

16 April 2008

Dear Secretaries of State,

During December of last year we published the Interim Report on lessons learned from the 2007 floods. It highlighted 15 urgent recommendations which I believed to be necessary in order to prevent or mitigate flooding which might occur before the final report is published. These recommendations were not just for government, they also called for urgent action by local organisations, the private sector and the public.

Hilary Benn, on behalf of the Government, accepted all of the urgent recommendations on the day of publication and undertook to work with all organisations involved to deliver changes as quickly as possible. In the Interim Report, I promised to monitor work against the urgent recommendations and committed to publish a commentary on what had been achieved by the end of March of this year.

This letter and supporting annex, sets out my views on progress. The Review Team have assessed progress against each recommendation on the basis of contributions from government departments and agencies, structured feedback from Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) and direct evidence received from organisations through the consultation process and a series of regional conferences. We have judged each recommendation to fall into one of three categories: 'complete', for those which have been carried out as we intended; 'acceptable progress', for those which have been the subject of considerable activity and are nearing completion; and 'insufficient progress', for those which we believe to be taking significantly longer than seems reasonable. In all our assessments, we are informed by a consideration of what those people directly affected by last summer's floods would consider to be fair. We are also mindful that our deadline for progress was demanding, though we recognise that the time elapsed since the publication and acceptance of the recommendations will be regarded by many as generous and that of the 107 actions identified we chose to prioritise only 15.

Overall, I am pleased to report that strong progress has been made against the majority of the recommendations, particularly recommendations 1 to 9, 12, 13 and 15. Government organisations, notably DEFRA and the Environment Agency (EA), have responded to the challenge with a programme of action. Good work has been done to improve awareness of specific flood risks amongst local responder organisations, particularly in those areas which face the most significant problems. This is coupled with positive work at the local level to enhance the resilience and effectiveness of emergency response, supported by new guidance from government. I am pleased to see these improvements, and overall we are already better prepared for future flooding emergencies.

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Nevertheless, there are areas for concern. In particular, it is disappointing that insufficient progress has been made against the recommendations which relate to critical infrastructure and public awareness.

Recommendation 10 asked for LRFs to be given basic briefing on critical infrastructure located in their areas, so as to prevent the sort of confusion around the location, criticality and vulnerability of essential sites that we witnessed last summer. Although a briefing arrangement has been agreed in central government, this is not yet leading to sufficient action at the local level. In this respect, responder awareness of critical infrastructure and its vulnerability to flooding has not significantly improved, save for those areas which have undertaken local initiatives.

Recommendations 11, 14 and 15 related to public awareness and engagement, something which the Interim Report recognized as crucial to effective flood risk management. Progress has been made, but significantly more needs to be done. Moving to an 'opt-out' telephone flood warnings scheme has proved to be complicated, but more should have been done to make decisive progress in this area including a clear timetable for action. In relation to the recommendations directed at the public, progress has also been patchy with no evidence that anything other than a small proportion of people at risk have done anything to help themselves. As a consequence, the public remain little better prepared than they were before last summer's floods.

I am also surprised by the variation in the levels of engagement, understanding and willingness to pursue improvements as set out in the correspondence from LRFs. Many LRFs were able to demonstrate existing capabilities or a commitment to rapid progress against the issues highlighted for improvement. But others have been slow to tackle the challenge, with some of the reasons cited – such as the complexity of the task, lack of resources or the inappropriateness of the recommendation – lacking credibility in the light of good progress elsewhere. The level of prevention and preparedness in relation to flood risk is variable, with different parts of the country experiencing different levels of assurance.

I hope that you will agree with me that more progress must be made on those recommendations which have not yet been completed. I will provide further commentary as necessary in my final report. To that end, I would be grateful for your views on what more might be done to speed up progress and ensure that the urgent recommendations are all delivered as quickly as possible.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Bates', with a stylized flourish at the end.

ANNEX – PROGRESS AGAINST INDIVIDUAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Flood risk awareness

Recommendation 1

The Review recommended that more frequent and systematic **monitoring of groundwater levels** at times of high risk should be undertaken by the EA, which should begin as soon as possible to predict and mitigate further serious ground water flooding from this winter onwards. The purpose of this recommendation was to counter the concern that groundwater flooding was a significant risk this winter, and should be factored into the work local areas were doing to improve their flood risk management. This recommendation has been **completed**.

