GEORGE
THE CITY FOR ALL REASONS

Appendix 3: GM Crisis Communications Policy

Crisis Communications:
Any crisis requires immediate communication intervention. Effective communication management is required to maintain and/or restore public confidence. This policy provides the key communication actions and processes that should follow in the event of a crisis and should at all times complement disaster and crisis-management protocols within local government.

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Definitions of Terms

Account	This refers to a valid profile using a social media platform for official social media use. Without an account, one cannot create a profile.
Citizen	Any individual that resides in the country.
Communication Action Plan	The annual master (action) plan on rolling out the strategy and a framework for developing programmes and campaigns.
Communication Campaign	Once-off, multiple, or cyclical communication activities with strategic stakeholders. These are time-bound and planned. They normally focus on an immediate objective.
Communication Policy	Provides the institutional framework in which the communication plan is implemented. It covers the division of responsibilities and general guidelines for communicating with various target groups and who can act as spokespeople for the municipality.
Communication Programmes	The continuous communication activities with strategic stakeholders, including internal and external newsletters.
Communications Strategy	The strategy determines the path and/or actions that must be taken for the organization to be able to reach its goals. Several different strategies can be employed to achieve organizational goals. The framework for communication planning allows the communication manager to establish a profile/framework against which to test communication decisions. It identifies the right problems to solve and prioritizes areas or issues for which to develop communication plans. It determines what should be communicated to support the municipality's overall objectives and may be aligned to local and national government objectives.
Disaster	A natural or human-caused event, occurring with or without warning, causing or threatening death, injury or disease, damage to property, infrastructure, or the environment,

	which exceeds the ability of the affected society to cope using only its own resources.
Disaster (Emergency) Area	The total area affected by the emergency (disaster) incident.
Disaster Management	A collective term encompassing all aspects of planning for and responding to disaster, including both pre and post disaster activities, namely, prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery, and rehabilitation. It may refer to the management of both the risks and consequences of disasters.
Drought	A weather condition that occurs over a period of time when rainfall is so low (or unreliable) that natural vegetation and/or farming activities are severely damaged or destroyed.
Early Warning	The identification, interpretation, and recognition of events which would draw attention to a potential emergency.
ECC	Emergency Control Centre.
Epidemic	Any outbreak of a contagious disease that spreads rapidly and widely amongst people and/or animals.
Expenditure	Disbursements of funds by government.
Flood Plain	An area of land adjacent to a river that is inundated by floods occurring in the river.
Forward Command Post (FCP)	Dealing with a disaster on the scene to ensure that role players responding at the site of the emergency are coordinating their response.
GCIS	Government Communication and Information System
George Municipality	: Any area within the municipal boundaries.
Hazardous Substances	Substances that can cause harm or damage to humans, animals, and the environment.
Hazards	Threats to life, well-being, material goods, and/or the environment. They are caused by extreme natural processes or technological developments. When a hazard results in great suffering or collapse, it is usually referred to as a disaster.

Human-Made Disasters	Human-Made Disasters: Disaster or emergency situations, which are caused directly or indirectly by identifiable human actions, deliberate or otherwise.
Incident	Incident: A relatively minor occurrence or event (that may lead to a public crisis).
IP	Internet Protocol
Incident Commander	The Incident Commander is the person responsible for all aspects of an emergency response; including quickly developing incident objectives, managing all incident operations, application of resources as well as responsibility for all persons involved.
JOC	Joint Operational Centre
Link/Hyperlink	A segment of text or a graphic that a user can click on, which takes you to different parts of a webpage or between two different websites.
Media Channels	The methods used to communicate a message, including spoken words, print, radio, television, or the internet.
Network	Interconnected paths of communication between various social media platforms, people, businesses, and groups.
Official Channels	A means of communication through which any content passes is conveyed or disseminated, relating to an office and its administration approved by, recognized by, or issued from authority.
Online Community	A group of people using social media tools as a means of sharing content and communicating with each other.
Platform	A framework upon which tools of communication such as social media operate.
Post	This is a piece of content that is shared on a social media platform.
Posted	The act of having shared a piece of content that is shared on a social media platform.
Profile	: A profile is a description a registered user or organization inputs about themselves on a social media platform. This

