



Chapter 2: The effect of the summer 2007 floods on individuals and communities

Summary

This chapter describes the experience of the floods from perspective of the individuals, businesses, farmers and communities affected.

It covers;

- The initial shock as the flooding began;
- The clean-up and aftermath;
- The on-going effects; and
- The public response.

Introduction

2.1 This chapter describes the exceptional and devastating effects of the 2007 summer floods on individuals, families, communities and businesses – effects which are still being felt today. It also describes some of the most visible positive stories that emerged – individuals and organisations going beyond expectations to help others and a genuine sense of community spirit and cooperation. These personal experiences form one part of the evidence base for recommendations later in this report.

2.2 The evidence for this chapter comes primarily from qualitative research commissioned by the Review, carried out in October 2007 by the independent research agency GfK NOP Social Research. The full report is available for download from the Review website www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/thepittreview.

2.3 The chapter also draws on evidence from research commissioned by The Consumer Council for Water to understand people's experience of the loss of water. The full report can be downloaded from www.ccwater.org.uk/upload/doc/Final.doc.

2.4 Also, we have used evidence submitted by members of the general public to the Pitt Review website,² comments sent to us by email and post and evidence gathered during visits to many parts of the country.

The initial shock

2.5 The scale and speed of the floods that affected people in summer 2007 came as a shock. In many cases, this reflects people's limited awareness of risk, especially of surface water flooding, and limited engagement in preparedness planning. Even if people were aware that heavy rain

was forecast, they did not expect it to affect them, and certainly not so seriously.

"You just think, oh, it'll never happen to me."

Householder, West Berkshire

"We were sat at the end of our drive watching... and all of a sudden it came up through the grate.... 10 seconds later Jane's house were gone."

Householder, Barnsley

2.6 For some, the first sign of the flooding was water running down the street towards them. For others, it was water seeping up through their floors or their toilets backing up, rendering their attempts to block water by sealing doors and windows useless. Many people at work or away from home, despite warning calls from neighbours, did not grasp the full magnitude of the floods until they returned home and saw the damage for themselves.

"It happened really quickly. It just came... like a river coming down the street."

Householder, West Berkshire

2.7 Most people had never experienced flooding like this before, and they did not know how to react – what preventative steps to take, who to call for help, whether to turn the power off. Many felt helpless and isolated and found that panic and distress immobilised them – they just watched helplessly as the water seeped through their homes and waterlogged their possessions. This was particularly the case for some vulnerable people who were unable to protect themselves or their possessions.

² www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/thepittreview



Flooding at Botley, Oxford © Rex Features

“(The experience) was terrifying... I really thought we might get washed away at one point.”

Householder, North East Lincolnshire

2.8 Others took steps to protect their property, either moving items upstairs or trying to prevent water ingress. Farmers and businesses were more likely to fall into this category, often because they had appropriate equipment on hand such as pumps or generators. Some farmers had the additional worry of rescuing their animals from drowning or from drinking contaminated water.

2.9 Feelings of fear and helplessness were exacerbated if people lost their water supply. Although bowsers and bottled water were available in various locations, it was difficult for vulnerable people, those without transport or those without much physical strength to collect the water to take it back to their homes unless they had help from neighbours. People appreciated the work carried out by those who provided them with water, but there were also reports of the scarcity of water causing arguments and tension in local communities.

“There was a band of young people aged anything from 15 to 25 offering to put (water) in the car for you... they were top notch.”

Householder, Cheltenham

“You got 4 litres per person per day... but there were people abusing it. (People with) shopping trolleys trying to flog it.”

Householder, Upton

2.10 Loss of power caused similar fear and distress. It meant that people could not get information from the television, radio and internet, and it also prevented people from communicating with others, as many modern landline and mobile telephones require power to charge batteries. Businesses could not communicate with customers or suppliers, leading in some cases to orders being cancelled. Loss of power could also cause serious health consequences – as in the case of one householder in Gloucestershire who relied on mains power for his oxygen source.

