- School reopening was announced without it being clear how all children could be kept 1 or 2 metres apart without acquiring extra classroom space and extra teachers.
- Relaxed lockdown rules often seemed illogical, or at least poorly explained. Why could we meet only one parent at a time? Was it realistic to allow lovers to meet as long as they stayed 1 metre apart?!
- Ventilator manufacture:- Let's invite every manufacturer to bid to build ventilators! How hard can it be to build them? *Answer*—Ministers were told, but apparently did not hear, that it is very hard to manufacture ventilators that are safe for patients to use. It is extremely difficult to build a controllable machine that will reliably – and over several weeks – deliver exactly the right mixture and pressure of gases to the damaged lungs of a very sick person.
- The Prime Minister announced 'Operation Moonshot' in September 2020:- a £100bn mass testing program depending on unproven technologies and yet-to-be-developed logistics. It would supposedly 'utilise the full range of testing approaches and technologies to help reduce the R rate, keep the economy open and enable a return to normal life.' - all to be in place by 'early 2021'. The announcement was met with understandable incredulity and derision.

Be agile. Learn. Don't Blame. Admit errors, but make it clear that lessons have been learned. You won't convince everyone, and your political opponents will criticise your 'U-turns', but most of the public will credit you for identifying things that are going wrong, and addressing them.

Examples:

- Ministers did not respond confidently and effectively to concerns about:
 - Shortages of PPE
 - Deaths in Care Homes
 - Higher mortality rates amongst the BAME population

Lead by Example. Ministers and senior officials must comply with their own legislation, and follow their own guidelines, or else they will lose moral authority, and will encourage others to ignore the same rules.

Examples:

- The Prime Minister, in the early days, seemed disinclined to follow his own social distancing and other guidance. (But he caught COVID-19 which – ironically – probably did much to encourage the rest of us to be more careful.)
- Dominic Cummings' trip to Durham and (the PM's father) Stanley Johnson's trip to Greece caused significant damage to trust in government, particularly because several Ministers, including the Attorney General, refused to accept that guidance had been breached and offered enthusiastic support to Mr Cummings.
- Health Secretary Matt Hancock's clinch with his mistress Gina Coladangelo (and Dept of Health Non-Exec Director) similarly suggested that there was 'one rule for them, another rule for the rest of us'.

Provide Accurate Information. Once reliable information becomes available it should be published in a form that allows it to be easily understood. It should not be presented in a way that appears particularly favourable to the Government.

Examples:-

- It should not have been possible for the Head of the UK's Statistics Authority to write to the Health Secretary about COVID testing data in these terms: "I warmly welcome of course your support for *the Code Of Practice for Statistics* but the testing statistics still fall well short of its expectations. It is not surprising that, given their inadequacy, data for testing are so widely criticised and often mistrusted."
- The Prime Minister and Education Secretary's August assurance that 'a study' showed that it would be safe for children to return to school should have been accompanied by publication of that study. Instead, there were media reports next day that the data in the study had not been fully analysed, and that its tentative conclusions had been over-hyped.

Avoid gimmicks and jokey language. The public are unlikely to be in the mood to be entertained.

Examples:

- NHS lapel badges are no substitute for plentiful PPE.
- “Whack-a-mole” is by definition a game which the moles win. It was not a good analogy for an anti-virus strategy.
- Marina Hyde was not far wrong when she commented that
 - "The government's crisis communications strategy could not be going worse if it was being led by the last speaker of a dead language People are still clearly extremely confused by what the advice is. ... JUST TELL US THE INFORMATION. It's a public safety briefing, not a fricking ring quest. The government's inability to clearly define essential terms means we are in a situation where “self-isolating” demonstrably means a range of things to different people. Same with “social distancing”. These urgently need simple and precise definition, and a comms blitz everywhere from social media to news bulletins to short TV ads."
 - In short - **Trust in government is a vital and precious resource. Do not squander it!**

4.8. Communications

Identify – ideally only one person – who will take responsibility for telling the public what is happening.

In general, it is probably best if the spokesperson is not a minister, given public distrust of politicians, and given the possibility that they will not listen to communications advice. Also, they will attract political questions which will impede clear communication of important messaging.

An (otherwise not well known) expert is often best, such as the Chief Veterinary or Medical Officer.

