



Best practice for crisis communicators

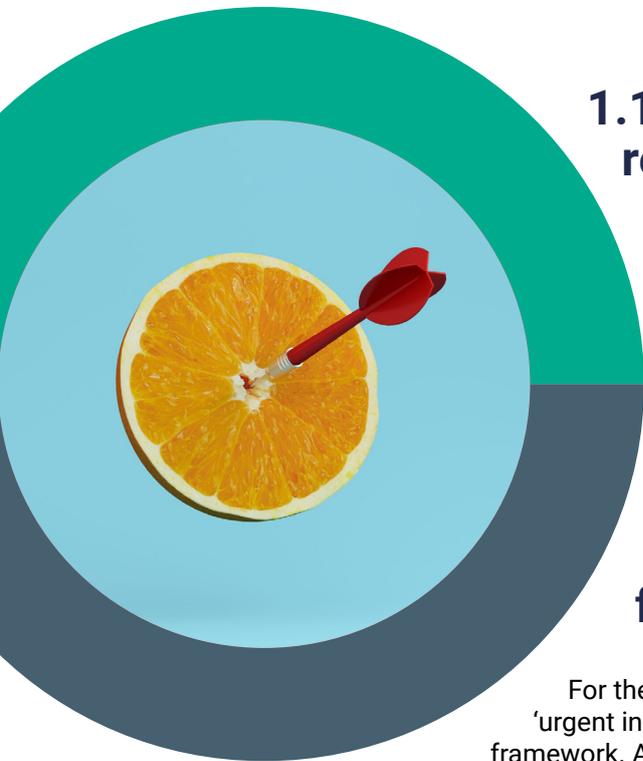
How to communicate during food
or feed safety incidents

Table of contents

1. About these recommendations	4
1.1. Who should read these recommendations?	5
1.2. What is an urgent food or feed-related incident or crisis?.....	5
1.3. Why have these recommendations been developed?.....	6
1.4. How should these recommendations be used?.....	6
1.5. When should these recommendations be used?.....	7
1.6. What other EFSA documents are available on this subject?.....	8
1.7. Who else might you need to collaborate with on communications?	8
1.8. Guiding principles for communicating during an incident.....	8
2. Communications workflow during an incident	9
2.1. The golden hour.....	11
2.1.1. Activate the crisis communication team (T+ 5min).....	11
2.1.2. Gather all available information (T+ 5min)	11
2.1.3. Define target groups (T+ 15min)	12
2.1.4. Set up crisis log (T+ 15min).....	12
2.1.5. Set up media and social media monitoring (T+ 20min).....	12
2.1.6. Inform relevant stakeholders (T+ 20min)	13
2.1.7. Draft internal & external statements (T+ 30min).....	13
2.1.8. Pause any planned social media or media releases (T+ 45min).....	13
2.1.9. Review media content, timing & facts (T+ 45min)	14
2.1.10. Release holding statement (T+ 50min).....	14
2.1.11. Plan next steps & distribute tasks (T+ 60min)	14
2.2. Preparing to communicate during the golden hour	15
2.2.1. Message development – communicating when facts are still uncertain..	15
2.2.2. Holding statement.....	16
2.2.3. Approval process.....	16
2.2.4. Distribution.....	17
2.2.5. Collaboration.....	17
2.3. Communicating after the golden hour.....	18

2.3.1. Development of internal Q&A or 'lines to take'.....	18
2.3.2. Publication of FAQ (external).....	19
2.3.3. Identify and prepare media spokespersons	20
2.3.4. Handling a media interview	20
2.3.5. Video statements	21
2.3.6. Deal with inaccurate information	22
2.3.7. Deciding which communications channels to use.....	22
2.3.8. Ongoing activities	23
2.4. Post-incident lessons learned	23
3. The role of EFSA & the Communications Experts Network (CEN).....	25
3.1. EFSA's to-do list.....	26
3.1.1. During the golden hour.....	26
3.1.2. During the incident.....	27
3.1.3. After the incident	27
ANNEX I: PRACTICAL TOOLKIT	28
a. Live incident or crisis communications checklist – a quick reference guide	28
b. Media enquiry log form	30
c. Holding statements – principles and examples	31
Phase 1: Emerging situation holding statement (when many of the facts are still unknown).....	32
Phase 2: Evolving wider awareness holding statement.....	32
Phase 3: Confirmed issue statement	33
d. Checklist for preparing a Q&A (internal) or FAQ (external) document.....	33
e. Stakeholder map – EFSA's example	35
f. Audience mapping template	36
ANNEX II: Crisis-preparedness activities in peacetime	37
ANNEX III: Glossary of terms	38
ANNEX IV: Useful references	39
ANNEX V: Contributors	40

1. About these recommendations



1.1. Who should read these recommendations?

These recommendations are for anyone who communicates (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 the assessment and/or management of food and feed safety, but may be useful as a reference for other relevant public organisations as well.

1.2. What is an urgent food or feed-related incident or crisis?

For the purposes of this document, we are using the concept of 'urgent incident' as defined by EFSA¹ and by the European regulatory framework. A food or feed safety incident at European level should be treated as urgent if **two or more of the following criteria** are met:

- a. The risk to public health is high (severe illness or death).
- b. The scale of the incident is large or likely to become so (the number of products, countries or people affected is high).
- c. The incident is, or is believed to be, intentional (e.g. bioterrorism or side effect of fraud).
- d. High actual or potential level of media interest or public concern (including perceived risks).
- e. Vulnerable groups of the population, e.g. infants or the elderly, are or are likely to be disproportionately affected.
- f. The source of the problem is unknown or difficult to identify.
- g. The incident has a serious potential impact on the functioning of the internal market.
- h. There is disagreement on actions between Member States.
- i. There is an institutional reputational risk.

In more general terms, a crisis is a development that threatens to have a significant, lasting negative impact on your organisation's reputation, financial situation or future viability. For instance, cyberattacks could certainly be included among the possible type of crisis we might face nowadays.

The stakes are extremely high during a crisis, and a wrong communication response has the potential to destroy the organisation. However, if the right decisions are made, a crisis can be turned to the advantage of the organisation and become an opportunity.

The definition of a crisis can vary from country to country and institution to institution.

For additional information on the EU regulatory framework on crisis management, please see **Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2019/300**² of 19 February 2019 establishing a general plan for crisis management in the field of food and feed safety. The plan covers:

- incidents requiring enhanced Union coordination, and;
- incidents requiring the setting up of a crisis unit bringing together the Commission, relevant Member States and EU agencies.