The EA has made progress with this recommendation, and LRFs report good progress. EA have produced national groundwater level forecasts for all of England's major chalk aquifers, from which the risk of groundwater flooding is highest, and shared this at the local level. This was achieved by undertaking two national groundwater level scenario forecasting exercises - one in October 2007 to assess risks at the start of winter, and the second in February 2008 to re-assess the situation after the heavy January rains. These were extended analyses, compared to those undertaken routinely for Southern England, so as to include the chalk aquifers of Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire, thus covering all major chalk aquifers in England. The EA are considering the scope to undertake such national forecasting on a more regular and systematic basis.

Recommendation 2

The Review recommended that the EA, supported by local authorities and water companies, should urgently **identify areas at highest risk from surface water flooding** where known, inform LRFs and take steps to identify remaining high risk areas over the winter months. This recommendation was prompted by the significant problems caused by surface water flooding during the summer, and an assessment that information was not being shared appropriately by the various responsible organisations. **Acceptable progress** has been made against this recommendation.

Although the EA has limited responsibilities in relation to surface water flooding, it has been working with local authorities and water companies and made significant progress with this recommendation over the past three months.

The EA have pursued a number of short-term actions including meeting with many of the LRFs to share knowledge of historic surface water flooding. Following on from that, the EA is determining what information is needed to gain a fuller picture of historical surface-water flooding. They will then request the information from Local Authorities and Water Companies and, once collated, provide the information to Local Resilience Forums to allow a multi-agency risk assessment of surface water flooding. The aim by August 2008 is to have an initial indication of

areas that may, in certain circumstances, be prone to surface water flooding. This will provide indicative information to LRFs.

LRFs are aware of the process, and have timetables in place to incorporate the new EA data into local flood planning. However, should this new information not be issued or prove to be insufficient for local responders, the assessment of progress in this area will be revised downwards.

Defences

Recommendation 3

The Review recommended that the EA should urgently develop and implement a clear policy on the **use of temporary and demountable defences**. This recommendation reflected community and professional confusion about the role of these types of flood defence, and the absence of a clear national approach to dealing with assets which are always in high demand during severe flooding events. **Acceptable progress** has been made against this recommendation.

The EA already has a demountable flood defence policy in place and their temporary flood defence policy will be circulated for comment to professional partners very soon. The EA intends to share and explain these finalised policies to professional partners and the public to make sure that they are clearly understood.

Local responders are informed of progress and anticipate that the guidance on the use of temporary barriers is imminent, not least because of effective dialogue by the EA. However, should this guidance not be issued or prove to be insufficient for local responders, the assessment of progress in this area will be revised downwards.

Local response arrangements

Recommendation 4

The Review recommended that all LRFs urgently reviewed their current local arrangements for **flood rescue** to consider whether they are adequate in light of the summer's events and their local community risk registers. This recommendation was driven by concern about the ad hoc nature of rescue efforts in many places, and the absence of clear operational control structures. This recommendation has been **completed**.

The returns received by the Review show that LRFs have been thoroughly reviewing their current local arrangements for flood rescue over the past three months. There is a clear sense that each area understands the strengths and limitations of local flood rescue capability, and is drawing up realistic (though often limited) plans accordingly.

However, there is no consistent approach to water rescue capabilities in England. Many LRF have different capabilities and funding structures in place. The Fire and Rescue Service plays a central role, but other organisations (statutory and non-statutory) also form a significant part of the picture. Representations to the Review cite a variety of reasons for the differences in capability – the lack of a statutory duty on any organisation to carry out flood rescue, an absence of funding for equipment and training, no agreed national scheme for mutual aid in flood emergencies. This response to the recommendation is cause for concern. If another wide area flooding emergency happened in the near future, those responding to the emergency would still not necessarily have the right resources or training to respond safely.

Recommendation 5

The Review recommended that all LRFs should undertake an urgent review of the **resilience of designated rest centres and other major facilities** to ensure either that they can be used in the response to flooding and other major emergencies, or that alternative arrangements are put in place. This recommendation reflected incidents during the summer floods which led to the loss of rest centres, emergency facilities and emergency equipment. This recommendation has been **completed**.

This analysis has been carried out by LRFs and contingency arrangements are being made where there are rest centres which are at risk of flooding. Other major facilities have also been checked and where there are vulnerabilities, these have been highlighted to the appropriate organisations for them to set up business continuity plans. A number of LRFs have carried our analysis against consequential risks such as loss of power.

The number of rest centres available has also been considered by LRFs with smaller, more localised rest centres being identified in some cases to be used if the emergency causes problems with travelling to rest centres (one of the tactical lessons from the summer floods).

