



# Chapter 7: Engaging the Public

## Summary

This chapter examines:

- raising awareness before the emergency;
- weather and flood warnings;
- providing advice during the emergency; and
- the role of communities and individuals.

**7.1** The events of summer 2007 touched many lives. As Chapter 2 explains, the impact on communities which suffered flooding or the loss of essential services was in many cases severe. The emergency response described in Chapter 5 did much to alleviate the impact, but the authorities were limited by the sheer scale of events. Communities, businesses and individuals needed to take action themselves before, during and after the flooding in order to protect people and possessions.

**7.2** This chapter explores how the public were involved in the flood-related emergencies, what impact that had and what lessons can be drawn for the future.

## Raising Awareness before the Emergency

**7.3** The public's response to the summer 2007 floods differed according to whether people were aware of the risks and able to take action as a consequence. People obviously need to be aware of a flooding risk before they can act. But even this may not be enough – of those we talked to who actually knew prior to the floods that they were at risk, relatively few had done anything to prepare. This finding is backed up by evidence from other sources. Recent research<sup>1</sup> suggests that while 60 per cent of at-risk residents in England and Wales claim to be aware that they live in a flood risk area, only 39 per cent of those who had previously been flooded have taken any action to prepare for floods, falling to 6 per cent of those with no prior experience of floods.

The RNLI evacuate Francis Jarvis, 78, a resident from Abbeyfield House, Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire © Rex Features

<sup>1</sup>Harries, T. (2007) "Householder responses to flood risk: The consequences of the search for ontological security. PhD Thesis, Flood Hazard Research Centre, University of Middlesex

“When I saw on the news that there were alerts and things, I didn’t take much notice of them.”

**Business, Hull**

“We were shut for three weeks after the first flood. The second time, we were more prepared and it didn’t come in. It took a week to get back (to opening) that time. We had just re-laid carpets after the first one and we said we’re not losing all that money so we took it up.”

**(Business, East Lindsey)**

**7.4** The Environment Agency’s flood warning system has limited levels of public uptake. In the regions affected by the summer 2007 floods, only around 20 per cent of people invited had joined the Flood Warnings Direct service. The level of uptake varies significantly: for the Midlands and Thames Regions, only 35 per cent and 28 per cent respectively of the people invited to sign up to the service did so, while for the North East (including Yorkshire) and Anglian regions, the figures are 17 per cent and 9 per cent. In addition, the Agency’s analysis shows that around 27 per cent of telephone calls made under the Flood Warnings Direct system were not picked up by recipients. In England and Wales overall, only around 41 per cent of people for whom the Flood Warnings Direct service is available take up the service – approximately 276,000 properties. Take up matters; research has shown that 75 per cent of people who receive a warning go on to take some form of action.

**7.5** The Review is aware of work the Environment Agency is doing to engage members of the public and reduce levels of apparent indifference. This includes targeted awareness campaigns to get householders and businesses to sign up to the Agency’s Flood Warnings Direct service and, in high risk areas, to develop flood

plans and business continuity plans. The Agency is now looking at alternative marketing approaches that tailor messages to a range of demographic groups by, for example, offering prizes for the first people to sign up for warnings or raising initial interest via puzzles in newspapers. This approach is currently being trialled and the Agency hopes to have results back by early 2008.

**7.6** Other approaches could include making the public and businesses more aware of the impact of flooding using graphic images of flood damage, in a similar way to the methods used in anti-smoking and drink-driving campaigns. Signs about flood risk could be placed on street furniture such as bus stops, lamp posts and benches, and in shared areas of buildings such as offices. In work premises, flood drills could be run in a similar way to the more familiar fire drills.

## Flood warnings

The Environment Agency’s flood warning system consists of four codes. Each code indicates the level of danger associated with the warning:

### **Flood Watch**

Flooding of low-lying land and roads is expected. Be aware, be prepared, watch out!

### **Flood Warning**

Flooding of homes and businesses is expected. Act now!

### **Severe Flood Warning**

Severe flooding is expected. There is extreme danger to life and property. Act now!

### **All Clear**

Flood Watches or Warnings are no longer in force for this area.

[www.environment-agency.gov.uk](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk)

**7.7** The Review has taken evidence that the current descriptions of areas at risk using named stretches of watercourse – for example, “between ‘x’ brook and ‘y’ stream” – are unhelpful, both to emergency responders and the public. Most people do not use watercourses as a reference point and struggle to understand information issued on that basis. Our research revealed that many people felt that a reliable alert was required that directly applied to their street or neighbourhood. The Review is aware that the Environment Agency has work underway to tailor information to individual communities.

“The websites don’t actually say Tesco’s car park is going to flood – it’s this tributary and that confluence – and for people who don’t have a geographical knowledge of the rivers and the way they’re formed, it’s almost impossible to weigh what’s at threat and what’s not.”

(Business, East Lindsey)

**7.8** There is a demand for personalised warning information that is tailored in its targeting, delivery method and detail. It would be helpful if these factors, could be considered and options drawn up before the Review’s final report.

**IC 64** – The interim conclusion of the Review is that the Environment Agency should produce a sliding scale of options for greater personalisation of public warning information, including costs, benefits and feasibility, before the Review’s final report.

