

Andy Valentine
University of Wales Trinity St David
Student Number: 2016519
MSc Policing (Operational and Strategic Leadership)
BMPO7001 Operational Leadership

The 2021 Skewen Flooding: Reflections of the Police Gold Commander and Strategic Coordination Group Chair

1. Introduction

On the 21st of January 2021, a major incident was declared following serious flooding in the Goshen Park area of Skewen.

Stemming from a “mine blow out”, the flooding necessitated the mobilisation of a multi-agency response involving a diverse range of Category One and Two Civil Contingency Act 2004 (CCA) responders and the emergency evacuation of over 80 residents from their homes (Neath Port Talbot Council, 2021). Whilst no lives were lost as a consequence of the incident, a total of 144 properties were affected with 59 being flooded internally and a further 17 damaged externally (Hansard, 2021). The total cost has yet to be determined but is expected to be in the millions, adding to the psychological harm that has undoubtedly been caused to members of a close-knit community.

This paper will detail the leadership reflections of the South Wales Police Gold Commander – the senior police officer with command responsibility (College of Policing, 2021) - and Chair of the Strategic Coordination Group charged with the multi-agency response.

Academic theories of leadership will be applied to key events that played out during the emergency response – a formal phase set out in Cabinet Office non-statutory guidance (GOV.UK, 2013). Contemporary research by Wilkinson, Cohen-Hatton and Honey (2021) relating to the impact of group decision making within the context of major incidents has also been applied.

The Gibbs Reflective Cycle has been used to structure this analysis (Dye, 2011). Reference will also be made to the Joint Decision Model (JDM) that underpinned the operation of the Strategic Coordination Group.

Figure One: Gibbs Reflective Cycle

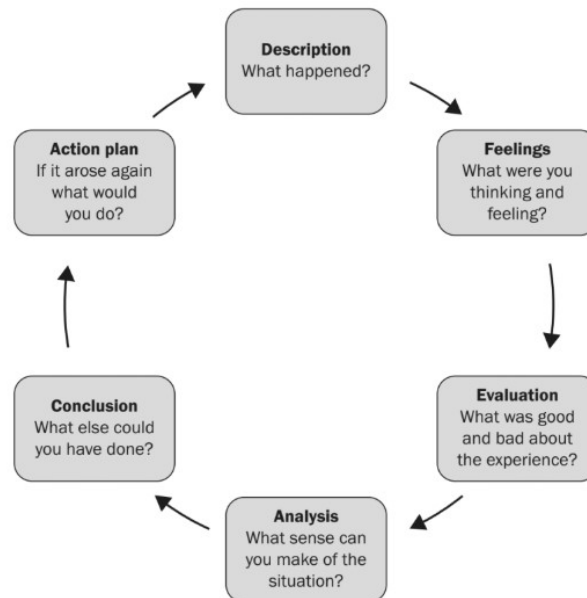
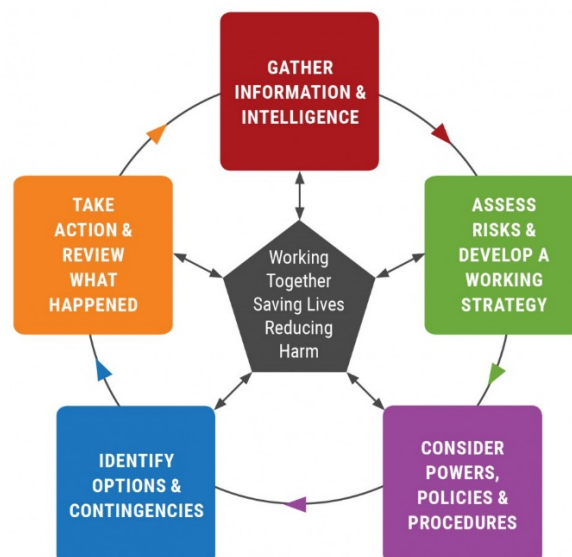


Figure Two: Joint Decision Model



2. Background

Responding effectively to civil emergencies is a statutory expectation of the United Kingdom's emergency services and a range of other public bodies, including Local Authorities and University Health Boards. Section 2 of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 places a duty on Category One responders such as South Wales Police to assess the risk of civil emergencies occurring and to have adequate plans in place to effectively reduce control, or mitigate the effects of an emergency (Legislation.gov.uk, 2004). In discharging their responsibilities, Category One responders may also be assisted by a second tier of actors that include utility companies and transport agencies such as Network Rail. As “cooperating bodies”, Category Two responders can play a substantial role in incidents affecting their sector (GOV.UK, 2013).