National planning and co-ordination

Recommendation 6

The Review recommended that the Cabinet Office, with other departments, should urgently consider the costs, benefits and feasibility of establishing arrangements for the urgent acquisition of supplies during a major emergency, including the use of call-off contracts or the creation of national or regional **stockpiles** of equipment and consumables. This recommendation responded to the very significant logistical challenges which the summer flooding presented, particularly in Gloucestershire. This recommendation has been **completed**.

The Cabinet Office, working with other departments, undertook a scoping study on stockpiling. This study surveyed Regional Resilience Forums to see what stockpiling, if any, was used at present and also considered possible options which could be used in the future including traditional stockpiling, call-off contracts and the use of supplies held in the community.

From this study, guidance has been written which lays out the options available. This guidance is currently going through Cabinet Committee clearance and will be issued to both the regional and local level in the summer after the National Capabilities Survey has concluded.

Recommendation 7

The Review recommended that Department of Health guidance clarifying the role and accountabilities of organisations involved in providing **scientific and technical advice** during a major incident should be implemented as soon as possible and understood by Gold Commanders. This recommendation reflected the confusion which occurred around different sources of scientific advice, and lack of clarity around the split between national and local responsibilities. This recommendation has been **completed**.

Guidance to the NHS on providing Strategic Command Arrangements across the healthcare sector was released, updating roles and responsibilities for NHS organisations during major incidents. It specifically clarifies the role of the Strategic Health Authority as the principal healthcare system manager during a crisis. Local responders have already begun incorporating the new advice into their planning activities, leading both to greater consistency and improved awareness of the role which health service organisations can play.

The Department of Health is continuing to work closely with the Cabinet Office to develop further Science and Technical Advice Cell (STAC) guidance at the local, regional and national level, including clarifying the roles of central advice and that of other health agencies. This guidance is due to be published in early summer 2008.

Recommendation 8

The Review recommended that the guidance currently under preparation by Cabinet Office to provide local responders with advice on the definition and identification of **vulnerable people** and on planning to support them in an emergency should be issued urgently. This recommendation was prompted by the particular problems faced by vulnerable people during the summer floods, and the problems which some local responders had in delivering a consistent and effective approach. This recommendation has been **completed**.

The Cabinet Office published guidance on 'Identifying People Who Are Vulnerable in a Crisis' at the beginning of March. LRFs have received this and are using it to further develop their humanitarian assistance arrangements. This fits well with a wider effort which local responders are making to improve the way they meet the

needs of vulnerable people during emergencies. This work, informed by the guidance, should prove helpful during future emergencies.

Recommendation 9

The Review recommended that, in order to effectively fulfil its Lead Department role for flood risk management and emergency response, Defra needs to urgently develop and share a **national flood emergency framework**. This reflected the fragmented nature of local flood risk planning and the benefits of national level frameworks on other issues. **Acceptable progress** has been made against this recommendation.

Defra completed a review of its Lead Government Department Plan to take account of the Pitt Interim Report findings and reissued this in early 2008. This will provide a basis for developing a flood emergency framework for England. New guidance on producing Multi-Agency Flood Plans was issued in early 2008, and local areas are already using this.

Defra have explained that an outline national framework is at an advanced stage of preparation, and should be ready during April for review and initial consultation. Defra anticipate that feedback and recommendations in the final Pitt Report will be incorporated into the work with a view to finalising the framework in the autumn. Work will then begin on a planning a national exercise that will test key components of the arrangements set out in the Framework and the Defra Lead Department Plan.

This is good progress, and a clear timetable for action. However, should this new work not be delivered or prove to be insufficient for local responders, the assessment of progress in this area will be revised downwards.

Critical infrastructure

Recommendation 10.

The Review recommended that **Category 1 responders should be urgently provided with a detailed assessment of critical infrastructure** in their areas to enable them to assess its vulnerability to flooding. This recommendation was a direct response to the loss and potential loss of essential services during the summer, and was the starting point for a much wider programme of engagement and information sharing. **Insufficient progress** has been made against this recommendation.

The Cabinet Office wrote to LRF Chairs in mid-March to outline the standardised procedures for how they can access this information on critical infrastructure in their areas. The EA are ready to share information on the probability of flooding from rivers and the sea to enable Category 1 responders to assess urgently the vulnerability to flooding of critical infrastructure in their areas. They have very

recently been given notification of the agreed Cabinet Office process for securely sharing such information.

