

A guide for communicating during extreme weather



Welcome to this good practice guide for councils communicating during periods of extreme weather. We have produced this in response to councils asking us for examples of good practice, how to develop a communications strategy and where they can go for further help and support.

Even the very best reputations can be damaged by single incidents and the impact of extreme weather on local communities can shape views about councils and their partners.

This guide is designed to help you develop a council-wide communications strategy to help your council prepare for, and react to, extreme weather and to ensure that you are able to communicate effectively with your residents. We hope you find it useful and to ensure we keep it up-to-date and relevant, would value further examples of good practice. If you want to share examples of the good work your council is doing, please email claire.thurlow@local.gov.uk



Introduction

Over the last few years, the UK has been subjected to an increasing number of extreme weather events from flooding, to wind and storms, snow and extreme heat. These can have a significant impact on local communities both at the time of the incident and in the longer-term. As well as the impact on people and their families, the effects of extreme weather can also impact on local businesses and local economies. In extreme cases, such as during a storm or during periods of excessive heat, this can result in loss of life.

During extreme weather, the most important role a council can play is to provide local leadership – the way we respond during such incidents can define places and local areas for years to come. How a council responds during such periods can also impact on reputation and how much your residents trust you. In the winter of 2009/10 much of the UK was affected by heavy and prolonged periods of snow. In many areas, councils were either unprepared or underestimated the scale of the impact on local areas and many places simply ran out of stocks of grit and salt. The resulting media coverage was extremely critical of councils, as indeed many residents were. Trust in councils fell and the reputation of local government and individual councils was damaged. Since then, councils have not only prepared well ahead of time, they have also demonstrated that they are ready to respond quickly and effectively to extreme weather and are able to meet the needs of their residents.

This, coupled with how councils actually deal with such episodes and provide information to residents, has helped to restore and indeed improve the reputation of local government.

Although in extreme cases the emergency services will take the lead on dealing with any incident, often declaring it a ‘major incident’¹, councils have a wider leadership role both in preparing for extreme weather and preparing their communities, dealing with the incident as it happens and the aftermath – the ‘clear-up’.

¹ You can find the definition of a ‘major incident’ in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/36/contents>

As well as dealing with incidents operationally, throughout all of these phases, effective communications is key to ensuring an effective response – keeping communities safe and signposting to help and support. Councils have a community leadership role in ensuring they and their partners deliver effective, timely and joined-up communications and clear, public information.

Communicating with your residents

During spells of extreme weather, residents turn to trusted sources such as councils for information on a wide range of issues which can include:

- where to go to for help (and more detailed and specific advice)
- what support is available to them
- local contact details (out of hours contact details are particularly important)
- personal safety
- health advice
- advice on securing their property
- school closures
- the ‘clean-up’.

During such times, people need to be able to access information quickly, easily and receive clear guidance on what support is available, what they should do for themselves and how they can help others. This will also help to set clear expectations about:

- what the council and partners are able to do to support residents
- where councils are not able to offer support and where residents should go for the support instead
- what residents will have to do for themselves
- how residents can help others.

During periods of extreme weather, ‘business as usual’ can quickly turn into ‘dealing with a crisis’. This is the same for communications. Communicating about gritting vehicles out

overnight preparing for the morning rush hour can quickly turn into issues such as road closures and major accidents. Providing proactive advice about heavy rainfall can quickly become a major flooding incident. The reputation of councils can depend on the effectiveness of planning and response.

The key to good practice and timely communications is **planning, preparation** and having the basics in place. The key questions you should ask are:

- Do we have a plan?
- What is that plan?
- Who will deliver it?
- What tactics will work best?
- Who will talk about our strategy?
- How will we measure whether this strategy has failed or succeeded?

When answering these questions, there are three 'must-dos':

1. Preparation

Preparing your council, your communications team – or communications manager in the case of sole practitioners – your communications channels and wider council staff before an extreme weather event is essential. Elected members must also be prepared and can be used in the media to show visibility in local communities.

