Crisis Communications Planning Guide

STOP Template

Introduction

This guide is designed to help government communicators create crisis comms plans for the major risks that their organisation, department or agency may face.

The document includes:

- STOP planning checklist, which sets out the key elements of a good crisis comms plan.

- A 'tear away' quick reference handbook, outlining the comms actions that need to be taken when a crisis hits.

By their nature, crises are often short or no-notice events. When a crisis does hit, lives and livelihoods can depend on effective crisis communications planning: crisis management can succeed or fail depending on the effectiveness of its communications strategy. As government communicators, it is our responsibility to ensure that effective crisis communications plans are drafted, tested, agreed, and kept up to date for the key risks facing the UK.

This guide provides an overview of how to put together a thorough crisis comms plan. It builds upon the Emergency Planning Framework.

If you are a GCS member and you want to learn more, please get in touch with us at crisiscomms@cabinetoffice.gov.uk and sign-up for the GCS crisis comms e-learning module.

"Time is the most precious resource we have in a crisis. That's why this guidance is so important. Doing the work in advance of a crisis to develop a strategy gives communicators more time to act decisively and provide vital information to the public when it matters most."

Simon Baugh - Chief Executive of Government Communications

STOP Planning Template

The STOP template sets out the key elements of a robust crisis communications plan:

S **Strategy**

- Crisis Overview
- Objectives
- Audiences and impacts
- Guiding principles

T **Tactics**

- Quick reference handbook
- Holding line / key messages
- Clearance requirements
- Contact lists
- Channels / templates

O **Organisation**

- Senior comms lead
- Team emails / contact details
- Policy and operational structures
- Logistics and business continuity

P **People**

- Number of people
- Required surge support
- Training plan

STOP: Strategy

Your crisis communication strategy sets out what success looks like, who you are looking to influence and the core principles you'll abide by when designing and iterating your messages and tactics.

Crisis overview

Use your organisation's risk-register to identify your risks. In your plan, describe the risk, what you know about it and what remains unknown. This section should also include to what extent the plan has been cleared and when it was last updated.

Objectives

Set out what you aim to achieve through your communications by writing a short, sharp mission statement. Set out the big picture of what successful communication will look like. It could be regaining public confidence, giving people the information they need to keep safe or explaining your organisation's plan.

In addition, you should put together an evaluation framework following the GCS Evaluation Cycle, to measure your success towards this objective.

Audience insight

You should consider who will be impacted by the consequences of the crisis. Vulnerable groups who may have particular needs will need to be factored in, as will any internal stakeholders/audiences that need to be accounted for. Make sure you record these groups and your key insights about them. Insights can come from behavioural science, focus groups and other kinds of research.

Message principles

The Krebs framework (outlined later) provides a useful starting point for what you should be considering in your messaging. Use this to consider what core principles and strategies will guide your communications throughout the response. This could include showing empathy to those who are impacted, providing transparency and sharing accurate information with impacted groups on a regular basis (even if it's incomplete), or demonstrating that your organisation is taking steps to address the crisis.

Panic? What panic?

It's important to make sure your strategy is grounded in an accurate picture of how the public might respond. The public very rarely exhibits truly irrational behaviour in times of crisis. What is often perceived or reported as panic is normally the public acting perfectly rationally to meet their essential needs. Essential needs include:

- Shelter

- Light

- Warmth

- Food

- Water

- Hygiene

- Health (physical and mental)

- Being safe from hazards,

- Being able to contact loved ones

- The need to receive information

- Feelings of autonomy

- Helping others

Believing that the public will panic and using this as the foundation of crisis planning can lead to flawed recommendations, and a misplaced focus on mitigating panic over more meaningful objectives – such as sharing accurate information with the public. Read our GCS' Behavioural Science Crisis Comms guide to learn more about panic and essential needs.

STOP: Tactics

When a crisis hits, you'll need to be able to act quickly to get your message out. Your tactics outline how you will deliver your message, and the actions you will take.

Quick reference handbook

Write down the actions you need to take in the first hour, day and week of a crisis. Use the crisis comms quick reference sheet in this guide as a basis for your plan.

Holding line / messages

Agree the key messages you'll likely need to communicate in the first 24 hours of a crisis. Try to pre-clear holding lines that are based on these key messages to use at speed when needed. Ensure that key team members know what these are.

Contact lists

Make sure you have contact details for key people and teams. You will need the details for the comms teams in other organisations or government departments that you will need to coordinate with (including out of hours contacts), in addition to policy officials, journalists and other stakeholders. Have both emails and phone numbers. Ensure that these are stored in a way that your team will have access to them, including if the crisis hits out of hours or when crisis comms leads are unavailable.

