

Background and Context

Avian Influenza was diagnosed in turkeys in rearing sheds at a multi-operation site at Holton, Suffolk. The site owner is Bernard Matthews, a high-profile multi-national operation. All turkeys at the site were culled. All persons coming into contact with the infected birds were offered health screening. Restriction and surveillance zones were enforced from 2 February to 12 March 2007. At the site, restrictions on the turkey rearing sheds were more prolonged than those on the meat processing operation. The source of the outbreak was not identified but the strain was identified as similar to that which caused an outbreak in Hungary, a country where Bernard Matthews also has commercial interests.

How the Topic was Handled

The national media operation for the outbreak of avian flu and for any animal disease outbreak is managed centrally by press officers in Defra's Communications Directorate. Press officers at Defra work closely with GNN colleagues locally and with the Local Disease Control Centre (LDCC) to ensure that media are kept up to date consistently at the national and local level. In addition, at the local level, different agencies, including in this case Suffolk County Council and Suffolk police, play an important role in communicating messages to residents and keepers in the local area.

The return of the nation's media to Suffolk in February 2007 for the outbreak of H5N1 came just six weeks after the world's media focused on the county for the murder of five Ipswich prostitutes in December 2006.

As a result, the groundwork and firm foundations had already been laid between communication officers and national correspondents. Indeed for a number of national and local outlets, it was the same correspondents who covered both stories.

Having already established this rapport with media representatives, answering queries and setting up interviews was smoother. The close timing of two high profile cases also meant that a very strong relationship had been forged between communication specialists based in different agencies, especially Suffolk County Council and Suffolk Police.

Likewise, there was an awareness by elected members and officers of the importance of the media in terms of disseminating key messages, public reassurance and operational information in times of crisis and emergency.

In technical terms, providing for the demands of interview requests allowed the communications team to offer three different responses, depending on the nature of the query.

- First, the assistant county trading standards officer was lined up to handle interview requests that would focus on operational procedure, such as the work of officers going door-to-door or from farm gate to farm gate. She also put across public reassurance messages. It was very useful to have one recognisable 'talking head' that could be publicly identified with the operational

messages. Her previous experience with the media stood her in good stead for the onslaught of questions and interview requests. However, we did find that placing one officer under such sustained level of media exposure over a number of days meant that this was a full time role for her during the period.

- Second, the county's senior politician for public protection matters, also gave reassurance messages.
- Third, a local county councillor, who also lived in the village of Holton, provided a public face and voice for the local community. She was a vital link with villages and the town council and gave information on the spread of Portuguese workers in the factory and surrounding area.

Throughout the bird flu outbreak there were three centres where communications specialists were based: near the site in Holton, at Gold command/ Local Emergency Centre and at Suffolk County Council HQ at Endeavour House in Ipswich. Messages were co-ordinated between the three points.

This was particularly useful during the first 36 hours for the following reasons:

1. co-ordination of messages out of Gold to those doing live media interviews
2. co-ordination of media for pooled facilities, eg. photocall for putting up restriction zone signs, farm gate visits
3. co-ordination of live press conferences and avoiding the existence of an information vacuum for the media on site and at newsdesks.

As the story broke over a weekend, the most efficient way to inform the public was through the media. With this in mind, we made the assistant county trading standards officer, as the main spokesperson, as available as possible to the media. She disseminated key public and operational messages for the general public, poultry farmers, back-yard chicken keepers, partners and local business.

She undertook live interviews constantly at the scene over the first few days, explaining what had happened, what the restrictions meant and what the next steps would be.

Trading standards officers were filmed, but not interviewed, putting up signs and doing farm gate checks with local poultry owners. Highways staff were filmed putting up signs at key points entering the different disease zones that were implemented.

A live press conference was organised near the site within the first 48 hours on Sunday to cater for national news outlets.

The necessary information reached its target quickly and cost effectively this way. We then followed this up with a mail out of over 92,000 letters to local residents. The absence of panic among local people, while not completely removing all concerns, did show that fast, comprehensive

information about the reality of the outbreak had reached those who needed it most and had reached them with enough detail to take effect.

The campaign also allowed the county's reputation to be restored quickly after the restriction zone was lifted.

Lessons Identified

- During an outbreak, it is vital to manage the media. Whilst in this outbreak some media interviews were given at the site, media interviews are NOT encouraged at infected premises so as not to hamper operational matters by encouraging a large media presence. Media do head to sites where activity is occurring and Defra will send a Government News Network (GNN) press officer to supervise and disseminate information, but responding organisations should not encourage the media by providing a spokesperson at the scene. All media interviews should be conducted from the LDCC and no portable media facilities should be provided at the site.
- Good established relationships with national press and with partner agencies ensured the media operation hit the ground running.
- The story breaking over the weekend meant that media was the key outlet for informing the public.
- It was invaluable having one recognisable operational expert, who was media trained, to front up most of the media interviews. However, this did take up all her time over the first few days, preventing her from undertaking more of an operational role.
- Local knowledge on the ground helped us tailor the messages we were issuing, especially in terms of back-yard chicken keepers and the sizeable Portuguese community.

Contacts for Further Information

Francis Thomas

Suffolk County Council

Head of Communication

Email: francis.thomas@comms.suffolkcc.gov.uk

Saraid Cann

Suffolk County Council

Communications Manager

Trading Standards

Email: saraid.cann@tradstan.suffolkcc.gov.uk