

Statement from Alistair Neill to Cabinet regarding recent flooding

Thank you for this timely opportunity to update Cabinet on the recent flooding in the County.

Communities across Herefordshire were heavily impacted by Storm Dennis, with a month's worth of rain falling in two days over the weekend of Saturday 15 and Sunday 16 February 2020. The sheer volume of water caused generalised flooding in many areas severely affecting properties and roads, and the rivers Wye and Lugg both rose to their highest ever recorded peaks bursting their banks. What this means is that these levels were the highest in over 200 years. At one point around 700 tonnes of water per second were flowing under the Old Bridge in Hereford. With widespread disruption experienced by residents and businesses, a major incident was declared on Sunday 16 February 2020 at 11.20am.

Major incident response

A Tactical Control Group (TCG) was convened working out of Plough Lane, chaired by Sue Thomas, Superintendent Herefordshire, West Mercia Police. This brought together a number of key agencies including Herefordshire Council, Public Health, the Environment Agency, West Mercia Police, Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service, West Midlands Ambulance Service, our health partners and utility services. Through the TCG, services were coordinated to protect and provide assistance to Herefordshire residents and businesses, focusing our early efforts on the most vulnerable members of the community.

Travel and transport across the county was extremely difficult with around 80 major and minor roads impassable at peak flood. Road and bridge closures were put in place where they were flooded or where their condition had become unsafe. Whilst a priority was to keep Herefordshire moving, the top priority has been to keep people safe.

Some areas experienced power cuts, however these were generally short term.

More than 300 residential properties experienced devastating flooding. Recovery and rest centres were opened in Ross, Leominster and Holmer Leisure Centres and at Point4 for people whose homes were flooded, providing shelter and refreshment.

In Whitchurch, 24 residents were evacuated from a privately-run care home and moved safely to alternative accommodation. The eldest of the residents was 97. In Hampton Bishop a care home became inaccessible to normal vehicles, so staff were transported to and from the home by military and fire and rescue services, and the basement was continuously pumped so that residents could remain in their home.

In total, 204 people were rescued across the county by fire and rescue services from either properties or vehicles.

Due to its proximity to both the rivers Wye and Lugg, much of Hampton Bishop remained inaccessible by road for many days. The delivery of essential food and medicine supplies was arranged, with council staff visiting the local ASDA supermarket, who kindly provided the food free of charge, on behalf of stranded residents.

During this time information was provided to residents across the county through a dedicated page on the Council website and via the Council's social media channels - which were viewed more than 6.5million times in the last 11 days - with the latest situation updates and general advice on what to do if affected by the flooding. Information was also shared through local newspaper, radio and community social media sites, and interviews on regional TV. With national and international media interest, the online news reach (that is number of people who have read about the flooding) is 1.18billion to date.

In addition, video messages were sent to residents in Whitchurch and Hampton Bishop providing information specific to those communities. These were circulated through Whatsapp, the local parish council and local residents through electronic messaging.

On Tuesday 18 February 2020, under emergency provisions, the decision was taken to allocate £1million of council reserves to support local residents and businesses impacted by flooding. Since this decision, the Government (Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government) has announced community and business flood recovery grants, which the council will assist people to access, with £500 available to residents and £2500 for businesses. Payment of grants started on Monday 24 February 2020 to the 322 residents and 64 businesses who have applied to date. In addition council tax and business rate relief is available for three months for flooded properties. At the this time we await word from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) as to whether local farmers affected can access its Farming Recovery Fund.

Recovery

With the impact of further rainfall and possible raised river levels, the formal position of emergency response was maintained until Tuesday 25 February 2020 when we formally moved to a 'recovery' position. However recovery for many communities started sooner than this.

The council provides recovery support and signposting to assist affected communities during recovery so that they can work towards restoring local services and facilities and returning to normal.

