

Draft advice note: Engaging in a crisis

We set out below a checklist of measures that can be taken to show that you have taken control of the situation, and be seen to be doing so. It also helps you to ensure high quality engagement as a key element of response to a crisis situation. We also cite some examples of good practice that authorities have already undertaken.

Immediate Engagement

- Make sure you have engaged your key senior stakeholders – tenants and residents groups, MPs, councillors, and partners particularly your fire service and police. Brief them and establish a direct and easy way they can get access to key people and updated information.
- Remember that when people are anxious, their ability to receive and retain information accurately is significantly impaired. So, you need to a) employ a variety of channels to communicate (written, face-to-face, telephone, online) and b) make sure that listening to concerns is built into the engagement process.
- The tone of voice should be suitably empathetic –talk about families not flats, people not properties, and homes not housing. Give as much information as you can and convey all the relevant contact information for people to learn more.
- A simple hotline telephone is the anchor for engagement. Put in place a staffed (ideally 24-hour Freephone) number. This is an essential element to convey that you are listening and appreciate the urgency. Make it direct dial without automated options.
- Develop a ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ (FAQ) sheet. This can then be supplied (with suitably drafted responses) to your team and also the public. This will be a dynamic document that will grow and change – so will need to be very regularly updated. Portsmouth’s FAQs is online [here](#).
- People who are contacted in the course of engagement should be asked to help pass on simple fact sheets with the hotline number on friends and neighbours. Actively seeking their assistance will expand your reach and help to build relationships.
- A simple script should be prepared for staff undertaking public facing work – a script that has listening built in.
- Concerns should be respected as genuinely felt, even if they are inaccurate. Briefings on active listening for staff will make interactions less stressful and more productive. Establishing rapport with residents is an essential platform from which to successfully correct misinformation.

Communicate with speed and clarity

- Ensure your most senior members of staff and councillors are prominent in communications and are quickly personally physically present on site to reflect the importance of the matter. Residents will want to feel that someone is taking responsibility at the highest level.
- Speed is essential or you will be in a reactive position. Your first action will be to agree your immediate communications framework and core response. This needs to be disseminated as widely as possible.
- Don’t neglect your internal communications and engagement (and also that with your partner organisations). Keep your staff briefed, let them know what they can do to help and reassure that action is being taken.
- Take responsibility – in emergencies it can be unclear which government agency is responsible. Local authorities cannot be seen to be deflecting or deferring. Make it clear that, while others will play their part, you are leading the response, and make yourself suitably approachable in that role.
- Make it clear you are taking action first and will sort out the costs after. A highly emotive issue needs a speedy and empathetic response.

Tangible + Visible

- Your response should be visible and tangible. Consider a summit event (ideally with all key agencies present) and invite all key stakeholders to be present and video key parts of it and publish it online. [Plymouth has already held a multi-agency summit and published what was discussed.](#)
- [Camden have already taken action](#) preparing to remove some panels and had staff in high vis jackets along with visible fire-safety patrols on estates
- Portsmouth have based staff in affected homes 24 hours a day whilst remedial work is carried out.
- Identify key influential members of the relevant community. Bring them in early and build up a relationship. If you gain their confidence this will provide an important communications channel. A quick and simple mapping exercise can identify them. Some self-select as leaders of local organisations, businesses, faith groups etc. Others may emerge (if you ask local people, or even ward or district councillors, 'who is in the know round here'). Other obvious sources are local shops, cafes, pubs, hairdressers etc.
- Monitor social media and ensure that you post information on relevant sites. Just as with face-to-face engagement ask local bloggers and moderators to play a positive, helpful role in promoting the latest information and hotline phone numbers and emails. Playing an active role will help to change the relationship you have with them.

Follow-up engagement

- Use direct methods to engage – face-to-face contact with the presence of council officers and relevant services. This has many benefits and remains the most effective form of engagement.
- Enlist Councillors active support and involvement in face-to-face engagement. But make sure that you quickly time table face-to-face canvassing of all affected homes. Simple 'sorry you weren't home' cards should be produced that carry the hotline number and core information.
- All communications should be two-way there should always be the opportunity for people to get in touch with the council – through the hotline but also other channels.
- Call local meetings as soon as you practically can. Ideally do this in conjunction with respected organisations and/or individuals in the area. It can be a useful way to gauge concerns and levels of anxiety.
- A reference group of influencers could be established to work with you to scrutinise the process of dealing with any consequences and work with you to rectify any technical or communications related issues.
- Whilst you will need to prioritise areas that are directly affected, don't confine your engagement to those. Other residents will have concerns about other properties and you will want reassure all residents that you are acting promptly and appropriately.