

1000 wds (excluding titles and notes)

Never waste a good crisis.

Flooding in Moray September 2009

Objectives

On Friday September 4 2009 large areas of Moray were flooded for the third time in 11 years.

Families who had to be evacuated were upset and angry, and their frustration at the slow pace of development was targeted at the Moray Council (note 2). At a cost of £83million, a flood alleviation scheme had been designed and is expected to start in 2011 following many years of preparation.

To obtain a Flood Prevention Order a scheme must be consulted upon and any unresolved objections presented to a Public Inquiry. There were 23 objections to the Elgin scheme claiming adverse effects on their property. The Inquiry was due to commence on September 23rd.

Had there been no objections this lengthy process would have been avoided and work could conceivably have started.

No guarantees had been received from government that the 80% funding for the scheme would be available when required.

We had to:

- Keep the public informed and provide constantly updated information on what services were affected and available, and where to get them.
- Provide regular information to the media, politicians and staff.
- Preserve and enhance the council's reputation and focus public minds on the causes of delay.

Strategy and implementation

At 11.30pm on Thursday 4th it was clear that a major flooding event was imminent in Moray.

From the outset the chief executive and the communications officer agreed that the crisis could be an opportunity to highlight both the delay created by the Public Inquiry process and doubts over government funding.

Limited resources meant outside assistance would be required, which was secured from nearby RAF Kinloss (note 2)

In accordance with the council's established media strategy, a communications hub was established in Elgin by Thursday midnight. Experience gained from previous incidents had led to an early warning system being implemented. By 1.48am on Sept 5 over 300 residents were contacted by this automated service and knew they were at risk.

By 2.30am the first of two-hourly press releases was issued, and all local politicians were updated by text and phone thereafter using the Wirefast service.

The situation across Moray deteriorated; in the centre of Fochabers village a bridge was washed away, along with a large part of a resident's garden. This resident, Ian Gordon, proved to be the most vocal of critics, as shown in the analysis (Appendix 1). Early commitments to a rapid replacement were made to balance negative comment.

Information on hotspots and services available was regularly uploaded onto the council's website by the communications team. Analysis of the hits over the 48-hour period shows that this source of information was heavily relied upon (Appendix 2). Public information buses provided on-the-spot assistance to residents.

As the waters started to subside on Saturday pm, the prospect of increased delays due to the imminent Public Inquiry was introduced in time for the Sunday press. In subsequent articles, radio and TV broadcasts, pressure mounted on the objectors to justify their position, forcing one company to employ a PR company to present their case to the public. The plight of flood victims, highlighted by HRH Prince Charles' visit, increased this pressure still further. A key phrase introduced into press releases on Saturday, 'focus minds', was used by the Prince and other commentators in reference to the objectors and Inquiry.

The question over funding was introduced on Monday 7th. The council could not practically commit to the scheme without knowing the level of support from government. Once in the open forum of the media the government was asked via the press to confirm that the money would be available.

Key to this objective was an interview arranged with BBC Radio Scotland on September 8 with the council's Depute Convener, where he would call on the government to guarantee funding. In a live, robust follow-up the next morning, Roseanna Cunningham MSP eventually confirmed the funding. This was quickly transcribed and read by the Chief Executive to a meeting of the Full Council ongoing that morning, ensuring the widest possible coverage and placing it in the council's minutes.

Press releases were sent out at regular intervals during the first day, and broadcast interviews given. The local radio station, Moray Firth Radio, carried bulletins throughout the flooding event. In the aftermath the managing director of the station, Danny Gallagher, emailed the council (Appendix 3).

Creativity – what makes this stand out?

Simply, a deep understanding of the rolling news agenda and how to capitalise the immediate crisis to help reduce delays and therefore greatly improve the prospect of flood protection to the community.

Strong knowledge among the communications team of recently completed flood alleviation schemes in Moray, and regular updates on how well they were performing in the crisis, helped to enhance the council's reputation. In press releases this was emphasised, creating a certain hunger for the Elgin scheme and isolating objectors. The flood and the proximity of the Inquiry provided an opportunity to focus minds. The public had all the information at a time when it was most relevant to them, finally understanding the council's problems.

By the time the Inquiry was due to commence the last objectors had withdrawn and the three-week inquiry was shortened to just a few days of formalities. This was a major benefit to the council, who now only had to convince the independent Scottish

Reporter that the scheme was viable before approval by Scottish Ministers, who had by then officially confirmed funding.

Budget

The council has two staff in its communications office. For the first 18 hours just one member of staff was available before relief was in place. Cost is below £10k. The objectives achieved are worth approximately £8million.

Evaluation

Independent analysis shows the coverage was factual in tone, with 22% beneficial coverage outweighing the 8% adverse coverage. (see note 1)

In the first two weeks following the incident, beneficial coverage was prevalent for the Council's response to the flooding. Most residents felt informed, staff were praised by the public through the media and the council's reputation remained intact, a real achievement given the level of criticism after previous floods.

The objectives as outlined at the outset were creatively incorporated into what was a fast-moving news agenda.

Note 1:

Independent analysis from Media Measurement Ltd. A sample of 99 online items from w/c 1/09/09 – 27/10/09 analysed. Results in Appendix 1

Note 2:

Moray Council has an annual gross spend of £230million, employs 4500 staff. Resident population 88,000.

The communications team is located within the Chief Executive's office. It comprises one Communications Officer, one PR Co-ordinator (on leave at the time of this crisis). Communications support provided by Press Officer for RAF Kinloss under membership terms of the Grampian SCG Public Communications Liaison Group, whose media strategy incorporates a contingency to supply members with media response assistance during an emergency.