To deliver effective communications, your plans need to be fully-integrated with the council's emergency planning strategy and agreed with colleagues across the organisation ahead of time. In particular, your communications staff and partner organisations should be working closely with the emergency planning team and LRF partners.

You need to lay the groundwork before you do anything else. If you're still worrying about communications when something goes wrong, it's too late. If you don't have a plan, you're not delivering effective crisis communications, you're doing damage limitation.

2. Decisiveness

Preparation is just a means to an end to help you make the best decisions on the day. When it comes to crisis communications, taking the lead and making clear decisions often means taking risks. But let's not forget that not making a decision is itself, a decision – and perhaps the riskiest one. In today's environment of 24/7 news, communicators need to make fast decisions and they need to make the right ones. A good strategy will ensure you do this.

3. Reputation

Why do we need to move fast? Because delayed communications mean an increased risk of potential damage and in extreme cases loss of life. At a time when trust in councils is at an all-time high, reputations built up over years can be damaged in hours. Businesses link crisis communications to brand confidence but in the public sector we often still see events as standalone, with no bearing on our reputation. Whether in the public or private sectors, crisis communication is about trust and reputation. In times of crisis it is essential your residents trust you to deal with any incidents as a trusted source of information.

Planning

Planning ahead is essential for ensuring that during extreme weather you're communicating the right information to residents and that your communications reflect the council's wider emergency planning strategy. A successful crisis communications strategy will help you to prepare your staff, your communications channels, review the information you're putting out and agree who will take responsibility for each area.

Communications strategy

Having a clear and defined communications strategy that has been agreed ahead of any extreme weather events will allow your communications team and colleagues within the council to react more quickly. The key elements of the strategy should be:

(i) Identify the possible issues you may have to deal with the starting point for a communications plan around extreme weather should be to scope out the events likely to affect your area². So, if you cover an area prone to flooding, think about how you handled events previously and what information your residents asked for.

(ii) Audiences (who will you need to communicate with?) once you have an understanding of the types of events you may have to respond to, you should consider the audiences in your area that you may have to communicate with. These audiences could include:

- residents (or a section of your residents)
- elected members
- your staff
- local stakeholders
- partners
- local businesses
- third-party service providers/contractors
- media (Local and national)
- local commentators (including those on social media)
- neighbouring councils (particularly important where councils share services)
- central government
- other agencies.

(iii) Key messages these are likely to change from incident to incident and will need to be agreed quickly after the incident you are involved in commences. Key messages are essential to being able to communicate clear consistent, reliable information to your residents, warning them before and keeping them informed.

Some key messages can be prepared ahead of the incident. These would usually take the

2 Useful websites to identify the likelihood of extreme weather affecting your area, include:
Interactive map
<http://apps.environment-agency.gov.uk/wiyby/37837.aspx>
Live flood warning map
<http://apps.environment-agency.gov.uk/flood/142151.aspx>

form of a holding statement setting out what the councils initial response is.

Communicating during the early stages of an incident (the golden hour – the first hour after an incident occurs) is an important part of reassuring your residents.

To develop your key messages, you should consider what the council will need to communicate to residents and businesses in your area at the time of severe weather. You should consider your key messages based on audience groups – what you might need to communicate with residents will be different to what you'd want to communicate to businesses and stakeholders in your area.

Example

The council has invoked its emergency plan and is working to ensure residents are kept safe and well. For up-to-date information, please go to our website at www.XXXXXX.gov.uk, follow us on twitter @XXXXXX, listen to local radio stations and you can call us on XXXXX XXXXXX. Once we are able to provide more information, we will update you

These might include:

- personal safety – please don't travel as conditions are dangerous
- vulnerable people – what support the council is providing to vulnerable adults who might be most affected
- advice on travel – condition of roads; public transport availability etc
- public services - open/closed
- securing properties – what your residents should do to protect or secure their houses or businesses
- business continuity – what the council is doing to support local businesses
- further information – contact details for residents wanting more information or help.

