Delivering effective warnings

Speed read

- Key elements that feature in the construction of a warning are the issuing authority, the call-to-action, timing and frequency of issue, maps and visuals, using clear language, making them easily accessible and shared, tailored for local communities and diverse audiences.
- Warnings need to be delivered through multiple channels such as websites and apps, radio and television, social media, SMS, face-to-face, sirens and public address systems, print media, community noticeboards, roadside messages.
- The Australian Warning System is a three-level scaled warning system. It includes a nationally consistent set of icons to show incidents on websites and apps, supported by calls to action.

Key points

- **The decision to warn**
  - Determining when a warning is required needs a guiding structure and process.
  - Use a consistent scale or categorised system to determine the level of warning.
  - The Australian Warning System is a three-level scaled warning system. It includes a nationally consistent set of icons to show incidents on websites and apps, supported by calls to action.
  - Warnings are underpinned by risk assessments that consider the nature of a hazard, exposure to the hazard, vulnerability to this exposure, and the overall level of certainty.
  - In the event of cascading events and consequences, coordinated warnings are more effective than several different warnings spanning different subjects.

- **Essentials of message construction**
  - State the issuing authority, use clear language, include a call-to-action, follow good practice structure, be consistent, consider timing and frequency of issue, use maps and visual information where appropriate, make messages easily shared, accessible, targeted to specific locations and tailor to local communities and diverse audiences.
  - Factors to consider when tailoring warnings: languages spoken, cultural diversity, history and stability within the community, social or economic disadvantage, population age, disability and specific support needs, hard-to-reach communities, tourists, telecommunication coverage, road and access conditions.
  - Be clear on what information should be presented as a critical warning, and which is best provided as general public information. Base these on impact and consequence for communities.

- **Getting the message out**
  - Deliver warning through multiple channels of communication. Each communication channel has its strengths and limitations, warnings should be tailored to suit the channel they are being provided on.
  - Common channels of communication: websites and apps, radio and television, digital and social media, telephone and SMS, face-to-face, sirens and public-address systems, print media, distribution lists, community noticeboards, roadside and variable message signs.

- **Planning for systems failures and unexpected challenges**
  - Critical public telecommunications infrastructure or key warning systems may fail or be unavailable for critical periods of time, or an event will overwhelm or confound usual processes.
  - How can warning systems rapidly adapt to different circumstances?
  - What are the most likely cascading impacts if public information and warnings cannot be provided as planned?
  - How do communities respond when expected supports fail?
  - The uncertainty of predicted and current events will often mean a decision to warn is complex. Importantly, uncertainty should not result in the delay or lack of warning.
  - Emergency services can work with local utility providers to articulate this priority and to assist in defining vulnerable communities (e.g. where mobile coverage is limited, or where particular communities might rely more heavily on information and advice).
- **Just as it is important to warn, it is equally important to advise community members when a threat has passed.**

Take action

- Download and use the guidance and materials on the Australian Warning System.
- Use *Guideline 1: Warning Message Construction: Choosing your words* (AIDR 2021) provides details on key elements that should feature in the construction of every warning.
- Review *Guideline 2: Warnings republishers* (AIDR 2018). It provides guidance on republishing warnings during emergencies for established emergency broadcasters, individuals and community members and private warning publishers or disseminators and outlines key considerations for those who may be working with or sharing content for warnings.
- Watch BNHCRC's video series on *Effective risk and warning communication during natural hazards:*
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMDhH3B6vFE
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MI39VI-vB3I
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TpBY-ylaBU

More information

- *Public Information and Warnings* (AIDR 2021)
- *AIDR's Warnings Collection* brings together key guidance material, research, information and professional development resources to support provision of effective warnings in Australia.
- *Handbook companion documents* for Public Information and Warnings (AIDR 2021).
- *NBN prepare for an emergency*.