Flooding

**Purpose**

For discussion and direction.

**Summary**

With the heaviest rainfall in 250 years across much of England and Wales since January, following coastal surges in December, fire and rescue authorities have been at the forefront of activity to ensure communities are resilient and protected as far as possible.

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| **Recommendation**  Members are asked to note the extensive work undertaken by the fire and rescue service in the recent extreme weather events and to discuss the issues raised in this report, particularly around a statutory duty.  **Action**  Officers will take actions as directed. |

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**Flooding**

**Background**

1. The coastal surge on 5 and 6 December and the heavy rain experienced since late December and continuing into February have together led many areas of the country to experience severe flooding. Following the heavy rain, groundwater flooding has also been experienced in a number of areas and this will remain a concern over the next couple of months.
2. It is estimated that around 4,500 properties were flooded in the period from early December to early January and an additional 3000 properties were flooded since late January. Many more households and businesses have been indirectly affected.
3. Most affected areas are now transitioning from response to recovery. This brings its own issues, and councils, in partnership with other local agencies, have been ensuring that debris and waste is safely removed, that public health messages are getting to communities and that households and businesses are aware of the financial support that is available to those who have been flooded.

**Fire and rescue service response**

1. Fire and Rescue Services have been at the forefront of the response. Over 1,000 firefighters have been in force across the country during the recent flooding events. Crews have been drafted in from a number of services to support the flood response in Devon and Somerset and also in the Thames Valley.
2. **Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service** received 218 calls, 60 of which were flooding related between 4 and 12 January. Firefighters have put themselves forward to work extra shifts. The FRS rescued 11 people whose cars had become stranded in water – including one with children in. The service also helped to evacuate about 20 residents from properties in Bablockhythe, near Cumnor.

1. A team from **Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue** has been sent to help victims of flooding in Somerset. The team have been on a 48-hour rolling rota to help the flood relief operation, using one of the force’s Unimogs, a four-wheel drive vehicle, to drive through rising water.
2. **Devon & Somerset Fire & Rescue Service**, with national mutual aid arrangements, has been providing High Volume Pumping capability to support the Environment Agency pumping operation on the Somerset Levels. Assets in use have included up to Nine High Volume Pumps (HVPs) which can pump up to 1.26 million litres of water per hour; two Fire Service Unimog vehicles in use at Muchelney to provide support to the local community; community support boats; and an incident Response Unit. The Service is continuing to assist local residents in Muchelney with the provision of transportation through the flood water each day.
3. **Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service** has been working closely with all other organisations involved in flood planning, coordination and response work, including police, ambulance, military and local authorities. 150 firefighters, including specialist water and rescue teams, have been working in the Wraysbury/Datchet/Poyle areas. Crews carried out 107 rescues/evacuations between 10 and 12 February. The Service has been ferrying supplies and medicines to those cut off by water. Crews have worked with Network Rail and the Army to protect several areas of railway critical infrastructure and prevention staff are providing safety advice and information from RBFRS outreach vehicles.
4. **Surrey Fire and Rescue Service**, together with Surrey Police, the Environment Agency, the military and local borough councils have been working to respond to flooding relating to nine severe warnings in place from the Berkshire border to Walton-on-Thames. Crews have rescued more than 1,100 people from homes near the Thames. The Service has also been operating a number of High Volume Pumping (HVP) units in the Lower Thames area.
5. **London Fire Brigade** has sent help and resources to assist other UK fire and rescue services. The Brigade has sent three fire engines, three fire rescue units and a Command Unit to Berkshire where has helped to carry out water rescues in flood stricken areas. It has also sent specialist senior officers to assist Oxfordshire and Surrey fire and rescues services who are advising on flood rescues and moving water. Firefighters have been attending the water treatment works in Kenley, Croydon which has been under threat of flooding, using three high volume pumps capable of removing 24,000 litres of water a minute away from the affected waterworks. The facility supplies water to 47,000 properties in the area.
6. **Hampshire Fire and rescue** attended 120 incidents in a 24 hour period as a result of the floods. In Milford on Sea, 32 people were rescued from a café that has been caught in the coastal surge. A High Volume Pump was deployed at Lymington quay to alleviate tidal flooding pressures. In a number of areas around the county, the Service helped in the deployment of sandbags and in clearing sluices. The Service also provided community reassurance in Romsey and Southampton.
7. A letter from Cllr Kay Hammond to Peter Holland CBE, the Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser on the fire and rescue service response is attached at **Appendix A**.

