Queensland Government arrangements for coordinating public information in a crisis

1. Purpose

The Queensland Government arrangements for coordinating public information in a crisis ('the Arrangements') can be activated to provide leadership for the many cross-government communication activities that occur as a result of an incident, and to assist agencies harmonise their activities and messages. The Arrangements replace the *Queensland Public Information Arrangements Strategy* and the *Queensland Counter-Terrorism Public Information Arrangements*.

2. Introduction

Should Queensland experience a crisis, whether it be a natural disaster, terrorism incident, influenza pandemic or biohazard, it will be vital that the Queensland Government coordinates and distributes reliable and consistent information to (i) maintain public safety and meet public needs; (ii) keep people informed and engaged; and (iii) support Queensland Government crisis management activities.

The importance of coordinating public information has been a key finding of post-disaster reviews in Queensland, Australia and internationally, which indicate that 'business as usual' arrangements are not sufficient. The benefits of coordination include the ability:

- to provide integrated warnings and information to meet the needs of affected people and businesses, without them having to understand different government departments

- to provide and reinforce consistent advice through various agencies, strengthening messages and avoiding public confusion

- for agencies to work towards a common strategic direction

- for agencies to draw on combined resources and expertise to resolve issues and meet communication objectives

- to provide integrated advice and support to the Premier, Ministers and other crisis leaders.

Many agencies have particular responsibilities during crises, including the immediate release of public warnings and other messages. The Arrangements provide a mechanism to assist agencies coordinate and harmonise their public information and communication activities, without impeding, duplicating or complicating their work. Media and communication officers remain within their agencies, and agencies retain responsibility for their own communication plans, products, activities and stakeholder liaison.

It should be noted that each event being responded to by the State Disaster Management Group (SDMG) and the Crisis Communication Network (CCN) will have a lead agency. The lead agency is responsible for briefing the Premier with situation reports (sitreps), media talking points and draft media releases. The lead agency also has responsibility for briefing all federal agencies such as the Attorney General's Department and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. These briefings will be shared by the lead agency with the CCN.

3. The Arrangements

3.1 Crisis Communication Network

The cornerstone of the Arrangements is the establishment of a CCN, comprising communication heads and staff from relevant agencies. The CCN will be chaired by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet (DPC) and supported by a small secretariat.

The chair and secretariat will:

- activate and coordinate the CCN (see part 4)

- set a schedule of regular CCN meetings, based strategically around other known meetings and events

- develop an incident communication strategy with CCN members

- attend SDMG or other incident group meetings to report on public information matters, and liaise with the CCN on return regarding implementation of decisions (the chair's role links the CCN with the directions set by government leaders)

- participate in relevant national meetings to report on public information matters and liaise with the CCN on return to discuss implementation of decisions

- discuss with CCN members the key themes and strategic messages that each agency can build into their own public information products

- discuss with CCN members the development of talking points, media conference details, media releases, promotional resources and advertising.

CCN members will:

- represent their agency (noting that agencies retain responsibility for their own communication plans, products, activities and stakeholder liaison)

- provide input into the incident communication strategy
- work together to problem solve key communication issues that arise, such as information gaps or inaccuracies
- work together to ensure communication is accurate, timely, coordinated and consistent within and between agreed authoritative sources
- work together to share resources, including staff where appropriate
- share advice about key communication activities and mechanisms to distribute information
- communicate advice from the CCN to their agency, ministerial offices and stakeholders as relevant.

3.2 Public hotlines

Arrangements are in place for Smart Service Queensland (SSQ) to activate a call-centre service on behalf of the Queensland Government, as a first point of contact for public enquiries about a crisis. Relevant agencies will contribute to the central script (refer to the *Strategic Framework for Disaster Call Centre Services* for further information).

Agencies activating specialist numbers for more specific or expert advice on certain matters will utilise and or link with SSQ to ensure callers are directed to the most relevant assistance regardless of the number chosen. The SSQ number will be advertised as the primary first point of contact.

SSQ will attend CCN meetings to discuss scripting and call-centre matters. DPC (Communication Services) will assist SSQ coordinate script updates from relevant agencies, which will promote consistency of messages and language and enable DPC to work with agencies on particular issues.

