



PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS COMMUNICATIONS

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BACKGROUND

Emergency preparedness refers to the readiness of an area to react constructively to threats from the environment, which is important for reducing impact on public safety, physical structures and systems (Perry & Lindell, 2003). Urban areas are often more vulnerable to the effects of natural and manmade disasters due greater population density and infrastructure complexity (Henkey, 2018). A key factor of importance for reducing this vulnerability is ensuring there are platforms for communication between communities and emergency responders regarding the potential local risks and strategies for managing these (Kis et al., 2013). Making risk information readily available in a format that is easy to understand is vital for allowing communities to anticipate the consequences of disasters and to put protective measures in place to limit damage (Kapucu, 2008). In contrast, failure to recognise the role of the public in risk management can have detrimental consequences for incident recovery time (Frewer, 2004; Kapucu, 2008).

Overall, research highlights that emergency preparedness communication is more effective when there is a collaborative rather than top down approach between emergency responders and the public (Chess et al., 1995). This allows emergency responders to identify and acknowledge the needs and concerns of their community and to use this to inform emergency planning (Chess et al., 1995). Research also indicates that the efficacy of emergency preparedness communication is impacted by public perceptions of how likely they are to come into contact with high-risk events (Pepko et al., 2013), and the trustworthiness of the source and content (Shore, 2003). It is therefore important that Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) establish a professional and trustworthy position within their community through being visible, approachable and open to feedback and criticism (Covello, 2003). It is also important that the information provided is trustworthy, both in terms of being timely and accurate (Brown & Miller, 2000).

Most LRFs, including Merseyside Resilience Forum (MRF), have established websites as platforms for communicating information regarding local risks and emergency preparedness to local communities. However, this can be a counter-productive way of sharing information because local communities are often unaware of the existence of LRFs, their role within the emergency management structure, and the importance of emergency preparedness (Fisher et al., 2014). Limited research has specifically focused on understanding public preferences for communication of emergency preparedness information and the role that LRF websites may play, despite the value of such evidence for improving public engagement in emergency preparedness. Accordingly, the following study examines public perceptions in Merseyside regarding what facilitates and hinders willingness to engage in emergency preparedness activities, and the role of the Merseyside Prepared website in helping with this.



METHODS

Interviews were conducted with nine participants (4 male, 5 female) who were all permanent residents of Merseyside. Participants were selected from across a range of ages (22 to 57, $M = 27.44$, $SD = 11.22$) and occupations, such as student, lifeguard and legal officer, in order to draw on a variety of perspectives in understanding what factors affect their engagement with emergency preparedness. Participants were asked questions relating to their understanding of emergency preparedness, willingness to engage in these activities, preferences for communication of risk information, and views on the Merseyside Prepared website. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and then analysed in order to identify common themes.

KEY FINDINGS

- Overall, six factors of relevance to understanding public engagement in emergency preparedness and preferences for communication of risk information were identified: i) Experience, ii) Trustworthiness of sources, iii) Flexibility of communication, iv) Motivation, v) Raising awareness, and vi) User experience.
- Findings highlight the importance of adopting a flexible approach to communicating information across different age groups, as a 'one shoe size fits all' approach was inappropriate.
- Key factors of importance for improving the Merseyside Prepared website are updating the content regularly, including links to other sources, and altering the structure and content of information to ensure it is concise, relevant to the public, and provides details of actions the public can take to help themselves prepare.

EVIDENCE REVIEW

Analysis of the interviews conducted with local Merseyside residents identified six themes that affect public perceptions of emergency preparedness communication. Direct quotes are provided to support each theme.

1. Experience

Across interviews, personal experience was identified as being important for affecting attitudes to engaging in emergency preparedness activities. Some participants worked in jobs that actively involved engaging in emergency planning, which had given them a good appreciation of the importance of this for both work and home settings. Similarly, participants who had first-hand experience of being affected by environmental threats, such as flooding, were also more receptive to seeking information about local risks and taking steps to mitigate the impact. Younger participants had no experience of preparing for emergencies and felt less confident about doing so. Rather than seeking out reputable information to educate and take steps to prepare, they would defer responsibility to older relatives, perceiving them as having more experience.

"One is the experience that I have gained through my job because actually in my job I have been involved in preparing emergency and incident planning."

"But I did live in quite a rural area back home, so we had a lot of flooding and my village used to get flooded in because there was two bridges either side. That was more experience I would say and where I've lived previously."