1 **EFSA procedures for responding to urgent advice needs**, 2021

2 **Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2019/300** of 19 February 2019 establishing a general plan for crisis management in the field of the safety of food and feed

1.3. Why have these recommendations been developed?

EFSA, in consultation with the Communications Experts Network (CEN), developed these recommendations to encourage consistent best practice during incidents related to EFSA's mandate. The aim was to provide clear and practical recommendations for communicating with external audiences during a food or feed-related incident.

1.4. How should these recommendations be used?

These recommendations should be used to inform the communications procedures and protocols in place in your organisation by providing best practices for communicating with external audiences during an incident.

A **practical toolkit** ([Annex I](#)) gathers a set of templates, checklists and materials which can be adapted to the context of your organisation and used for crisis communication. The first document is a quick reference guide, which you can use as your checklist for communications during a live incident or crisis situation.



1.5. When should these recommendations be used?

Proper crisis communication starts before the crisis with **risk communication**³, that should be part of your organisation's daily work in peacetime. Risk communication is mainly ongoing communication which aims to prevent and prepare for possible future risks.

Crisis communication, on the other hand, deals with immediate hazards and takes place within pre-crisis, emergency or post-crisis situations. These guidelines focus on crisis communication and will assist with your communication activities in this respect.

- **Before an incident arises:** read the recommendations and decide which elements are applicable or add value in your own organisation, then integrate them into your procedures. The recommendations include suggestions for pre-incident communications planning that you may wish to adopt for your organisation. It is a good idea to use these recommendations during crisis training exercises too, 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.
- **After an incident:** the recommendations will enable your organisation to capitalise on lessons learnt and increase its crisis communication preparedness via updated procedures and templates, and regular training sessions.



3 For additional information, please see EFSA's report '**Technical assistance in the field of risk communication**', which provides practical advice on the implementation of the future 'General Plan for Risk Communication' required under **Regulation (EU) 2019/1381**. The report includes EFSA's recommendations to the European Commission on the design and implementation of the general plan and on defining the concepts of risk communication and crisis communication.

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

- **When food is cooking up a storm – proven recipes for risk communications**
- **EFSA procedures for responding to urgent advice needs**

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

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

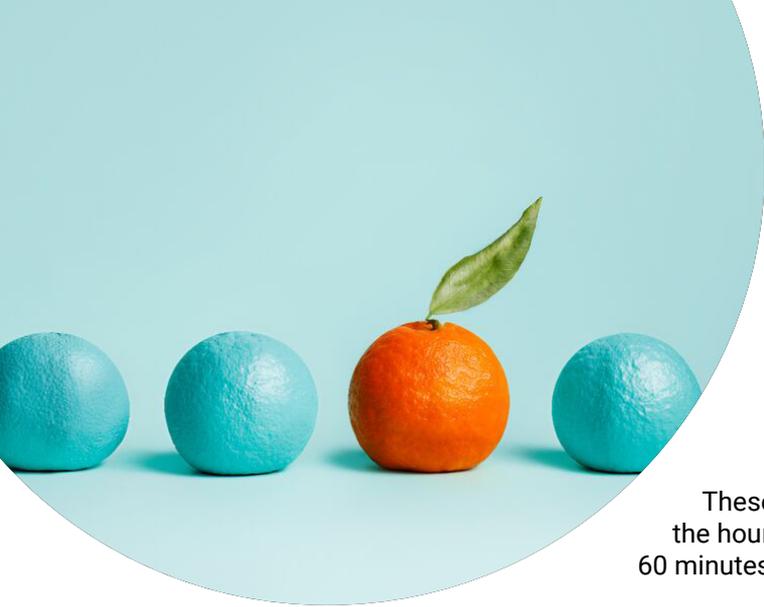
These recommendations refer specifically to the communication roles of EFSA and of Member States during an incident or crisis. It is also possible that you will need to work with other entities on effective communication, such as DG SANTE, the **European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)**,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

1.8. Guiding principles for communicating during an incident

The following six principles should guide your communication efforts during an incident.

- Take control over communication regarding the situation, even if the facts are still uncertain. This will help to prevent the spread of misinformation and disinformation.
- Communicate quickly and regularly to protect human health.
- Identify who you need to communicate with and how you will reach them.
- Be clear and transparent.
- Never underestimate the potential impact of the incident.
- Collaboration – remember crises do not stop at international borders.

2. 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 elements come together in the **golden hour**, which is the hour immediately after the onset of the crisis. These first 60 minutes are crucial for the outcome of the crisis.

You must respond quickly and get the message out or risk losing control of the narrative. This could be a joint response together with the CEN or single CEN members more closely affected by the crisis. Silence creates an invitation for others to define the crisis and the organisation's motives and actions. Social media and the internet do not afford communicators the luxury of time: information about a crisis and consumer panic could spread around the globe before an organisation has the chance to respond. Releasing a holding statement indicates awareness of an issue and provides organisations the opportunity to show prompt and proactive care and concern with maximum effect. Time is ticking and you have no time to lose. With good preparation ahead of a crisis, you should be well prepared to respond during the first 60 minutes of a crisis.

The golden hour comprises **three phases**:

1. **Starting off**

- Putting the crisis plan in motion
- Convening the team & defining roles
- Who needs to know... now?

2. **Analysis**

- What do we know?
- Stakeholder mapping
- Worst case scenario

3. **Response**

- Holding statement
- Who speaks on behalf of the organisation & who takes care of what stakeholder?
- What needs to happen next?

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 and the CEN.

2.1. The golden hour

This section offers a more detailed description of what needs to happen during the golden hour.

2.1.1. Activate the crisis communication team (T+ 5min)

After an organisation activates an urgent response process, the crisis communication manager convenes the crisis communication team either virtually, in hybrid mode or in person, and briefs them. The senior management team must also be informed of the crisis.

2.1.2. Gather all available information (T+ 5min)

Based on the below list of questions, the crisis communication team gathers all the relevant information. The information is then evaluated according to priority and urgency, and serves as a basis for decisions on further actions (holding messages yes/no, etc.).

