

Effective Risk Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

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Background

M News ▶ UK News ▶ Boris Johnson

Boris Johnson's toxic legacy means residents think they're being gassed at front door

Southall Gasworks and a chemical factory is being developed for housing after former mayor Johnson used special powers to push development through



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Presentation scope

- Key principles of good practice in risk communication
- How site investigation and risk assessment outputs feed into effective risk communication
- Case study of putting this into practice on the Buchanan St. Ambrose Schools independent review



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Key guidance on risk communication



ITRC Risk Communication Toolkit for Environmental Issues and Concerns

1 Introduction

Risk communication is the process of informing people about potential hazards to their health, property, or community. It is a science-based approach for effective communication in situations of high stress, high concern, or controversy (USEPA, 2016). Risk communication is often seen as an effort that only happens after a crisis or emergency; however, it should provide a mechanism for community stakeholders to participate in the process of decision-making about potential risks or actual threats to their person, property, or community. Risk communication provides people the best available scientific, public health, and environmental information concerning potential threats, empowering them to make sound choices. This information is best delivered in easily understood language from trusted and credible sources. Having a risk communication plan in place prior to an emergency will improve effective and successful risk communication, reducing repercussions of any incident. Additional information is available in the Toolkit.

The Toolkit is applicable to current, immediate, and emerging environmental issues and concerns. Risk communication can be particularly challenging when dealing with contaminants of emerging concern where science is rapidly evolving. Communicators must grapple with competing interpretations of uncertain science and risk management strategies, while earning community trust and promoting meaningful engagement. The discipline of community engagement is intertwined with risk communication and associated planning.

A common misconception among environmental professionals is that risk communication occurs only after a crisis or emergency. In fact, it requires consistent communication through multiple avenues well before public concern develops. It is often in the form of a dialogue between the risk managers and the affected community.

2 Key Aspects of Risk Communication

Five key aspects necessary for developing and implementing an effective risk communication plan are shown in Figure 1 and described below (Haines, Chase, and Sandman 1991).

Understand How Communities See Risk

People evaluate and understand risk differently, depending on the inherent characteristics of the risk itself. Communications can help people frame the risk and address issues that are of greatest concern to communities. The more you understand the view or perceptions of the affected people and communities, the better you will be able to address their needs.

Stakeholders who perceive a risk as unacceptable or less acceptable are more likely to express emotional outrage when confronted with news about a hazard in their community. Practitioners need to acknowledge, honor, and address this emotion to facilitate constructive and meaningful dialogue.

The information in this fact sheet is fully described in the ITRC Risk Communication Toolkit (Toolkit) (<https://istc-1.org/enr.org>).

The purpose of this fact sheet is to:

- provide summarized information about risk communication
- describe the Risk Communication Planning Process
- reference a list of communication engagement tools included in the Toolkit

Interested Party:
Responsible parties, state regulators, and owners and operators of contaminated site who have a vested interest or are impacted in some way a situation or issue.

Stakeholder:
A person, group, or organization that is affected, potentially affected, or has an interest in a project or a project's outcome, either directly or indirectly (Presidential/Congressional Commission 1997).

Figure 1. Five Key Aspects of Risk Communication

CLAIRE case study bulletin CSB 8 July 2007

CLAIRE case study bulletins provide a source of information on the issues involved with the remediation of specific sites in the UK. This case study bulletin describes how good communications are an intrinsic part of the investigation and remediation of contaminated sites.

Public affairs and communications on contaminated land projects
A case study of South Car Park, Coventry

Background

South Car Park (SCP) was once part of the former Courtlands main coke production works in Coventry. Its remediation and the associated public affairs and communications aspects have been recognised as setting trends.

Historically, the site housed an effluent plant and was used to store coal and the chemical carbon disulphide (CS₂), used in the manufacture of viscose, between about 1904 and 1967. Thereafter, it was gradually converted to use as a car park.

The land came into the Alko Nobel UK Ltd portfolio following the company's acquisition of Courtlands plc in 1998, and is currently leased for use as a car park. The site is bounded to the north and west by high industrial units, to the east by the Coventry Canal, and to the south by a residential estate.

