

## **Essex County Councils Beacon Status and its Business Continuity Duties under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004**

Arthur Rabjohn (MBCI) of Steelhenge Consulting interviewed Richard Verrinder (Business Continuity Manager) and Paul Walker (Emergency Planning Officer responsible for BC promotion) from Essex County Council's Emergency Planning Unit about the business continuity components of its Beacon Status award for Civil Contingencies for Emergency Planning.

For those unaware of the detail of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (CCA04) there are a number of duties placed upon Category One Responders which in a local authority's case include business continuity and the promotion of business continuity to both business and the voluntary sector. In achieving Beacon Status Essex CC had to demonstrate the highest standards of application and compliance to these duties. There are therefore a number of lessons that can be identified to assist other emergency managers' address the business continuity aspects of their programmes. This interview is intended to highlight those lessons so that they can be shared and turned into lessons learned. In Part I we looked at the development of BC in Essex CC, in Part II we looked at its application. This part of the interview deals with the other duty placed on local authorities, that of 'Promoting Business Continuity'.

AR: Richard and Paul, today I want to ask you about the 'Promotion of BC duty'. Have you established a local continuity forum and if so how successful is it proving to be?

PW: Perhaps I should start by mentioning that Essex had already set up a Business Continuity Forum when the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 came into force in November 2005. This forum was for any interested Local Authority officers and its original scope included those with a business continuity or risk focus. Once the CCA came into force this Forum was given the task of producing a strategy which would enable the Essex Local Authorities to deliver this new statutory duty. This strategy was then agreed by the Essex Chief Executives Association and the members of the forum agreed which of the different elements should be locally decided and delivered and which co-ordinated centrally through the County team. Membership of this forum included all of the 2 Unitary and 12 Districts Authorities within the County. The actual membership was made up of emergency planning officers, risk managers, business continuity managers and economic development officers.

With the 'Act' coming into force and the forming of the Essex Resilience Forum (ERF), the LA BC Forum was renamed the 'LA BC Working Group (LA BCWG)' and become a sub working group of the Local Authorities Working Group (LAWG). The group constitution was reviewed to include all local authority officers who have an interest in either internal BCM arrangements or external BC Promotion, the group total is presently at 37 members.

Some of the first tasks for the newly named working group were to review the groups Terms of Reference, review of the initial promotional strategy and scope out the tasks required in developing events, products and information for use on websites and hard copy format.

Since the duty that is placed on the local authorities by the CCA is to provide 'Advice and Assistance to Businesses and Voluntary Organisations' information and resources which have been created and collected have been made available to a large number of different business groups and, of course, also to the Local Authority Voluntary Forum members.

Approximately 18 months on, the LA BCWG has provided a relaxed platform that has encouraged local authority staff involved in the promotion of business continuity to share ideas, materials and workloads.

AR: How have you gone about promoting BC beyond the BC Forum and LA BCWG?

PW: From the strategy and work scoped by the BC Forum / LA BCWG, the following promotional activities were agreed:

Firstly a holding statement was placed on the Essex CC website outlining business continuity principles, the Councils intended actions and where further information could be obtained, i.e. Business Continuity Institute website. This holding statement was also used by members of the working group and added to their District and Unitary websites – thus ensuring a consistent approach around the County.

Next, a launch event was organised for November 2005 aimed at the 'influencers' within professional organisations, e.g. Chambers of Commerce, Business Link, Federation of Small Businesses and Category 1 & 2 partners. Those who came were requested to take back the business continuity message to their own organisations and so to 'spread the word'. We had always viewed the process like that of dropping a pebble into a pond a number of times and keep watching the ripples until the edges all join.

The event itself consisted of a series of presentations from those with a professional BC background including John Sharp, Policy Director at Continuity Forum and from those who had experienced real business disruptions and the lessons they had learnt. Following the presentations and during lunch, various display stands were set up that to encourage further liaison amongst the attendees.

Following the launch event, a further three different style of promotional events were planned to start to reach the business community throughout Essex. The aim of conducting these different events was to determine what types of event were the most effective in our county.

The first event to be conducted was a road show event targeting smaller business within a business park. Considerable effort and advertising was conducted prior to the event; however during the event itself it was found to be very difficult to persuade businesses to leave their premises and visit the event caravan for even a few minutes, even though it was only a few minutes walk away. Later during the event it was decided to split the event team in to smaller groups and to visit each of the business locations and deliver handouts containing business continuity advice and top tips.

The second major event was a business breakfast meeting hosted by one of the local district authorities. The attendance at this event was much better and the venue was full. This demonstrated that the time that an event was run was important in getting a good response. Again, speakers from the local authority and local business presented their own business continuity experience and shared their lessons – both good and bad. In general, two hours at a free breakfast at the start of the day proved a good incentive for businesses as it did not cut into the working day too much.