"I think a lot of the younger people because they don't know about the risks of things that can happen."

2. Trustworthiness of Sources

In line with previous research (Shore, 2003), feedback indicated that participants would only pay attention to information if they felt that it came from a trustworthy source, such as emergency services and local authorities. Younger participants also included their parents as a trustworthy source of information, viewing older relatives to be more knowledgeable. Also in line with previous research, participants noted the importance of ensuring that information is regularly updated in order to provide current assessments of potential threats within a local community. Failure to update information regularly would cause them to question how trustworthy and relevant it was, and would therefore reduce the likelihood of them utilising this information to inform their actions.

"Also, a website is only as good as regularly as it gets updated"

"So, to be honest, I think I'd like the council and the authority to kind of give us the opportunity or the forums to erm, what's the word I'm looking for, focus groups."

"Its social media coming from a legitimate source. i.e. verified fire and rescue or verified Merseyside police."

3. Flexibility of Communication

Across all interviews, feedback highlighted the importance of ensuring that risk information was communicated in a way that would be accessible to all age groups. Participants noted that this would require a flexible approach using multiple methods and platforms because different age groups engaged with platforms in different ways. For example, younger participants preferred to source information through social media platforms but would not actively search for emergency preparedness information so it would need to be readily visible on the websites that they frequented. However, all participants commented that this approach would be less suitable for the elderly, particularly those with less experience of using technology and online platforms. Suggestions were made to target information to these audiences through posters and leaflets at venues that this population are likely to frequent, including medical practices and supermarkets. All participants noted the importance of ensuring that the information was readily accessible because it was unlikely that most members of the public would invest a great deal of effort in actively searching for such information, partly because they would not be aware of the relevance of such information to them.

"The only way you can force people to get engaged with an initiative like this is to actually give them information because quite frankly people aren't always going to get of their backsides and go and find out about it."

"It really depends on the demographic of the area; you know for example if not everybody has a personal computer, so you know how do they deal with it?"

"I think because kids are more tech savvy nowadays, they're more likely to go to websites, perhaps I'm not saying more, but perhaps more than adults would."



4. Motivation

Across participants, feedback highlighted that they would be more willing to invest time and effort into preparing for emergencies if they were clear about the potential consequences for them. Younger participants demonstrated lower motivation for attending to risk communications and taking steps to prepare for emergencies because they perceived themselves to be at a low risk of being affected by potential disasters. They also noted that they did not own property, have expensive possessions or children, and so did not perceive themselves as having strong enough reasons to invest time and effort into preparing. Despite this, there was a consensus across participants that it was important to invest time in preparing for emergencies, particularly given that funding cuts have stretched emergency service resources, but younger participants saw this as being the responsibility of their older relatives.

“If it was going to directly affect me, in sort of a selfish point of view, I would then be like I need to prepare.”

“I think, its more kind of that mentality where you just think, it’s not the kind of thing that would happen to you.”

“I think when you start a family you want to protect more and keep people safe. Especially when there are kids around. I think kind of, when you’re younger, you don’t care.”

5. Raising Awareness

Across participants, there was a lack of awareness regarding both the role of MRF and the Merseyside Prepared website, with only one participant having viewed the website prior to participating in this study. This lack of awareness was highlighted as being a major barrier in whether the public would engage in emergency preparedness activities. Participants commented that once they had been directed to the website through participating in this study, they found the information helpful. However, they felt that more work was needed to raise public awareness of the existence of the website within the region, along with more public engagement activities in order to emphasise the importance of preparing for emergencies. A range of suggestions was put forward for raising awareness, including hosting regular community meetings or focus groups, advertising on social media platforms and local radio stations, along with leaflets and posters.

“Yeah, I think it’s one thing to know a website exists its another thing to actually use it. Until you know it exists, you’re not able or likely to use it.”

“I think probably the website should promote something along the lines of; ‘these are the issues that may arise and it’s important that we as a community work together to make sure that this doesn’t happen’ as opposed to ‘oh my god this has happened where can I find some advice?’”

“Yeah, obviously many people don’t even know it even exists...I think they could reach out to the people of Merseyside on social media or otherwise I just think that people won’t read it.”