- Type of event or issue: what happened and where?
- Who is affected?
- What is the cause?
- Has this event or issue been reported in the media or in an external source and is it of current interest to the media or the online community?
- Who inside and outside the organisation knows about it?
- Are CEN members aware? Consider making a quick contact via instant messaging platform.
- How might this event impact the organisation? Is it scalable?
- Is active outreach to the media advisable?
- Which stakeholders should be involved? What should be communicated?
- Does the event have political implications?
- Is it possible to foresee how Member States might react?
- Which employees will be involved?
- Is all the information needed known? What should be said?
- What is likely to happen next? What action will be taken?
- What is the worst that can happen (in addition)? What would that mean?



2.1.3. Define target groups (T+ 15min)

The crisis communication team must clearly define the target groups (internal/external) for the respective scenario in order to enable appropriate communication with all relevant stakeholders in the event of a crisis. Consider relevant public decision-makers and organisations.

The list of stakeholders should be recorded so that tasks can be quickly assigned and implemented.

2.1.4. Set up crisis log (T+ 15min)

Work with your pre-prepared crisis log book to keep track of contacts and developments. For easier access and logging, the crisis communication manager could set up a dedicated email or a shared online document where all crisis team members add their activities.

2.1.5. Set up media and social media monitoring (T+ 20min)

During the crisis, you should pay close attention to social media in addition to traditional media. When an incident is suspected or is 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 of search terms will adequately cover the situation.
- Set up additional monitoring processes as required.
- Set up a **media enquiry log** (template in Annex I, b) that 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 given. Nominate someone to take responsibility for keeping the log updated as media enquiries come in, and to review it at least every few hours.
- Define your **social media monitoring approach**. **Create search queries** covering the main topics/keywords related to the incident and monitor those at least every few hours. Use the social media monitoring platform already in use in your organisation – there is no extra time for testing and learning. 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 whether they are contacting the public, or organisations and businesses involved in the situation, or are directly approaching organisations through social media channels.
- Share important findings with the CEN.

EFSA performs daily monitoring of traditional and social media and can share the results with the Member States.

If appropriate for your organisation, identify a communications consultant/company in 'peacetime' to help you at short notice during an incident. An external communications expert can:

- assist with monitoring,
- help you develop an appropriate response strategy,
- help respond to comments posted online.

2.1.6. Inform relevant stakeholders (T+ 20min)

In order for the crisis communications team to be able to establish and continuously ensure information chains to relevant stakeholders (internal and external), use the EFSA stakeholder list and decide who needs to be informed, including DG SANTE and CEN members

2.1.7. Draft internal & external statements (T+ 30min)

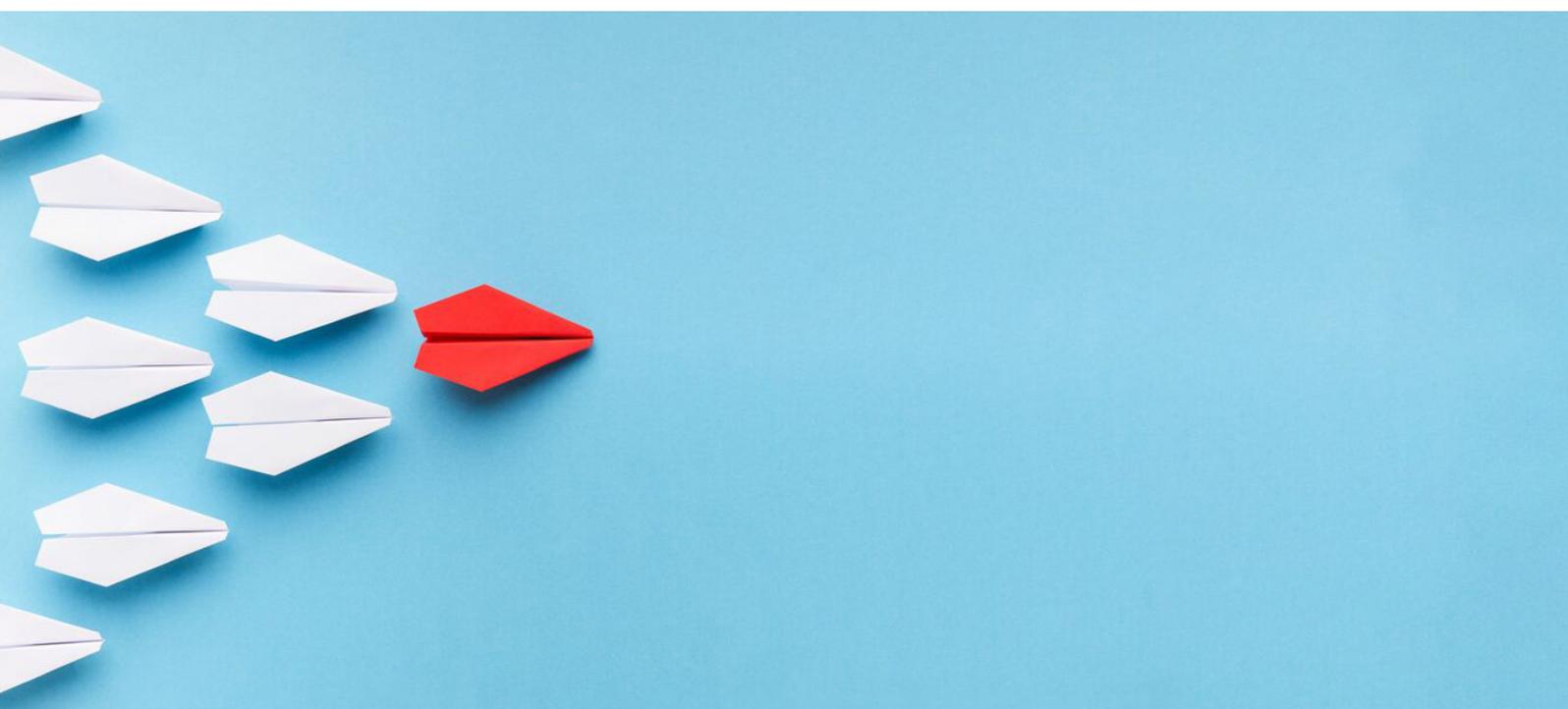
In our digitally connected world, it is important to be seen to be taking immediate action to assess the situation properly. Your holding statement is one way of making sure that external audiences see you doing this.

Your organisation should have prepared a series of pre-approved holding statements (see Annex I, c), revised and approved by your legal team ahead of a crisis. This accelerates the speed of work and communications on crisis day.