The major incident response to the Skewen floods drew on a broad range of Category One and Two responders reflecting the scale and complexity of the incident. This included two police forces, British Transport Police and South Wales Police, Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service, the Welsh Ambulance Service NHS Trust, the Swansea Bay University Health Board (UHB), Neath and Port Talbot Local Authority, National Resources Wales (NRW), Public Health Wales (PHW) and the United Kingdom Coal Authority.

Given the scene's topography and hazards present, Category Two responders including Western Power and Dwr Cymru were also critical actors in the civil contingency response.

Whilst the 2004 Act provided the statutory framework for the emergency response, doctrine arising from the Joint Emergency Service Interoperability Programme (JESIP) was of paramount importance. The Joint Doctrine sets out five principles for responding to major incidents, namely *co-location, communication, coordination, joint understanding of risk* and *shared situational awareness* (JESIP, 2016). Critically, these principles are underpinned by a Joint Decision Model – a modification of policing's National Decision Model – helping ensure interoperability through a common methodology.

JESIP is a thematic construct whose origins lay in an analysis of themes and recommendations from public inquiries or significant learning events from thirty-two major incidents dating back to the 1980s (Pollock, 2013). Pollock's research identified common and consistent failings in major incident responses but also capability gaps that hindered interoperability between emergency responders. These ranged from poor working practices and organisational planning, inadequate training and ineffective communication through to the absence of common and easily understood doctrine and shared situational awareness.

The duality of the JDM and the five JESIP principles, that emerged from the tri-service programme, seeks to prevent a repeat of earlier failures by "locking in" Category One and Two responders to a shared system of working - a process firmly embedded through a national training and development programme, Joint Organisational Learning. The intrinsic value of these developments in managing the strategic, tactical and operational response to a civil emergency has been recognised by the South Wales Local Resilience Forum (SWLRF) for some time.

The SWLRF's Multi Agency Coordination Group Implementation Protocol (MACG) embedded the JDM into the standard operating procedures for both Strategic and Tactical Coordination Groups (SCG/TCGs) (SWLFR, 2021) – structures that provide coordinating functions to any civil emergency necessitating a multi-agency response (GOV.UK, 2013). This approach was consolidated by the unique challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The breadth and scale of harm arising from Coronavirus and the requirement for infection and prevention controls necessitated the strict application of the JDM and a risk based, escalatory approach. This was achieved through the adoption of a structured Microsoft PowerPoint presentation that provided a robust framework for the identification and management of threat, risk and harm on a cross-sector basis (Valentine, 2020). This methodology was employed throughout the emergency response phase to the Skewen floods that ran for an eight-day period. Given the extended duration, this report will focus on the initial response and the outcomes of the

first Strategic Coordination Group that managed what was a complex and impactful major incident.

3. Major Incident declaration and the agreement of command protocols

3.1 Description

From 1230 hours on Thursday 21st January 2021, South Wales Police and the Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service (MWWFRS) started to receive 999 calls from local residents in the Goshen Park area of Skewen reporting flooding (South Wales Police, 2021). The two emergency services immediately responded with local police resources being deployed from South Wales Police's Swansea, Neath and Port Talbot Division.

On arrival, officers were faced with growing flooding necessitating the immediate implementation of road closures. Over the coming hour, however, the intensity and volume of water emerging, from what was initially thought to be a burst watermain, increased significantly. Consequently, at 1312 hours, MWWFRS declared a major incident at scene.

