

Introduction

Operational issues, air traffic control staffing and airline delays are among the challenges that London Luton Airport's (LLA) crisis communications team (CCT) routinely faces. On the 10 October, a catastrophic fire destroyed LLA's main car park and around 1,200 vehicles within it. Alongside the customers directly affected, the airport was severely disrupted with all approaches closed and operations paused for 18 hours.

Over the ensuing days and weeks, the team handled +200 media enquiries (and counting), as well as overseeing proactive management of media interviews, whilst ensuring regular flow of official updates via multiple channels (social, website, email) and customer, stakeholder and staff communications and guidance too.

Brief, objectives and budget

The events that unfolded, during and following the fire, received unprecedented levels of scrutiny as the airport found itself at the heart of a media storm. Working with multiple involved stakeholders, the team's brief was to devise and execute a solid plan, take swift action and adopt an omni-channel approach to ensure LLA was on the front-foot throughout this fast-moving crisis.

Objectives

- To protect and repair LLA's reputation
- To maintain the confidence and support of stakeholders
- To ensure clear, timely communications during a declared crisis

Budget

Comms-specific activities and resources were contained within day-to-day team and departmental running costs, with no additional budget spend.

The idea, research and planning

LLA plans for crisis events through a continually refined, rolling training and familiarisation programme, including workshops with operational colleagues and partner organisations, and annual airport-wide exercises. On this occasion, actions were guided by a robust crisis communications plan which includes an activation matrix, role cards, checklists and prepared meeting agendas, shaping the response for any incident where operational disruption or reputational harm is possible. Despite the huge challenge, this was all in a day's work for the team. Prior to the fire incident, the crisis plan was deployed three times during 2023, including the national airspace computer failure in August, with each incident followed by a detailed debrief/review.

Strategy, Creativity & Innovation

With the airport closed, flights diverted, road access routes blocked, thousands of passengers disrupted and dramatic pictures emerging from the scene, media scrutiny was instant and intense. The CCT strategy was to manage the narrative from the outset:

- Within 30 minutes of the alarm, the CCT assembled, held its first meeting, and shared a holding statement – before the first media enquiries and the emergency services had declared a major incident
- Posting a holding statement on Twitter was a key step to owning the narrative on social channels and dampening speculative ‘chatter’ of a terror attack or aircraft accident
- A 48-hour crisis comms plan was established, with assigned roles/responsibilities across media, passenger and stakeholder communications
- A team comprising comms representatives from LLA, emergency services and Luton Council was assembled to agree media messaging/strategy – indicative of the collaborative approach throughout
- The team supported HR/Internal comms to ensure staff were updated and reassured on latest developments

Delivery/Implementation of Tactics

The CCT worked tirelessly to keep car park customers, passengers, staff, stakeholders and media updated through a steady drumbeat of information.

- Managing +200 press enquiries
- Delivering rapid and tailored responses across all mediums
- Cooperating with emergency services on onsite press briefings and a drip-feed of frequent proactive statements • Monitoring media to gauge sentiment, identify positive news angles and correct the record where appropriate (e.g. addressing criticism around vehicle access by highlighting structural safety issues with the car park)
- Using multi-channel communications to provide frequent updates: o +100 proactive social media posts, o 16 detailed updates from LLA’s Operations Director on the LLA website and via email to an estimated 16,000 customer contacts Leveraging the airport’s stakeholder network to align communications
- Liaising with the Motor Insurers’ Bureau (MIB), the Association of British Insurers (ABI) and salvage operators to align messaging around vehicle recovery
- Using communications channels of airline partners to share updates
- Working with National Highways to advise motorists via digital screens along surrounding roads

Flipping the script

Given the relentless demand from news crews looking to extend the ‘drama’ post-fire, CCT took advantage of interest to demonstrate LLA’s strong response and return to normal operations. This included –

- Hosting 12 on-site broadcast, radio and regional media visits including national outlets BBC, ITV and Sky News, with interviews fronted by LLA’s Director of Corporate Affairs
- Addressing criticism around perceived delays to accessing/recovering vehicles by sharing drone footage (confidential) to reveal the scale of devastation

Measurement, evaluation and impact

- 8,000 items of coverage generated: +200 media correspondences managed; 12 broadcast, radio, media hosted onsite; 16 proactive statements issued
- Utilised multi-channels communications to deliver the message: +100 social media posts; FAQs + frequent website and email updates to affected customers and those with future car park bookings
- Website users jumped 129% in first 72hrs demonstrating its importance as a primary source of information Passenger and stakeholder feedback overwhelmingly positive:
- Brand Health recovered quickly post-fire and stands at an all-time high
- By December 2023, we recorded our highest annual ASQ* score of 4.06 out of 5 pax rating their experience as very good/excellent
- Net Promoter Score remained at 42 (Great) * A globally recognised airport customer service benchmarking programme

“The comms response for the car park fire was excellent. Representatives were kept up to date with a detailed sit-rep and current actions being taken by the airport, ensuring partner comms teams were on the same page when sharing messages.”

Pritesh Mistry, Civil Protection & Business Continuity Manager, Luton Council

“The communications response from the airport was exceptional... going above and beyond what we would expect.”

Leanne Ehern, Head of Communications, Beds Fire & Rescue Service

“The LLA team played a vital leading role alongside the emergency services during this fast-paced major incident. Their social media updates provided the definitive narrative in the moments immediately after the fire and several hours afterwards, giving emergency services a clear, accurate place to signpost people to for the latest information. Updates were timely, accurate and informative which was extremely helpful.”

Jon Vale, Comms Manager, Beds Police