Best practice for **crisis communicators**

How to communicate during food or feed safety incidents

efsa
European Food Safety Authority

Best practice for crisis communicators

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About these recommendations

1.1. Who should read these recommendations?

These recommendations are for use by anyone who is responsible for communicating (directly or indirectly) with external audiences during a food or feed related incident or crisis. They are aimed at the EU Member State organisations responsible for food and feed safety, but may be useful as a reference for other relevant organisations as well. A full glossary of terms can be found in Annex 9.

1.2. What is a food or feed related incident or crisis?

For the purposes of this document, we are using the term 'incident' as defined by EFSA: 'A food or feed safety incident at European level should be treated as urgent if two or more of the following identifiers are met:'[1]

- The risk to public health is high (severe illness or death).
- The scale of the incident is large or likely to become so (the number of products, countries or people affected is high).
- The incident has occurred, or is believed to have occurred, as a result of an act of terrorism.
- High actual or potential level of media interest or public concern.
- Vulnerable groups of the population, e.g. infants or the elderly, are or are likely to be disproportionately affected.
- The source of the problem is unknown.

The legal EC definition of a crisis situation, according to the Corrigendum to Commission Decision 2004/478/EC (Annex, section 2.1), includes the following critical factors:

1. EFSA (European Food Safety Authority), 2012. EFSA procedures for responding to urgent advice needs. Available online: http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/supporting/pub/279e

‘[T]he situation involves a serious direct or indirect risk to human health and/ or is perceived or publicised as such or can be perceived and/or publicised as such

and

the risk is spread or could be spread by a large part of the food chain

and

it is highly likely that the risk will spread to several Member States and/or non-Community countries.’

The European Commission will establish a crisis unit, comprising nominated crisis coordinators from Member States, when the above conditions are considered to be met.

For the sake of simplicity, in these recommendations we will use ‘incident’ when referring either to an incident or a crisis situation.

1.3. Why have these recommendations been developed?

The EFSA Advisory Forum Communications Working Group (AFCWG) developed these recommendations to support a consistent application of best practice during incidents related to EFSA’s mandate. They are designed to meet the need identified by the Heads of European Food Safety Agencies for clear and practical recommendations for communicating with external audiences during a food or feed related incident.[2]

1.4. How should these recommendations be used?

These recommendations capture current best practice for communicating with external audiences during an incident. They will help you integrate them into your own communications procedures and protocols as applicable in your organisation.

In Appendix I you can find a quick reference guide, which you can use as your checklist for communications during a live incident or crisis situation.

2. HEFSA (Heads of European Food Safety Agencies), 2014. Sharing protocols, experiences and knowledge on management and communication during a food crisis. Available online: https:// publicacionesoficiales.boe.es/ detail.php?id=001368214-0001

1.5. When should these recommendations be used?

- **Before an incident arises:** read the recommendations and decide which elements are applicable or add value for your own organisation, and integrate them into your procedures. The recommendations include suggestions for pre-incident communications planning, which you may wish to adopt for your organisation. Use these recommendations also during crisis training exercises to help familiarise yourself fully with them.

- **During an incident:** use the recommendations to help your organisation follow best practice when communicating with external audiences. Use this document as a reference tool to clarify the respective roles of EFSA and Member States regarding external communications during and after an incident.

1.6. What other EFSA documents are available on this subject?

- When food is cooking up a storm – proven recipes in risk communication

http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/corporate/pub/riskcommguidelines.htm
(also available in French, German and Italian)

- EFSA procedures for responding to urgent advice needs

http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/supporting/pub/279e.htm

Further references to documents written by other organisations can be found in Annex X.

1.7. Who else might you need to collaborate with regarding communications?

These recommendations refer specifically to the communication roles of EFSA and Member States during an incident or crisis. It is also possible that you will need to collaborate with other bodies for effective communication, such as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), the Health Security Communicators' Network, the World Health Organization (WHO) etc. Identify possible organisations during your stakeholder analysis.

1.8. Guiding principles for communicating during an incident

- Take control of communicating about the situation – even if the facts are still uncertain.
- Communicate quickly to protect human health.
- Identify who you need to communicate with and how you will reach them.
- Be clear and transparent.
- Never underestimate.
- Collaborate – remember crises do not stop at international borders.

Supporting information regarding each principle can be found in Annex II.