(iv) Roles and responsibilities agree as part of your plan, who will be:

- The lead spokesperson(s) – You should consider who your key spokespeople will be for media interviews. All spokespeople should be media trained and feel comfortable with what they'll be asked to say and when. For example, the leader or chief executive might want to talk about local leadership and the senior officer 'on the ground' may be the person to talk about the 'nuts and bolts' of the council's response. It is helpful to use the same spokesperson for interviews as your residents will recognise 'the face and voice of the council' and start to trust and empathise with them.
- Responsible for authorising media statements.
- Responsible for staffing the media office, particularly out of office and during holiday periods eg Christmas or bank holidays.
- Responsible for policy contacts.

(v) Contact details Ensure you have out-of-hours contact details for all of your key communications personnel and for those of your partners.

You should also think more widely than just your council, including how you will work with stakeholders and other service providers in your area. On a local level, it's often useful to agree a lateral communications strategy with stakeholders, deciding on spokespeople, joint messaging and ways of working ahead of time. On a national level, confirm who in your council will communicate with national stakeholders – such as the Environment Agency, the Local Government Association (LGA), COBRA and relevant government departments – and when.

Communications channels

Media

A proactive extreme weather media plan is essential to promote the readiness of your council and ensure the hard work that goes into preparing for and dealing with issues such as snow, freezing temperatures or flooding is recognised by your residents.

It is also important to communicate what steps they may need to take to prepare.

This can be achieved by:

- Planning a steady stream of proactive press releases months in advance of any possible winter weather. The aim of these must be to ensure that by the time heavy snow or rain does actually fall, residents are already well aware of the work that has gone into preparing for it and any action they should take. Examples could include how much salt the council has in stock, community volunteers being recruited to help spread grit or issue flood advice to residents and businesses and, investment in new equipment to cope with adverse weather.
- Consistent messages – **we are prepared, our plan is working, we are looking out for the vulnerable and leading community efforts residents can get information from (websites, social media etc).**

Good practice

Many councils offer their local media photo opportunities in the autumn to highlight the amount of grit they have ready for the winter, and their access to specialist vehicles such as gritters and snow ploughs.

This is also an opportunity to highlight where community grit bags are provided for use by local communities.

- Preparing strong reactive lines to rebut any potential criticism (ie salt running out, unexpected transport disruptions) – begin preparing media plans and considering any potential negative questions early.
- Ensure spokespeople are given clear briefings and key messages for proactive interviews ahead of any bad weather.
- Take an active role with Local Resilience Forum partners to manage media communications, either directly or as part of a multi agency response group.

As part of preparing your response, it is helpful to have the following information available:

- ✓ number of homes affected
- ✓ council staff deployed
- ✓ number of calls to your out-of-hours emergency line
- ✓ whether you have had to evacuate (and if so how many) residents and are you using council facilities as rest centres?
- ✓ high profile issues (such as closed railway lines)
- ✓ where residents can find information.

The LGA also promotes the work of councils in the media each winter and is always asked to comment on work of local authorities before, during and after any bad weather. To do this effectively, we need your help. You can do this by:

- offering up winter weather teams as case studies or for filming opportunities to regional and national media
- completing our annual Winter Readiness Survey which asks questions about grit stocks, new equipment and community schemes
- sending all winter-related press releases to media.office@local.gov.uk to help us populate our Winter Watch web page and share good practice with other authorities.

Social media

During the floods in 2014 social media was an absolute game-changer. Many councils not only used social media to share information but also as a way to connect residents together to offer help, share resources and provide updates. This meant councils were playing the role of facilitator rather than deliverer of services. In some places, those without a clear plan found themselves in the position of being replaced by their residents and local commentators as trusted voices of authority.

Effective use of social media is essential to ensure messages about winter readiness and bad weather are successfully communicated to as many residents as possible. It is important to proactively use your Twitter and Facebook accounts to:

- post regularly plugging links to websites, out of hours emergency contact details, notice of any emergency work or disruptions
- highlight work of winter weather teams, upload photos and videos of them in action working with local communities
- use twitter hashtags (for example, #TwitterGritter) and engage with local Facebook groups to get them to share links and stories
- constructively engage with resident feedback, questions or complaints through social media
- act as a voice of reason, even if the messages are repeated.

