Emergency forum to learn Cumbria flooding lessons

Role of regional media is key to keeping public informed of disasters

By Jon Slatterty

The vital role regional newspaper websites played after the devastating floods in Carlisle knocked out the rest of the media is to be highlighted at a top level meeting on the disaster.

Cumbrian Newspapers editorial director Keith Sutton believes the internet’s ability to keep the public informed in a crisis is one of the major lessons the press and the emergency services can learn from the floods.

It will be one of the issues raised at a meeting of the newly formed Regional Media Emergency Forum in Cumbria on 15 February.

The forum is for representatives of the media, government, police and emergency services to discuss the implications of disasters.

The meeting will examine the huge impact the floods had on communications and the media after an electricity power station, feeding 15 sub-stations flooded. Mobile phones, television and radio transmitters were knocked out and the power to Cumbrian Newspapers’ new £5 million printing press was cut, costing the daily News & Star all but a few thousand of its Saturday 8 January edition on the day after the floods.

Sutton will be stressing the importance the internet sites of the News & Star and weekly Cumberland News played in getting information to the public and how they broke through the news blackout.

This was reflected in website use: the News & Star site got 1.7 million hits — eight times its average figure. The Cumberland News website recorded 250,000 hits.

"Many residents had little idea of the scope of the disaster because they had been unable to see pictures or get authoritative news,” Keith Sutton, Cumbrian Newspapers.