A major incident is defined within police Authorised Professional Practice (APP) as 'an event or situation, with a range of serious consequences, which requires special arrangements to be implemented by one or more emergency responder agencies' (College of Policing, 2020) and its designation represented the growing level of risk posed to the public and the need for greater capability and coordination to ensure effective risk mitigation.

MWWFRS' declaration was communicated to the South Wales Police Force Incident Manager (FIM) via the Multi Agency Incident Transfer system – an interface between police and fire and rescue and command and control systems. The FIM, who is an officer of the rank of Inspector responsible for critical incident management, reviewed ongoing events in Skewen and escalated the matter to attention of the Force Senior Duty Officer for their general information.

Whilst this represented an appropriate course of action, there were three omissions in the force's initial response. The first related to obtaining a detailed account of the major incident using the METHANE mnemonic, the second was the absence of a Forward Control Point involving

Bronze or Operational Commanders at scene to facilitate shared situational awareness. Finally, the declaration of a major incident should have prompted the initiation of the SWLRF MACG to trigger the convening of Strategic and Tactical Coordination Groups.

The author of this report was appraised of this incident at 1429 hours in his capacity as the force Gold Commander for COVID-19 and the Chair of the Strategic Coordination Group responsible for the wider civil contingency response to the pandemic.

Based on the developing threat picture and the divergence in practice, the author travelled to the Public Service Centre (PSC) in Police Headquarters, Bridgend with a view to supporting the ongoing response and, if necessary, assuming command.

Upon arrival at the PSC and following liaison with the Force Incident Manager, it became apparent that the identified omissions stemmed from concurrent demands. As well as coordinating the flooding respond, the FIM was also commanding a spontaneous firearms incident in another part of the force. The duality of demand presented a significant risk to effective coordination and the author's awareness of this situation became the tipping point for intervention and the agreement of a new command protocol.

Contact was subsequently made with the Divisional Commander for the Swansea, Neath and Port Talbot division – a colleague and peer – to discuss the situation.

Recognising the territorial sovereignty of her command and the impact on regional partnership arrangements, understanding and respecting local command intentions was important.

Through friendly and professional dialogue, the colleague welcomed the adoption of the incident by the author's command. However, to maintain local connectivity and effective stakeholder engagement, the Divisional Commander assumed the role of Gold Support – a decision that also afforded her professional development opportunity in a less familiar policing area.

Having assumed command at 1532 hours, the author initiated immediate action to achieve greater alignment with JESIP doctrine by directing the FIM to implement the MACG and urgently convene Strategic and Tactical Coordination Groups (South Wales Police, 2021). The

establishment of a Forward Control Point at scene and the appointment of a Silver (Tactical) Commander was also implemented, thereby, enhancing command, control and coordination arrangements (C3) to managing what would be a protracted incident.

3.3 Feelings

Following an initial review of the incident, the author was concerned at the initial trajectory of the force's response and what appeared to be divergence with JESIP doctrine. The growing scale of the flooding highlighted the need for an integrated multi-agency response.

Whilst satisfied that action was ongoing by the force and other emergency services to save life, there was growing evidence that the work of responding agencies was disparate and not fully coordinated. As an operationally and occupationally competent commander, this generated professional concerns but also anxiety given the profound consequences that can arise from crisis response (Anderson 2018).

Anxiety would transition to a desire to intervene, as the existing command structure the author was responsible for was permitted to adopt other concurrent threats. An interventionist approach, however, was balanced by a recognition of the existence of other command structures, most notably the FIM and Force Duty Officers and Swansea, Neath and Port Talbot Division's Senior Management Team, who had been made aware of the incident through locally deployed staff. Maintaining cordial and professional relationships with peers and being respectful of their sphere of command was another important consideration.

3.4 Evaluation

The author believes the decision to intervene in the incident and assume command was, on balance, a positive act and ensured reconciliation of the force's initial response with national civil contingency doctrine. It also resulted in the mobilisation of multi-agency structures that would provide greater capacity and capability to coordinate the emergency response to 'a life at risk' incident.

The author believes an emotionally intelligent approach to leadership was demonstrated in their interactions with contemporaries and junior colleagues.

