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INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON GROUP ON RISK ASSESSMENT

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA: A GUIDE TO RISK COMMUNICATION

A Paper by the Secretariat

Summary

1. This paper:
 - i. gives a progress report on research projects examining the social amplification and attenuation of risk;
 - ii. describes subsequent work on a guide based on the research for use by Government Departments dealing with risk issues to enable them to make best use of the media as a channel for risk communication; and
 - iii. provides a draft of the guide (at Annex A) to enable ILGRA members to see its structure and content.

Background

2. Some hazards or events which experts regard as presenting relatively low risk can become a focus of social and political concern because public perception of the risk is amplified, while others, which experts consider present a high risk, do not, because public perception is attenuated. Working between 1998 and 2001, four research teams¹ examined factors, particularly the media, which lead to this mismatch between public and expert opinion. All four projects are now complete. Two have been published as HSE Contract Research Reports² (CRR), a third is in the process of being published as a CRR, and the fourth will be published commercially by Cambridge University Press early in 2002. The research was sponsored by: the Cabinet Office, Civil Aviation Authority, Economic and Social Research Council, Environment Agency, Food Standards Agency, Department of Health, Health and Safety Executive, and the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland.

¹Based at the Universities of Birmingham, East Anglia and Surrey, and Queen's University, Belfast.

²HSE CRRs are available under "Research" on the HSE website. Details are in Annex 1 of the attachment to this paper.

3. The research provided a great deal of material which will be of use to officials who need to understand the role of the media in influencing public opinion, and communicate with the public through the media, on risk issues. However, in the form of academic research reports running into some 1,500 pages in total, this information is not readily accessible. The research steering group decided that a short, practical Guide for Departments to use as a working document would be the best way to make information generally available. A first draft of this guide was written and circulated to steering group members and the research teams for comment in August. Earlier comments have now been incorporated, and the revised draft is attached.

4. The next step in the process will be to incorporate later comments and circulate the revised version to steering group members to produce a final draft. The final draft will be discussed and validated at a workshop planned for December. The workshop will involve representatives of the sponsoring Departments (including press office staff) and research teams, and independent experts and practitioners.

Issue

5. Information on this work was included in the Government Response to the Report of the BSE Inquiry (paragraphs 5.25 and 5.28 of the response refer).

6. The project having now reached a stage where a tangible output is available, this is a suitable time to advise ILGRA members of progress and to seek their views on the draft Guide.

Action

7. ILGRA members are invited to note progress on the project. Detailed comments have already been provided by members of the steering group and the researchers, but ILGRA members are welcome to comment on the attached draft. Will anyone who wishes to attend the workshop, or nominate a representative, please send details to the contact below.

Deadline for comments

8. Comments should be sent to the contact below by **Friday 16 November**.

Contact

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