**Financial Support for fire and rescue authorities under the Bellwin scheme**

1. The Bellwin scheme provides emergency financial assistance to local authorities including fire and rescue authorities. Such assistance is usually provided in response to an emergency caused by the weather, but relief may also be available in other circumstances. In recent years, the scheme has been activated in respect of the explosion at the Buncefield fuel depot, extensive flooding in Yorkshire, the Midlands, Cumbria and the North West, and for costs associated with the riots in the summer of 2011.
2. Bellwin funding is designed to recompense authorities for the costs of emergency measures undertaken to safeguard life or property, or to prevent further suffering and inconvenience locally, during exceptional circumstances. There are strict rules on the types of expenditure that are eligible for reimbursement.
3. In response to the recent flooding events the government opened the Bellwin Scheme and has also changed the rules that apply to applications in a way that is beneficial to fire and rescue services. The key changes that affect fire and rescue services are:
   1. paying Bellwin Grant at 100% above threshold instead of the normal, default 85%;
   2. allowing upper tier authorities with responsibility for fire to claim on a comparable basis to standalone fire authorities;
   3. reducing Bellwin thresholds for all county councils and unitary authorities; and
   4. extending the eligible spending period until the end of late May 2014.

**The role of fire and rescue services in flooding response**

1. The Pitt Review, produced following the 2007 floods, sought to clarify the responsibilities in the response to flooding. Some in the sector consider that there still remains some ambiguity about which agency has responsibility for the co-ordination of flood response across the country.
2. Flood response plans are currently the responsibility of Local Resilience Forums (LRF) and it is currently for those bodies to determine which agency should act as the lead in flood coordination, depending on local circumstances. The LGA has supported this position. Its reasoning has been that these are matters that should be for local determination and should not be subject to national guidance of legislation.
3. CFOA has taken the view that LRF Chairs should be advised that the default expectation is that the local Fire and Rescue Services will be the lead authority for the co-ordination of the rescue phase of the emergency response to flooding incidents. It argues that in practice the fire and rescue service is the lead agency for the co-ordination of rescue operations during the emergency phase (boats, pumping, command and associated advisors) of inland flood response activity. For example, the Fire and Rescue Service National Co-ordination Centre (FRSNCC) now acts as the repository for asset registration and mobilisation of emergency responders to inland flooding incidents
4. The experience of the recent flooding should now inform this debate further. The flooding response by local agencies including fire and rescue services and the partnership working that has taken place locally has been broadly seen as successful and this has been acknowledged by Ministers.
5. Guidance to LRFs should only be amended if there is a compelling case that flood response would be improved by fire and rescue services being designated as the lead authority for the co-ordination of response. Before going down this route a fuller understanding of the response in the recent extreme weather events is needed and this should also be informed by the outcomes of the review being undertaken by Oliver Letwin MP.
6. The Pitt Review (2007) also recommended that the fire and rescue service’s role in fire response should be fully funded. Fire and rescue do not receive specific funding for flood response. However fire and rescue services respond both as a local emergency service and within the national resilience framework. The Government has not sought to make flood response a statutory responsibility for fire and rescue. If it were to do so, this would constitute a new burden and would need to be fully funded.
7. If flooding events, like those seen in recent months become a more common feature of the weather systems in England. It will be important to review the national resilience framework in which fire and rescue services operate together with the funding mechanisms to ensure that the necessary support that the Sector provides during extreme weather events remains fit for purpose.
8. The Fire Conference has a plenary session on national resilience and a workshop on flood response and water rescue. Both provide an opportunity for the role of the fire sector in extreme weather events to be discussed in more detail.

**Next steps**

1. Officers will continue to monitor the ongoing reviews of the recent flooding response and will update FSMC on the publication of the Letwin Review findings.