Taking time to understand the causal factors behind the divergence from JESIP doctrine in lieu of adopting reactionary or punitive approach was positive. Through professional discussion with the FIM and a systems thinking approach (Arnold and Wade, 2015), it was identified that their role was a “single point of failure” for implementing the MACG, particularly when facing concurrent critical incidents. Feedback for the FIM was also provided in a constructive and balanced way helping to promote self-reflection and personal learning.

An area of personal development from this phase was the relatively protracted timelines for the transfer of command. The author’s preference for consultation and consensus, particularly with local policing colleagues, may have extended the timeline for activating a SCG.

4.4 Analysis

The author believes a number of leadership styles were demonstrated during the incident’s early stages. The prescriptive action communicated to the FIM was arguably consistent with the active form of ‘management by exception’ - a characteristic of transactional leadership (Judge and Piccolo, 2004). The proactive stance taken by the author to seek the activation of the SWLRF MACG and the immediate establishment of a Force Control Point reflected an anticipation of further impairment to the multi-agency response. The communication of the operational risks to the FIM within the context of the divergence with JESIP doctrine arguably represented the ‘contingent reward’ dynamic of Bass’ conceptualised transactional leadership model (Anderson and Sun, 2017).

Whilst a transactional leadership approach was needed in part, a blended approach was arguably demonstrated. The author’s initial engagement with the FIM arguably represented the ‘High Directing and Low Supportive’ (S1) phase of the situational leadership model (Blanchard, 2007). The dynamic nature of the incident, coupled with the growing risk to life, was not immediately conducive to less intrusive or transformational forms of leadership. However, as the response

phase matured following the implementation of the SWLRF MACG, the opportunity to debrief the incident and identify personal and organisational learning suggests the transition to the coaching phase (S2) of Blanchard's model.

The author's interaction with their peer – the local Divisional Commander – may be considered to provide evidence of 'authentic leadership' by both parties.

As Walumbwa et al theorised in 2018, authentic leadership is a 'pattern of leadership behaviour that draws on and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate to foster greater self-awareness, an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing of information and relational transparency.'

It is argued that the four components of this model were demonstrated by both officers in agreeing the command protocol that saw the adoption of the Skewen floods by the Force COVID-19 command structure. The author and his colleague demonstrated *self-awareness* and *relational transparency* in recognising their personal limitations – the Divisional Commander's lesser experience in leading major incidents and the author's limited connections with local stakeholders and key individual networks. The instinctive use of the JDM, familiarisation of unfolding events through subordinate briefings and the ongoing review of incident log ensured that the agreed command protocol reflected the *balance processing* typical of authentic leadership. Finally, both parties were driven by an *internalised moral perspective*, namely a commitment to doing the best for the communities affected by flooding.

3.5 Conclusion

The actions taken by the author and colleagues reconciled the force's response with established civil contingency doctrine and set about the activation of strategic and tactical structures that would become intrinsic to coordinating the response of 14 organisations. Nevertheless, personal learning from crises is a common and desirable trait (Anderson, 2018), particularly where this is embedded within the culture of an organisation (Jacques, 2012).

On reflection, the author would maintain the collaborative and consensual approach with colleagues, but would have been more dynamic and explicit in determining primacy or, if necessary, highlighting omissions in the organisational response. This would have maximised the prospect of a SCG being convened within the two-hour window recommended in the 2018 Kerslake Report – the findings of an independent review into the Manchester Arena terrorist attack.

3.6 Action Plan

The personal and organisational learning arising from the circumstances described prompted a series of actions. Following the conclusion of the response phase, the author initiated a ‘lessons learned review’ of the initial response and engaged with the Local Resilience Forum Coordinator to commission a review of the MACG. The latter action acknowledges the overreliance on the FIM in mobilising a SCG. Consequently, technological solutions are being scoped to dynamically contact SCG members and, thereby, remove the FIM as a ‘single point of failure.’ Additional training for FIMs on major incident procedures has also been commissioned.