The next event was to conduct a full morning workshop seminar for businesses followed by lunch. During this an introduction to business continuity presentation was given followed by the delegates working in facilitated small groups. In these groups the delegates were given time to consider their own level of preparedness using a ten minute checklist and then to complete an outline BC Plan template. Again it is a resource intensive method, but one which drew very good feedback from the attendees due to the ability of the facilitators to provide almost one to one coaching and advice. So, there is a considerable effort needed to arrange such an event but it did produce an actual 'deliverable' for those attending. Those who came were invited to join a local 'buddy' scheme so that they could encourage each other as they improved their plans.

Whilst these are the three main types of event conducted in addition to these various other smaller events and presentations have been conducted during other regular Business Meetings and AGMs, with both internal authority services and external professional organisations. Whilst it had not been actively considered, in conducting these smaller events and presentations, it was found that a 'domino' effect of contacts had occurred. Each presentation of the business continuity basics at one group has led to an additional contact and further presentations. So the best message to give, Arthur, is to 'keep at it' and the message will keep on trickling out.

AR: So where did you get all of the material that you used?

That's a good question, Arthur. Before any of the above events could occur we needed to produce easy to understand and simple to follow guidance. We've now produced a large number of documents which can help in delivering this message. We discovered that the amount of available information on the internet was apparently endless. We decided that no small business would be likely to research for more than a few minutes, and if they did, they would more than likely be put off by the amount of information available. So, we produced two easy to follow documents. One was a BC Plan Template and the other was a ten-minute assessment (based on the one produced by London Prepared). These were used during the events and have also been placed on the Essex Resilience Forum (ERF) website.

AR: What have been the hurdles that you have had to overcome to be able to achieve a reasonable level of promotion of business continuity into the small medium enterprise (SME) sector of your community and how receptive have they been to it?

PW: The biggest hurdle to overcome has been to engage the business managers interest in business continuity planning and understanding of the benefits of contingency planning, with many businesses stating "it will never happen to me", "it's someone else's problem" or "I just don't have time for this". Even after a large fire that directly affected 76 businesses on a business park, two workshop seminars were conducted for the remaining 200 businesses, however take up was only a total of 13 businesses with the remaining stating again "we'll be OK" and "we'll sort something out".

The local authority has a statutory duty to respond to incidents that affect the community (both residents and visitors) within their District. The concern that we have is that many of the small businesses have the expectation that the local authority also have a duty to assist businesses to recover should a disaster affect their business itself. The effect of some businesses not having any insurance cover at all leads to a measure of desperation in trying to find someone, in fact anyone, to help them back on their feet.

AR: How have you measured effectiveness of the business continuity promotion work?

PW: Another good question and one that we are still struggling with. We have looked at this from two angles. Firstly, and perhaps the easiest, is to determine the effectiveness of the events themselves. We use event evaluation forms at the end of the event and then make sure we understand whether any amendments are needed before we run the same events again. Secondly and considerably more difficult, is to determine the effectiveness of the overall promotional activity and the business understanding of business continuity. Recently a faxback evaluation form with four very simple tick box questions was sent with the

business rates to approximately 10,000 businesses in Essex with a return rate of less than 1%. So, as we move on we are finding methods not to use, as well as ones to try!

One of the districts sent out separate advice booklets and achieved a higher rate of interest – but at a considerably higher cost. We are considering using email questionnaires via the economic development unit mailing lists as another alternative to use. It would be good if the Regional Government would like to fund and co-ordinate a regular survey so that we could have a much better country wide picture which would be both repeatable and consistent.

AR: What external partners have you identified and engaged with in this process?

PW: As I mentioned earlier, during the 'Launch Event' we engaged with various external professional organisations that included; Business Link, Federation of Small Business, Chamber of Commerce (at County and District level) and all Category 1 Responders.

Furthermore, the 'domino effect' that we found has proved an effective, ongoing source of new contacts through each link in the chain. One internal authority contact led to a presentation to the Essex Rural Partnership. This in turn led to a contact with the Essex Association of Local Councils (EALC). This group has close contact with Parish Councillors from each of 272 parishes in Essex. The EALC have taken the information provided and created a 'model' continuity plan which can be used by each of the parishes. You just never know how many groups are out there and where the next lead might come from.

AR: Richard and Paul, thank you for sharing with me how you are successfully meeting the duties of the CCA04 with regards to Business Continuity and set a benchmark for others to strive for. Congratulations on achieving Beacon Status for Essex County Council.

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