

Extreme Weather: From Response to Recovery

Purpose

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This paper provides an update on the current situation and the state of response and recovery to recent extreme weather events. It outlines the strategic priorities for local government as local areas move from response to recovery and partners consider the implications of the recent extreme weather events for longer term resilience.

Recommendations

That the Executive agree that work on the strategic priorities for local government set out at paragraph 30 will be taken forward by the Finance Panel (Resources Board from September 2014) and the Environment and Housing Board (Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board from September 2014).

Action

Officers will take action as directed.

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Background

1. On 19 February Members received an update report on the impact of and response to the recent extreme flooding events. This paper updates the position as an increasing number of local authority areas move from response to recovery. It begins to draw out the lessons learned from the operational response, outlines the strategic priorities for local government going forward, as well as setting out the implications for individual householders.

Current position

2. Around 7,000 properties have been flooded since this period of extreme weather events began in early December 2013. A similar number have been indirectly affected by the flooding. Of those areas affected by the flooding, only Avon and Somerset remains in response mode. The others including - Surrey and Thames Valley - transitioned to recovery in the last week of February 2014. A recovery plan has been prepared by Avon and Somerset Local Resilience Forum in conjunction with relevant agencies and central government.
3. Groundwater flooding remains an issue, and a number of areas, including, Hampshire, Thames Valley and Surrey are likely to continue to be affected for the next two months.
4. Flood defences have been damaged in many parts of the country. The Environment Agency (EA) has prioritised around 250 EA and local authority assets for immediate repair and projects totalling £25 million have either been completed or are underway. A further £100 million will be available in the next financial year for additional flood defence repairs. There are still a number of transport routes disrupted.

Impact on the citizen

5. The cumulative impacts of the floods and severe weather on citizens affected will be long-lasting and extend beyond the immediate tasks of recovery and repair. In some areas citizens will face the cumulative impacts of damage to their homes and livelihoods if their businesses are affected, combined with increased insurance premiums, decline in the value of their property, higher costs of travel to pay for damaged infrastructure, and potentially a surcharge for sustainable drainage systems. For some households this could seriously drive up the cost of living and negatively impact on the local economy. These cumulative impacts need to be properly understood and considered in the long term policy response to communities at risk from flooding and tidal surges and the case for investment in flood defences.

Government's response

6. The Government's governance of the response and recovery is now three pronged:
 - 6.1. At the time of writing **COBR** (the Government's national emergencies committee) is still sitting. Its role is to receive updates on current events and to plan and coordinate the immediate response.

- 6.2. The **Ministerial Recovery Group**, chaired by the Secretary of State, Eric Pickles MP, is coordinating the recovery from the recent events and is considering the policy response in that context. It will meet weekly until mid-April.
- 6.3. The **Flooding Cabinet Committee** is taking a strategic Ministerial oversight of policy on flood recovery and long-term resilience which will next meet in May. Government is also appointing a number of ministerial Flooding Envoys who will visit areas to identify issues and collect good practice to feed into this meeting.
7. Cllr Mike Jones, Chairman of the Environment and Housing Board, has represented the LGA on the Ministerial Recovery Group since its inception.

Local Government Response and the Letwin Review

8. Councils and Fire and Rescue Authorities have worked tirelessly to support communities affected by the extreme weather events and local authorities have been rightly praised by Ministers for this work.
9. In terms of preparedness and response, councils have deployed a wide range of help and services to residents and businesses. This includes:
 - 9.1. Working through the Local Resilience Fora to put in place flood plans so that necessary resources are deployed quickly and effectively.
 - 9.2. Working with fire and rescue service and other emergency services, the EA, the military and other partners such as RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution) to identify areas at risk and deploying resources to help residents and businesses on the ground.
 - 9.3. Providing up to date advice and information about flood warnings.
 - 9.4. Provision of sandbags and other defence equipment, and emergency generators.
 - 9.5. Mutual aid working across to deal with particular pressures for example sandbags and staff.
 - 9.6. Coordinating the voluntary and emergency services to evacuate households.
 - 9.7. Setting up rest centres.
 - 9.8. Providing temporary accommodation.
 - 9.9. Providing support for vulnerable people, including where necessary new provision for those in residential care.
10. Oliver Letwin MP has undertaken a review which has considered events in December/January. The Chairman of the LGA met with, and subsequently wrote to, Oliver Letwin MP highlighting: good communications channels between residents and councils; the value of the LGA being part of COBR; and the valuable assistance by the military.
11. The conclusions of this review were included in a written parliamentary statement on 6 March. This highlighted the LGA's role in streamlining access to different funding

schemes. It also commended local authorities who demonstrated good practice in their response, and mentioned the continuing work with local authorities to set out more clearly what residents can expect from councils in an emergency, such as support outside business hours, being visible during the response, and providing emergency planning advice.

Partnership working

12. Lead Local Flood Authorities (single and upper-tier councils) have a lead role in managing local flood risk, particularly for surface water runoff and groundwater flooding as well as managing its interaction with other sources of flooding, for example from rivers and the sea. This requires co-ordination and co-operation between local partners to establish the most effective arrangements depending on local circumstances.
13. Partnership arrangements bring together county, unitary and district authorities, the EA, water companies and sewerage undertakers and other players including Internal Drainage Boards to work on securing effective and consistent management of local flood risk in their areas. We are arranging meetings with the Association of Drainage Authorities (ADA), National Farmers Union (NFU), Water UK as well as our ongoing engagement with the EA to discuss how effective existing partnership arrangements are and how we work together in the future.