Using the approved templates, prepare the initial holding statement with the help of the crisis communications manager and/or legal counsel. It should state what, if anything, you believe you know, with the acknowledgment that these are early impressions that may need to be corrected later. Reinforce that you are committed to finding out as much as you can, and that you will update your audiences as you learn more. Above all, speak with compassion throughout the statement. Empathy for any injured or aggrieved parties is essential.

2.1.8. Pause any planned social media or media releases (T+ 45min)

Stop any posts you have pre-scheduled. Unrelated social media and marketing activities could make your organisation look tone-deaf and insensitive.



2.1.9. Review media content, timing & facts (T+ 45min)

Review and update any of the information you have already collected. If any information has changed, you may need to update your holding statements.

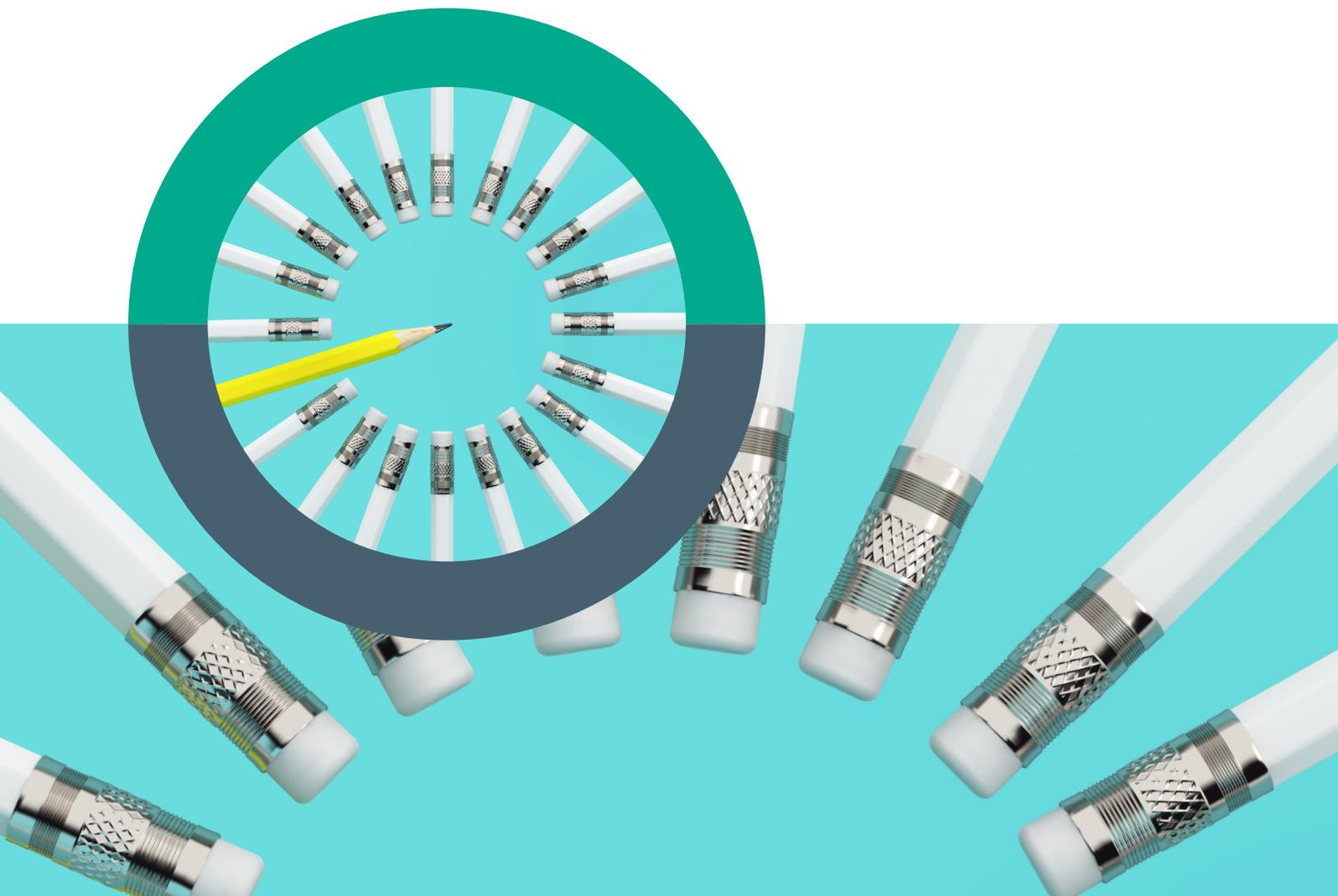
2.1.10. Release holding statement (T+ 50min)

This is the moment to publish an initial holding message. Send this proactively to selected media outlets and post the messages on your homepage (e.g. as a pop-up) and on social media (Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc.).

2.1.11. Plan next steps & distribute tasks (T+ 60min)

After surviving the initial crisis phase, the question is: what next?

The crisis team should meet after the golden hour and develop a plan for the next steps to take. Specifically, this involves managing media inquiries, key internal and external stakeholders, and the digital public.



2.2. Preparing to communicate during the golden hour

2.2.1. 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 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. Your messages should be empathetic. 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 the number of key messages to a maximum of three or four.
- 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.
- Focus on your target audiences:
 - make the messages relevant to each specific group of people, considering their needs and perceptions;
 - treat people as human beings with individual, emotional needs, 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.'

Please note: if the **facts are or become known** at this stage, your messages should focus on the information available, e.g. details about the issue, symptoms of people affected, and a call to action for the audience (you can refer to Annex I, c: example of statement for phase 3).

2.2.2. 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 that external audiences see you doing this. You can use the holding statement reactively or, if appropriate, proactively with the media. You can post it on your social media channels or on your website no later than 50 minutes after a crisis is activated, until more information is known.

The holding statement should address the three fundamental questions the media will be asking 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.

2.2.3. Approval process

Seeking approval for an initial holding statement can be difficult but is a good test of the 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 those 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.

2.2.4. Distribution

Distribute your holding statement to key stakeholders proactively within 50 minutes from the activation of the crisis, 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, you should consider the proactive use of social media to share the holding statement, alongside traditional media channels. Use social media channels to communicate a message directly to a specific audience.

When using social media, keep your message short and include a link to the full statement on your organisation's website. You can also create a website pop-up to draw immediate attention to the holding statement. 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 and LinkedIn 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.