	may include basic information about the user or organization, a picture, a description, and links.
Public Space	In the context of social media, this refers to areas online where the general public partakes in various forms of engagement in a personal and professional capacity.
Redirect	Web server function that sends a user from one URL to another, usually via a link.
Sharing	The act of passing on the content to and from individuals, groups, and organizations across social media platforms.
Social Media	A collection of interactive online platforms and tools that individuals, groups, and other organizations use to share content, profiles, opinions, insights, experiences, perspectives, and media itself. It allows for the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Examples include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, Google+, blogs, comments facilities on third party websites, mobile and tablet apps, and any other form of electronic communication to which it is possible to post messages that are visible to the public.
Social Media Communications Officer	A professional Communications Officer that specializes in using social media channels as a communication medium for local government audiences.
Social Media Monthly Action Plan	Operational Social Media plans are developed every month for the municipality in line with the annual communication action plan.
Social Media Platforms	The tools or mechanisms that are used to facilitate the creation and exchange of content generated for and by users.
Social Media Presence	When an individual, group, or organization creates an account on any social media platform.
Subscribing	When an individual or organization selects to have access to an online service in order to receive up to date information.
Tools	These tools include access to social media platforms, budget and/or cellphone allowance to manage municipal social

	media platforms remotely (i.e., airtime and/or data to manage social media via smartphone).
Tone	This is implied by the words selected and in how the words are arranged. It is also determined by the writer's attitude and knowledge towards the subject and the reader. For example, choosing to write formally or using slang.
Transactional Engagement	Two-way communication that focuses on positive working relationships in exchange for desirable rewards and where feedback is required. Not anything of monetary value.
	To stop following someone's activities or remove oneself as a member of a community on a social media platform.
User-Generated Content	This term is used to describe any form of content such as video, blogs, images, audio files, and other forms of media that are created by users online and is accessible to other users.
Usernames	A sequence of characters is used as identification and is required when logging on to a computer and or social media platform.
Users	An individual or organization that partakes in any type of engagement or information sharing on a social media platform.
URL	Uniform Resource Locator - technical term for the web address of an internet site.

Acronyms used

IDP: Integrated Development Plan

RDP: Reconstruction and Development Programme

GCIS: Government Communication and Information System

GM: George Municipality

1. Introduction

According to the Disaster Management Act, the George Municipality is mandated to develop a disaster management plan tailored to its circumstances. This plan must anticipate potential disasters in the area, assess their likely effects, and identify communities at risk.

It should encompass contingency plans and emergency procedures, including coordination of responsibilities among various stakeholders, prompt disaster response and relief efforts, recovery and rehabilitation strategies focusing on risk reduction or mitigation, procurement of essential goods and services, the establishment of strategic communication channels, and **the dissemination of information as outlined in the GM Crisis Communication Policy.**

This policy sets out the framework for communication during a crisis situation by the George Municipal Communications Department.

Situational Analysis

George Local Municipality, situated in the Western Cape within the Garden Route District, covers a vast area of 5191km² and is home to 294,000 residents as of STATSSA 2023. It boasts diverse landscapes, ranging from the arid Little Karoo to the temperate Garden Route. The municipality is bordered by several other municipal areas, including Oudtshoorn, Mossel Bay, Dr Beyers Naude, Kou-Kamma, Knysna, and Bitou.

The George Municipality administers a geographically diverse area, encompassing mountains, forests, wilderness areas, coastline, lakes, rivers, estuaries, farmlands, timber plantations, fruit orchards, and arid grazing areas. Important national roads like the N2, N9 (R62), and N12 pass through the area, with George Regional Airport serving the Southern Cape and Little Karoo regions.

The city of George serves as the primary urban center, hosting 84% of the municipal area's population, while Wilderness, Uniondale, and Haarlem accommodate the bulk of the remaining urban population, with 9% residing in rural areas.

South Africa faces various natural and human-induced hazards, notably floods, droughts, and fires, often linked to water-related challenges such as excess or scarcity.

These hazards have far-reaching impacts on infrastructure, resources, and livelihoods, particularly affecting vulnerable community sectors. Changing societal vulnerabilities, compounded by factors like poverty and limited resource access, increase the risk and lead to significant physical, financial, and social losses.

Climate Vulnerability

The Western Cape Province, home to the George Municipality, is particularly vulnerable to climate change due to its coastal position and the influence of rising sea temperatures on weather patterns.

Local Scale Vulnerability

Understanding vulnerability at a local level is crucial for disaster preparedness and response. Identifying high-risk populations and implementing appropriate frameworks to address vulnerability are integral components of effective disaster management.