- They should aim to demonstrate calmness, confidence, trustworthiness and competence.
- They should remember that 90% of the initial information reaching the crisis management team will be wrong, so they should not go into detail at that stage. (But see above for the need for honesty and accuracy once reliable data becomes available.)
- It follows that they should avoid speaking with certainty when there isn't any.
- Avoid judgmental language when talking to or about people who are concerned.
- Once reliable facts are available, they should focus on communicating that information.

Examples:

- Politicians fronting the daily COVID press conferences were frequently so worried about ‘Gotcha!’ questions that they were unable to give sensible answers to straight questions. They also felt it necessary to offer promises which could not be kept, thus diminishing trust in the government's ability to cope with the crisis.
- The American CDC became distrusted by many as it changed its recommendations. It may also have been a problem in the UK as it was never entirely clear whether the hand-washing and mask-wearing advice was precautionary or based on strong science.

- Jacob Rees Mogg should not have dismissed parents' and others' concerns about insufficient test capacity as 'carping'.
- No.10 briefed the press that "booking holidays is a choice for individuals" on the same day that the Transport Secretary said that "people shouldn't be booking holidays now".
- Well before COVID – During a fuel supply crisis, a senior politician encouraged the public to hoard petrol in jerry cans kept in garages ... forgetting that hoarding should never be encouraged, not everyone has a garage, and petrol is highly flammable.
- Some years later, a leak of his WhatsApp messages showed that the Cabinet Secretary was familiar with the above advice:- "We are losing this war because of behaviour - this is the thing we have to turn around (which probably also relies on people hearing about isolation from trusted local figures, not nationally distrusted figures like the PM, sadly)"

Ensure that your decisions, regulations and guidance can be easily communicated. If not, there may be a problem with the policies. In particular, guidance must be consistent with legislation.

Examples:

- 'Plain English' guidance – a bit like the Highway Code – would have been very helpful in summarising lockdown guidance as it develops.
- The preparation of such guidance would most likely have exposed some of the contradictions, illogicalities and impracticalities in the developing guidance.
- Ministers' summaries of the guidance (in their interviews) was often at odds with emergency legislation. This caused confusion, including for the police and others attempting to enforce the 'rules'.
- Many lockdown relaxation decisions were pre-briefed to the media, in general terms only, sometimes many days before they were due to take effect. This encouraged many to apply the new rules (illegally) before they came into force. And the lack of detail caused misunderstandings and some confusion.
- The unattributable pre-briefing of 'air bridges' (relaxed travel restrictions) was classic. *The Times* reported that "travel sites were inundated with demand for [overseas] summer breaks" ... until ... Home Secretary Priti Patel warned that "these measures won't come into force overnight ... there will be an announcement in the next few days ... [the public should wait and] listen to the advice".
- Once air bridges had been introduced, travellers were not warned that quarantine-on-return might be introduced at very short notice – as happened only two weeks later once many thousands of Brits had begun their summer holidays in Spain.
- Subsequent government briefing seemed oblivious of the fact that an employee who had less than two year's service, and who self-isolated on return from Spain, could be sacked by their employer without being able to complain of unfair dismissal.
- The local lockdown strategy was described as "whack-a-mole", but no one could tell from this who was supposed to do the whacking, or what sort of mallet to use. It would have been better to explain quite clearly what would trigger local lockdowns, and which powers sit centrally and which locally.
- The announcement of new lockdown rules for Greater Manchester was announced in a tweet at 2116 one evening - so giving less than three hours' notice. This was hardly likely to improve trust in HMG's apparently panicky handling of this issue, and seemed

to many to be grossly unfair, not least to those planning Eid celebrations next day. It was for the Islamic community the equivalent of Christmas lunch and associated festivities - including church services - being prohibited in an announcement at 2116 on Christmas Eve.

But do not simplify complex messages for specialist audiences. Encourage and trust intermediaries to communicate as necessary to their readers and members.

Although you will wish to make full use of social media, the broadcast and print media are an important intermediary in communicating with the public in times of emergency. They need to be assisted and respected.

Try to avoid clichés.

Alastair Campbell:- Clichés are best avoided at the best of times, which these most certainly aren't. These are times in which clear straight talking is highly recommended. This is best done accompanied by hard fact and detail. ... every briefing should start with a clear factual demonstration, supported by graphics, of cases, deaths, and issues of capacity such as beds, masks and protective clothing, ventilators etc.

Do not unveil longer term strategies without significant detail being in place. You must be able to answer obvious questions.