4. Setting the strategy and the convening of a Strategic Coordination Group

4.1 Description

Following the transfer of command, two immediate priorities existed. The setting of a strategic aim and objectives and the earliest possible mobilisation of a Strategic Coordination Group (SCG). The former was drafted at 1641 hours in order to provide focus for responding agencies (College of Policing, 2020):

Figure 3: Strategic Aim and Objectives

To respond effectively as the South Wales Local Resilience Forum (LFR) to flooding arising from mine workings at Gosben Park, Skenen and, as far as reasonably possible:

- *Protect and preserve life,*
- *Contain the incident,*
- *Mitigate and minimise its impacts,*
- *Relieving suffering,*
- *Providing the public and businesses with warnings and advice,*
- *Protecting the health and safety of responding personnel,*
- *As far as reasonably practicable, protect property,*
- *Safeguarding the environment,*
- *Maintaining or restoring critical activities*
- *Create conditions for recovery, promote restoration and improvement activity in the aftermath of an incident to return to the new normality*
- *Maintaining normal services at an appropriate level,*
- *Promoting and facilitating self-help in affected communities,*
- *Facilitating investigations and inquiries,*
- *Facilitating recovery of the community*
- *Evaluating the response and recovery effort,*
- *Identifying and taking action to implement lessons identified.*

The development of an initial multi-strategy was a unilateral act due to the need to provide strategic direction to tactical commanders. The author's desire to convene a SCG by early evening was another important consideration, especially as the timeline advocated in the Kerslake report had been exceeded.

The strategy was subsequently communicated to the newly appointed Silver Commander – a Superintendent responsible for operational policing in the Swansea, Neath and Port Talbot division – with a requirement on her and counterparts in the other emergency services to develop tactical plans (South Wales Police, 2021).

Identifying and evacuating residents, especially vulnerable members of the community, were priority considerations along with containing the scene and, if possible, the extent of the flooding. The prevalence of COVID-19 introduced additional complexity into the operation. Evacuating members of the public required the rapid deployment of additional personal protective equipment along with bespoke infection and prevention control procedures at Local Authority rest centres that would receive casualties. Self-evacuees also presented an additional unconventional risk to public health.

At the time of the incident, Wales remained in the Welsh Government Alert Level 4 with the most stringent levels of civil restrictions in force. Whilst a civil emergency constituted a reasonable excuse for household mixing, the uncontrolled migration of potentially infected persons had the potential to substantially increase the risk of household transmission.

COVID-19 also necessitated a virtual SCG meeting using the Microsoft Teams platform. Whilst a large number of participants were experienced with this methodology through their involvement in the pandemic response, the Skewen Flooding involved a broader range of Category Two responders, some of whom struggled with gaining access due to their organisation's information technology infrastructure. The unanticipated nature of the meeting also led to a reliance on 'on-call' duty officers, which for some national agencies led to the involvement of colleagues with limited personal reference to the affected communities.

Ahead of the meeting efforts were made to identify a SCG Chair. Given that the response phase was heavily focused on the towards waterborne rescue and evacuation, the author engaged with the initial MWWFRS Strategic Commander – a Group Manager – and invited them to consider undertaking this role. This was declined with the MWWFRS citing a preference for a police Chair to enable their service to focus on the rescue effort.

The first SCG meeting was held at 1730 hours. Following introductions and scoping of the most appropriate agency to chair, the author was confirmed in this role and the use of a bespoke PowerPoint presentation structured around the JDM was agreed.

The initial focus of the SCG was to achieve common situational awareness.

An overview of the incident using the METHANE mnemonic was received and benefited from the diverse range of Category One and Two responders present. Contributions from subject matter experts, such as the Coal Authority and Natural Resources Wales, enabled the group to comprehend broader consequences and provided a layered understanding of the risks facing the public, as well as the action taken by emergency services to date. For example, the potential for

large scale subsidence arising from a mine shaft collapse, as well as environmental harm through water pollution and mining contaminants was effectively imparted.

Through active listening and participation, a prioritised set of strategic threats, as detailed in Figure 4, would emerge (SWLFR,2021).