PART A: Purpose

A1. Purpose

The Crisis Communications Policy for George Municipality aims to establish an organized and efficient framework for communication during emergencies and disasters. It delineates essential actions and strategies to ensure timely and accurate information dissemination, thereby safeguarding lives, property, and community well-being.

A2. Scope

This Crisis Communications Policy is designed to address these contextual factors and provide a clear framework for communication during emergencies, helping to protect the community and enhance resilience in the face of crises.

Effective and immediate communication during a crisis is critical for any organization or individual to manage the situation and minimize potential damage. The key to successful crisis communication is to act quickly, communicate clearly, and remain transparent throughout the entire process.

Effective communication management is required to maintain and/or restore public confidence. This policy provides the key communication actions and processes that should follow in the event of a crisis and should at all times complement disaster and crisis-management protocols within local government.

A crisis can be declared nationally, provincially, and locally, and communications should at all times complement disaster and crisis-management protocols within local government. Communicators should assist with identifying or be made aware of any potential crisis and should manage communication activities to avert or limit.

PART B: Regulatory Framework

- Disaster Management Act, 2002 (Act 57 of 2002)
- George Municipal Disaster Management Plan
- GM Communications Policy
- Annexure 2: GM Social Media Communications Policy
- Constitution of South Africa (1996)
- Local Government: Municipal Structures Act (1998)
- Local Government: Municipal Systems Act (2000)
- Media Development and Diversity Agency Act (2002)
- Intergovernmental Relations Framework Act (2005).
- GCIS Communication Policy 2022
- Annexure 1: The Minutes: Executive Mayor in Committee Meeting 21 July 2004
- Annexure 6: Code of Conduct for Municipal Staff Members
- George Municipality's crisis communication plan is aligned with the Communication Policy and Municipal Disaster Management Plan, as per the Disaster Management Act, Act 57 of 2002.
- **The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa:** The Constitution of South Africa guarantees freedom of the press, which includes the right to freedom of expression, the right to access information, and the right to receive and impart information.
- **Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA):** This law was enacted to promote transparency and accountability in government and public bodies. It allows journalists and members of the public to access information held by public bodies.
- **Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA):** This law regulates the processing of personal information by public and private bodies. It aims to protect the privacy of individuals while also ensuring that journalists have access to information that is in the public interest.
- **Press Code:** The Press Council of South Africa adopted the Code for print and online medium and the Press Code is a set of ethical guidelines that journalists in South Africa are expected to follow. It covers areas such as accuracy, fairness, and impartiality in reporting.
- **Protected Disclosures Act:** This law provides protection for whistleblowers who disclose information about illegal or unethical conduct in the workplace, including in the media industry.

PART C: DEALING WITH A CRISIS

1. Defining a Crisis

A crisis is an unforeseen or unexpected event that threatens institutional operations and can have extremely negative consequences.

The National Disaster Management Act defines a disaster as a progressive or sudden, widespread or localized, natural or human-caused occurrence which causes or threatens to cause death, injury, or disease.

2. Types of Crisis

A crisis can be manmade and can impact public safety, lead to financial loss, or even reputational damage for the institution. If not managed effectively, a crisis can lead to an emergency.

There are various types of crises that organizations can face, and each type requires a different approach to communication. By understanding the different types of crises that organizations can face, you can develop a comprehensive crisis communication plan that takes into account the specific challenges and risks associated with each type of crisis.

Natural disasters:
This type of crisis includes events such as hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and wildfires. The impact of natural disasters can be widespread and can affect the operations of an organization, its employees, and its customers.

Technological crises:
This type of crisis involves a malfunction or failure of technology, such as a system outage, data breach, or cyber attack. Technological crises can have significant consequences for an organization, including damage to its reputation and financial losses.

Human-caused crises:

This type of crisis includes incidents such as workplace accidents, product recalls, and lawsuits. Human-caused crises can be caused by the actions of employees, suppliers, or customers, and can have legal, financial, and reputational implications.

Reputational crises:

This type of crisis involves damage to an organization's reputation, such as a scandal or negative media coverage. Reputational crises can be caused by a variety of factors, including unethical behavior, poor management, or a failure to meet customer expectations. It's important to note that some crises may overlap or fall into multiple categories. For example, a data breach may be both a technological crisis and a reputational crisis.

3. Crisis Protocol

It will be the responsibility of the Municipal Manager for George Municipality, to invoke a local emergency response, after consultation with the George Disaster Management Team plus all Directors.

At the onset of the event the Municipal Manager, Directors and the Disaster Management Team will congregate at the Disaster Management Centre and determine whether a Joint Operations Centre is required.