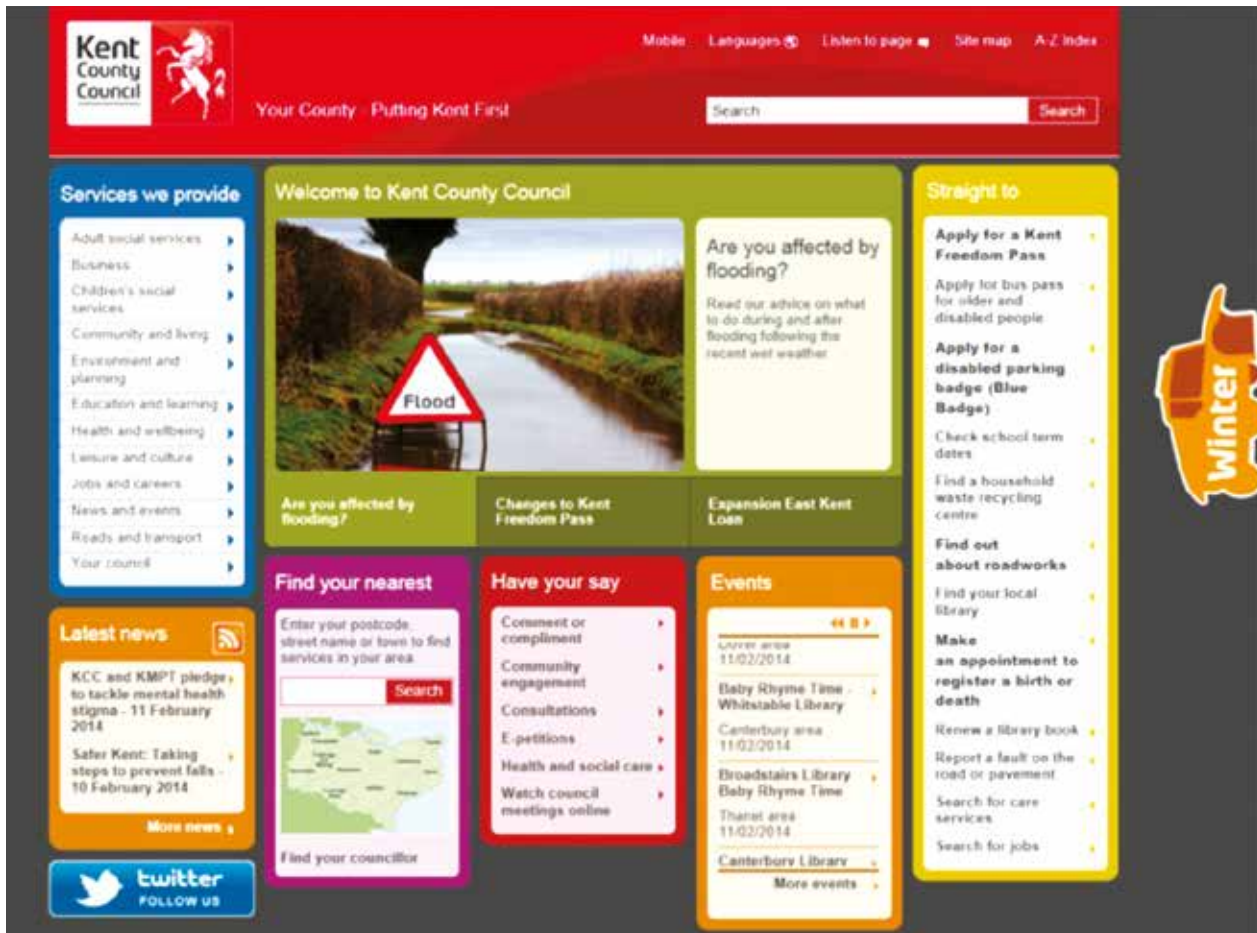
A council can't do everything and, at times of extreme weather, decisions will need to be made about delivery priorities. Social media can help you to identify local networks which could be willing to help and support their areas. Locating and engaging with these networks will allow you to spread essential information and leverage their offers of support.

