

Making the Partner Exercise work: A guide for facilitators

Aims of the exercise

This exercise came about as a way of getting emergency planners to firstly think about resources they could access within their own community and secondly, to consider the way in which these resources would be realistically accessed.

Background

The exercise was initiated by Lucy Easthope, Lancaster University. Previous experiences of post disaster recovery, coupled with her ethnographic research in the village of Toll Bar after the floods of 2007, led Lucy to conclude that emergency planners should aim to play a role of 'brokerage' between affected community members and existing support networks (for example health and community support groups, voluntary sector and cultural organisations) and indeed within their own council (for example the housing department, social services and neighbourhood management teams).

"The research evidences in great detail the 'efforts' that went into developing relationships and this was mutual from both the community and the responders. It also captures the way in which this often took many months to fully extrapolate the benefits e.g. I would assert that without the many months of relationship building that went on in 2007-8, the flood warden scheme that was initiated 2008-9 would not have been as successful.

*A further lesson that I have translated into training material is the powerful collaboration between the neighbourhood management team, the emergency management team, the voluntary sector agencies and strategic leads at the council. The emergency planners provided a critical logistics and support role but should be commended for 'allowing' the recovery to be managed by those with the operational expertise with regard to aspects such as rehousing and waste clearance, while also calling upon the expertise of organisations such as the British Red Cross"
(Lucy Easthope, 2009¹)*

The design of the exercise

All of the questions posed here are based loosely on recent events, both in the UK and overseas, and in some cases have featured in debrief reports about them. (The issue of mobile phone chargers for example has come out of debriefs into flooding rest centres. The issue of cards and tributes left at incident sites has been raised after numerous incidents).

The aim of the questions is to be suitably generalised so that they could be applied to a number of different types of emergency.

How to use the exercise

This exercise has now been tested in a number of settings over two years. The best circumstances for using it seem to be with a mix of emergency responders from a localised area who are working in an operational role and are already engaging with local partners coupled with their strategic colleagues who are then able to observe how this will work in practice.

Usually it has followed a presentation highlighting why this relationship building is important using recent case studies such as the work undertaken in Doncaster after the 2007 floods. It is probably best to avoid using it as a start of the day ice breaker as some scene setting does seem to work well.

It has generally been used in an informal 'group-work' setting; small teams work on the questions or a portion of the questions and then come together to discuss the feedback. There are sample answers but it is important to understand that these are not set in stone and are instead more of a guide. In a local area, there may be a better, more specific response. As discussed below, some of the discussion time is also allocated to examining how the links might be made / or the services accessed with the partner agencies.

The facilitator should not expect to know all the answers so should be open to input from delegates. Ultimately the completed answer template can form a local resource.

How to make the exercise challenging

This exercise is designed to be quite challenging. Some delegates who attend are very certain that they are best placed to deliver all the services so it is good to explore this in the discussion time.

You may also wish to challenge delegates who provide answers that are too generalised e.g. when asked about local language interpreters some delegates will write in the box "use a local university". Consider asking*which local university? Does it even have a languages department? Are they best placed to be translating sensitive or distressing material?*

This is not saying that the university isn't a good option but aiming to generate a more specific, localised debate e.g. the delegate will provide an example of a time when they did effectively form a link with a University or perhaps used a service like Language Line and crucially **how** this link was made. This again emphasises the importance of the discussion time in a really open environment

Summary

Training and exercising for recovery can be difficult; recovery from emergencies can take months and years and capturing this aspect can be problematic in a short training session. By breaking issues down with this partnership exercise you should be able to generate a really useful debate, leading to further exploration of the potential linkages within the community.