Figure 4: Thematic SCG Risks

RED	AMBER
• Loss of life and risk of injury from flooding • Damage or destruction to property • Risk of community transmission of COVID-19 arising from the evacuation of persons • Public awareness and understanding of risk to life • Disruption to critical services, including gas and electricity • Environmental risks arising	• Displaced persons from evacuated premises • Risk to the occupants of the [REDACTED] Care Home • Disruption to transport infrastructure, including the road and rail networks • Disruption to domestic and business water supply • Health, safety and wellbeing of category one and two responders • Organisational resilience of category one and two responders • Community cohesion

After considering the continuing appropriateness of the multi-agency strategy, the SCG reviewed its legal basis for action as well as its battle rhythm and relationship with the Tactical Coordination Group (TCG) responsible for coordinating the operational response. This provided structure and an effective operating model, enabling the group to focus on developing a comprehensive multi agency plan.

To support this process, the author steered the group to collectively advance and agree options and contingencies that would mitigate the identified threats. The resulting tactical plan centred on the continuing multi-agency evacuation of affected housing, the safe reception of evacuees to

Local Authority rest centres, scene preservation and the commissioning of environmental and structural surveys to understand the cause of the flood and measures to mitigate its short, medium- and long-term effects. Warning and informing the public was another strategic priority leading to the development and employment of a multi-agency communications strategy.

The meeting concluded at 1910 hours with agreed options and contingencies that were communicated to the lead tactical commanders during the meeting and single agency briefings.

4.2 Feelings

The time between assuming command and the commencement of the SCG was a highly pressurised and demanding time for the author. The collapsing timeline necessitated the rapid assimilation of information to enable the development of an initial strategy. The acceptance of uncertainty and a need to make decisions in the absence of a totality of knowledge was also critical in the early operational phase.

Whilst familiar with chairing SCG meetings, the author experienced some personal disorientation. In the first instance, unfamiliarity with some agency representatives generated a degree of anxiety whilst technical difficulties experienced by some agencies in joining the SCG caused frustration and concern.

The unconventional nature of the incident added to the sense of disorientation. With the source of flooding being attributable to a man-made phenomenon, drawing on the professional expertise of subject matters experts, particularly the Coal Authority and NRW was an urgent realisation. Understanding corporate jurisdictions relating to operational requirements, such as structural surveys and scene security, was another area that required detailed examination.

The author's personal concerns were, however, buoyed by the contributions and professionalism of SCG participants. With most attendees having been engaged throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a high degree of familiarity with civil contingency and JESIP doctrine which arguably facilitated the development of a coherent tactical plan. As Jacques (2012) identifies

building relationships before crises is a key and beneficial leadership role and aided the response to the Skewen flooding.

4.3 Evaluation

On balance, the author believes the SCG coordinated an effective response to an unprecedented major incident. A comprehensive range of mitigations to prevent the loss of life and reduce the immediate and ongoing impact of flooding were implemented.

Over 140 affected residents, including elderly members of a residential care home, were evacuated during the height of the second wave of the pandemic. Whilst sadly damage to many residents' homes could not be prevented, medium to long term environmental harm was avoided.

Efforts to support the transition to recovery were progressed at the earliest opportunity and included the establishment of a Local Authority Information Hub and the provision of psychological advice for affected residents by PHW.

In contrast to the critical findings of Wilkinson, Cohen-Hatton and Honey's research (2019), the author believes the emergency response phase was cohesive and reflective of contemporary civil contingency doctrine. This was achieved through the SCG's structural and procedural configuration with appropriate executive level representation and tight alignment to the JDM. The use of a structured agenda arguably achieved balance in *situation assessment (SA)*, *plan formation (PF)* and *plan execution (PE)* – three typologies associated with group decision making associated in major incident emergencies (Wilkinson et 2021).

Imbalance in these outputs could have had adverse consequences - particularly in understanding the legal basis for action and the breadth of options and contingencies needed to effectively respond to the incident (Wilkinson et al, 2019). For example, taking time to explore the epidemiological implications of an uncontrolled evacuation of affected residents with the 'on-call' PHW consultant - *situation assessment* - and developing a contact tracing strategy - *plan formation* – reduced the likelihood of community transmission of COVID-19 being aggravated by the Skewen flood.