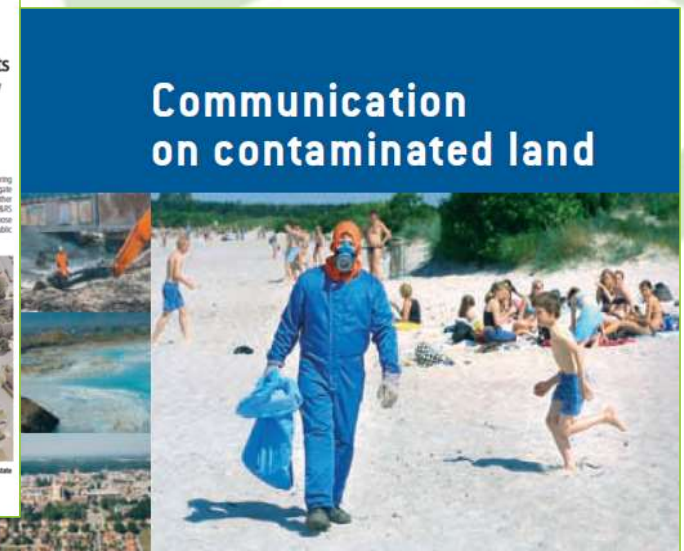
Investigations began in 2003 when, during routine site maintenance, Alko Nobel replaced a collapsed drain to prevent local flooding and found five underground tanks containing small quantities of CS₂. Alko Nobel commissioned Environmental & Remediation Services Ltd (ERS - formerly Contrex) to manage the project and implement the public communications programme. The field investigations were led by the consultancy ESI Ltd and the principal contractor on site was EDS Ltd.

There then followed a programme of investigations and remediation. The risk assessment raised the question of the potential for off-site migration of CS₂, although it was uncertain as to whether any significant migration had occurred. To resolve this uncertainty, Alko Nobel commissioned an investigation to determine the extent of any off-site migration and assess the associated risks to residents in the adjacent estate.

Communications planning

Letters had been intermittently sent to residents and neighbouring companies during the investigation works. The decision to investigate residential gardens took the communications requirements to another level and Alko Nobel's corporate communications team and ERS worked together to produce a comprehensive strategy, to enable those involved to respond effectively to the inevitable questions and public concern these investigations would cause.

Public affairs and communications on contaminated land projects
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Key principles of good practice in risk communication

1. Understand the context

- Past or future exposure?
- Voluntary vs. involuntary risk?
- Known quantity or new hazard?
- Remember Perception = Reality



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Key principles of good practice in risk communication

2. Aim to understand what drives people's key concerns

- Tiered concerns?
- Other factors
- Stress and worry

3. Be proactive

- Build your relationships with key stakeholders early on

Key principles of good practice in risk communication

4. Identify your stakeholders

Key groups of stakeholders	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People directly affected• Local community representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Decision makers• Relevant interest groups
Types of stakeholders	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Occupier and past occupiers of an affected site or area (e.g. residents or workers)• Landowners• Entity responsible for causing (intentionally or inadvertently) or knowingly permitting the contamination• Local businesses, schools, nursing homes, etc.• Local leaders, councillors and local MPs• Local authority and regulatory agency contacts, including contaminated land officers, planning officers and community relations staff• Decision makers and financial staff within the local authority or government	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developers• Other regulatory agencies• Site investigation personnel including environmental, health and safety consultants• Community groups and business associations• Activist groups• Conservation bodies• Legal and insurance advisors• Local health trust(s) or equivalent, and the local public health agency• Local media

Key principles of good practice in risk communication

5. Identify the best communication tools to use

- Decide whether a process of notification, consultation, community dialogue, or a combination of these is most appropriate

Available Communication Methods		
Notification	Consultation	Community dialogue
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Press releasesCommunity newslettersLetter notificationPublic meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Door knock (house visit)Information road showDirect correspondence by letter, email or telephone callIssue formal consultation documentsPresentationMeetings supported with information provisionTargeted correspondence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Community drop-in sessionPresence at a local community eventStakeholder forum / Roundtable workshopTelephone hotlineWeb-based consultation

Increasing complexity →

Key principles of good practice in risk communication

6. Build trust and credibility and break down barriers

- Trust is hard to win but easy to lose
- Demonstrate genuine concern and empathy
- Take time to understand
- Be honest about what you do and don't know
- Avoid physical barriers

Key principles of good practice in risk communication

7. And finally, remember communication is a two way process

- Listen before offering possible explanations or solutions
- Communication is not just a technical issue; it encompasses emotions
- Use clear language and avoid jargon
- Use pictures and diagrams to help visualise



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Developing an effective risk communication strategy

FIGURE 1. Assessment of Level of Communication Need – The Communication Net

Increased complexity means greater communication need (i.e. a larger net)...