Additional resources have been deployed across the county to expedite road cleaning and inspection and assessment of the condition of roads and bridges. Surveys using specialist equipment are being carried out. We have established that there are at least 71 locations across the highways network where repair work is required and of these 51 require extensive work to remedy the damage caused which is expected to cost upwards of £1.6million. Whilst work to repair damage has commenced, several roads and bridges will require longer term attention and investment to fully address flood damage and secure their resilience. As such I expect the final repair bill to multiply.

We are extremely mindful of the experiences of people who live and work in the communities affected by current road and bridge closures, however it will take weeks before many are safe to reopen. As of 27 February, there remain 28 road closures in place, with restricted access particularly problematic around Fownhope/ Holme Lacy and Walford/ Leintwardine. We ask people to continue to adhere to road these closures and bear with us while this work takes place. We will be looking for Government funding under the Bellwin scheme for the repair of roads and other infrastructure. Clearly travel through the county will continue to be impacted and additional bus services have been established in those areas that are impacted by prolonged road closure. School transport services have also been supplemented.

Communities across the county are facing the unenviable task of cleaning-up their homes and businesses. Herefordshire Council are providing a free service to collect flood-damaged household items from outside residents' houses, and commercial vehicles won't need permits at household recycling centres in Herefordshire until Sunday 1 March, for the disposal of flood damaged items. Lost wheelie bins are being replaced.

Helping with the clean-up effort, Herefordshire Council staff joined with others from local response services to deliver cleaning supplies and assistance to a number of communities affected by flooding. The Talk Community Big Herefordshire clean-up has involved hundreds of staff who volunteered to visit residents and businesses in prioritised areas to distribute information about flood recovery, provide help with completing grant forms and deliver cleaning essentials to designated community hubs. These door-to-door visits by our staff have been very gratefully received by residents and businesses. Among the other volunteers were retired firefighters who had driven from Kent, east London and north Yorkshire to support

our efforts by clearing out flooded properties. In total more than 400 volunteers have now visited 42 different sites. Those volunteers were not only from the council, but also from:

- Police
- Fire and Rescue
- Herefordshire Council
- British Red Cross
- Tunnels to Towers provided support to lift and move heavy furniture and equipment out of homes ready for waste collection.

With many local play areas affected by the flooding, the council funded sessions in local leisure centres offering a safe place for children to play during the half term. And as pupils returned to school, the Council's school transport service put alternative services in place for those communities still impacted by flooding and road closures.

Information has been sent to local businesses and representative groups about how to access short-term desk or office space to aid with business continuity, and recovery grants. Our farming and agricultural businesses will be impacted beyond a single season.

Over the coming weeks we will be working with residents and businesses to access flood resilience grants, once details on this have been received from Government.

Future considerations

Although the recent high river levels and extent of flooding across the county was unprecedented, climate changes mean that it is sensible to assume that they will become a more regular occurrence. If unprecedented is the new normal, we need to think and plan differently. It must be a priority for us to work to build community resilience to flooding across the county and work with partner agencies to consider and plan flood defence and prevention measures.

We will be looking to Central Government to provide special funding to support this and repairs to our road network, bridges and other infrastructure to a standard that will be able to better withstand extreme weather conditions, and are writing to government departments and MPs in this regard.

In the longer-term, the council will need to give careful consideration to planning issues, where we build and how we manage our environment appropriately, and again we will be looking to Government to support this through policy and action.

I am mindful that whilst Herefordshire is well into recovery mode, our west Mercia neighbours in Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin in particular remain in emergency response, with once again, unprecedented flooding. We continue to liaise across west Mercia through the Strategic Control Group, where Herefordshire Council will chair the region's communications as all areas move into recovery.

I would like to round-off by recognising and thanking people from across the county during this time of extraordinary disruption. The impact of this flooding has been substantial and significant, and we do not underestimate how upsetting and disruptive it has been for many. It may take several months before the county can return to 'business as normal'. However, residents have responded with resilience and a wonderful sense of community.