2.11 Many people were forced to evacuate their homes, either staying with friends or relatives or sleeping in rest centres or

temporary accommodation. This in itself caused worry – fears that their homes would be looted in their absence, fears of continuing damage to their possessions which they had been unable to take with them, and concerns about when they would be able to return home.



Evacuation centre at Dinnington Comprehensive, South Yorkshire © Empics

The clean-up and the aftermath

2.12 When the floods began to recede, the full extent of the damage became obvious. Many felt overwhelmed by the scale of the clean-up and uncertain how to go about it. Those who stayed in their homes often had to live amongst the effects of the floods – mud, silt and sewage, in addition to wet floors and plaster hanging off wet walls. There were reports that this resulted in a continuous bad odour and infestations of rats, mosquitoes and flies.

“It didn’t even look like flood water. When you looked at it, it looked thick and soupy and grimy and horrible. When you walked into the water, if you held your hand an inch under the top.. you wouldn’t be able to see your hand... sludgy and slimy”.

Householder, Sheffield

2.13 Disrupted living patterns also led to family and personal stress. In some cases, different members of the same family had to live apart. When families went to live with relatives, the arrangements increased the potential for family arguments. For those who stayed at home using only the upper floors, cramped living conditions added to family tensions. Those with continuing loss of power were unable to cook or store chilled food.

“We all live upstairs and everyone is at each other’s throat all the time now”.

Householder, Hull

2.14 Many people talked about emotional health problems, and attributed these to the stress that the floods had caused.

“My wife will be fine one day, and she’ll be in tears the next”

Business, West Berkshire

“Every time you try and relax you envisage (the water) coming down the street again... it’s scary.”

Householder, Toll Bar, Doncaster

“..tired and stressed and obviously you are depressed and you are run down because you just walk down the stairs and your house is a complete shit hole and you have just had .. it redecorated”

Householder, Toll Bar, Doncaster

2.15 Some people also reported physical health problems, including sickness, diarrhoea, asthma, sore throats, cold sores and bad chests, which many attributed to the damp living conditions and continuing contamination of their homes.

Case study – Emma Dickens, Female Householder, Hull

Emma Dickens is a young mother from Hull whose family home was flooded this summer. At the time her baby was nine weeks old.

Soon after her home was flooded, Emma noticed that her breathing was becoming increasingly difficult, and she started to feel pain in her chest and back. She was diagnosed with pneumonia, which, according to her doctor, was brought on by breathing in mould spores. She was admitted to an acute hospital ward with her baby. However, as doctors were anxious about the baby's exposure to germs in the acute ward she was advised to leave the following day and move to a domestic location with a dry atmosphere, and not return home for the good of her own health and that of the baby.

Emma and her baby eventually moved in with relatives and stayed there for some weeks, before she felt well enough to return to her own home and the rest of her family.

“The aftermath and the clean-up? The point is that the community and the church did it. We cleared our street. We moved perhaps two tons of mud off the street. Five lads with hose pipes and jet washes and we cleared our own street because we were traipsing sewage into the house. That was after everybody had rung the council and said 'look, we've got our own skips, we've got rid of the stuff. Can you just send somebody down to clean the street, a road sweeper?' They wouldn't even send that. So we had to do that ourselves, because otherwise you're trailing crap back into your house that you've just cleaned out.”

Householder, Chesterfield

2.16 Almost all businesses affected suffered stock and equipment losses, and were unable to operate normally due to flooded sales premises or loss of power and communications resulting in lost orders or enquiries. Where businesses were out of action for some time, there was a serious effect on trade – particularly small businesses. Delays were increased by paperwork which had been lost or damaged in the flooding, resulting in problems making insurance claims, tracing orders and filling in tax returns. Many businesses struggled to make payments for utility bills, bank loans and other expenses.

The effects of flooding on consumers also had an impact, with fewer customers and reduced spending, especially in the tourism and leisure industries. For other sectors such as building, hotels and takeaway restaurants, there was a reverse effect, with increased demand from customers.