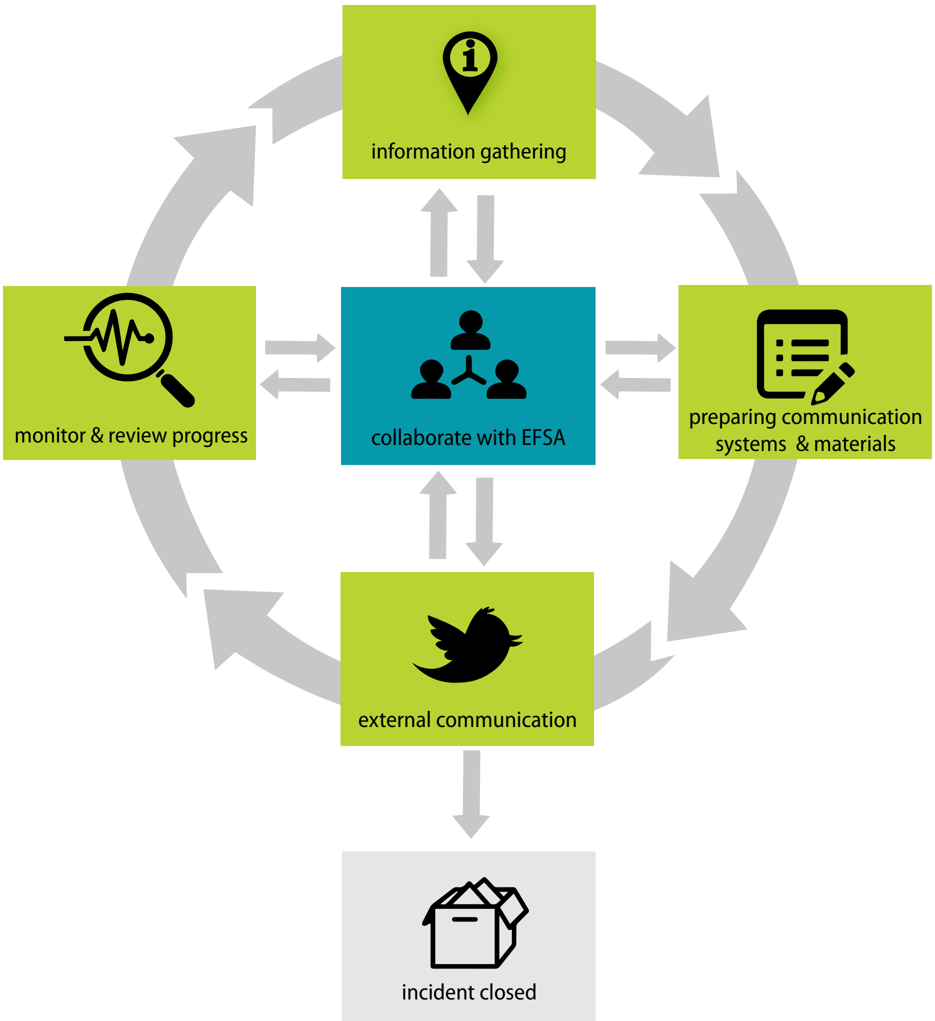
Communications workflow during an incident

There are four key elements to effective communication during an incident:

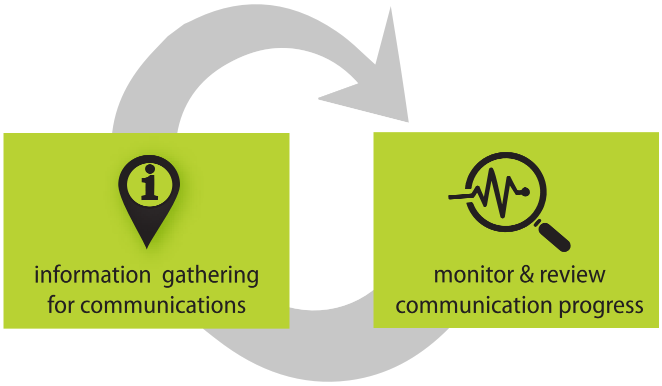
1. Information gathering
2. Preparation
3. Communication
4. Monitoring & review

These are often repeated in a cycle as the incident develops. For each element, think about what information and resources are available from – or can be shared with – EFSA.

Sections 3.1 to 3.4 give detailed recommendations on the specific actions needed for each element. See sections 4 & 5 for more details on the specific roles of external communicators in EFSA and MS.



2.1. Information gathering / monitoring & review



Monitoring / horizon scanning

When an incident is suspected, or occurring, begin online monitoring as soon as possible. Track both traditional and social media channels so you know what is being reported, commented on and shared, and be ready to respond.

- Take time to double-check that existing monitoring search terms will adequately cover the situation.
- Set up additional monitoring processes as required.
- Set up a journalist enquiry log and online comments log (templates in Annex III & IV).
- Share important findings with the AFCWG.
- EFSA performs daily media monitoring of traditional and social media and can share the results with the MS.

If appropriate for your organisation, identify a digital communications consultancy in 'peace time' to support you on short notice during an incident. This external expert resource can:

- Assist with monitoring.
- Help you develop an appropriate response strategy.
- Help respond to comments being posted online.

2.2. Preparing to communicate

a) Message development / communicating when facts are still uncertain

Communicating while facts are still uncertain is one of the hardest challenges in the early stages of an emerging incident. In this situation it is important to say what you know, acknowledge what you do not know, and indicate what you are doing to acquire that information. Keep the message simple and clear. This is essential in building trust with your target audiences.

It is best practice to develop just three or four clear and consistent key messages for use during an incident. These should demonstrate that you are aware of the situation and are taking action to address it.

Prioritise the effect of an incident on people. Your key messages should address issues related to public health and deal with public concerns and perceptions. Support each key message with appropriate examples and data or other evidence to make them credible.

For consistency, and to help convey authority, these messages should be used for all your communication materials. They can be adapted for effective use across a range of different channels and in different contexts – direct communication (person to person), phone calls, emails and social media.

It is best practice to continuously review your messages as the incident develops and to update them as necessary.

The formula below will help you develop your key messages:

Key message development

- Limit key messages to max. 3 or 4.
- Avoid clichés or jargon.
- Summarise the essence of what you want to convey.
- Make sure messages are relevant to the specific audience(s) you want to communicate with.
- Don't be afraid to say if the facts are still unknown.
- Don't speculate or blame.

Use examples or evidence:

- At least one for each message – to add credibility, establish authority and create trust.
- Avoid complex data.
- Keep the language simple and practical.
- Use analogies or day-to-day comparisons to help people understand large numbers or scientific terms.

People:

- Make the messages relevant to each specific group of people, considering their needs and perceptions.
- Treat people as human beings with individual emotional as well as rational needs.
- Quote names (if appropriate) to bring your information to life.

Example of a possible set of holding key messages:

- 'We are aware that several people have become ill having eaten red kidney beans, and we hope that they make a quick and full recovery.
- We are working hard to investigate the cause of the problem and …
- . … will be sharing further information as soon as we have it.'

b) Holding statement

In our digitally-connected world, it is important to be seen to be taking immediate action to assess the situation properly.

Preparing a holding statement is one way of making sure to be seen by external audiences to be doing this. You can use the holding statement reactively or, if appropriate, proactively with the media, post it on your social media channels or on your website in the short-term until more information is known.