This decision must be communicated to the Garden Route District Municipality Centre and/or Provincial Disaster Centre if so required.

The George Municipal Disaster Management Team will consist of officials operating at the JOC or via TEAMS:

- **Municipal Manager:** Head of the JOC (or as appointed)
- **Disaster Management Team:** Disaster Management Officer / George Fire Chief, Law Enforcement Manager and Traffic Services Chief (or representatives of)
- **JOC spokesperson:** Communications Manager and/or Senior Communications Official

- **George Integrated Public Transport Network:** GIPTN PTOO and GO GEORGE Manager (if required)

- **Directors:** It is advisable that all Directors of the municipal directorates should form part of the disaster management team and attend the establishment meeting. Thereafter the Directors and departmental officials who are experts in their field, would be involved in terms of line unction.

- **South African Police Services:** An officer, not below the rank of Inspector, as well as knowledge of the specific area affected if appropriate.

- **Medical Services:** CEO and/or Medical Practitioner George Provincial Hospital. (subject to the nature of the crisis)

- **Secretariat:** A team responsible for the data collection and Call Centre.

- Other possible members could include George Tourism, the Department of Labour, the Department of Social Development, the Department of Transport, SANRAL, and Provincial Traffic etc, subject to the nature of the crisis.

4. Role of Head of Communications

- The Head of Communications must be notified immediately of any crisis that is emerging or breaking by the Municipal Manager and/or relevant Disaster Management Officer.

- The Head of Communications will then gather and verify information about the crisis and is given the authority to take action immediately under guidance until a broader decision is made as to how the institution will proceed.

- A protocol must be developed with the INCIDENT COMMANDER (as appointed for the specific crisis) and main role-players regarding information gathering and sharing, and an immediate communication strategy must be listed indicating immediate and long-term goals for the communication around the incident.

- The Head of Communications and/or designated communications officials will form part of the Joint Operations Centre and establish physical representation if so required.

- Be responsible for developing the strategy and tactics on how information is to be released, who must speak for the department on the issue, and the audiences who must be communicated with.

- Identify the target audience, select preferred communication platforms, appoint a spokesperson, and draft a holding statement.
- The Head of Communications and/or senior communications official are responsible to communicate facts quickly, accurately, and be open and accessible to all audiences while mindful of confidentiality and legal and privacy considerations.
- In a major incident, the Head of Communications or designated communication official coordinates with other responding agencies to ensure consistent, accurate information dissemination and to avoid the release of potentially sensitive information.

5. Crisis Spokespersons

Subject to the nature of the crisis, the political principal, municipal manager, and Head of Communications can be used as official spokespersons during a crisis.

Experts such as the Disaster Management Officer and/or technical experts from the relevant departments will be used to provide specialist input to media responses and/or speak as official representatives of the institution.

Designated spokespersons must make themselves available to:
- participate in communication planning and the preparation of key messages relating to the crisis;
- Respond to media enquiries promptly and professionally.

6. Communication Approval Processes

The Head of Communications and the Head of the JOC and the Incident Command Centre will establish a fast-tracked approval process as per the existing GM Communications Policy for media responses and media statements.

Approvals should adhere to a strict agreed turnaround time bearing in mind the quality and accuracy of information that must be made available.

7. Media Centre and Working with the Media

- The assigned Communications Official is responsible for establishing a media area that does not impede operations and will filter all media requests for briefings, interviews, etc., via the Incident Commander/ Disaster Management Official.

- Where feasible this media centre must be fully equipped with all the necessary communication apparatus.

- The media centre will also be able to hold media briefings and conferences. Even though the centre can be established close to the JOC it must be completely separate to avoid media interference with the operation of the JOC.

- Every role player will make use of his own communication equipment.

- The Head of Communications is tasked with providing accurate, timely information to the media about the incident and operations of the disaster, fire, and emergency services within the Incident Command Structure (or JOC) and where such verified information is obtained from the Incident Commander.

- The communication perspective must be represented when key crisis decisions are being made.

- All media enquiries will be directed to the Communications Office.

- The Head of Communications together with the Disaster/Crisis Management Team will decide on the frequency of media briefings/media updates, whether hourly, daily, weekly, or monthly, again subject to the severity of the crisis.

- Daily media briefings should be held at scheduled intervals, subject to the intensity of the crisis.

- All media enquiries will be acknowledged within one hour of receipt, and a comprehensive response must be prepared to be released within a short timeframe. This response will then be used for subsequent enquiries on the same topic.