Best practice

During the floods in early 2014, local communities were using their street names as hashtags to enable neighbours to redistribute sandbags to where they were needed most, freeing up the council to focus on areas that needed more support.

Website

Websites are often the first point of contact for residents to find out more information about their local council. As such, it's essential that all relevant information is easily accessible on your website and that consideration has been made to their user journey (how they will use your website and how they will find the information).



Increasingly, residents are also looking for information on things such as insurance claims and compensation. Although not directly the role of councils, providing links on council websites and acting as a signpost can and will be seen by residents as very helpful and part of a wider leadership role.

If a resident finds missing or wrong information during an emergency and doesn't feel able to rely on your council for the 'basics' – contact numbers, support, information – their trust in your organisation will fall.

More importantly, they may do the wrong thing placing more pressure on you, the emergency services and partners.

All council websites should have the following information easily accessible from the home page:

- normal working hours and out of hours contact details for your council – note: this should ideally not be a premium number

- advice specific to certain services such as vulnerable adults
- further relevant contact information such as the Environment Agency's number
- prominent information about emergency support for residents and businesses
- links to further advice, such as to the Environment Agency, the Met Office and Public Health England
- links to social media such as hashtags
- media office contact.

Good practice

In the 2014 floods, Kent County Council put their flooding resources and relevant information for residents front and centre of the website so it was easily accessible and highly visible.

Whilst there has been a shift to bring more services online, allowing residents to carry out daily tasks via a council website, at times of extreme weather – and in the period leading up to it – residents, businesses and local partners will often be looking for a number to call to allow them to speak to someone directly.

Although emergency numbers should be available online all year round, when your council is facing an extreme weather event, your digital team should be briefed to make it particularly prominent as soon as possible so that it is easily and quickly accessible.

Good practice would be to add all relevant links to information on your home page.

Emails

If your council sends out emails to members of the public, then you potentially have a bank of email addresses ready to hand for when a crisis unfolds.

Email is ideal for communicating information to a large number of people at one time. There are more people than ever before checking their emails on a smart phone. This means you can relay key information about adverse weather to members of the public quickly.

Make sure your emails direct members of the public to your website, where they can find further information such as out of hours contact details for your council, as well as links to organisations including the Environment Agency and the Met Office. Also make sure the sign-up button for your e-alerts is visible on your website, for those individuals who are not already signed-up.

If you do not already split your emails into different topics, then now is the time to set-up specific alerts for traffic incidents and school updates which interested residents can sign up to ahead of time. Then when the bad weather hits you know you will be targeting the right audiences.

With extreme periods of weather the situation is likely to change daily – and even hourly, so be prepared to issue several e-alerts over a short time period.

Text messages

Text messages are still one of the most popular methods of communication around the world. Over 90 per cent of people in the UK have a mobile phone and the average person sends around 170 texts per month (Ofcom – The Communications Market 2014). These figures demonstrate the potential value of councils using text message to communicate with members of the public.

If you have a sms system already in place, or are considering installing a system, then your council should consider using it to keep members of the public informed during crisis situations – such as bad weather conditions.

It is particularly effective for sending out urgent timely information. For example, informing members of the public about road or school closures due to adverse weather. Text messages are delivered quickly with information in the hands of an individual in minutes. This means residents have the ability to act quickly, whether it's stopping them from using certain roads or taking their children to school.

With limited resources, text message also makes good business sense for councils – as well as members of the public. You can draft announcements, as and when key messages arise, and send them out quickly.

Internal communications

Keeping your staff informed

With any crisis communications, making sure your staff know everything the council is doing, before it happens, is paramount. Frontline staff in particular will need to feel informed and confident enough to advise residents directly of how the council is dealing with the situation, and how they can keep up-to-date and stay in touch with developments. For example, all staff should be aware of the council's procedures for the distribution of sandbags during flooding.

Or when snow ploughs and gritting lorries are due to be out on the roads. Regular promotion of the council's contact centre, social media accounts and website should be considered

as residents' source for updates, accessible from most devices. Media enquiries should be directed to the press office.