The holding statement should address the three fundamental questions the media will ask when an incident occurs:

a) *What happened?*

b) *How did it happen?*

c) *What are you doing about it?*

Early-stage holding statements will address at least these three basic questions, even if all the answers are not known yet. It is best practice to use an authoritative and efficient tone of voice while also expressing concern and empathy for those affected, without taking responsibility if the cause is still unknown.

Expect media and consumers to ask about whom to blame. It is important to be prepared for this, while being careful to avoid speculation.

Example holding statements adapted from those developed during the 2015 EFSA crisis training exercise can be found in Annex 5.

Approval process

Seeking approval for an initial holding statement can be difficult but is a good test of approval channels and timelines to be expected for further communications. This is also a good time to agree the frequency of any progress or update calls with all involved in reviewing the development of the situation. Preparing approval processes for a crisis during 'peacetime' is useful to ensure clarity and quicker approvals when needed.

Distribution

Distribute your holding statement to key stakeholders proactively, or use it only in response to enquiries, depending on the nature of the incident and the potential for external speculation to escalate beyond your control.

When planning your distribution list, it is best practice to consider the proactive use of social media to share the holding statement beyond traditional media channels. Use social media channels to communicate a message directly to a specific audience group.

When using social media keep your message short and include a link to the full statement on your organisation's website. The most appropriate place to post this will depend on the audiences you want to reach and what existing channels your organisation has in place.

You can post the full statement on Twitter via the image function. Facebook also provides the functionality to publish the full statement.

It is important that you follow up your initial post with regular updates. State that the 'situation is being investigated' and update the holding statement when more information is known.

Collaboration

It is important to share any approved holding statements by email with other MS via the AFCWG. This will assist collaboration and ensure consistency of messaging from all MS agencies and institutions affected or involved. In the interest of speed, you may wish to share the holding statement in your own language.

c) Identify and prepare media spokespersons

You need to identify and brief the most appropriate media spokespersons for the particular incident before you receive any media requests for interviews. This decision needs to be made very carefully. Make the spokespersons aware that they will be the 'public face of the organisation in relation to this incident'. They should clear their diary to ensure their availability. It can be helpful to have both a political spokesperson to demonstrate government commitment and a scientific spokesperson to help build trust.

The spokespersons should be senior managers, senior scientists or senior communications professionals who have undergone crisis media training.

Ideally, there should be just one spokesperson per incident to ensure consistency and accuracy in all communications. Extreme circumstances may require you to call on additional individuals to serve as spokespersons on a managed rota basis. Designated spokespersons should be prepared through intensive situation-specific media training and rehearsal prior to any interviews.

d) Handling a media interview

When preparing spokespersons for interviews during an incident, reinforce the following points.

A spokesperson should:

- Be honest and show concern.
- Avoid speculation and provide only facts.
- Be positive and available.
- Speak calmly and deliberately to convey authority.
- Be sensitive to the needs of those affected and not disclose names or give graphic descriptions.
- Always answer a question. (The spokesperson should give a reason when

there is no answer. Stating 'no comment' is not an option! The spokesperson should acknowledge the question and bridge to a key message – see ABC technique below).

- Always correct a journalist who asks a question based on a wrong assumption. Only answering the question may give the impression that the assumption is correct.
- Not repeat negative or inflammatory words used by a journalist.
- Not blame another organisation or MS for difficulties.
- Not offer monetary assessments of damage in the midst of an incident. (The spokesperson can say that such assessments will be made during an investigation).
- Keep a record of what he or she said.

Remind dedicated spokespersons of the **ABC technique** to help them answer difficult questions:

Acknowledge – the question: 'That's an interesting point you raise ...'

Bridge – to your agenda: '… but our priority right now is …'

Continue – with your message: '… ensuring the safety of the people who might unknowingly consume the affected product, please can we urge them to return it immediately to the store where they purchased it.'

e) Development of Q&A and 'lines to take' (Internal)

A Q&A (Questions & Answers) document, sometimes referred to as 'lines to take', is designed to help an organisation's spokespersons give effective interviews to the media and/or deal with questions from other internal and external audiences. Developing a set of Q&A is particularly useful during a crisis.

A Q&A is always an **internal document**. It should never be released externally.

The quickest way to prepare a Q&A is through a brainstorm, involving the communications team and, ideally, risk assessment and/or risk management colleagues.

Remember these points when developing a Q&A:

- Set out your key messages at the top of the document. These should form the basis of your answers.

- If it is a long Q&A document, divide questions into sections under broad topic headings.

- Think about what your audiences might ask when drafting your questions. During an incident a journalist will want to know:

    1. *What happened?*
    2. *How did it happen (who is to blame?)*
    3. *What are you doing about it?*
    4. *How will you ensure it doesn't happen again?*

- Anticipate tough questions. They will be asked anyway and you need to have an answer prepared.

- Put the most likely questions at the top of the list.

- Use your key messages to shape your answers. It is likely that there will be repetition in the answers –this is fine.

- Do not be defensive.

- Detail any background or supporting information that the interviewee may be able to offer the journalist, with full sources where appropriate.

- Challenge the responses yourself and then ask someone new to the topic – do they understand and believe your responses?

- Check answers to avoid ambiguity, jargon and inconsistency.

You can find a Q&A template with some suggested questions in Annex VI.

f) Publication of FAQ (External)

FAQs are Frequently Asked Questions which are typically published on an organisation's website. They should offer factual information to the public, reassure audiences (if appropriate) and advise on what action to take (if any).

To identify the most possible questions to include, consider what information the public might most likely want to know. Imagine what your friends or relatives would ask about the topic.