The composition and diversity of the SCG was another strength. As Bang and Firth (2017) identify, pooling cognitive resources leads to more reliable assessments of information and outcomes.

The SCG responsible for the Skewen flood included 14 agencies, including a less familiar Category One responder – the Coal Authority – an executive agency of the UK Government. As became apparent, the cause of the flooding would be attributed to a “blow-out” in a disused mine and their expertise in structural engineering and historical mining practices enhanced situational awareness and influenced the tactical responses of the traditional ‘blue-light’ services.

The complexity of the response phase would grow following the identification of dangerous subsidence, generating a substantial risk to the environment and essential services. A trinity of insights and action by the Coal Authority, NRW and Dwr Cymru was crucial in preventing domestic water contamination and environment pollution. An absence of open discussion with subject matter experts during this element of the response phase could have led to ‘optimism bias’ (Bang and Firth, 2017) by the Chair or ‘blue-light responders’ and resulted in an underestimation of the level of risk presented by subsidence and mine water pollutants.

4.4 Analysis

Before analysing the leadership behaviours of the SCG chair and participants, it is important to emphasise its constitutional basis.

Under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, responders retain their own corporate and operational responsibilities as well as any liabilities arising from their actions or otherwise. Consequently, a SCG is a coordinating function and not a legal entity in its own right with neither the Chair nor the wider group having any powers of compulsion over member agencies. As Wilkinson (2020) notes, a SCG is ultimately a diverse group of experts from specific domains working towards a common goal or set of goals.

In the author’s view, the absence of a collective liability amongst members creates parameters on the leadership style of participants. Whilst JESIP doctrines promote consistency in thinking and

approach, the absence of compulsion and legal effect necessitates cooperative forms of leadership amongst members to achieve positive outcomes.

Indeed, these constraints greatly reduce the prospect of transactional leadership being a viable or acceptable approach. The absence of a hierarchy amongst the members agencies negates 'leader and follower exchanges' that underpins this style of leadership (Aarons 2006). Contingent reward – another accepted tenant of transactional leadership (Bass,1985) – is also alien to effective interagency working during a major incident given the constitutional dynamic.

Analysing the work of the SCG during the Skewen flooding suggests those engaged in the strategic response demonstrated *integrative public leadership* (Crosby and Bryson 2010). This is a leadership style necessary to 'bring diverse groups and organisations together in a semi-permeant way, and typically across sector boundaries, to remedy complex public problems and achieve the common good.' It is also exemplified by 'multi-sector collaborations with no hierarchal relationships existing between partners (Morse, 2010).'

Sun and Anderson (2012) have added to the academic understanding of integrated public leadership. Their distillation of extant literature suggests it has four dimensions, *integrated thinking*, *integrative behaviours*, *integrative leadership resources* and *integrated structures and processes*. The first concerns the cognitive ability of public leaders to understand the forces impacting on the multi-sector collaboration and how they interrelate. The second relates to how the same leaders foster semi-permanent connections to achieve public good whilst the next relates to the moral desire to serve the community by bringing in necessary expertise and the use of appropriate social connections. Finally, the model references institutionalised systems, structures and processes that leaders pragmatically leverage to further the cause of collaboration.

Sun and Anderson's model resonates strongly with the strategic response to the Skewen flood. The SCG that was established was a temporary multi-agency collaboration convened to coordinate the response to a complex and serious major incident. Helpfully, the pandemic had already forged professional relationships between executive members of the SWLRF due to the protracted

timeline in which the COVID-19 SCG had been operating. This familiarity had conditioned Category One and Two responders to operating within the context of a major incident – both personally and organisationally – for a sustained period demonstrating *integrative behaviours*.