6. User Experience

As part of this study, participants were asked to view the Merseyside Prepared website and to provide feedback on what they thought about this risk communication platform. In particular, participants praised the resources directed toward young children, commenting that this was really useful for engaging them in discussions regarding the importance of emergency preparedness. Younger participants noted that having access to resources such as this when they were children, and making use of such materials in school settings to educate, would have made them more confident and less reliant on older relatives for preparing for emergencies. However, feedback also indicated that further focus was needed on ensuring that all of the content was relevant to the public. In particular, feedback highlighted that there was a great deal of dense text focusing on the legalities of civil contingency plans, which they saw as being less relevant to them. In contrast, there was not enough focus on detailing the concrete actions members of the public could take to prepare for emergencies.

"Its just very, serious and formal. Its not very, it doesn't look like a website that's made for the general public really."

"However, when I clicked the 'risks in Merseyside' page it would actually tell me the risks and how to prepare. Rather than just looking at the risk register as a massive PDF document. Erm, I more want to see information and guidance."

"I think having an easily readable and understandable piece of information is good and then have other links to something a bit more comprehensive, if that person wants to go and read about it later on."

"The learning zone or that family zone? I really like that! What its doing is giving educational resources on there to get children, like worksheets to get children to understand what disaster planning actually is."

A few participants also highlighted technical issues with the website, including problems with the webpages loading, multiple error messages, and failed hyperlinks. These technical glitches affected their overall experience and their motivation to continue searching through this platform. Feedback from across participants also highlighted a need for the website content to be updated regularly and to be more visually appealing in order to improve engagement. Currently, they felt the website was very text heavy, which was cognitively demanding to read. Instead, participants suggested breaking the information down into smaller chunks, converting information into visual diagrams, checklists of simple emergency preparedness steps, and videos. They noted that if these changes were made, they would be more willing to utilise the website on a regular basis.

"There's a lot going on and a lot of the hyperlinks don't work, I was trying to read what it was before and I just didn't get it."

"Obviously, the website could be made more visually appealing and more accessible in terms of the layout. I found it quite hard to read, because of the big sprawling lines of texts I actually couldn't be bothered to read it all."

"Nicer layout, I think just in little chunks of information I think I would be more willing to read it."



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on feedback provided by residents of Merseyside, the following recommendations are provided for improving emergency preparedness communication within this region:

- **Adopt flexible approaches to emergency preparedness communication.** Preferences differ across different demographics, which means there is no 'one shoe size fits all' approach. Instead, it is important to communicate across a range of platforms that are targeted for different audiences, including educational activities in schools, local radio stations, social media platforms, and leaflets and posters distributed in supermarkets and surgeries to ensure that all age groups have access to important risk information.
- **Raise awareness of the existence of the Merseyside Prepared website.** General awareness of the role of MRF, the existence of the website, and the importance of preparing for emergencies was low across participants. Once directed to the website, appreciation for the importance of emergency preparedness increased. Taking steps to raise awareness of this platform will improve public viewing and engagement in emergency preparedness activities.
- **Provide more concrete information on steps to take to prepare for emergencies.** Rather than focus on the legalities of civil contingencies, members of the public want more concrete information about how they can protect themselves and mitigate the impact of disasters. This includes providing easy step-by-step guides, such as a flow chart, to guide them through preparing.
- **Present information in a more engaging format.** Rather than being text heavy, members of the public would prefer risk information to be broken into small chunks that are less cognitively demanding to process, and to include videos and simpler visual aids to make the content more engaging. This will make it easier for members of the public to understand the information and improve willingness to engage.

CONCLUSION

Overall, findings highlight that public preferences for communication of risk information differ across demographic groups, with younger people preferring social media platforms, whilst older people may prefer traditional methods such as local radio, posters and fliers. Willingness to invest time in preparing for emergencies also differs, with younger people more likely to defer responsibility to older relatives. Feedback indicates that educating children from a young age on the importance of emergency preparedness would be beneficial for improving confidence and motivation to engage. In line with previous research, both the trustworthiness of the source and the information are important for promoting engagement. Emergency services and local authorities were considered to be trustworthy sources but further work is needed to improve the trustworthiness of the information contained on the Merseyside Prepared website by ensuring it is updated regularly and that issues with broken hyperlinks and technical errors are addressed. Public engagement in viewing the website and taking action to prepare for emergencies would be improved by raising awareness, ensuring all content is relevant, and presented in a way that is visually engaging. However, it is important to note that whilst feedback was detailed and came from a diverse sample, it represents the views of nine Merseyside residents. Further work using questionnaires and focus groups to draw on a larger sample from across Merseyside would be beneficial for highlighting potential nuances in public preferences for risk communication.



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