- The media response must be separated from official media statements issued on the crisis but should at no point contradict each other.

- News coverage must be monitored in order to respond appropriately where necessary.

8. **Role of Journalists during a crisis**

- Journalists play a critical role in crisis communication by aiding the dissemination of accurate and timely information to the public during times of crisis.
- Their reporting can help to mitigate the impact of a crisis by informing the public about the situation, providing updates on the response efforts, and offering guidance on how to stay safe and protect themselves.

9. **Employee Communication**

- The Municipal Manager and/or delegated to the Head of Communications, will keep officials informed of issues relating to the crisis using established internal communication channels.
- Updates should be provided at the same time or before details are released to external audiences.

10. **Integrity of Communication**

- When communicating during a crisis, there is a need to strike a balance between presenting the relevant facts in the public domain without causing unnecessary panic.
- It is crucial to address fake news and false information which can cause panic and make it harder to respond effectively. By checking and verifying facts and photographs, before sharing updates, the communication team ensures residents and stakeholders are provided with accurate information.
- The Communications Department assigned official to be the single point of contact for the media. The goal is to provide effective, regular communication updates with the public via the news media and municipal channels, where possible developing a positive perception of the emergency services but focusing on the dissemination of important safety messaging.
- Transparent communication not only protects the community's well-being but also strengthens trust in official channels. By being honest and timely, public discussion can be guided in the right direction, ensuring everyone stays informed and safe.

11. Informing Other Government Stakeholders

The Head of Communications will arrange to keep existing stakeholder forums abreast of the crisis and the way it is being managed.

The following organisations external to the George Municipality must be primarily involved, subject to the type and extent of the crisis:

- South African Police Services
- DFFE
- SANParks
- Cape Nature
- Western Cape Provincial Departments as relevant to the specific crisis (Mobility, DSD, Infrastructure, Health, Education etc.)
- Western Cape Disaster Management
- Garden Route District Municipality Disaster Management Environmental Health (GRDM)
- NSRI
- George Airports Company Ptd Ltd
- Civil Aviation
- George Provincial Hospital
- George Mediclinic
- Medical Emergency Services
- Provincial Traffic
- GIPTN
- SANRAL
- Eskom
- Animal Protection Society
- SPCA
- Schools
- Churches
- Business Community and Business Chambers (Businesses)
- Media
- PetroSA
- Weather Bureau

12. Social Media Use in a Crisis

- The George Municipality has established social media channels in place including Facebook, X, Instagram, You Tube and My Smart City App.
- The GM Social Media Policy approved in March 2025, creates an environment for municipal social media to enable rapid and quality social media communication during a crisis.
- A dedicated communications official must be allocated the responsibility of managing social media as a part of crisis management.
- This person will ensure that social media measurement tools are in place to monitor engagement on social media sites;
- They will ensure that information and updates are placed on municipal social media sites and webpages in a timely manner and that these are used as alert/feedback mechanisms to citizens;
- They will monitor all municipal social media sites, and other public sites on an ad hoc basis as requested, for any mentions of the crisis and to assist with the preparation of adequate responses;
- And finally, they will respond to any social media activity on the municipality's own profile pages in a timely manner.

13. Media Monitoring

- Media monitoring may be the only tool an organization may have in the early phases of a crisis.
- The Head of Communications must monitor local, regional, provincial, national and international -print, broadcast and online media daily and maintain regular contact with the Political principal, the Municipal Manager and officials advising the municipality leadership on emerging issues and how the municipality is being portrayed that may result in a reputational crisis.
- The Head of Communications must accordingly maintain or adjust the communication response as needed to limit rumors, correct errors and maintain confidence in the municipality.
- Feedback on relevant media coverage should be provided to the crisis management team at least twice a day during a crisis situation, where deemed necessary.

- When the crisis has passed, the Head of Communications should be a part of the debriefing session with the Crisis Management team and provide a summary of news coverage relating to the crisis.
- Attention must be paid to the overall success or failure of the crisis communication efforts, problems to be avoided in the future and appropriate follow-up measures.

14. Conclusion

This Crisis Communications Plan, in conjunction with the George Municipality Communications Policy and the George Municipal Social Media Policy, provides a comprehensive framework for effective crisis communication and management. Together, they aim to safeguard lives, protect municipal property, and ensure public safety during critical situations while maintaining public trust and transparency.

15. Policy Review

This policy may be reviewed and amended as and when amendments to legislation and/or policies necessitate.