Strategic Priorities for Local Government

14. Local councils will want to provide support to individuals as far as possible. Much of this will be providing advice and support in navigating funding schemes, and identifying householders with multiple issues who may be struggling with utility companies and financial arrangements. It is therefore likely that council support will continue to work well after the floods have receded.

Funding

15. The government has provided around £200 million in immediate financial support for councils, communities and businesses affected by the recent extreme weather events. Although this is welcome, it is likely that the ongoing bill will continue to rise. As the picture continues to unfold we will compile more accurate figures of the overall costs to councils.
16. There is recognition from Government that the incremental announcement of a number of different funding schemes has not been ideal and they are working to bring these schemes together into a coherent package. We are working with them on that, providing advice on streamlined administrative arrangements and simple reporting requirements.
17. In the future, we think this argues for a more coordinated approach across Whitehall to provide a single pot of funds which can be administered flexibly by local government.
18. The eventual repair bill from the summer floods of 2007 was estimated to be over £1 billion and it is likely that this winter's emergency will be of similar if not greater, scale. We are working with Directors of Finance to estimate the eventual cost of the flooding. Much of the cost will need to be met, one way or another, by local authorities and so councils will need further help to repair fully the damage caused by this extreme weather.

19. The impact on highways is a particular concern. The LGA has called for the creation of a highways maintenance emergency fund similar to that established following similar events in 2007. The Government has to date provided £33.5 million in capital funding for roads as part of the emergency response funding, but this will be insufficient to cover the repair costs which will run into hundreds of millions of pounds.

Bellwin Scheme

20. The LGA has argued for some time that the Bellwin scheme is inadequate in its current form. The Secretary of State has made changes to the current Bellwin scheme in response to the severity of the impact of the floods. The Scheme is now open to costs incurred to the end of May 2014, and payments have been increased to 100 per cent of the cost, rather than 85 per cent, with a proportion of money being paid in advance. The threshold of 0.2 per cent of an authority's revenue expenditure has been altered to make it easier for counties to reach the threshold. Councils have until the end of June to submit claims.
21. However, the Government has now recognised that the Bellwin Scheme needs further reform and it has announced that it will be undertaking a full review. The LGA believes that the Government should ensure that future emergency responses should be funded from a central budget with a single gateway, and that any Scheme should allow capital expenditure (as Pitt recommended) and tax reliefs to affected properties. Although Ministers have been clear that a threshold will continue to apply before accessing funding, one option might be a fixed sum threshold, different for counties and districts which would give authorities more clarity.

Funding Flood Defences

22. Councils have welcomed the Partnership Funding model for funding of flood and coastal defences, using their own funds to leverage in EA funding (Flood Defence Grant in Aid) as well as other sources. The new model enables an important link to be made between local beneficiaries and flood risk investment. Local authorities have committed the majority of external contributions for flood defences (approx. £110million) since the new partnership funding model came in. However, going forward their ability to do so will be constrained by reductions in budgets. The EA capital budget for flood defences has been protected. Going forward there will be a need to identify other sources of match funding for flood defences.
23. The LGA has previously said that the current funding model for flood defences should also support a more diverse range of priorities in order to reflect the needs of small and dispersed communities and release wider benefits beyond direct local beneficiaries and support growth.

Sustainable Drainage Systems

24. Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) can play an important role in flood risk management by reducing surface water run-off from development. The LGA is concerned that this new burden would not be funded in the conventional way, but by councils imposing a new charge through council tax mechanisms on residents of new development for the SuDS maintenance, which will place pressure on household finances and will be costly and impractical to collect.
25. Our suggestion is for an alternative route for collection, which offers value for money and administrative efficiency, through existing water bills issued by water companies. This

could be done either through commercial agreement with water companies or by introducing a legal power for councils to precept on water companies.

26. On timing, we were encouraged that the Government has listened to our concerns and announced that implementation will now be October and not April. We have also stressed that implementation of the SuDS legislation cannot go ahead until a charging and collection regime has been resolved and agreed. We are continuing to raise our concerns with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) civil servants and Ministers on these issues.

Wales

27. The Welsh Minister for Natural Resources, Alun Davies, commissioned a review into the damage caused to flood defences following the extreme weather. Phase one of the review was published on 14 February 2014. Phase two will examine the wider lessons learned from the storm and will be completed by the end of April 2014.
28. All affected authorities were contacted to obtain initial reports of damage to coastal defence infrastructure and other coastal assets, as well as to identify funding needs for immediate emergency works to restore these. The initial picture appears to be that coastal defences around Wales performed well, protecting thousands of properties. The estimated cost of the immediate repairs to coastal defences is around 8.1 million, with an additional £3 million costs relating to associated damage caused by the storms.
29. The Minister has announced funding of £4.6 million for flood repairs in this financial year 2013/14 for emergency works to flood defence infrastructure and also to assist storm-hit tourism and business. The Minister has also reiterated that funding has already been allocated for Borth (£2 million), Colwyn Bay (£5 million) and West Rhyl (£2.1 million) in this financial year to improve vital coastal defence schemes.

Next steps

30. Subject to Members' view, the LGA will continue to highlight councils' work on recovery across the country in the media. We will also:
- 30.1. Participate in the Ministerial Recovery Group providing support and engagement with local authorities as required.
 - 30.2. Take forward a number of funding issues, particularly around understanding costs; lobbying central government for additional capital funding to cover the costs of road and other infrastructure; ensuring reform of the Bellwin Scheme benefits local government; and funding of flood defences.
 - 30.3. Work with government to overcome the challenges in implementing sustainable drainage systems.
 - 30.4. Meet with a range of partners to assess the effectiveness of current partnership arrangements and how these should operate in the future.