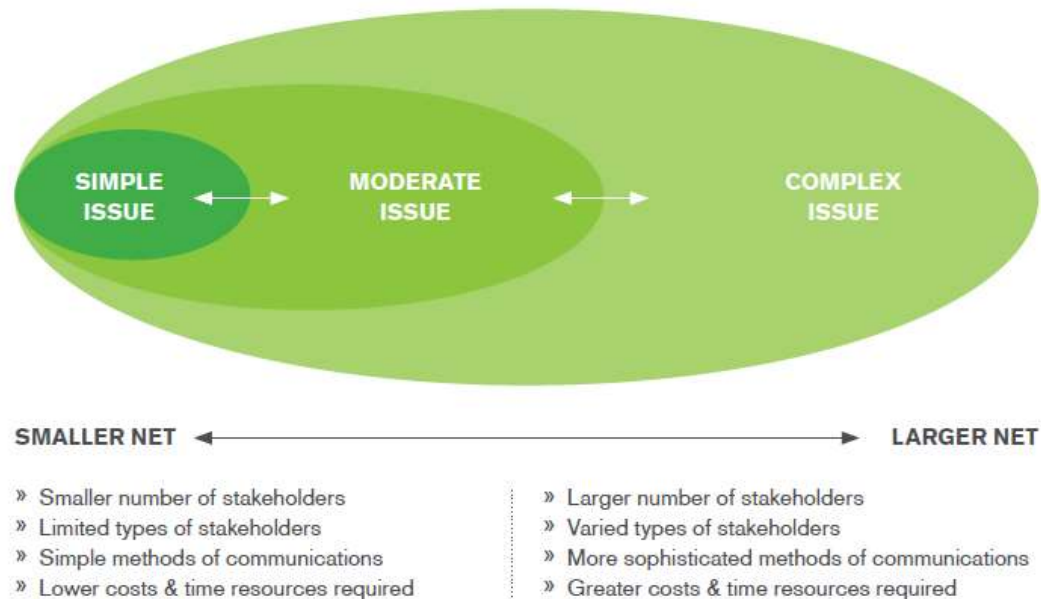
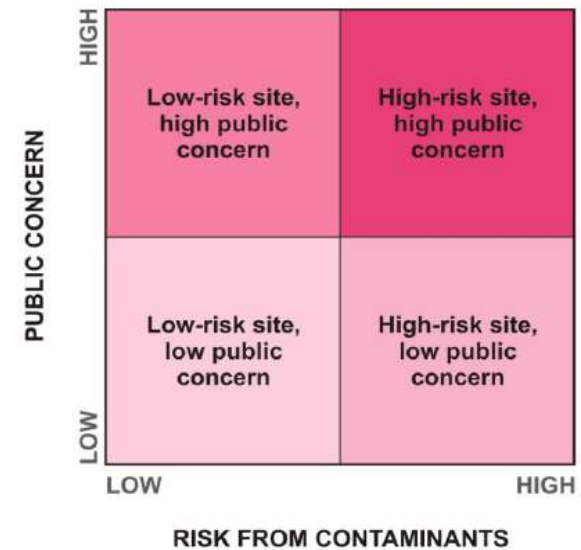


FIGURE 2. Risk vs Concern Scenarios



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How site investigation and risk assessment outputs feed into effective risk communication

- Do the job right from the outset
- Project timescales may need to be expedited.
- Explain clearly in reports what has been done and what the findings are.
- Detail the assumptions and uncertainties in the assessment
- Prepare non-technical summaries and get your report proof-read by a lay person
- Consider 'what if' scenarios you may be asked about



To summarise (ITRC)



Figure 1. Five Key Aspects of Risk Communication

Buchanan and St Ambrose High School Campus Independent Review – Background

- 13.2 hectare former landfill site, redeveloped for school and learning campus opening November 2012
- Health concerns raised relating to blue tinged water and suspected bladder cancer cluster led to public concern
- School closed by strike action and significant adverse media attention
- Scottish Government Independent Review Team (IRT) set up 12 June 2019 to undertake independent and impartial review of the evidence relating to the site and potential health effects



Buchanan and St. Ambrose High Schools, Coatbridge (Image: Daily Record)



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Buchanan and St Ambrose High School Campus Independent Review – Scope

Key tasks identified and undertaken by the review team included:

- Obtaining relevant background and current evidence from agencies involved to review key decisions, the planning process (including site assessment and remediation), water quality testing and responses to health concerns.
- Engaging with the public and key stakeholders to hear their concerns directly
- Liaising with staff from NLC and NHS Lanarkshire to generate a better understanding of their actions, and
- Reviewing information already in the public domain from media, social media and from the public agencies.
- Commissioning specialist advisors to verify previous site assessment and testing and to assess current site conditions