The FAQs will need to cover the following information:

- The nature of the problem.
- Which products or types of products are affected (be as specific as possible).
- The level of risk or danger to health (in simple language).
- What action should be taken to minimise or eliminate the risk (e.g. boil the food in question for 10 minutes before eating it, or do not eat certain foods).
- Use infographics and other visual representations to ensure that the advice can be clearly understood.
- What symptoms to look for and what to do if oneself or a family member falls ill.

Alongside each FAQ, develop a possible answer that can be published on social media channels. On Twitter, for instance, the answer should be brief and link to a longer explanation. However, as Twitter now allows you to provide a text-heavy image as part of a tweet, this option may be preferred over squeezing FAQs into 140 characters. You could share your FAQs and related visual materials with other MS and EFSA to help them develop their own FAQs and support the consistency of messages.

Remove FAQs from your website once the incident is declared closed.

2.3. Communication

a) Track all media enquiries

Track all media enquiries to ensure that they are dealt with in a professional and timely manner and to monitor any resulting coverage.

- Set up a media enquiry log if not done so already (see template in Annex III), which includes the journalist's name, publication, contact details, enquiry details, deadline, general attitude and tone of voice, links to any previous coverage on the subject and whether the information has been supplied or an interview has been held.

- Nominate someone to take responsibility for keeping the log updated as media enquiries come in and to review it at least every few hours.

b) Track all social media posts

Identify journalists on their social media channels (most will have a Twitter account) and monitor their accounts to see how they comment as the incident unfolds. You may also be able to establish if they are contacting the public, or organisations and businesses involved in the situation, or are directly approaching organisations through social media channels.

Capture relevant social media posts, including imagery (this could be done with screen shots), within one document. The record of the post will enable you to identify the channel used and the user profile. Keep screenshots and hyperlinks of posts as evidence.

Correct inaccurate information

Always be prepared to respond to inaccurate information. Take control of the messages and keep in mind the three Cs of crisis communication: concern, commitment and control.

If you find inaccurate information reported by media or posted on social media, consider whether it is a good use of your time to correct it either by contacting the journalist or by responding to the social media post. If possible, provide them with a link to the source for correct information – remember to use the same #hashtag when responding to reach as many people as possible who may have seen the inaccurate claim.

c) Deciding which communications channels to use

Depending on which audiences you need to communicate with, you should think about which channels might reach them most effectively. In some instances traditional and social media may not be sufficient. Instead, you may need to consider outreach by SMS messages or even establishing a toll-free consumer enquiry line, which can be publicised in retail stores.

d) Using social media in an incident

As social media tactics are still less well understood than traditional media tactics, we have devoted a separate section to how to get the most out of social media during an incident. Some of the points below are also referred to in earlier sections –this section is meant to provide greater detail and guidance.

Context

Social media have an important role to play in your overall incident communications strategy. They are one of a variety of channels that you can use to listen to and share with your audiences: journalists, consumers, politicians, scientists, businesses and industry. Even with the availability of 24-hour television and radio news channels and online versions of newspapers and magazines, a story can develop faster on social media than via other channels, and the conversation can help to clarify different stakeholder perspectives.

Social media monitoring can therefore be a very valuable source of intelligence about the way the incident is developing. You should use the information you gain from social media to adapt, test and refine your on-going communications strategy.

There are many benefits of using social media as a communications tool during an incident:

- It enables fast and transparent communication, which is unedited before it reaches the audience – providing an opportunity to set the tone and news agenda with both journalists and the public.
- It is an efficient and cost-effective way to gather information, identify issues and re-assess risks.

Managed well, it allows you to harness the support of advocates and can help in restoring confidence after an incident has occurred.

The importance of perception

On social media, even more so than with ‘traditional’ media, perception is often the reality. What people believe and how they respond will often be based on how an incident is being seen to be handled, not necessarily the incident itself.

Perceptions of responding inadequately online can soon result in even closer scrutiny, while an organisation that is being seen to be doing everything right often ceases to hold the same ‘social’ attraction.

Social media tactics in an incident

The following tactics will help you maximise the use of social media during an incident and potentially enable a faster response time:

- **Treat social media as equally important as traditional or more established communication channels**. When creating and adjusting a communication plan, always ask: should there be social media component?

- **Organise your teams**. Establish clear channels of communication internally so that the communications team receives updated information from risk assessment and/or risk management colleagues as soon as it is available. Ensure your teams know which social media channels they should be using and watching. Running TweetDeck or Twitterfall and projecting the message windows on the wall is helpful in providing information on latest developments to team members when responding to the incident.

- **Set up extensive media and online monitoring**. Know what is being said about your organisation and how – monitor and respond to perceptions, especially if they are inaccurate. Keep a list of companies that can be used to implement advanced online monitoring with special tools that can be set-up in one or two hours. Investigate and build these lists of supplier companies before an incident happens.

- **Respond to social media queries**. On-going monitoring should identify when audiences (journalists, general public, stakeholders) are asking questions on social media channels. You need to find out how much influence these audiences have before deciding whether to post individual responses (e.g. an influential journalist with many followers on Twitter might merit a response if it helps reach your target audiences). Once you have taken the decision to reply to individual posts, there will be an expectation that you continue to do so. It is therefore important to ensure that you have sufficient resources in place to do this. If the information can be released publicly, then these selected queries should be answered on the relevant social media channel or by directing followers to where the holding statement and FAQs are held online.

- **Adapt messaging, holding statements and FAQs so that they can be used across a range of different social media channels**. Identify how you need to present messages on Twitter, Facebook and any other channels. Remember: journalists often use social media as a source of stories. Factor the prevailing political, public and media climate into your response.

- **Ensure you have the resources available to deal with the incident.** React quickly to online enquiries or complaints – always be available. Make sure you and your team are empowered and trained to respond immediately to comments on social media as deemed appropriate.

- **Proactively establish two-way dialogue with stakeholders.** Ask them to help promote relevant messages to their own audiences. Tweets with images, links and relevant #hashtags get much higher engagement than those without. If you need help getting an important message out, then ask for retweets from your followers. Your tweets have a 12 times higher chance of being retweeted if you ask for it.