You could create a landing page on your website gathering all the material related to the incident as it becomes available (statements, FAQ, etc.). Mention the hashtag used in crisis-related posts on social media to facilitate timely access to new content and promote consistent use of the relevant hashtag. You may embed the relevant social media feeds (from your organisation or other official sources, e.g. EFSA) into the page. Provide contact details for media representatives (your Press Office) and for citizens affected by the crisis (e.g. a hotline).

Consider the need for internal communications too. Your staff deserve to receive information on the incident promptly and should be provided with a way to approach the crisis team should they have any professional or personal questions. You may also remind colleagues about your organisation's policy for outreach and use of social media (e.g. if contacted by journalists, direct them to the Press Office, etc.).

The same principles of honesty, clarity, consistency and timeliness apply. Tools used for internal communication may include sending an email from an authoritative voice (e.g. the director), the intranet, Yammer, or personal contacts should the incident happen outside of working hours. Let staff know where and when you will make new information available.

2.2.5. Collaboration

It is important to share any approved holding statements on collaborative platforms (e.g. SharePoint, Teams) or through messaging applications, social media groups or emails with other Member States via the CEN. This will assist collaboration and ensure the consistency of the 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.

By now, the golden hour is over.





2.3. Communicating after the golden hour

Communication is paramount during the first days of an incident. This section provides an overview of actions and tips for all colleagues involved in the crisis communication response.

2.3.1. Development of internal Q&A or 'lines to take'

A questions & answers document (Q&A), 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 brainstorming with 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 test them with someone new to the topic – do they understand and believe your responses?
- check answers to avoid any ambiguity, jargon and inconsistency.

You can find a Q&A template with some suggested questions in Annex I, d.

2.3.2. Publication of FAQ (external)

FAQs are frequently asked questions and are typically published on an organisation's website. They should offer factual information to the public, reassure audiences (for example, about products not affected by the incident, if appropriate) and advise on what action to take (if any). Do not underestimate the importance of FAQs; sometimes, these pages are visited by more users than those accessing the official press release.

To identify the most relevant 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:

1. the nature of the problem;
2. which products or types of products are affected (be as specific as possible);
3. the level of risk or danger to health (in simple, concise language);
4. 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);
5. what symptoms to look for and what to do if you or a family member falls ill.

Use infographics and other visual representations to ensure that the advice can be clearly understood.

Adapt the answer to each question for publication on social media channels. On Twitter, for instance, the answer should be brief and link to a longer explanation. However, as Twitter allows you to provide a text-heavy image as part of a tweet, this option may be preferred over squeezing FAQs into 280 characters. You could share your FAQs and related visual materials with other MSs and EFSA to help them develop their own FAQs and support the consistency of the messaging.

FAQs should be treated as a live document and updated regularly as new information becomes available.

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



2.3.3. 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 tailored crisis media training 'in peacetime'. –

Crisis spokespersons differ from peacetime spokespersons who contribute to the business-as-usual media activities of your organisation, for example by giving interviews on topics related to their area of expertise. Crisis spokespersons come into play during crisis situations only, when the crisis team is activated.

Ideally, there should be just one spokesperson per incident to ensure consistency and accuracy in all communications. Make sure backups are available and briefed if needed (e.g. in case the spokesperson needs to take unplanned leave). 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 situation-specific media training, including simulations and rehearsals, prior to any interviews.

2.3.4. Handling a media interview

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

A spokesperson should:

1. be honest, empathetic and show concern;
2. avoid speculation and provide only facts;
3. be positive and available;
4. speak calmly and deliberately to convey authority;
5. be sensitive to the needs of those affected and not disclose names or give graphic descriptions;
6. 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);
7. always correct a journalist who asks a question based on a wrong assumption. Merely answering the question may give the impression that the assumption is correct;
8. not repeat negative or inflammatory words used by a journalist;
9. not blame another organisation or Member States for difficulties;
10. 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);
11. keep a record of what he or she has said.



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

- A. **Acknowledge** the question: 'That's an interesting point you raise ...'
- B. **Bridge** to your agenda: '... but our priority right now is ...'
- C. **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.'

2.3.5. Video statements

Crisis communications are becoming increasingly visual, whether in the form of video content, images or interactive graphics or simulations. Visualisation tools help enormously during a crisis because they can allow the organisation to communicate its message in a clear and straightforward manner, at a time when everyone is expecting forthright answers. This is particularly relevant if a crisis has emerged as the result of a technical issue that is difficult to explain.

Video statements are particularly an asset at the onset of a crisis, as they allow you to be proactive and transparent, whilst avoiding stakeholder interaction when there may not yet be much to say. Depending on the type of crisis, it is important to evaluate who is best placed to be the voice of your organisation. In the case of an organisational or reputational crisis, the message should come from the very top of the organisation, i.e. from the executive director or equivalent. Senior managers or scientific experts may be more relevant during a food safety crisis.

Video statements by an organisation's top management in crisis situations have become more common. They signal that the person at the top cares and allow organisations to get the word out quickly without relying on intermediaries like reporters or TV stations. You may consider having a plan in place on how to produce video statements at short notice. A word of caution: video is a powerful tool if done right, but any misstep in tone, message or delivery will be magnified in a crisis.



2.3.6. Deal with inaccurate information

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.

In particular, on social media follow your organisation's guidelines for social media engagement to assess whether and how to respond to inaccurate information or attacks. For example, you may decide that it is not worth engaging with haters.

Remind staff via internal communication channels that evaluating and responding to inaccurate information will be dealt with by the communication team only.

Remember to use the same hashtag (#) when responding, in order to reach as many people as possible who may have seen the inaccurate claim.

2.3.7. 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 via messaging platforms, organising hybrid/online press conferences or even establishing a free-of-charge consumer enquiry line, which can be publicised in retail stores.

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



2.3.8. Ongoing activities

During the incident, continue to:

- gather the facts and develop messages for more detailed communication materials;
- review and update messages;
- consider what visuals will be used or created to accompany the materials developed.

2.4. Post-incident lessons learned

In the immediate aftermath of an incident, it is important to capture any lessons learned from a communications perspective. Communication 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 about 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 Member States and/or EFSA collaborate?
- How well did the communication professionals from each affected MSs and/or from EFSA collaborate?
- Were updates shared in a timely way?
- Was communication between MSs and EFSA clear despite language barriers?
- How well did the inter-organisational communication channels work (CEN, 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 and social media monitoring 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 identified the lessons learned, it is important to share them with the CEN. This will help you identify any training requirements and seek opportunities to make collective improvements to collaborative processes.