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Buchanan and St Ambrose High School Campus Independent Review – Strategy

A key aim was to rebuild trust in the community of the professionalism and integrity of public officials. As such, the approach adopted was based on the following key principles:

- independence and freedom from actual or perceived bias or conflict of interest
- openness, particularly to hear representations from as many as possible and assess evidence
- transparency, publishing all findings except for medically confidential materials

Communication strategies were developed and implemented for:

- Data gathering phase – proactive approach, multiple methods of communication and engagement with individuals or smaller groups
- Report publication phase – larger meetings and wide media engagement, but with a strong personal touch

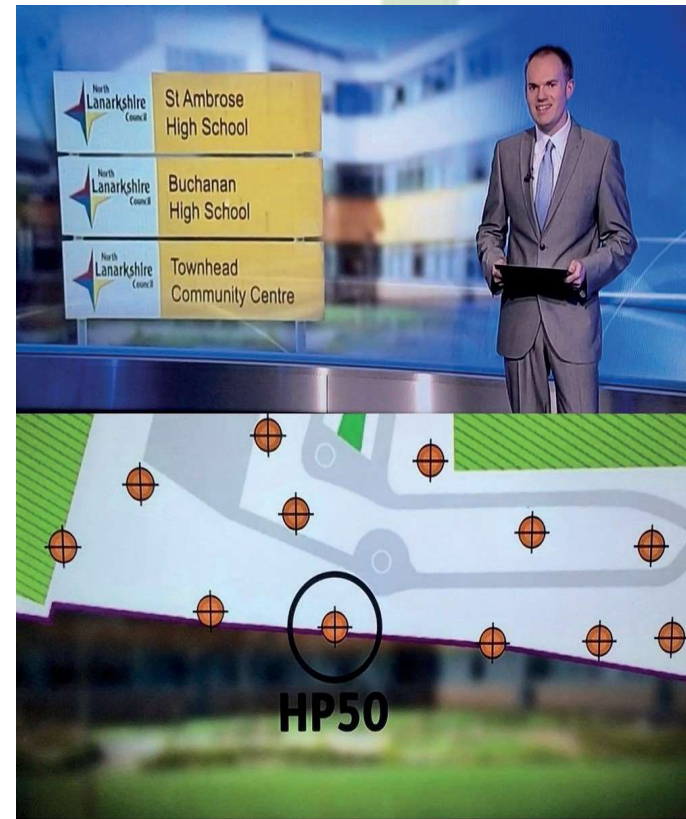


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Buchanan and St Ambrose High School Campus Independent Review – Outcomes

- RSK commissioned to provide evidence on current soil quality, to assess risks to site users and ideally confirm the site had been remediated effectively at the time of development
- 50 trial-pits excavated across grassed soft landscaping areas, 75 made ground soil samples tested for a wide range of contaminants of concern, including those potentially associated with cancer risk
- Additional work beyond the norm to rule out other possible concerns



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Buchanan and St Ambrose High School Campus Independent Review – Outcomes

- Proactive and transparent approach to stakeholder engagement – using independent experts and rapidly disseminating information gathered – facilitated confidence in the conclusions of the final report.
- Transition from stakeholder concern regarding the site and suspicion of public authorities' motives to one of acceptance, trust and confidence being restored.
- Schools were reopened shortly after the end of the summer holidays – minimal interruption to education of pupils and significant associated benefits to stakeholders
- Confidence was retained in the planning regime and the processes used to assess, remediate and verify that sites affected by contamination can be developed safely.
- 'Site Recovery Group' recommended to maintain trust going forward



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Buchanan and St Ambrose High School Campus Independent Review – Outcomes



Coatbridge's Buchanan High teachers strike over health fears

20 June 2019



Parents and pupils joined teachers on the picket line at Buchanan High School.

Teachers at a Lanarkshire school at the centre of chemical contamination fears have started a week-long strike.



Coatbridge schools at centre of health scares 'are safe'

9 August 2019



An independent review into fears of contamination at a school campus in North Lanarkshire has said that the schools are safe.



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References

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- Greenleaves III report: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidelines-for-environmental-risk-assessment-and-management-green-leaves-iii>
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- Buchanan and St Ambrose High School campus: geoenvironmental site investigation: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/buchanan-and-st-ambrose-high-school-campus-geoenvironmental-site-investigation/>



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Thank you for your time