2.17 Farmers faced many of the same difficulties as other businesses, but they also had their own particular problems. For cattle and dairy farmers, barn flooding caused destruction of stored feed, and damage and contamination of grassland.

2.18 Risk of contamination had a particularly serious effect on dairy farmers, as contaminated feed or water could permanently damage the animals' milking productivity. Milking cows must drink 15 – 20 gallons of water a day, so loss of water supply was a huge challenge. Animals had to be rescued from the flood water and temporarily housed, and a reliable alternative water source identified. In addition, heavy milking machines could not be moved to higher ground, and were therefore damaged and contaminated by the flood water.

2.19 For crop farmers, the type of crop determined the level of damage caused by flood water. Peas and potatoes, some of the UK's most important crops, are

destroyed after just 24 hours in water. Wheat, sugar and rapeseed survived, but with poorer yields.



A bridge emerges from flood water near Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire © Empics

2.20 In the aftermath of the flooding, those who were insured had a very different experience from those uninsured. As well as financial compensation, insurers provided invaluable advice about how to proceed with each stage of drying out and cleaning up.

2.21 There were highly variable experiences of insurers' responsiveness. Most received an immediate response, though some tried for several days to reach their insurer before being able to make contact. The timing of visits from loss adjustors was also crucial as it represented the first step in the claim process, and meant that cleaning up could begin. Many received visits very quickly, while others were forced to wait due to a lack of available loss adjustors, with resultant hardship for businesses and householders.

"Personally I haven't a problem with the insurance companies, it's the loss adjusters."

Business, Rotherham

"My mum has sent me her wages, that's the only way I'm surviving because I've got no income. I can't get a job because I am still classed as having my own business. I can't get any benefits because I am classed as having my own business. It just seems like a road block dead end ... I've got cover that only pays at the end. I've got my building cover that pays at the end. I've got stock cover which pays at the end. Content cover which pays at the end... my loss adjustor said well we can't do any kind of decent interim payment until you get these documents to me, these papers which I am scrabbling with my accountant to get because obviously I haven't paid him either."

Business, Doncaster

Advice was less easily available to those who were not insured. They also had to spend money hiring drying out equipment, and replacing damaged items such as white goods. Farmers were unable to insure growing crops, but most of those not insured were council tenants, and therefore received help with building repairs, and also financial support from the council and sometimes from community organisations such as parish councils and churches. Financial support from the Council was a key source of tension in some communities, as there was a perception that council tenants were given undue priority over both insured and uninsured private tenants.

"I was one of the idiots who wasn't insured. I had to do it on my own but I didn't get enough information about what to do. I bought meters, I bought humidifiers. You spend all that money, but it's damp again later."

Householder, Berkshire

Case Study – Neil Robinson. Dairy Farmer, Gloucestershire

Neil Robinson had 200 milking cows in his herd, each consuming around 15-20 gallons of water a day. When the flood struck, the cows were not unduly affected as they were moved to higher ground. However, a few days into the flood, the farmer heard on the radio that the water was going to be cut off in a matter of hours. He had very little time to put in place an alternative source.

First, he explored the idea of getting water from an old well on the farm, but it had not been used for years and the water was stagnant. Second, he bought some water piping and tried to relay water from a borehole in an adjoining farm. This scheme also failed. Time was running out. With no fresh water to drink, the cows would become dehydrated and distressed. Option three was to investigate the suitability of using the water from a duck pond on the farm. This turned out to have fresh enough water for the cows to drink, so water from the pond was pumped into troughs in the farmyard until the mains water was restored.

Neil has yet to discover the long-term effects on the herd's milk yield.

“Those who were insured and not with the council didn't get no help from the council because the council prioritise people who weren't insured.”

Business, Hull

“Not having had a kitchen to work in until last week from June, Morrison's has been second home and I know all the transport cafes around Chesterfield! You don't get that back do you? It costs a lot more than catering for yourself at home.”