However, LRFs have reported or displayed uncertainty and confusion over the process, and none have presented evidence of any briefings yet taking place or even being timetabled. Many local areas seem to be trying to initiate their own programmes of critical infrastructure planning, but claim to be hampered by legal limitations or operational security concerns.

Public awareness and engagement

Recommendation 11

The Review recommended that the EA should work urgently with telecommunications companies, consulting the Information Commissioner as necessary to facilitate the roll-out of **'opt-out' telephone flood warning schemes** to all homes and businesses liable to flooding, including homes with ex-directory numbers. This recommendation was driven by the low take up of automated flood warnings, particularly in some of the areas most severely affected by the summer floods. **Insufficient progress** has been made against this recommendation.

The EA are pursuing this issue with the Information Commissioner, British Telecom, the Electoral Commission and the Ministry of Justice. Further discussions will take place at the end of April. However, there is no clear timetable for delivering change in this area despite the wide-ranging support for the proposal. Sufficient progress would be characterised by a clear public timetable for change.

Recommendation 12

The Review recommended that LRFs urgently develop plans to **enhance flood warnings through 'door-knocking'** by local authorities based on an assessment of the post code areas likely to flood. This reflects best practice which emerged during the summer floods, and is already adopted in some areas. This recommendation has been **completed**.

LRFs have carefully considering their plans, taking into account local needs, the practicality of door-knocking in their area, the resources of the local authorities and the other options available to them to enhance flood warnings.

It seems that the effectiveness of door-knocking as a method of disseminating information is well understood by those LRFs who have undertaken it in the past. Some LRFs have plans which utilise resources of the Police, other local community groups and EA staff where appropriate. Others intend to include this in community or parish plans which are currently being developed in their areas. This seems an entirely appropriate and logical development of the recommendation, and will lead to tangible improvements in local capability during flooding emergencies.

Recommendation 13

The Review recommended that LRFs urgently make arrangements to **involve local media representatives** in the local preparedness and response to support their public information role, a recognition of the pivotal role that the media played in getting information out to the large numbers of people affected by flooding or loss of essential services. This recommendation has been **completed**.

The proposals for action on this issue have been received with enthusiasm by LRFs. Their feedback suggests that arrangements throughout the country are well underway with local media representatives being involved in various ways depending on the local need. Effective engagement with the media at early planning stages will help this relationship run smoothly during an emergency. The Review will continue to encourage LRFs to foster emerging relationships and look for new ways of encouraging local media to be involved.

Recommendation 14

The Review recommended that **members of the public make up a flood kit** – including key personal documents, insurance policy, emergency contact numbers (including local council, emergency services and Floodline – 0845 988 1188), torch, battery or wind-up radio, mobile phone, rubber gloves, wet wipes or antibacterial hand gel, first aid kit and blankets. **Insufficient progress** has been made against this recommendation.

The concept of flood kits is being promulgated by many local authorities, as well as the EA. Flood kits are highlighted on many local authority and EA websites as a sensible way of coping with the initial problems of being flooded. It is encouraging that this message is being delivered to the public by organisations.

However, it is difficult to measure any increase in the readiness of the British public to cope with another flooding emergency. Certainly, those who were flooded over the summer or who live in an area badly affected by floods are likely to understand the need to be ready for another flood and to lessen its impact. However, we have looked at the sales of those items likely to be found in flood kits to check whether there has been any marked increase in their sale since the summer but so far, we have not seen such a trend. We have also seen no evidence to suggest wider or increasing public awareness in this kind of practical improvement, nor do local or national agencies any increased demand from the public for advice on this issue.

Recommendation 15

Linked to the recommendation above, the Review also recommended that **members of the public increase their personal state of readiness and resilience to floods by following the EA's practical advice**, where appropriate. As with recommendation 14, this recognises the importance of the public being

able to help themselves during wide area emergencies. **Acceptable progress** has been made against this recommendation.

Over 37,500 homes have newly registered on the EA's Floodline Warnings Direct system since January this year. This is a result of both a recruitment campaign and pre-registering over 15,000 customers. The EA are planning on pre registering over 26,000 customers in 2008-09 to make sure more people are able to receive warnings.

So far this year the EA have had over 17,000 people log on to read their website pages on 'simple ways to protect your home from flooding', in comparison to last year when only 7,500 logged on. The EA has also had over 8,000 people log on to view advice on producing an emergency flood plan in comparison to fewer than 1,500 for the same time last year.

This reflects a step change in the level of take-up and interest, and is to be commended. The public have responded positively, and the EA has successfully encouraged that. However, this good progress needs to continue, and the Final Report is likely to return to the role of the public.