- **Establish #hashtags for the incident, or use those already in use, to help reach a wider audience.** Monitor how the topic is being discussed and therefore searched for on social media and consider using the same terms. Remember the 'horsemeat' issue. Technically, it was related to horse DNA. However, neither the public nor the media were using this phrase so it made sense for MS to use (the scientifically inaccurate) #horsemeat on Twitter.

2.4. Post-incident lessons learned

external communication

In the immediate aftermath of an incident it is important to capture any lessons learned from a communications perspective. Communications professionals may often be asked to facilitate this process from a wider incident management perspective.

The following questions might provide helpful discussion prompts for a review of incident management. Select those most relevant to your role and/or organisation:

General:

- What went right? What worked well and why?
- What went wrong? What were the gaps, weaknesses and frustrations?
- What urgently needs addressing to avoid any mishap in the future?
- Were there any areas you felt uncomfortable or ill-equipped to deal with?
- How did the team work together?
- How did you feel about your own performance?

Collaboration:

- In general, how well did the affected MS and/or EFSA collaborate?
- How well did the communications professionals from each affected MS and/or from EFSA collaborate?
- Were updates shared in a timely way?
- Was communication between MS and EFSA clear despite language barriers?
- How well did the inter-organisational communication channels work (AFCWG, Yammer etc.)?
- What improvements do you recommend for the future?

Communications:

- How effective was the external communication?
- Did you address all key audiences? Were any missed out and why?
- How did perceptions change as a result? Was this tracked? How?
- How responsive were you with your communications to external feedback?
- Did the media monitoring – including social media – work effectively?

Systems and processes:

- How well did the crisis team handle the incident?
- Did the crisis team make good use of procedures?
- Did the crisis team make good use of resources?
- Was there clear leadership and direction?
- What have you learned – individually and collectively?
- What training do you need to manage an incident more effectively in the future?

Once you have captured the lessons it is important to share them with the AFCWG. This will help you identify any training requirements and seek opportunities to make collective improvements to collaborative processes.

Incident-specific training needs:

Realistic, scenario-based training exercises are a very effective way of testing crisis communications procedures ahead of a real incident. Best practice would suggest that a full in-country simulation, involving all the key players in a food or feed crisis, should take place at least once a year.

Multi-country scenario trainings, such as those organised by EFSA, are an effective way of simulating a wider pan-European response as well as building relationships with counterparts in other MS.

Ideally, spokespersons likely to be nominated to represent their organisation during an incident should attend crisis media trainings at least once every two years to ensure that they are confident in dealing with the media in potentially hostile interview situations.

The role of EFSA & the Advisory Forum Communications Working Group

EFSA's Advisory Forum Communications Working Group (AFCWG) provides an important mechanism for exchange of information and experiences. It provides a basis for strengthening the coherence and co-ordination of communications activities between the national authorities and EFSA. Close involvement and participation of the European Commission ensures consistent communication and clearer messages on food safety, taking into account the different but complementary roles of risk assessors and risk managers.

During an incident (involving multiple Member States) within EFSA's remit, the AFCWG will co-ordinate risk assessment-related crisis communications with the AFCWG members and the European Commission, ensuring timely access to information for all members[3].

EFSA TO DO LIST. The EFSA communications team will undertake the following actions.

Note: These are not necessarily set out in the order in which they will need to be completed (in some cases, some actions may need to take place simultaneously).

During the incident:

1.1 Convene the incident communications team:

- Identify the most appropriate member of the communications team to lead the incident response.
- Identify the lead person for social media if necessary.
- Identify support needs from the web team.
- Identify additional tools or resources.
- Create a contact list of the communications team.
- Set up a social media group for the communications team (WhatsApp or similar).

3. EFSA (European Food Safety Authority), 2013. Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications (AFCWG) Terms of Reference (ToR). Available online: http://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/assets/ afcwgtor.pdf

1.2 Brief internal stakeholders that the team managing the incident communications may not be able to prioritise other activities.

1.3 Agree on approval channels for all communications activities during the incident.

1.4 Check availability of key people for sign-off.

1.5 Liaise closely with the Advisory Forum and other external stakeholders to ensure regular updates on communications actions.

1.6 Schedule an AFCWG conference call as soon as EFSA is officially notified (or when it becomes unofficially aware) of the incident:

- Assess which MS need to be involved and invite the relevant AFCWG member as necessary i.e. those already (or with the potential to be) affected.
- Keep all other MS updated and offer the option for them to join the AFCWG conference calls.

1.7 Schedule follow-up conference calls for the duration of the incident to ensure diary time is allocated for these important updates.

1.8 Chair AFCWG conference calls (and as key tasks of this role):

- Set out objectives at the start.
- Facilitate a summary of the current situation (by asking participants to provide updates).
- Facilitate sharing of communications messages and timing of media communications to encourage a collaborative approach.
- Advise on EFSA's perspective and sharing EFSA's communications messages.
- Facilitate discussion of next steps.
- Summarise agreed actions and schedule next conference call.

1.9 Review EFSA's media monitoring and social media monitoring set-up, and update it if required, to ensure that references to the current incident will be picked up. This may involve the translation of some technical terms into languages other than English where appropriate.

1.10 Share media monitoring and social media monitoring reports with affected and potentially affected MS at a frequency agreed with the AFCWG.

1.11 Prepare a reactive holding statement, explaining EFSA's role in the incident, for use in response to any media enquiries.

1.12 Share the holding statement with MS via the AFCWG.

1.13 Ask MS to share their approved holding statements and other communication materials relating to the incident with the AFCWG and other involved MS.

1.14 Track all requests for information by setting up logs for media enquiries and social media posts.

1.15 Deal with all media enquiries in a timely manner, working closely with affected MS to ensure EFSA's responses are aligned with theirs.