At the end of the lessons-learned exercise, you should consider the following:

- updating template materials and communication procedures if improvements are identified as part of the review;
- ensuring external (and, as appropriate, internal) communication is represented in any wider review of the incident within the organisation;
- future training requirements;
- arranging regular refresher training, as needed, for the risk assessment team and/or communications team, e.g. crisis simulation exercises, media interview training courses, etc.



3. The role of EFSA & the Communications Experts Network (CEN)

EFSA's CEN provides an important mechanism for the exchange of information and experiences. It provides a basis for strengthening the coherence and coordination of communications activities between the national authorities and EFSA in their areas of responsibility for risk communication. The 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.

A food or feed safety incident involving one Member State only is primarily tackled at national level. This workflow can be applied and adapted to the national context to deal with such incidents. Timely liaison with the EFSA's CEN is essential for helping its members to be prepared for potential further developments, including the involvement of additional countries.

During an **incident within EFSA's remit that involves multiple Member States**, EFSA will coordinate risk-assessment-related crisis communications with CEN members (and/or the appropriate national contacts) and the European Commission, ensuring timely access to information for all members.



3.1. EFSA's to-do list

To ensure that communication activities relating to a crisis are coherent and well-coordinated across the European Union, EFSA's crisis communication team (called "Incidents Communications Team"), working closely with EFSA's CEN coordinator, will undertake the actions outlined below.

3.1.1. During the golden hour

1. **Schedule a CEN hot topic conference call as soon as EFSA is officially notified (or when it becomes unofficially aware) of the incident (T + 15 min):**
 - assess which MSs need to be involved and invite the relevant CEN member as necessary, i.e. those already affected or with the potential to be affected;
 - keep all other MSs updated and offer them the option to join the CEN conference calls;
 - ensure timely access to information for all members by providing collaborative platforms (SharePoint, Teams).
2. **Track all requests for information (T + 20 min)** by setting up logs for media enquiries and social media posts.
3. **Prepare a reactive holding statement (T + 30 min)**, explaining EFSA's role in the incident, for use in response to any media enquiries.
4. **Share the holding statement (T + 40 min)** with MSs via the CEN.
5. **EFSA facilitates the Member States' sharing of approved holding statements, Q&As/FAQs (T + 40 min)** and other communication materials relating to the incident with the CEN and other MSs that are involved.

3.1.2. During the incident

1. **Schedule follow-up conference calls for the duration of the incident to ensure diary time is allocated for these important updates.**
2. **Chair CEN hot topic 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 the sharing of communications messages and timing of media communications to encourage a collaborative approach;
 - advise on EFSA's perspective and share EFSA's communications messages;
 - facilitate discussion of next steps;
 - summarise agreed actions and schedule next conference call.
3. **Deal with all media enquiries** in a timely manner, working together with the affected MSs, the European Commission and other relevant institutions.
4. **Deal with inaccurate information** as appropriate, if information provided by EFSA is reported inaccurately by the media or on social media. Consider whether to correct it either by contacting the journalist or by responding to the social media post.
5. **Share media monitoring and social media monitoring reports** with affected and potentially affected MSs at a frequency agreed with the CEN.
6. **Continue to share relevant information with Member States.**

3.1.3. After the incident

1. Share appropriate or valuable **lessons learnt** with MSs via the CEN, and request MS **feedback** on the management and/or coordination of external communications during the incident.
2. Update **template materials and procedures** if needed.
3. Consider **future training needs** and plan regular refresher training.



ANNEX I: PRACTICAL TOOLKIT

a. 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	Responsibility	Share with EFSA/ other MSs	Done
Golden Hour				
Convene the crisis communication team and gather all information	T + 5	Crisis communication manager		
Brief internal stakeholders and ensure senior management is informed of situation and communications actions	T + 5	Crisis communication team		
Inform chair of CEN of the evolving issue in your country and what actions have been taken so far	T + 10	Crisis communication manager		
Check availability of colleagues for sign-off in line with the crisis policy	T + 15	Crisis communication team		
If not yet defined, agree on approval channels				
Agree on the frequency of progress calls				
Define and record internal and external target groups	T + 15	Crisis communication team		
Set up crisis log book to keep track of all developments. Consider dedicated inbox or shared online space	T + 15	Crisis communication team		
Inform and liaise with key external stakeholders such as the Advisory Forum (AF)	T + 15	EFSA		
Schedule and chair CEN conference calls. Invite relevant MSs and keep all other MSs informed	T + 15	EFSA		
Inform and liaise with key internal and external stakeholders	T + 20	Crisis communication team		
Set up media and social media monitoring in collaboration with service provider if relevant	T + 20	Media and Social Media Officers		
Draft internal and external statements and share with EFSA and other MSs as appropriate	T + 30	Crisis communication team / legal team	YES	
Pause any planned social media/media releases	T + 45	Media and Social Media Officers		
Review media content, timing & facts	T + 45	Crisis communication team		
Release holding statement and share with EFSA and other MSs as appropriate	T + 50	Media and Social Media Officers	YES	

Actions during a live incident/crisis	Deadline	Responsibility	Share with EFSA/ other MSs	Done
Planning the next steps and distribute tasks	T + 60	Crisis communication team		
After the Golden Hour				
Participate in CEN conference calls if your 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	Ongoing	Head of Communications (member of the CEN)		
Keep your MS Advisory Forum member updated	Ongoing	Head of Communications (member of the CEN)		
Nominate and brief media spokespersons – organise media prep if necessary	D 1	Media Relations Officer		
Deal with media enquiries in a professional and timely manner. Consider a press conference if inquiries become overwhelming in number	Ongoing	Media Relations Officer		
Review media and social media monitoring reports frequently. Correct inaccurate information where possible and relevant. Consider whether additional resources are needed for monitoring and response. Share relevant information with EFSA and MSs	Ongoing	Media and Social Media Officer	YES	
Define the channels to be used to reach the target audiences identified. Consider the needs of hard-to-reach audiences and tailor your strategy	Ongoing / modify and adapt as needed throughout emerging situation	Head of Communications		
Identify third-party 'friends' for potential endorsement or to multiply your key messages and information	Ongoing / modify and adapt as needed throughout emerging situation	Head of Communications		
Prepare Q&A / FAQ and share with colleagues for review / new information to be added Share with EFSA and other MSs as appropriate	D 8	Media Relations Officer	YES	
Consider what visuals might be useful to support your messages, particularly for FAQ	D 8	Designer	YES	
Continue to review and update messages Continue to share with EFSA and other MSs as appropriate	Ongoing	Crisis communication team	YES	
After the incident				
Capture lessons learnt on external and internal communication and share with EFSA/CEN Update template materials and procedures if needed		Crisis communication team (contribution of all staff involved)	YES	
Consider future training needs and plan regular refresher trainings (including crisis simulation exercises, managing media interviews)		Crisis communication team		

