

**SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE –
22ND APRIL 2013**

FLOOD RESPONSE

Report by Bethan Morgan, County Emergency Planning Officer

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the county-wide response plans that are in place with regard to flooding and look ahead at how these will change following learning from recent flooding events.

Background

1. In 2011, a Joint Severe Weather Plan was adopted by Oxfordshire County Council, the District and City Councils that outlines a common approach to adverse weather events. The plan is maintained by the emergency planning leads collectively of these authorities with the support of key partner agencies such as police, fire, ambulance and the Environment Agency.
2. The aim of the plan is to outline the joint emergency response arrangements across Oxfordshire councils in response to severe weather. This includes a framework for the responsibilities of both County Council and District Councils in terms of activation, allocation and deployment of resources. The plan complements a number of existing Oxfordshire emergency plans and should be read in conjunction with those.
3. The plan deals with a number of severe weather scenarios; gales/storms, winter weather such as snow/ice/fog, heavy rain/flooding, heatwave and drought. These have been identified in the UK Climate Change Risk Assessment and furthermore assessed as risks within the Thames Valley Community Risk Register.
4. The following sections outline the activation processes and key structures relating to flooding in particular and how plans are changing in response to learning from past flooding events.

Activation criteria

5. As with all plans, the Severe Weather Plan includes activation criteria and in the case of flooding, these are generally:
 - Amber or Red severe weather warning – Met Office National Severe Weather Warning Service;
 - Amber or Red risk – Flood Guidance Statement
 - Flood Warning or Severe Weather Warning – EA Flood Warning
 - Notification from partner agency or internal service
 - Visual observations from the public received and verified

6. Once the activation criteria has been reached, a multi-agency teleconference will be organised to assess the potential likelihood and impact upon the county and consider appropriate action to take. The initial teleconference will include all of the local authorities as well as specialist teams from within OCC and external advisers such as the Met Office.

Coordination

7. Within OCC, this activation triggers generic actions outlined in the County Emergency Plan which cascades information to all directorates and specialist teams such as Communications. An internal teleconference is held which considers what structures are required internally to deal with both the flood response and the business continuity actions required.
8. Within the County Council, specialist cells such as the severe weather desk in Highways are established, as well as the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) and each directorate's crisis management cell if required. Once established, the EOC provides coordination of response with external partners both within Oxfordshire and the rest of Thames Valley.

Multi-agency response

9. Activation of the Joint Severe Weather Plan triggers similar activity across the Oxfordshire local authorities, with internal measures such as EOCs, business continuity arrangements and resources being placed on standby in readiness for emergency response.
10. The plan recognises that each local authority will have its own resources and set of policies for responding to flooding. For example, established sand-bag shelters in some districts that are maintained with community support or pre-identified locations where sand and bags may be dropped at appropriate times.
11. The benefit of the joint plan is that these separate resources can be collectively reviewed and deployed to support the response. In the flooding event of November 2012, not only did the response trigger the opening of community sandbag stores but in the case of OCC highways, sandbags could be pre-deployed to known surface-water problem areas to support the local community. The use of multi-agency teleconferences and good communication streams between EOCs and emergency responders means that at-risk areas can be identified and appropriate action agreed between partners.

Community resilience

12. The local response to flooding is based upon a tiered approach starting with personal and community resilience through to emergency response by the traditional emergency responding organisations.

13. The emergency planning unit (EPU) has worked with the District and City councils, the Environment Agency and OCC services to promote community resilience to individuals and communities. This work was initially led by the EA after the 2007 floods; encouraging flooded communities to produce community flood plans. In the past 3 years, the EPU and partners have promoted the development of multi-use community emergency plans to Parish and Town Councils and in the future, to Parish Meeting areas as well. One of the outputs from these efforts has been a database of locations that can be used by the community in the case of evacuation. During the floods of 2012, the database was successfully used to identify appropriate locations for rest centres in Abingdon and Henley.
14. The promotion of community emergency plans is an ongoing project and work is underway, particularly in the Oxford City area, to support communities that had previously produced flood plans to revisit these and review their contents to ensure they identify action to be taken during flooding events. Work is also underway with the City Council to identify how community resilience should be promoted to non-parished areas which, in other districts, provide a basic structure for this promotion activity.
15. The work undertaken by the emergency planning teams within local authorities is undertaken in consultation with OCC Highways and Drainage teams to encourage the adoption of community emergency plans where flood alleviation and management activities are being discussed.
16. One of the areas for development following recent flood events is the role of volunteers in the community to act as points of information and intelligence. In a limited number of locations within the County, flood wardens had been recruited by the EA but the number of these has reduced over time. Discussions are underway between partners to establish if community-based volunteers could be recruited to act during emergency events (not just flooding) to support community resilience and be a source of local intelligence.

Improving intelligence of flood-risk

17. Every flooding event provides responders with more information about at-risk locations which is useful in profiling the resources and actions required to respond. Each agency with responsibility for collating data (such as the EA or OCC under the Flood and Water Management Act) is able to use this historic data during a response to assess the impact of flooding events upon the community. As these systems are introduced, testing in real-time is proving useful to refine and improve their usage. These sources include:
 - The widespread use of the new EA flood warning codes to publicise flood risk – introduced in 2011, the 3 stages of warnings are becoming familiar, as are the recommended actions to be taken.
 - Improved use of EA Flood Warnings Direct with smaller catchment areas to provide flood risk information direct to registered properties.

Following feedback, some of the areas will be reviewed by the EA in the next year to improve the targeting of warnings.

- Web-based river levels and live flood warning maps provide a clear picture of how watercourses are responding to weather events. The EA is reviewing some telemetry sites and how information is provided following observations from partners but overall, these have improved how both responders and residents access information.
- OCC EPU is currently testing a new service offered to partners by the EA to register key sites so that alerts are received if these sites are at risk of flooding; this is a targeted service which should assist OCC in identifying locations such as schools, care establishments and fire stations when at risk, thus providing an opportunity to protect these sites or invoke appropriate business continuity plans.
- The weather events of 2012/13 provided an opportunity to improve usage of social media to provide information on disruption (such as road closures) to the public. The speed of resources such as Twitter proved useful in increasing communication - not only to those people with Twitter accounts, but was used to inform media partners for onward communication via more traditional outlets such as radio.

Learning from flooding events

18. Plans are reviewed in response to post-incident debriefs and lessons identified. The Joint Severe Weather Plan is reviewed annually prior to the onset of winter and lessons from the flooding and snow events of winter 2012/13 will be incorporated in the next review. This review schedule permits all of the partners involved in the plan to consider amendments required not only to that plan, but also to their own internal processes and plans as well as improvements to systems or policies that have been made by the wider responder community. This also provides an opportunity to make amendments to our complementary plans to ensure the full suite of plans is current and reflect learning and best practice.

19. The Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to:

- a) note the report.**