1.16 Correct any inaccurate information, if information provided by EFSA is reported inaccurately by the media or social media. Consider whether to correct it either by contacting the journalist or by responding to the social media post.

1.17 Organise translations of MS's holding statements if possible (and other, subsequent MS communication materials) where the messages would be useful for other affected MS.

1.18 Circulate translated copies to affected and potentially affected MS.

1.19 Identify key external stakeholders (target audiences) that EFSA needs to reach via its different communication channels. A stakeholder map used during the EFSA 2015 crisis training exercise is included for reference in Annex 7, and an audience mapping template is included in Annex 8.

1.20 Consider the needs of hard-to-reach audiences who may need to receive information via different channels and/or in different languages.

1.21 Identify stakeholders who might worsen the situation or make it more difficult to manage and develop a communications plan and/or reactive messages for them.

1.22 Identify third party 'friends' who might be able to provide credible, independent information and/or endorsement.

1.23 Continue to gather the facts and develop messages for more detailed communications materials.

1.24 Continue to review and update EFSA messages for the duration of the incident.

1.25 Consider what visuals are available to accompany media materials.

1.26 Continue to share relevant information with MS.

1.27 Ask MS to share their approved Q&As/FAQs and other communication materials relating to the incident with the AFCWG and other involved MS.

1.28 Nominate the media spokesperson for this issue.

1.29 Brief him or her on the key messages and give a media training refresher to rehearse interviews.

After the incident:

1.30 Identify and discuss lessons learned once the incident has been closed.

1.31 Share appropriate or valuable lessons with MS via the AFCWG and request MS feedback on the management and/or co-ordination of external communications during the incident.

1.32 Update template materials and communication procedures if improvements are identified as part of the review.

1.33 Ensure external and, as appropriate, internal communication is represented in any wider review of the incident within EFSA.

1.34 Consider future training requirements.

1.35 Arrange refresher training, as needed, for the risk assessment team and/or communications team, e.g. crisis simulation exercises, media interview training courses etc.

The role of external communicators in the Member States

There are many different ways the MS allocate responsibility for risk assessment, incident management and external communication among various agencies and government departments. These recommendations, therefore, cannot set out a single chronology of actions, distribution of tasks and clear definition of roles that would be correct for all.

Detailed below are best practice recommendations for communicating with external audiences during an incident.

The communication teams in the MS will take some or all of the following actions, as appropriate for their organisations.

Note: These are not necessarily set out in the order in which they will need to be completed (in some cases, some actions may need to take place simultaneously).

During the incident:

2.1 Convene the incident communications team:

- Identify the most appropriate member of the communications team to lead the incident response.
- Identify a separate social media lead person if necessary.
- Identify support needed from the web team.
- Identify other tools or resources needed.
- Create a contact list of the communications team.
- Set up a social media group (such as WhatsApp or similar).

2.2 Brief internal stakeholders that the team managing the incident communications may not be able to prioritise other activities.

2.3 Agree on approval channels for all communications activities during the incident.

2.4 Check availability of key people for sign-off.

2.5 Obtain all information (or input, if appropriate to your role)

- Conveyed to the EC (if appropriate to your role, liaise with crisis coordinator so that you know if/when the EC has been notified of the incident).
- Conveyed to RASFF (if appropriate to your role, liaise with RASFF contact point so that you know if/when a RASFF alert has been issued).
- Conveyed to EFSA (if appropriate to your role, liaise with your EFSA Focal Point).

2.6 Inform chair of the AFCWG and confirm whether the AFCWG is being convened.

2.7 Review your media monitoring and social media monitoring set-up, and update it if required, to ensure that references to the current incident will be picked up.

2.8 Review media coverage and social media conversations frequently.

2.9 Participate in all AFCWG conference calls if your MS is or has the potential to be directly affected.

2.10 Report back to communications colleagues.

2.11 Brief risk assessment and risk management colleagues on communication recommendations made by EFSA and the AFCWG during these calls.

2.12 Keep your MS's Advisory Forum member updated.

2.13 Establish approval channels for media materials.

2.14 Check availability of key people for sign off.

2.15 Prepare a reactive holding statement for use to respond to media enquiries until you have more detailed information about the incident.

2.16 Share approved holding statements with EFSA and other MS. In the interest of speed, you may wish to share the holding statement in your own language via the AFCWG. EFSA can possibly organise translations into other languages if needed.

2.17 Track all requests for information by setting up logs for media enquiries and social media posts.

2.18 Deal with all enquiries in a professional and timely manner, working closely with the AFCWG to ensure your responses are aligned with EFSA and other affected MS.

2.19 Correct any inaccurate information if you find inaccurate information reported by the media or posted on social media. Seek to correct it either by contacting the journalist or by responding to the social media post.

2.20 Identify key external stakeholders you need to reach via media and/or social media communication and the specific channels you will use to reach them. A stakeholder map used during the EFSA crisis training exercise in 2015 is included for reference in Annex 7 and an audience mapping template is included in Annex 8.

2.21 Consider the needs of hard-to-reach audiences who may need to receive information via different channels and/or in different languages.

2.22 Identify other stakeholders who might worsen the situation or make it more difficult to manage and develop a communications plan and/or reactive messages for them.

2.23 Identify third party 'friends' who might be able to provide credible, independent information or endorsement.

2.24 Continue to gather facts and develop messages for more detailed communications materials (e.g. press release, FAQs etc.).

2.25 Consider what visuals are available to accompany media materials.

2.26 Liaise with your risk management counterparts to develop accurate and consistent messages.

2.27 Continue to review and update messages for the duration of the incident.

2.28 Continue to share materials with EFSA and other MS (again, this can be in your own language. EFSA can possibly arrange translations if needed).

