

Flooding: Resilience and Response

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, councils have been at the forefront of activity to ensure communities are resilient and protected as far as possible.

Recommendation

That the Executive discuss the latest position, particularly with regards to new Government money which is now available to councils; and identify any new work.

Action

Officers will take actions forward as directed.

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Background

1. With the wettest January since 1766 and as storms continue to batter the UK, great swathes of the country remain submerged. The Environment Agency has issued more than 500 flood warnings this year, many of them at severe level indicating a danger to life. The crisis-hit Somerset Levels remain at the highest risk of continued flooding, but since the beginning of February, the flooding has spread to all of southern and south west England. As the bad weather has continued, the River Thames burst its banks with water levels not seen before. Over 70 per cent of fire and rescue services are providing assistance to affected areas and there are now 3000 army personnel assisting the rescue effort. The scale of the challenge is unprecedented: 3 million tonnes of water are being pumped away from Somerset Levels daily; 5,800 homes have been flooded; the Highways Agency has dealt with 8000 incidents last week; over 5000 engineers are involved in restoring the rail network and it will take months to repair; and at any one time there are around 14,000 people without electricity. All this has caused real distress and disruption to communities.

Flood Defences and local authority role in flood risk management

2. Although of course no consolation to flooded households, it is worth remembering that since 2007 and the Pitt Review, councils have invested heavily in flood defences.
3. The Flood and Water Management Act 2010 implemented the recommendations from the Pitt Review and placed a series of new responsibilities on Lead Local Flood Authorities or LLFAs (county councils and single-tier councils). LLFAs have a 'lead' role in managing flood risk from surface water, groundwater and ordinary watercourses (non-main rivers), working closely with partners involved in flood and water management.
4. Main duties include: applying and monitoring a local flood risk management strategy; cooperation with other risk management authorities including district and borough councils (in two-tier areas) water and sewerage companies, the Environment Agency and others; maintaining a register of local structure and features likely to have a significant effect on flood risk; investigation following significant flood events; acting as a sustainable drainage approving body and to approve, adopt and maintain all new sustainable drainage systems serving two or more new properties (not yet implemented).
5. In May 2011, Defra introduced a new policy approach for funding flood and coastal defences which aims to encourage funding from other resources. The proportion of central funding a project receives through this flood and coastal erosion resilience partnership funding is dependent on the benefits it will bring. Over this spending review period in excess of £148 million in external contributions has been secured. Councils have provided the majority of external contributions under the new model, committing more than £110 million.
6. This will have made a contribution in no small part to the 180,000 properties which have been protected from flooding this year.

Local Government Response

7. Our strategy to date has focused on highlighting the continued sterling work of councils and councillors working with the military, the fire and rescue service, the police, the RNLI and Coastguards and many other partners on the ground to protect people and property. The role of councils has been widely commended by national politicians and the evident community spirit in order to help neighbours and organise Flooding Volunteers has been widely welcomed. We have promoted all these in our materials.
8. The LGA has also been liaising with the national media on a daily basis to highlight the work councils have been doing on behalf of their communities. We have also been working closely with councils affected to ensure that information for residents on their websites is clearly accessible.

Additional Funding

9. The Prime Minister has given a public commitment that 'Money is no object' in getting these areas back up and running. There have been multiple announcements about additional funding, summarised below and totalling £202 million.

Bellwin: Local Authorities will be reimbursed for 100% of the costs above the threshold (as opposed to standard 85%).	£15m
Grant funding to Cornwall council to be passed on as savings of £5 per domestic flight ticket from Newquay up to end February.	N/A
Emergency flood defences repairs and maintenance 2014/15.	£100m
Emergency flood defences repairs and maintenance 2013/14.	£30m
Severe weather recovery scheme for most affected councils, including DfT funding for potholes (closing date 19 February).	£37m
100% business rate relief and defer tax payments for 3 months.	N/A
Support to farmers whose land has been waterlogged.	£10m
Hardship funding for SME businesses.	£10m
Grants of £5k for affected homeowners and businesses to improve flood defences.	tbc

10. Since these announcements, we have been working closely with central Government on the details of the schemes, some of which will be passed on to councils to disburse. There are however a few details where we need to continue negotiations and push for greater levels of funding to be released. One example is the commitment to fund the provision of sandbags for flood-hit areas, yet the current threshold of the Bellwin scheme is 0.2 per cent of a council's revenue budget spend. If, for whatever reason, that threshold is not met, then the cost of sandbags will not be reimbursed. We are currently assessing how many areas this might affect.

11. Although the Government has made some promising commitments about waiving business rates, there is no commitment about reimbursing councils for council tax deferral schemes. This is an area of local discretion which many councils may wish to pursue. A commitment to fully meet the cost of this would go a long way to reassuring councils that there will be no further shortfall in their budgets.
12. Understandably, we have not been able to ascertain from councils the likely costs of repair of the infrastructure in their area. As soon as we move into recovery phase, and these figures become clearer, we will be able to make an assessment of whether this overall funding is of the right magnitude.

Communications

13. As this issue took on a heightened level of seriousness, we established a dedicated microsite on the LGA website so that our member authorities can find all the information they need in one place: <http://www.local.gov.uk/flood-resilience>. This contains sections on funding, case studies about council activity, a number of press notices and comments and rebuttals on specific issues for example the accusation that councils are charging for sandbags. This part of the web is receiving a healthy level of engagement, well over 3,000 page views a week and is updated daily.
14. We are liaising with the national media on a daily basis to highlight the work councils are doing on behalf of their communities. We have also been working closely with affected councils to ensure that information for residents on their websites is clearly accessible. We have also used the Chairman's and Chief Executive's bulletins to get information out to the sector quickly. We have timed these to coincide with Government announcements so our members can keep up to date with the latest position.

Ongoing issues

15. The national co-ordination mechanism (COBR) is essentially a command and control operation and the Prime Minister has asked for reassurance about a number of issues and services which local authorities run. Concerns have been raised about: councils having emergency and out of hours telephone numbers sufficiently visible and active on websites, particularly for vulnerable people; the provision of respite/rest centres and levels of mutual aid; and the setting up of a national helpline. Our approach has been consistently to remind central Government that responding to communities is the day job for councils and that, although provision will be different across the country, we can be confident that councils are providing these services.
16. Because of the prolonged nature of the flooding, there are emerging concerns about fatigue of emergency services and partners and the resilience of smaller areas to maintain this level of support. We are therefore encouraging greater use of mutual aid with areas not so affected by serious flooding.

Review of response

17. The Government has charged Oliver Letwin MP with carrying out a review of the current response to flooding. The Chairman has met him already and this is due to report in March. We also have a roundtable/teleconference pencilled in for 24 February where Brandon Lewis wants to explore some of these issues direct with Leaders.