Sign-off requirements and out of office preparation

You will need to make sure that all documents are cleared at the appropriate level, and to help do this swiftly you should outline the sign-off process required for new messages before they are issued. For each individual or team named in this section of the STOP plan, you should have alternative contact details prepared in case of absence, or if you contact them outside of office hours.

Channels and Templates

Consider how you will use your different channels to get your message across. Whether it's press activity, briefings, digital, stakeholder engagement or marketing you should know how your messaging will vary across each of them, and which platforms might be best for each stage of the crisis. You should also think about how you can communicate to internal audiences in your organisation or across Whitehall.

Once you have this, make sure you create templates that are ready to be used for media monitoring, Q&As and forward looks of activity. If you don't have these already, reach out to contacts in the government crisis comms space, who may have templates ready for you to use.

Structuring your messages

A useful set of principles for what communication should aim to do during a crisis is the Krebs framework. The model emerged from the latest behavioural science and the work of John Krebs, former head of the Food Standards Agency.

The Krebs Framework sets out how messages should be structured during a crisis in order to give the public the information they need, and how this can be achieved.

It's a useful tool for all communicators to keep in mind as they put together their holding lines and crisis comms strategies. The Krebs framework is detailed below.

The Krebs Framework

Communicate what is known

Communicate what is not known yet

Explain what the Government is doing

Tell the public what they should do

Explain when and where more information will be available

Do not limit information 'to control panic'....

Communicate consistently and frequently

Use trusted messengers

Set expectations that information may change

STOP: Organisation

The quality of communication within your team and with those external to it is an important factor in determining how successful your crisis comms response will be. You need to identify the key team members you'll need and the key relationships you'll need to cultivate.

Senior comms lead and sign off

Quick, high-quality decision making and leadership is vital in a crisis. You should aim to have a named first in command or 'Gold' lead, who knows it's their responsibility to overview the crisis comms response. They in turn should have a second in command (Silver) and third in command (Bronze) to assist them. As important as identifying these individuals is knowing who to contact if they are off shift.

Roles and responsibilities

Within the comms team there are a variety of different roles that will need to be carried out by teams or individuals, including press team, strategy team, marketing team, internal comms, insight and evaluation team, digital team and administration team. You need to discover whether you currently have the capability to fill each of these roles and insert this into an organogram.

Policy and operational structures

Understanding of the wider policy and crisis management plan will be important to informing your messaging and comms response. You should know which meetings will you need to be invited to, what products e.g. 'SitReps' (Situation Reports) will you need to feed into, when are key decision points likely to be and who the key decision makers are. Aligning your battle rhythm with COBR or other crisis management structures can ensure comms are in the room when it matters.

Logistics and business continuity

Having someone in charge of logistics will help you adapt to the changing nature of the crisis as it develops. This role could cover anything from ensuring new team members from surge support are able to quickly get laptops and access documents, to drafting rotas and providing compensation and refreshments to those working overtime. These factors can waste valuable time during a crisis if they are not determined beforehand.

Location

Being able to co-locate as a comms team, or with your crisis management colleagues, is an effective way to share information and drive results. You will need a location ready and ensure that everyone has access to the right buildings/IT/security passes. A back-up plan in case your first location is unavailable would also help.

How to use AI

Large Language Models can be used to make your crisis comms planning quicker, and more efficient. You can use Assist, GCS's bespoke AI tool, to:

- Input information into the STOP planning prompt to generate a first draft of your crisis comms plan.

- Research good crisis communication practice, and what has worked before in similar situations.

- Brainstorm audience needs and expectations, in addition to channels and approaches.

- Create first drafts of messages and press releases.

- Quick translation (only in exceptional circumstances).

Uniquely, the tool includes pre-prepared prompts to provide more tailored responses. For example:

- Applying the latest frameworks in Crisis Communication.

- Suggesting SMART objectives for communications activity.

- Identifying target audiences and summarising their capabilities, opportunities, motivations and behaviours.

- Using this understanding of the audience to suggest relevant communications channels to reach that audience, and identifying spokespersons trusted by that audience.

- Highlighting considerations or weaknesses around the approaches it suggests

Assist has been developed in close coordination with the Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO) and Cabinet Office Data Protection team, and users are able to input data up to OFFICIAL SENSITIVE classification.

To learn more about how you can responsibly use generative AI as a GCS member, you can review the new GCS policy on use of generative AI in government communication, and the new Ethical Framework for Responsible Innovation on the GCS website (both launched in April 2024), or reach out to AI.GCS@cabinetoffice.gov.uk.

STOP: People

Crises are about people. You need to plan to make sure you have the right people in your team, and that they are as prepared as they can be to play their role.