**7.9** Along with awareness campaigns, the Environment Agency has a pilot scheme to automatically register eligible households and premises for flood warnings unless they opt out. The question has been raised

as to whether it is legally permitted for such an ‘opt out’ scheme to be rolled out more widely, for example to ex-directory telephone numbers. This needs urgent clarification and the Review hopes a solution can be found.

**REC 11** – The Review recommends that the Environment Agency 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.

## Weather And Flood Warnings

**7.10** The Review has received largely positive evidence from the public on the accuracy and timeliness of the Met Office’s Severe Weather Warnings. As described in more detail in Chapter 5, weather forecasts preceding the events of June and July 2007 were generally detailed and accurate within the limitations of current technology. The public were kept well informed, receiving warnings via the media and the Met Office’s website and Customer Centre. The Met Office also held regular briefings with its customers, including the BBC, to share the most up-to-date information.

**7.11** The Environment Agency’s Flood Warnings generally worked well in summer 2007 for river flooding, and effective and timely coastal flood warnings were issued during the East Coast surge in November. However, many of the summer’s emergencies were caused by groundwater and surface water flooding and therefore many people affected were unaware of the situation even as it unfolded.

“The first time we heard about the water coming in we were having our tea and water started coming in and we left it for a bit and then my wife was getting a bit panicky so she phoned a social worker because my son has got special needs and she said phone the council and they told us to stay in. I think we got out of the house about 8.30-9pm and we were still waiting to be picked up at 12.30am and the police took us down to Bentley and then the council took us to Don Valley.”

(Householder, Toll Bar, Doncaster)

## Methods of warning the public

**7.12** Flooding in summer 2007 disrupted electricity supplies and led to power outages, disabling mains-powered radios, televisions and computers. Fixed line telephones also failed. As a result, a diverse range of warning methods was employed to ensure warnings reached their intended audience.

**7.13** Warning methods used included:

- door-to-door calls, cross-referenced with records of vulnerable people;
- electronic message boards on major arterial roads and motorways;
- mobile loudhailer announcements;
- PA announcements in public buildings;
- sirens;
- automated telephone, fax, email and text message services (Flood Warnings Direct); and
- broadcast media announcements on television and radio.

**7.14** Door-to-door calls were viewed as particularly effective and were welcomed by residents, as also witnessed during the flooding on the East Coast in November 2007. This is a simple but effective method

which can be put into effect quickly while additional warning methods are explored.

“If I had had a radio that worked, it would have been on 24/7”.

(Householder, Sheffield)

**REC 12** – The Review recommends that Local Resilience Forums 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.

**7.15** The reported lack of public awareness in many cases during the floods could be an indication that the full suite of warning methods was not used in every area. Indeed, this might not have been practicable. Although some people might have received a number of overlapping warnings by different methods, in other cases, individuals might have been missed altogether. Even where warnings were given in good time in an area, someone not tuned in to the media and not signed up to receive direct flood warnings might have been entirely unprepared when the floods hit. Raising awareness generally and systematically assessing the feasibility of all warning methods in each area could help prevent such situations arising.

**IC 65** – The interim conclusion of the Review is that the Environment Agency works with local responders to raise awareness in flood risk areas and identify a range of mechanisms to warn the public, particularly the vulnerable, in response to flooding.

**7.16** Members of the public can also take steps to improve the means by which they can access information during an emergency. For example, battery-powered or wind-up radios can be invaluable in

providing a resilient communication method when conventional means are disrupted by failed electricity supplies.

### Providing Advice During The Emergency

**7.17** Once flooding had occurred and once essential services were lost, the public needed advice on what to do. In most instances, they turned to the authorities. People needed basic information on the extent of flooding, the implications for health and welfare and advice on issues such as transport options and whether to switch off their electricity. In the absence of specific advice, ‘Go in; Stay in; Tune in’ is recognised as being the best general advice and should be incorporated in other flood-related communications as an initial message.<sup>2</sup>

### Telephone information lines

**7.18** Telephone contact with the authorities was a key source of information for many during the flooding emergencies, particularly those directly affected. But many people commented that they were

passed from organisation to organisation when seeking advice. In some instances, the publicising of several different telephone lines left people confused about which one to ring.

**7.19** In addition, there were instances of 999 calls being made when, for example, a garden or unoccupied vehicle had been affected by flooding. Although clearly distressing to the individuals affected, these kinds of events are not considered emergency situations by the police, fire and rescue services, and this contributed to the pressure on emergency call centres during the events of June and July.

**7.20** Nevertheless, there were also success stories. Members of the public were able to get information on flooding via the telephone from a variety of sources. In addition to Floodline – (0845 988 1188), the Environment Agency help-line which provides advice on flooding to the general public there were a number of other organisations such as Hull and Barnsley councils which set up flood information lines for the local community. These services

### How did the public feel the authorities dealt with this summer’s floods?

“...There were highly mixed reports of the efforts of the police and the fire and rescue services, even from within the same immediate local area. Some described highly responsive and helpful emergency services, while others had felt isolated and unsupported. Many felt that the local community had borne a great deal of the responsibility in assisting those who were more vulnerable.”