b. Media enquiry log form

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)

c. Holding statements – principles and examples

Key principles

- Limit the number of key messages to a maximum of three or four.
- 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.
- Focus on your target audiences:
 - make the messages relevant to each specific group of people, considering their needs and perceptions;
 - treat people as human beings with individual, emotional needs, as well as rational needs;
 - quote names (if appropriate) to bring your information to life.
- If the incident involves food recalls, you may share details of the affected products with the respective company prior to publication to make sure information is correct, but it is advisable not to share your media statements with industry actors before publication.
- Go live asap: a statement released at 10.00 p.m. will be immediately picked up by online news outlets.

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

[Location] [Date]

[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 cooperation 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 (include link) at 1.00 pm, this afternoon, etc.].

Media contact: [name employee communications team], tel. [mobile no.]

Phase 2: Evolving wider awareness holding statement

[Location], [Date].

[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 ongoing [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].

Media contact: [name employee communications team], tel. [mobile no.]

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: Confirmed issue statement

[Location], [Date].

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)*]. The 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.

Media contact: [*name employee communications team*], tel. [*mobile no.*]

d. Checklist for preparing a Q&A (internal) or FAQ (external) document

The **Q&A** is an internal document developed to guide your spokesperson during interviews and interaction with media.

FAQs will be made publicly available to inform and (if appropriate) reassure the public, advising on potential actions to take.

Golden rule: place yourself in the journalist's or in your neighbour'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. What symptoms should people be looking for?

A. [Short, clear explanation.]

Q. What are you doing about it?

A. [Successful measures taken if any.]

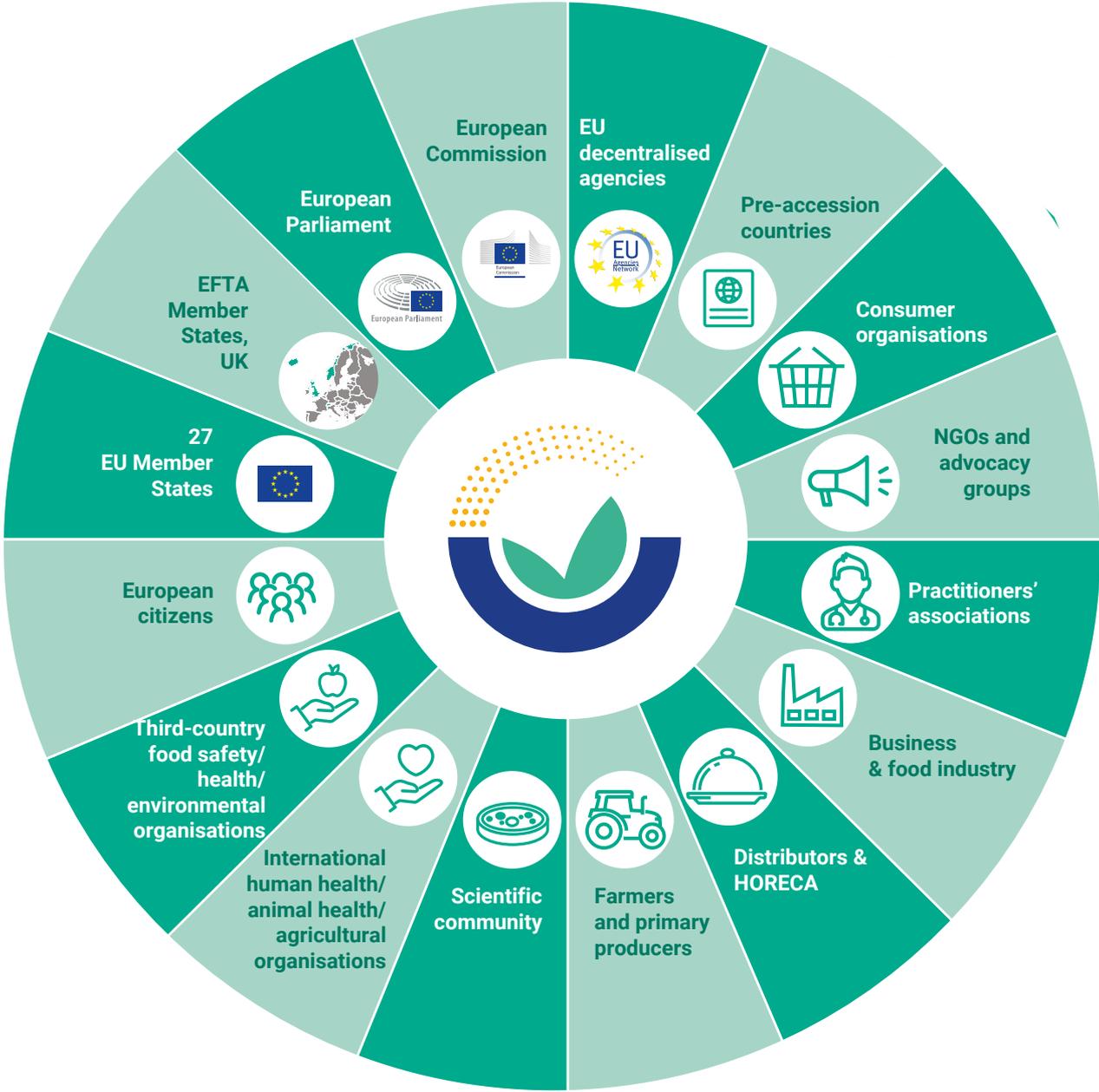
Q. When will the product be back on sale?