Examples:-

- Quarantine policy was confused:- Initially no quarantine, then quarantine for everyone, then 'air bridges', then a 'traffic light' system, then ... silence!
- Testing and 'test & trace' were sometimes briefed as absolutely vital, and sometimes as unimportant.
- The Joint Biosecurity Centre was announced as having a key role in setting the COVID alert level, which would in turn inform lockdown/relaxation policy. Many weeks later, and well after significant relaxation decisions had been taken (and after a renewed lockdown in Leicester) the centre had still not formally come into existence.

Prepare to be blamed. The over-adversarial nature of UK politics cannot be totally wished away, so it should be handled as a formal risk to your plans – a risk that should be mitigated in an open way.

Do not promise regular press conferences. The absence of worthwhile announcements soon leads to excessive spin, empty promises, repackaged repetitive statements, and consequential lack of trust – plus wasted official and Ministerial time.

- Example: It was a mistake to promise daily press conferences during the COVID-19 crisis.

See *Annex B* below for communications advice contained in the conclusions of the BSE Inquiry.

4.9. Further Reading

The above advice draws heavily on Catherine Haddon's [Political decision making in a crisis](#).

The constitutional and human rights aspects of responding to crises are covered in authoritative detail in Adam Wagner's *Emergency State*.

The IfG published its initial 'lessons learned' [from Covid] report in August 2020:- [Decision Making in a Crisis](#).

It followed it up with [Responding to Shocks - 10 lessons for government](#) in March 2021.

It also published [Science Advice in a Crisis](#).

A blog about the psychological contract between government and citizen (by Gill Kernick and me) [may be found here](#).

Tim Harford has written a very interesting blog explaining [Why we fail to prepare for disasters](#).

More detailed advice on handling risks to health and safety, including communications advice, [may be found here](#).

The Prevention Paradox is explained in Chapter 1.3 of this handbook.

ANNEX A

Here are some very sensible **Top Tips for Incident Management** from Sir James Bevan, Chief Executive of the Environment Agency:-

Lead: if you are your organisation's leader, you need to lead the response to a big incident. Don't try and do the day job as well. The incident is the day job till it's over. Be decisive: be prepared to take big decisions. In an incident the biggest risk is not taking a decision at all, or taking it too late. You will not have all the facts: decide anyway.

Move fast: Flick the switch early to put your organisation into incident mode. If you don't get ahead of the curve you will never catch up. So over-resource at the start: people, kit, whatever. You can always scale back later. Establish your battle rhythm immediately – which meetings when with whom to do what – and clear roles and responsibilities.

Get on the ground: The absent are always wrong. Being present and visible at the scene of an incident is as important as what you do when you get there. So get yourself and your team to the scene as soon as possible.

Have a strategy: Be clear what your goals are and ensure everyone in your team knows. Be ready to adjust your strategy as the situation changes, because it will.

Win the air war: The media battle (the air war) is as much a part of the incident as your operational response (the ground war). You need to win both. So use the media: don't shy away from it. Have a simple message and keep on saying it. Get the tone right: calm, authoritative, empathetic, commitment to do what's needed. Accept the inevitability of critical reporting: it's not personal. It will go away.

Manage upwards: We all have bosses. Tell them what you are doing and listen to what they want.

Stay well: Look after your staff's wellbeing and your own. Ensure everyone is fed and watered and gets a break, including you. Tired people make bad decisions.

Be ready beforehand: Have an incident plan and practice beforehand. No plan will survive contact with reality, but it's better than not having one. Time spent in preparation is never wasted: what you do in peacetime is reflected in how you perform during the incident.

Learn the lessons afterwards: It will never be perfect. But each time you do something right or wrong, you will learn valuable lessons for next time. Do a wash up afterwards, write down the main lessons and keep them handy. You will need them again.

ANNEX B

Here is an extract from **the conclusions of the BSE Inquiry**:

- To establish credibility it is necessary to generate trust
- Trust can only be generated by openness
- Openness requires recognition of uncertainty, where it exists
- The public should be trusted to respond rationally to openness
- Scientific investigation of risk should be open and transparent
- The advice and reasoning of advisory committees should be made public
- The trust that the public has in the Chief Medical Officer is precious and should not be put at risk
- Any advice given by a CMO or advisory committee should be, and be seen to be, objective and independent of government.

or faulty links.

END OF SCS HANDBOOK PART 4