Regular updates to all staff by email, or stories on the staff intranet, are two ways to ensure information is communicated to them effectively. You should consider updating staff:

- before (saying how we will help residents)
- during (how we are helping residents)
- after the event (how we helped residents, thanks for your commitment and assistance etc).

Good practice

Draw up a core script with main messages, contact details etc for all front line staff to use during periods of extreme weather.

Business continuity – informing staff when extreme weather affects your place of work

During periods of extreme weather council staff and resources will often come under extreme pressure. All staff should be made aware of the council's business continuity plans, should the offices be closed, or access is too dangerous for those travelling on public transport or on the roads. The council's business continuity plans should be visible and easy to find. The plans should be regularly reviewed.

A well thought-out process for communicating your business continuity plans should be used and tested regularly. Each team should have a business continuity representative, responsible for relaying key messages to team members before, during and after business continuity plans are activated.

Information on how staff can continue to work, if possible, should also be communicated regularly. If staff are required to work from home or remotely, they should be contacted with advice on how this can be done.

Checklist

- ✓ Communications strategy and plan agreed across the council?
- ✓ Spokespeople and what they'll communicate agreed?
- ✓ Key messages developed and agreed?
- ✓ Media and social media plans in place?
- ✓ Local stakeholders engaged?
- ✓ All relevant information available on website?
- ✓ And a plan in place to make the information more prominent when necessary?

Case study

In late 2013, **Maidstone Borough** suffered its worst flooding since 2000. The three rivers in the borough were repeatedly placed on flood warning and there was significant property flooding, with at least 36 families being evacuated – some up to four times in six weeks.

The council communications team checked social media feeds for 18 hours a day from Christmas Day to warn and inform residents with two purposes: communicating important information to residents and using information from residents to help inform the council's response.

Getting information out to residents

The communications team gave frequent updates combining information from the experts – especially the Environment Agency - with advice and details on what the council was doing to help. This highlighted the multi-agency response while covering warnings and informing responsibilities.

Virtually everything that was tweeted – from locations of incident liaison officers to information on free collections of damaged goods – was retweeted, reassuring thousands about the council's response.

At the height of the emergency, updates were frequent and regular but when updates became less frequent – when things started to return to normal – people were worried that they'd missed something. The team made a point of informing residents about the latest information they'd received, even if those updates offered nothing new.

It was also important to remind people what wasn't affected by flooding – the team communicated consistent key messages that the town centre was still open and gave information on parking and roads to try to support businesses through the flooding.

Using the information reported by residents

As well as giving the council a quick and effective way to inform residents, social media also gave it information about potentially serious issues affecting residents. Information was fed into the Emergency Centre as it came up, with the team monitoring search terms and hashtags to capture as much information as possible. Through social media, some serious issues in two streets were identified that the council had previously been unaware of, and it was able to get help to both areas.

The council was also able to suggest the deployment of Incident Liaison Officers to check issues as they arose, using residents to inform the flood response.

Some conversations inevitably needed to be taken offline, so the communications team liaised closely with the council's contact centre and set up a special email address so that where social media wasn't the best form of contact, residents could still be assured of a quick response to help them through.

Case study

Somerset has unique flooding characteristics - it is designed to flood, but not to the extent that was suffered in the past two years. The formal communications process was run through Gold Command and via Police. However that does not stop local authorities stepping in to support this effort in other ways– that’s what Somerset County Council did.

The council communications team recognised a gap in communications on the ground and inside three days set up a communications hub in a disused school. This proved to be a focal point for community groups who shared the space with the council and its partners. Visibility improved, residents and communities knew where the council was and how to contact it and as a result, communications flowed far more effectively. One of the lessons learnt is the need for a single phone number immediately across the public sector which would bring about more joined-up working between community and voluntary groups as well as cross-public sector.