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

For Q&As, consider also:

- using infographics and visual, clear representations,
- shorter answers to be published on social media.

e. Stakeholder map⁴ – EFSA’s example

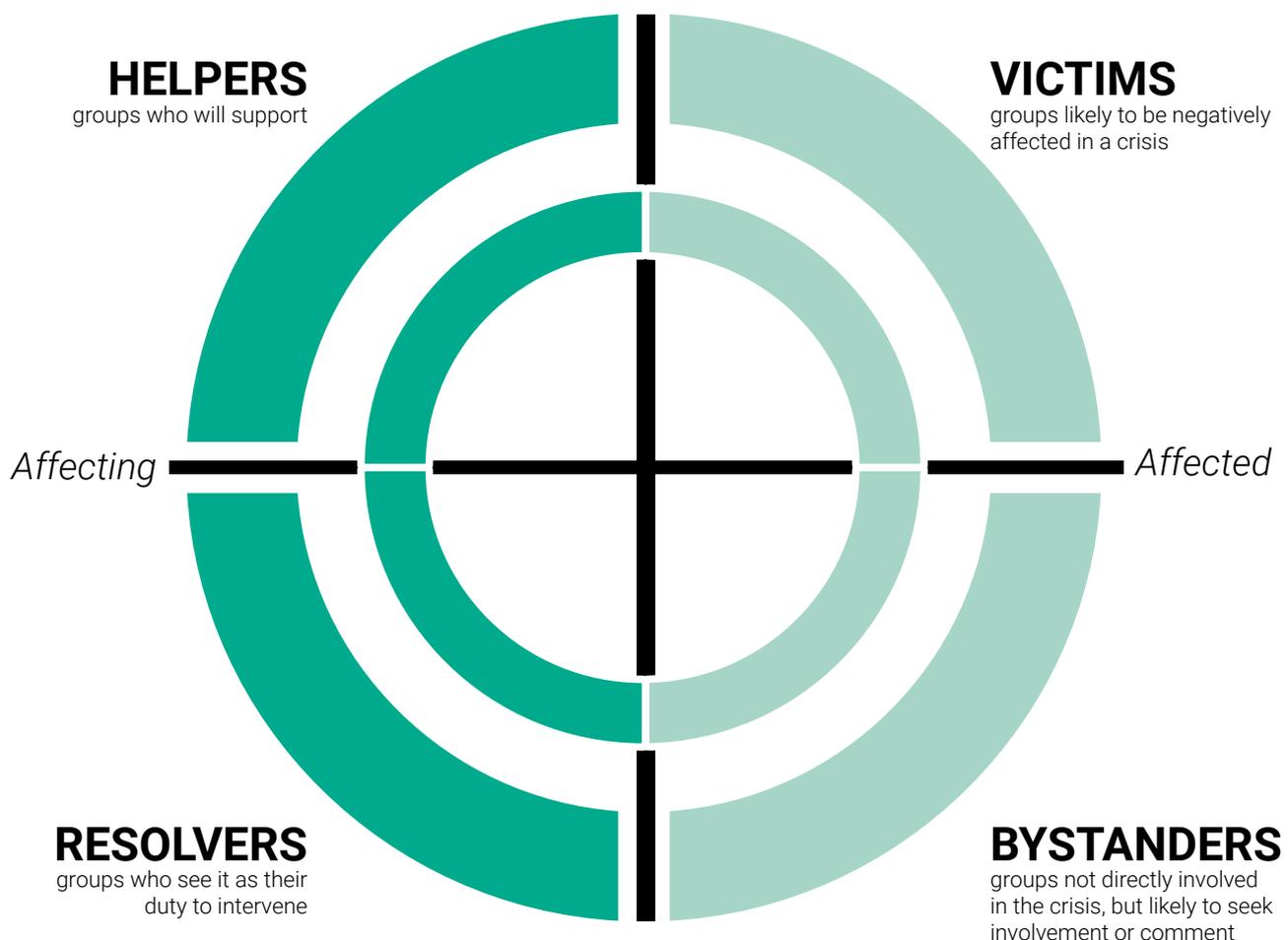


4 This is an illustration of the landscape of European and international stakeholders with whom EFSA communicates and collaborates during incidents. It is not a formal map of official stakeholders..

f. 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 MSs, 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 II: Crisis-preparedness activities in peacetime

Once an organisation reaches a certain size, it is not a question of if a crisis will hit, but when. It is critical that significant time and effort is invested in preparing for future crises. If you think preparation is expensive and time-consuming, try facing a crisis you are not prepared for.

Certain activities need to happen before a crisis strikes. Carrying out the below activities would be ideal to ensure that the organisation is crisis-proof.

- Crisis training with the crisis team should take place at least once a year. Make sure new staff members are trained.
- Update your crisis document each year. Every member of your communication department should be familiar with it.
- Realistic, scenario-based training exercises are a very effective way of testing crisis communications procedures ahead of a real incident. 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 Member States. Participation is recommended.
- After each simulation, the crisis communications manual should be revised.
- The crisis communications manual should include a wide range of scenarios – the response to a death from intoxication will obviously differ from the IT network going down.
- A stakeholder mapping exercise must be carried out once a year to identify key external stakeholders. A stakeholder map is included for reference in Annex I, e and an audience mapping template is included in Annex I, f.
- Distribute all updated crisis materials to all those involved every 6 months.
- Check the crisis approval process (for statements, for example) to ensure clarity and quicker approvals when needed.
- Identify a list of spokespeople and provide them with media training. Ideally, spokespersons likely to be nominated to represent their organisation during an incident should attend crisis media training at least once every two years to ensure that they are confident in dealing with the media in potentially hostile interview situations.
- Organisations may decide to establish mechanisms to quickly deploy the resources needed to effectively respond to the crisis (e.g. the press office and social media team may need additional support to face a sharp increase in requests and activity).
- A strategy to consolidate and improve the reputation of your organisation can be hugely important. If stakeholders trust the organisation, crisis communications will be smoother.
- Ensure your social media monitoring activities on free or paid platforms are effective. Test different tools and platforms in peacetime if you consider switching.

ANNEX III: Glossary of terms

ABC	Acknowledge-Bridge-Continue technique
AF	EFSA's Advisory Forum
CEN	EFSA's Communication Experts Network
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's Focal Point
HoA	Heads of European Food Safety Agencies
MS	Member State
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 IV: Useful references

- CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) online. **Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication (CERC)**
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ANNEX V: Contributors

EFSA would like to thank all those who contributed to the development of these recommendations, in particular:

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