Householder, Chesterfield

Ongoing effects

2.22 The floods continue to have detrimental emotional, health and financial effects. Many people still cannot return to their own homes – or if they can, are forced to live in cramped conditions amongst rubble, dirt and ongoing repairs as winter approaches. In addition to the obvious costs of repairs, there are hidden costs which add an extra burden. These include having to rely on takeaways because the kitchen is not yet in use, or paying for expensive crèche facilities because homes are unfit for small children to play in during the day.

2.23 Businesses and farmers also face ongoing emotional and financial difficulties as they try to rebuild their businesses, often crippled by rising expenditure coupled with reduced income.

“It's four or five month now, isn't it? It'd be six or seven month before we get open and then we've got to rebuild, business plan back again and start from scratch. It's going to be a massive job.”

Business, Sheffield

“Winter's coming. And you're living on a concrete floor with no doors.”

Householder, Berkshire

The public response to the floods

2.24 Whilst the emotional and financial toll of the floods is undisputable, one positive

Case Study – Elderly woman from Wychavon area

This elderly woman was on holiday when the floods hit. She was told not to attempt to return home until the water subsided, and remained with friends for a month.

When friends took her to view the damage to her property, it greatly upset her. She was not able to return there, even to look, for some time, but relied on friends to do what was necessary to organise insurance and repairs.

After a month, the insurance company delivered a caravan to her drive so she could return home and be closer to the property while works were carried out. However, being small of stature, she found it impossible to reach the light switches which were on the ceiling, or comfortably use the work surfaces without standing on a stool. She simply burst into tears.

Her neighbours, she said, were wonderful – caring, supportive and always on hand to help. They were staying in a caravan on the adjoining drive and theirs was more compact. A solution was found – the neighbours and the elderly lady exchanged caravans.

aspect of the flooding was a heightened sense of community camaraderie. There were some reports of community division, with resentments arising over perceived disparities in the level of support provided by the authorities. But overall, the need for the community to pull together resulted in new relationships forged with neighbours. People, especially those who were vulnerable, often relied on neighbours for help and support during the flood and clean-up phase, whether in the form of cups of tea, hot meals, loans of equipment, help with cleaning or emotional support. As one householder summed up, “you realise how good people are”.



Residents of Abingdon, Oxfordshire prepare for the floods © Rex Features

“There is one thing that is good, if there are elements of good, that it has brought a lot of people together.”

Business, Barnsley

“A lot of people struggled but the community spirit on this estate then was absolutely unbelievable. Everybody pulled together, no matter what, no matter who was there. There are some kids on there that are ruffians and they were the ones wading through the water giving people, who couldn't get out, a loaf of bread or whatever you could get to them.”

Householder, Sheffield

Case study – Coppertops Pub, Worcester

On Friday 20 July, Coppertops pub in Oldbury Road, Worcester flooded when, with no warning, a small brook nearby burst its banks. The landlady, Jenny Wilkes, was extremely shocked by the speed with which her pub flooded. Within a very short space of time, the water was halfway up the outside door, leaving little time to salvage anything from the cellars or ground floor of the property. By the evening, the entire ground floor had flooded right up to the ceiling and the pub had lost its power supply.

It took a week for the floodwaters to subside and, since then, Jenny has been trying to get her business fully up and running. Determined not to be beaten by the flood, Jenny quickly opened the upstairs bar, the only area not to be flooded, lighting it with candles and offering bottled drinks only as the cellars were contaminated. Her regular customers have been very supportive and have helped her business to continue to run.

In October, Jenny was still running her business from the upstairs bar, serving bottles and cans only, while work continued on the rest of the pub. There was power to work the lights and fridges using a generator but still no mains electricity. The ground floor was being refitted, but due to the time it took to dry out and for fixtures and fittings to be stripped out, the contractors were still working on the job. Coppertops Pub did not expect to be back to normal until January. Coppertops Pub is only open for business today because of the resolve of the landlady and the support of the customers.



We rediscovered community spirit, found what I thought was missing, had gone away”
“People come to our community centre, and want to have a hot drink, sit in a soft chair and just be dry.”

Residents, Barnsley