2.29 Nominate the media spokesperson for this issue.

2.30 Arrange refresher media training and brief him or her on the key messages.

After the incident:

2.31 Review lessons learned (relating to external communications) internally once the incident has been closed.

2.32 Share them with MS via the AFCWG.

2.33 Update template materials if improvements are identified as part of the review.

2.34 Ensure communication is represented in any wider review of the incident within your organisation / MS (if appropriate to your role).

2.35 Consider future training requirements.

2.36 Arrange refresher training, as needed (and if appropriate to your role), for the risk assessment team and/or communications team, e.g. crisis simulation exercises, media interview training courses etc.

ANNEX I: Live incident or crisis communications checklist – a quick reference guide

- Use this table as your checklist during a crisis situation. You can use it for your own team and for actions to be carried out by Member States and by EFSA.
- You can find further information regarding each item listed in the guidelines.
- Items are not necessarily in chronological order.

Below is an example of how the checklist could be used during a crisis.

Actions During a live incident/crisis	Deadline	Responsability	Share with EFSA/ other MS	Done
Obtain all information (if appropriate to your role) and convene the incident communications team	01/01	Media Relations Officer		
Brief internal stakeholders and ensure senior management is informed of situation and communications actions	02/01	Head of Communications		
Agree approval protocols and check availability of key people for sign-off	02/01	Head of Communications / Media Relations Officer		
Inform and liaise with key external stakeholders such as the Advisory Forum (AF)		EFSA		
Inform chair of AFCWG of the evolving issue in your country and what actions have been taken so far	03/01	Head of Communications (member of the AFCWG)		
Schedule and chair AFCWG conference calls. Invite relevant MS and keep all other MS informed		EFSA		
Participate in AFCWG conference calls if you country is (or has the potential to be) directly affected. Be prepared to give an update on the status in your country and media / social media coverage. Brief colleagues on conference call outcomes as appropriate	05/01	Head of Communications (member of the AFCWG)		

Actions During a live incident/crisis	Deadline	Responsability	Share with EFSA/ other MS	Done
Keep MS Advisory Forum member updated on communications		Head of Communications (member of the AFCWG)		
Prepare key messages. Share with other MS, if relevant	06/01	Media Relations Officer	YES	
Review media / social media monitoring with your service provider. Share social media monitoring reports, if relevant	07/01	Social Media Officer	YES	
Draft holding statement and share with EFSA and other MS as appropriate	07/01	Media Relations Officer	YES	
Prepare Q&A / FAQ and share with colleagues for corrections / new information to be added	08/01	Media Relations Officer	YES	
Translate MS materials if necessary and useful, and circulate as appropriate		EFSA	YES	
Consider what visuals might be useful to support your messages	08/01	Designer	YES	
Nominate and brief media spokespersons – organise media training for spokespersons, if necessary	09/01	Media Relations Officer		
Track all requests for information by setting up media enquiry and social media post logs	07/01	Social Media Officer		
Deal with media enquiries in a professional and timely manner. Consider a press conference if inquiries become overwhelming in number	On-going (from 01/01)	Media Relations OfficerW		
Review monitoring reports frequently. Correct inaccurate information where possible. Review whether additional resources are needed to respond / monitor	On-going	Social Media Officer		
Identify key external stakeholders and channels to best reach them	On-going / modify and adapt as needed throughout emerging situation	Head of Communications		
Consider the needs of hard-to-reach audiences	On-going	Head of Communications		

Actions During a live incident/crisis	Deadline	Responsability	Share with EFSA/ other MS	Done
Identify third-party 'friends' for potential endorsement or to multiply your key messages and information	On-going / modify and adapt as needed throughout emerging situation	Head of Communications		

ANNEX II: Guiding principles for communicating during an incident (expanded)

Take control of communicating about the situation – even if facts are still uncertain.

- If you don't communicate, somebody else will. Their information might not be accurate and could even make the situation worse.
- Communicating while many of the facts are still uncertain is one of the hardest challenges in the early stages of an emerging incident. It is important to say what you know, to acknowledge what you don't know and to indicate what you are doing to acquire that information.

Communicate quickly to protect human health.

- Communicate as proactively as necessary and be responsive to incoming enquiries.
- Manage the process of securing internal approval of external communication materials efficiently to ensure accurate and timely media updates. Avoid any unnecessary, potentially life-threatening, delays in communicating important information.

Identify who you need to communicate with and how you will reach them.

- Take time to consider which groups are most at risk from the situation and how you will reach them in the most effective way – e.g. through traditional media, websites, selected social media channels, email etc.
- Think carefully about your audiences – in particular their existing level of knowledge, as well as other multicultural considerations (such as local variations in food preparation and consumption).
- Always show compassion, but make sure you also give practical, easy-to-follow guidance to those who might be affected by the issue.

Be clear and transparent.

- Double-check your understanding and that of others, in particular when working across borders.
- Consider language and/or dialect variations when communicating. This is particularly important when taking part in conference calls.
- Always have translations double-checked by a native speaker to ensure accuracy.

Never underestimate

- Be careful not to over-react, but always plan for the worst while monitoring closely if and how the situation evolves.

Collaborate – remember: crises don't stop at international borders.

- Take time to consider which other countries might be impacted by the issue.
- Offer to share your knowledge of the incident and your crisis-related communication materials with other Member States who are or could be affected.
- Make contact with EFSA and join the AFCWG as appropriate.

ANNEX III: Media enquiry log form

Name of person taking inquiry:

Name of the journalist:	*Phone:*
Date:	*Mobile:*
Time:	*Email:*
Deadline:	*Twitter:*

Media/social media outlet and country/region
Purpose of call/enquiry
General attitude and tone of voice
Links to any previous coverage on the subject
Action taken (if any)
Next steps (including person responsible)

ANNEX IV: Social media comments log template

Date:	Time:	Social media comment & location (include hyperlink)	Response (if any)

ANNEX V: Examples of holding statements for use during the three phases of a developing crisis

(adapted from 2015 crisis training exercise organised by EFSA)

- **Phase 1: Emerging situation** holding statement (when many of the facts are still unknown)

[*EFSA/Member State organisation]* is aware of a suspected multi-country food safety incident, affecting [*X, Y, Z – state confirmed countries*].