Number of people

Calculate the number of people you need in your team to respond to this crisis scenario, and remember to include shifts. If you require surge support to staff up for the crisis, you'll need to have an idea of where this will come from. Equally you'll need to know which other individuals in your organisation or elsewhere might be brought in to support a crisis response. Since 2023, the UK Government has built a **Crisis Communications Surge Team**, with trained volunteers who can be deployed to support a crisis response. For more information about the surge team including information on how to join, please get in contact with the GCS Crisis Comms team at crisiscomms@cabinetoffice.gov.uk

Skills and training

Making sure your people have the skills they need to do the job is essential. Team members and senior leaders need to understand the role and value of comms in a crisis. Team members should complete the new GCS e-learning on crisis communications, and further training can also include shadowing in teams that are experienced in crisis response.

Testing

Practicing and testing all aspects of emergency plans is a key part of crisis preparedness, not only to identify and address any weaknesses in advance, but also to help the organisation and its staff to become aware of their individual roles. Tabletop or live exercises can help test your plan, and at the same time give individuals a better understanding of their likely roles to give them the skills and confidence to respond when a crisis hits. GCS plan to develop exercises for key NSRA risks as part of this process.

Wellbeing

Responding to crises can take an emotional and physical toll. You will need a plan for making sure your team has the support they need to perform effectively when the crisis hits. For this, look up your departmental wellbeing advice.

Making Communications Accessible

During crises, people with additional needs may be extremely vulnerable. It's critical you consider them in your communication.

Consider upfront how you will ensure your communications are inclusive and accessible by default in line with relevant legislation such as the Equality Act 2010, Public Sector Equality Duty and British Sign Language Act 2022. This may also include, for example, providing BSL translation of critical information, providing alternative formats such as Easy Read, and working closely with stakeholders, partners and influencers.

GCS' inclusive communications template sets out the accessibility standards which all GCS communications content must meet, including links to guidance on how to do so. It also helps you to think through how you can make your content inclusive to different audiences, so that it has a wider and more effective impact.

You may need to produce communications quickly during a crisis, and in these circumstances it may be challenging to produce BSL translations and alternative versions of materials at the same time. You should continue to engage all of your key stakeholders regularly and ensure all your initial communications are as accessible as possible. Where appropriate, for communications critical to your audience, for example on health advice, you should consider committing to producing as a priority BSL, and other appropriate formats when circumstances allow, and within a feasible time frame. Wherever possible, tell your audience when the BSL translation will be available. You may also need to have a plan for interpreting and/or translating urgent communications.

Finally you should consider when it is important to translate your messages into other languages, depending on the needs of your audience.

Quick Reference Sheet

Objective: Verify information, issue holding line and mobilise your team

FIRST HOUR

- Verify details of the situation
- Alert senior management, No10, Cabinet Office, relevant Other Government Departments and political colleagues
- **Check if there is a crisis comms plan in place, and if any of the following steps have been pre-prepared**
- Develop, draft and sign off holding statement for immediate release
- Assemble core crisis response team, and establish key contacts (including team members, policy and operations, other Departments, devolved administrations, journalists, local responders and third party stakeholders)
- Start monitoring media/social channels and produce first media monitoring product
- Start to develop key messages and Q&A
- Set up internal 'battle-rhythm' of meetings, working with policy and operational leads
- Ensure other non-related pre-scheduled communications are put on hold

Objective: Confirm team roles and keep the public and other stakeholders informed

FIRST DAY

- Set objectives and strategy for response
- Release public statement using the Krebs framework
- Confirm crisis comms team roles/responsibilities and any shift patterns
- Establish a cross government communication and 'battle-rhythm' (via a rolling email chain and/or daily meeting). This needs to be comms-to-comms but also connect to policy and operations teams
- Respond to media inquiries and set up an effective logging system for these
- Identify/prepare designated spokesperson
- Schedule press conference/media briefing and briefings with key external stakeholders (if appropriate to do so)
- Issue guidance via websites/social channels, considering accessibility requirements
- Ensure effective internal communications: update employees with any critical information
- Ensure effective stakeholder management: reach out to key stakeholders, and log engagements
- Update key messages as needed
- If the situation is uncertain and unclear, start scenario planning and drafting associated comms products/plans

Objective: Keep coordinated, reassure and rebuild

FIRST WEEK

- Sequence a grid of activity with Other Government Departments, addressing public concerns
- Compile a script with the latest lines to take to help answer expected questions from the media/ stakeholders
- Publish detailed content about crisis response plans and targets
- Identify impacted audiences and stakeholders, and express support and commitment to affected groups
- Schedule further spokesperson and expert media interviews, and outline changes to policies/ procedures if relevant
- Communicate regular updates (i) internally (ii) to stakeholders and (iii) to the public
- Evaluate the impact of communications against the GCS Evaluation Cycle