



Public Perceptions of Risk

Friday, 20th March 2009, South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Training Centre, Sheffield

Again, we have ventured far afield from our normal North West base and this time travelled to Sheffield (which again is apparently North West of somewhere!), where we were considering the issue of Public Perceptions of Risk in conjunction with the South Yorkshire Fire Prevention Association.

As risk professionals, or for those of us who have an interest in the profession of risk (!), our aim for this meeting was to look at risk from the other side of the fence and consider some of the issues around how the public perceive risk and how it affects businesses, industries and even the government.

This was a very busy day, which was generously hosted by the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service (SYF&R) at their Brigade Training Centre in Sheffield, where we were provided with refreshments and a very good lunch, all for a very reasonable fee basically covering the catering. The presentation slides are on the website alongside this note which provides a brief summary (with the responsibility for any errors or misinterpretations being mine alone!). Please note that there are no slides for Michael Clapham MP as he presented without any.

We started the day with Phil Winrow from the Environment Agency providing us with some interesting insight into the vagaries of the weather and the terrifying effect it can have in terms of flood risk. He raised a number of issues relating to the public's perception to risk, with the oft heard comments of "it won't happen to me" or "it won't happen to me again" meaning that a staggering number of people are still unprepared for floods! Phil illustrated some of the measures that are being taken to tackle flood risks, including the relationships that are being forged with related professional partners, such as the Highways Agency and the water companies. Phil gave us all quite a lot to think about regarding flood risks that we can take back to our homes and our businesses.

We then had Michael Clapham MP, the Labour Member of Parliament for Barnsley West and Penistone who talked to us about the health and safety risk issues, especially relating to fire safety. Michael raised some eyebrows with the thorny issue of future training requirements for fire risk assessments on business premises and the potential view of the government in who should carry these assessments out.

Our next speaker was Andy Cloke from the SYF&R Service who managed to keep us going after the lovely lunch! Andy spoke to us about fire safety and the legislative changes that came about in October 2006, which means that the Fire Brigade no longer undertake fire risk assessments but they do have to audit them to ensure that meet regulations. He considered the pros and cons of this new system and gave some tips on when fire safety should be considered – basically as soon as possible, so early in the design stages and then throughout the design, construction and use of the building. He left us with the warning that in uncertain times, such as these, safety often suffers, but it this is the time when it should be at the top of the agenda, especially when arson and fraud often increase.



Prior to our coffee break, we had Professor Lynda Warren from Aberystwyth University speaking to us about public concerns over radioactive waste and its management, especially in relation to her membership of the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoWRM). Lynda considered the overarching risks in radioactive waste management being fear of harm, which is more important to the public and fear of failure of the programme to deal with the waste, which is more relevant to the regulators and government. She explained the previous remit of CoWRM to educate the public regarding the safety of waste management and how that does not always work to bring about confidence and buy in to the process. Lynda then explained how the CoWRM is now working to manage the risks through involvement with communities and partnership approaches with the implementers. At the end of the more softly, softly approach Lynda explained that hard decisions still needed to be made to deal with the waste.

First after tea was Martin Caunt from the Risk and Regulatory Advisory Council (RRAC) who talked to us about the role of the RRAC role and their approach to considering public risk. Martin stated the RRAC's definition of a public risk as "Any risk that may affect any part of society to which government might respond". He then explained the role of the RRAC and how they can bring new ways of thinking about public risks to ensure it is properly managed by the right individuals or groups. Martin explained the development of a map of the public risk landscape, which plots the different stakeholders and how they interact with each other and then considered the best way to communicate with the public. He did state that he thought some of the issues he raised might be quite confrontational and indeed left us with some questions to ponder, including one asking whether risk management professionals are part of the solution or part of the problem! Please do not send your answers to us!

Finally Mike Robertson from Risk Solutions took us through the research, measurement and resultant modelling of risk and societal concern, particularly with regard to the rail industry. Mike explained some of the scenarios and questions used to gauge societal concerns and showed us some of the scores. He also explained that they looked for patterns in the results and found that there were six clusters that contained distinct patterns. These different 'anatomies' of societal concern were given headings from "you can't legislate against that" to "stupid idiot". Mike then described some of the uses of this research in supporting decision making, aiding communication and monitoring public attitudes and concerns about other sectors and industries. His point at the end summed up the whole day – "If you want to know what people think about an issue..... ask them!"

Kate Boothroyd
IRM North West
8 April 2009