The use of social media changed from being “citizen journalism” – highlighting issues, to a “citizen solution” – the calls for help and support were answered with the greatest pace by local people. Facebook was a particularly important tool; a campaign site set up to promote dredging of Somerset’s rivers, with a few hundred “likes” almost overnight swelled to 12-15000 as people used it to call for help and others answered. Whether it was for a spare pair of hands to pump out a house, calls for more sandbags or tonnes of animal feed, the answers came from the community – and not just the local community, the online community stepped up nationally with help and donations coming from across the country. Somerset Council set up giant warehouses to store the donations of kit, clothes, food and boats that had been sent in. That groundswell of community goodwill has endured and nine months after the flood waters receded, volunteers are still thick on the ground helping those whose property was flooded.

Case study

Birmingham City Council started using WhatsApp to communicate with residents during the 2015 elections – and is now planning to trial it in the winter months to promote bad weather alerts.

Geoff Coleman, Media Officer at Birmingham City Council, says: “The elections offered the perfect opportunity to test WhatsApp. We plan to incorporate WhatsApp into our Winter Alerts system letting residents know about gritting and other key messages around this time.”

During the elections, Geoff says WhatsApp was “universally popular” with a range of stakeholders including members of the public, councillors, senior officers and local government staff.

The logistics of WhatsApp

You do, however, need to think about logistics. As you need a phone number for a WhatsApp account, the communications team purchased a cheap PAYG smartphone (£40) and £10 in credit. It then restricted the internet access to wifi only – so the credit wouldn’t be touched. To send out the messages, they used Web WhatsApp, as sending out updates via the phone would have been ‘fiddly’.

Birmingham did find that the connection can dip in and out occasionally, making WhatsApp more useful for general updates, rather than time-specific messages.

Geoff adds, however, that if you find the right niche topics, “Whatsapp can be extremely useful and rewarding” – and feels residents will find it useful during potential adverse weather this winter.

Case study

During particularly bad weather in December 2013, the seven councils in **Dorset** (as the council partnership Dorsetforyou.com) issued a winter weather bulletin to prepare residents and businesses for the challenges ahead. The email gave advice on flooding and keeping warm, as well as providing the latest information on school closures and issues on Dorset roads.

A council spokesperson said: “E-newsletters give us a way of communicating directly and quickly with residents. We can signpost people to the latest information, both before and during the disruption caused by winter weather.

“E-newsletters are particularly useful in reaching those who aren’t regular users of social media, including the most vulnerable members of our communities – in fact, our e-newsletters refer seven times as much traffic to our website than Twitter.”

This e-bulletin had a 57 per cent open rate, which is higher than the councils’ standard bulletins which generally have an open rate of 25-30 per cent.

Case study

Walsall Council uses a mircosite – walsallweather.co.uk - to convey winter weather messages each year, with information on school closures and changes to refuse collections.

The council has also integrated the Cover it Live software – a web based live blogging tool that allows you to broadcast up to date commentary – into its main website, providing live tweets on gritting in the West Midlands.

This includes details on which roads have been gritted and the location of grit boxes for local residents to use on their own streets. Organisations – including Walsall Council – which use #wmgrit in their tweets will have their commentary fed through the Walsall Council website.

Richard Bolton, from the council's communications team, said the use of social media, in particular Twitter, has proved a hit with residents who are kept up to date about council services during periods of adverse weather.

“Gritting is one of hundreds of unseen but vital local government jobs and so it's a good idea to use social media to let people know what we're doing. What's important is to do the job and let people know about it. As far back as 2010, we decided to tweet gritting information, on top of school closures, bin collections and other services. When we first started out, we had around 1,000 followers to our @WalsallCouncil twitter account. Now we have more than 16,000.

“Our transport engineers gauge when we grit and then email that decision to us in the communications team or the duty press officer if it's out of hours. We're ready to pass on that info, usually in the form of words such as: “Our crews will be out gritting again later this evening as another chilly and icy few hours beckons. Take it easy!” as well as expel a few myths about how grit or salt works, along the way.

“It works because it's simple and effective.”

The LGA offer

For further guidance and examples of good practice visit:
www.local.gov.uk/floodportal

The LGA can support you and your council in a number of ways:

- Advice on communications plans in preparation for extreme weather events
- Comms support and advice during an extreme weather event
- Advice on communicating successes and recovery post-event

For more information about how the LGA can work with you, please contact:
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