There is currently limited information available about the scale of the incident or what has caused it. However, a(n) [*incident management team – use whatever term is most appropriate*] has been convened and is working intensively to investigate the issue.

The health and wellbeing of the general public is our primary concern, and our thoughts are with those affected at this difficult time.

[*EFSA/Member State organisation*] is following the situation carefully and is in close co-operation with its partners at European and national level. We will provide a further update on the situation [*state where & when – e.g. on our website at 1pm, this afternoon etc.*].

- **Phase 2: Evolving wider awareness** holding statement

[*EFSA/Member State organisation*] can confirm that there is evidence demonstrating the presence of [*XXX – indicate substance, organism etc.*] in [*XXX –specific product(s)*] from [*country of origin and/or manufacturer*].

We are working with our partners, including [*e.g. EFSA/ECDC/Member States*], to continue the investigation and to understand the full extent and likely cause of the problem.

While the investigation is on-going [*EFSA/Member State organisation*] advises people to [*specify action, e.g. follow good kitchen practice, destroy/return product etc.*], which in this case means [*specific hygiene/cooking actions, if applicable*].

The health and wellbeing of the general public is our primary concern, and our thoughts are with those affected at this difficult time.

Please check with [*relevant national food safety authorities]* for notifications on the specific products recalled.

- **Phase 3: Widespread** issue holding statement

Investigations by [*indicate official body/source – e.g. the Environmental Health Authority*] in [*country*] have confirmed that … [*state confirmed issue details*].

This has resulted in high levels of a potentially harmful [*XXX – chemical/biological contaminant etc*.] in [*XXX –specific product(s)*]. Symptoms of those affected in this outbreak appear to be consistent with the effects of [*XXX contamination*].

A Europe-wide recall of the affected product(s) is underway. Please check with [*relevant national food safety authorities*] for notifications on the specific products recalled and on what actions to take if you have purchased the affected products.

The health and wellbeing of the general public is our primary concern, and our thoughts are with those affected at this difficult time.

ANNEX VI: Checklist for preparing a Q&A or FAQ Document

Golden Rule: Place yourself in the journalist's shoes and think about which questions you would want to ask. Consider the basic questions – **Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?**

In addition, it is worth considering the questions below:

- **Q. What products have been affected?**

  A. [*State full name of product(s) as shown on packaging where possible. Emphasise that no other product is affected.*]

- **Q. What is the country of origin?**

  A. [*Be as specific as possible.*]

- **Q. Which countries are selling the affected product?**

  A. [*Be as specific as possible.*]

- **Q. What is the problem?**

  A. [*State what is wrong with the product. Be specific.*]

- **Q. What should concerned consumers do?**

  A. [*Give clear actions, e.g. return product to retailer where it was bought, adopt good hygiene / food preparation practices etc.*]

- **Q. How did this happen?**

  A. [*Short explanation, if possible. Otherwise, say that 'urgent investigations are underway to find out'.*]

- **Q. When did you hear about this problem?**

  A. [*Be honest. Emphasise that prompt action was taken.*]

- **Q. How big is the risk?**

  A.[*Be honest. What percentage of people/products is likely to be affected? Again, emphasise if this is a precautionary measure*.]

- **Q. How many people have been affected?**

  A. [*Be honest and show concern for their wellbeing*.]

- **Q. When will the product be back on sale?**

  A. [*As soon as possible, once we are satisfied that the problem is resolved.*]

ANNEX VII: Example: EFSA stakeholder map

(map used during 2015 crisis training exercise)

This is an illustration of the many European and international stakeholders with whom EFSA communicates and collaborates during RRA. It is not a formal map of official stakeholders.

ANNEX VIII: Audience mapping template

It can be helpful to classify crisis audiences into four types, depending on the role they are likely to play in the situation. This is especially useful if you are dealing with a small number of audiences or some very clear sub-groups who are crucial in achieving a positive outcome. Once you have identified and classified audiences using this approach, perform a risk and opportunity assessment for each group. You can then agree on a strategy for each group.

- **Helpers –** groups who will support your organisation, e.g. emergency services, trade associations, expert independent scientists, counterparts in other MS, EFSA etc.
- **Victims** – groups likely to be negatively affected in a crisis, e.g. the public, suppliers / manufacturers of any product at the centre of the crisis.
- **Bystanders** – groups not directly involved in the crisis, but likely to seek involvement or comment, e.g. NGOs, media**.**
- **Resolvers** – groups who see it as their duty to intervene, e.g. regulators, technical experts, communicable disease advisers.

ANNEX IX: Glossary of terms

ABC	Acknowledge-Bridge-Continue technique
AF	EFSA's Advisory Forum
AFCWG	EFSA's Advisory Forum Communications Working Group
AFSCO	EFSA's Advisory Forum and Scientific Cooperation Unit
DG-SANTE	European Commission's Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (Santé et Sécurité Alimentaire)
EAHC	European Commission's Executive Agency for Health and Consumers
EC	European Commission
ECDC	European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
ECHA	European Chemicals Agency
EFSA	European Food Safety Authority
EMA	European Medicines Agency
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FAQ	Frequently Asked Questions
FP	EFSA Focal Point
HEFSA	Heads of European Food Safety Agencies – informal working group
MS	Member State(s)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation

Q&A Questions and Answers

RASFF Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (EC/DG-SANTE tool to exchange information about measures taken responding to serious food/feed risks)

ToR Terms of Reference

WHO World Health Organization

ANNEX X: Useful references

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ANNEX XI: Contributors

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