This, along with the tight application of the JESIP doctrine, represented effective employment of *integrative structures and processes*. It also achieved *integrative thinking* with member agencies working together to develop shared situational awareness of threat and risk and the use of *integrative leadership resources* to secure their mitigation. For example, the safe evacuation of affected residents during COVID-19 civil restrictions necessitated a coordinated response by the emergency services, the Local Authority and PHW. Epidemiological advice played an unconventional but critical role in balancing immediate humanitarian needs with preventing the wider transmission of COVID-19. Similarly, a trinity of action was needed by the Coal Authority, NRW and Dwr Cymru to rapidly understand the potential harm caused by subsidence to the environment and essential services. These agencies worked in concert sharing resources and expertise to mitigate potential long-term environmental damage (SWLFR, 2021).

As Chair, the author believed he demonstrated behaviours associated with distributed leadership, which is defined as the ‘distribution of leadership influence across multiple teams’ to achieve shared goals and objectives’ (Carson et al, 2007).

The Skewen floods stemmed from the combination of environmental factors and failing civil engineering - areas of expertise beyond the ordinary competence of a senior police officer. Consequently, there was a significant reliance on the skills and expertise of subject matter experts, such as the Coal Authority and PHW, to provide situational intelligence and deliver interventions that would achieve the SCG’s strategic aim and objectives. Distributing leadership responsibility to those best placed to understand and respond to strategic risks, such as environment harm and mass subsidence, was critical.

To achieve this, the SCG Chair believes he acted as an ‘*explorer*’ (Bang and Frith, 2017) encouraging collective discussion to understand threat and risk and develop optimal responses. The author

believes his approach was helped by the discipline afforded by the JDM and its integration into the SCG's operating model.

4.5 Conclusion

As Pollock's (2013) research has shown, there is inevitably personal and organisational learning arising from major incidents. Indeed, a reluctance by senior emergency services leaders to acknowledge the need for improvements can have toxic consequences for their careers – as evidenced by the public outcry to the former London Fire Brigade Commissioner's, Dany Cotton, evidence to the public inquiry into the Grenfell fire disaster (The Guardian, 2018).

On a personal level, the author believes he placed himself in a position of disadvantage by not drawing on additional resources to support the mobilisation of the SCG. Consequently, the competing demands of achieving situational awareness and developing an initial strategy was personally demanding and created additional pressure.

As Anderson (2018) articulates coping with substantial stress during a crisis is an important attribute. Recognising personal capacity and drawing on additional resources to address immediate operational requirements was a key learning point.

The decision to accept the role of SCG Chair and not challenge a potentially more suitable agency to assume this responsibility has been an enduring reflection. Whilst policing's ability to deal with the 'here and now' (Ramshaw et al, 2019) has been recognised, the environmental and humanitarian weighting of the response phase may have benefitted from a chair with urban search and rescue experience in the first instance.

Ensuring full organisational preparedness is another development area.

Although the SWLRF had successfully operated a virtual SCG throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, an emergency activation in response to a spontaneous incident had not been attempted. Consequently, challenges emerged in securing full attendance due to varying IT provision amongst Category One and Two responders. Understanding organisational capacity and familiarity with virtual working is crucial if the benefits of this operating model are to be sustained.

4.5 Action Plan

The author's personal reflections prompted him to consider his approach to the initial response to any future major incident he may command. Although the response phase was in keeping with established doctrine, the mobilisation of additional command support to provide greater capacity and capability during the setup of a major incident response is a course of action that would be initiated going forward.

The identification of the most appropriate agency to lead the SCG is another matter to which the author would give greater personal attention. Though JESIP doctrine and local response plans assign this role to policing by default, encouraging a professional discussion amongst participating responders to test and validate this approach would be advantageous.

The organisational learning from this incident has been formalised and communicated to the force and SWLRF coordinators to assist with revisions to the SCG activation protocol. Testing and exercising the convening of a SCG within a virtual environment is another learning outcome.

5. Final Reflections

In conclusion, a diverse range of leadership styles were needed to successfully manage the strategic and operational risks arising from the Skewen flooding. Whilst transactional approaches were briefly needed in mobilising South Wales Police's response to the flooding, the leadership style employed by the Chair soon transitioned to a cooperative approach reflecting the SCG's constitution and legal status. In responding to the incident's complexities and nuances, integrated public leadership by those involved in the SCG proved definitive in keeping the public safe.

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