3.3 Websites

Agencies retain responsibility for updating their websites and content to provide relevant information about an incident. In addition, DPC has arrangements in place to activate integrated Queensland Government content that supplements and links other content and websites, and provides information not specific to any particular portfolio. This information will be a prominent link from the Queensland Government Gateway (www.qld.gov.au) and from the Premier's website.

Public hotline and website information prepared once can be delivered through both channels, promoting consistency and avoiding reliance on any individual capability.

3.4 Social media

Agencies using social media retain responsibility for updating, maintaining and monitoring their presence. This is to be consistent with the *Official use of social media guideline* (Queensland Government Enterprise Architecture). The CCN will work together to identify the most appropriate primary social media sites and ensure links and feeds are established and maintained with the Queensland Government Gateway (www.qld.gov.au).

Social media usage in times of crisis may include:

- community alerting and status reporting
- disaster preparedness and coordination
- community engagement and myth busting
- linking the community to other appropriate sources of authoritative information.

When using any form of official social media, agencies must ensure any supporting communication forums, websites and call centres are advised directly and through the CCN in order to maximize communication consistency and accuracy when the public seek further information.

3.5 Messaging (voice and text)

Emergency Alert – Queensland Operational Guidelines are to be followed for all persons involved at any stage in the use of Emergency Alerts (EA) in Queensland.

EA messages will be utilised to:

- warn targeted areas of the Queensland community of imminent and severe threats from fire, chemical and natural weather or geological events
- direct those warned, to other sources of information and/or direct them to move away from an imminent hazard or threat.

When using any form of messaging, agencies/users must ensure supporting communication forums, websites, social media and call centres are advised directly and through the CCN as soon as possible in order to ensure messaging is supported when the public seek further information.

3.6 Media conference support

Post-incident reports have highlighted the value of providing coordinated media conferencing facilities, which bring together a number of cross-government spokespeople in the one venue to cover the various angles of an incident.

However, at times, the preference of leaders might be to hold individual press conferences at the site of an incident. Should leaders require central Brisbane media conference arrangements that exceed current capacity, DPC (Communication Services and Facilities Coordination) will work with the Premier's office to establish a suitable facility near the Executive Building.

Should on-site arrangements be required, the lead response agency will liaise with relevant parties to arrange appropriate media conference facilities on location.

3.7 Media monitoring

Agencies will retain responsibility for their own media monitoring activities during an incident. Media monitoring will be included as a standard item on the agenda of CCN meetings. In addition, DPC (Communication Services) will monitor media for the specific purposes of:

- working with agencies to correct inaccuracies
- working with agencies to fill emerging information vacuums
- looking for opportunities to present 'good news' stories.

3.8 Forward deployment

Agencies retain responsibility for deploying media and communication officers to the scene of an incident as required for their purposes. DPC (Communication Services) may also wish to have an officer at the scene. This decision would be made at the time, but may not be necessary given the CCN enables sharing of such information between agencies.

4. Activation

The Arrangements have been designed for flexible use in any crisis that would benefit from a coordinated Queensland Government public information response. The DPC Director-General will activate the Arrangements and advise the DPC Deputy Director-General who will advise the DPC Director, Communication Services.

At the time of an incident, DPC will discuss activation of the Arrangements with the relevant strategic incident management group. It may be appropriate for the Arrangements to be activated during any preparation phase available, as well as the response and recovery phases of an event.

Factors that will influence that decision include the:

- size, severity and nature of the crisis
- threat or perceived threat to public safety and security
- contribution of multiple agencies or multiple jurisdictions to managing the crisis
- impact on multiple agencies or jurisdictions
- impact on critical infrastructure and industry.

5. Stakeholder liaison

Existing mechanisms to facilitate government communication with specific target audiences and stakeholders (including media outlets) will continue to apply.

It may be appropriate to include relevant stakeholders in CCN meetings to provide broader contextual information. In some instances, CCN members may seek the assistance of stakeholders to facilitate more targeted distribution of information.

6. Review

The Arrangements can be modified at any time to enable more flexible and responsive communication outcomes.

A review of the Arrangements will be undertaken following their use.