“Voluntary organisations such as the Salvation Army and parish councils provided highly valued practical and financial assistance. In contrast, many felt unsupported by their local council...in helping with the clean-up operation.”

“Overall, there was a sense of a lack of preparedness on the part of the authorities for dealing with the advent of flooding. There was a desire for evidence of co-ordinated overseeing of any future event, with co-ordinated efforts at a national and also a local level.”

*GfK NOP Qualitative research undertaken during October 2007 in areas affected by the summer floods.*

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.preparingforemergencies.gov.uk/gisiti.shtm>

made use of local authority contact centres, which are now a regular part of service delivery for most local authorities.

**7.21** In practice, information requests generally fell into two distinct areas: advice on the likelihood or scale of flooding; and details of local response and recovery services, including how to deal with the loss of essential services. This suggests that non-emergency advice by telephone during a flood emergency should come from just two sources – the Environment Agency for flooding information and local authority contact centres for local advice. (The provision of more specific advice, for example on health or utilities, is discussed below.) Work is under way to raise public awareness of the difference between emergency and non-emergency situations. This work could usefully draw on experiences of the floods, and the final output could include information on Floodline or details of local authority call centre numbers.

**IC 66** – The interim conclusion of the Review is that advice by telephone during a flood emergency should come from just two sources – the Environment Agency for flooding information and local authority contact centres for local advice.

### Internet advice

**7.22** Many people were frustrated at having to access a number of websites to find information on different flood-related issues such as the disconnection or restoration of electricity and water supplies, health notices and flood warnings. Furthermore, some people could not find the information they needed as they did not know where to start looking.

“Well if there is an advice line or internet, there are loads of ways of getting messages or being able to find information like a flood line. If there is one, I don’t know.”

(Business, Barnsley)

**7.23** It would be of great value if a single website provided links to all the websites needed for a comprehensive set of advice on flood-related matters. This could be the area’s Local Resilience Forum website, with all Category 1 responders also linking back to this ‘hub’ website. Other useful information could also be linked, for example the guidance from the Electrical Safety Council on actions to take once floodwater has subsided.<sup>1</sup>

**IC 67** – The interim conclusion of the Review is that advice disseminated via the internet should be coherent by ensuring integration and consistency between local websites, including that of the Local Resilience Forum and those of all Category 1 responders.

**7.24** The Review has also received evidence about public concern over the lack of information to customers about the water supply position. This came through both our discussions with the public and social research carried out for the Consumer Council for Water. Good engagement with the public helps to allay anxieties in an already stressful environment.

“Advice is needed to tell you how to get rid of the water, how to switch the electric off, how to stay safe.”

(Business, Sheffield)

<sup>1</sup> [www.esc.org.uk/pdf/flood\\_advice.pdf](http://www.esc.org.uk/pdf/flood_advice.pdf)

**IC 68** – The interim conclusion of the Review is that essential service providers should maintain continuous provision of public information during an emergency, through a website linked to other responders and local authority contact centres.

### Health advice

“The thing that I found most difficult, as a company trying to keep 34 people going, and in the end we relied on Severn Sound and the website, was to find out what was the truth about water. Can you drink it? Can you use it in the dishwasher? Can you boil it? They didn’t know and they said first it wasn’t drinkable.”

(Business, Tewkesbury)

**7.25** In many instances, consistent health information was hard to find. In some cases, health advisors said it was safe to

stay in flooded properties, yet in others, families were told to leave their homes immediately due to health risks from fungal spores. In the recovery phase, builders were unable to find advice as to whether renovating damp properties posed health risks. Schools and householders were not confident about using playing fields and gardens once the floodwater had receded. Television images of children playing in floodwater suggest that the dangers of contaminated water had not been widely understood by the public.

**7.26** There is a clear need for well-signposted, easily-accessible flood-related health advice. The Health Protection Agency (HPA) has suggested that it could be asked to lead this work, with support from other partners such as the Environment Agency, the Food Standards Agency, the Drinking Water Inspectorate and water companies. This should be considered. The use of a diverse range of media would help to ensure that as many people as possible see this information.



Builders clear out debris in the Canterbury Arms in Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire © Getty Images

### Case study: The provision of health advice

When the floods struck, Cheryl Maddra, a registered child-minder, was looking after six small children at her home. The logistics of reuniting the children with their parents were complicated, as the street was closed and virtually impassable. Cheryl had to rely on the parents finding a way to reach her house and then making their own arrangements to get the children through the rising water in the street and back to the main road. Her house was severely flooded, so she was unable to resume childminding for some weeks – this had a knock-on effect on the families whose children were being cared for, as without childcare, they could not return to work.

After the clear-up in her home, Cheryl resumed her childminding duties. However, she was anxious about the state the garden had been left in following the floods. Although she had cleared the debris from the garden, it still looked messy and dirty from the mud and silt left behind as the water subsided. She was anxious about allowing the children outside to play. This was a real problem with six lively youngsters in the house all day, so Cheryl decided to seek advice about this from the authorities. Despite all her efforts, she could not find anyone who could, or would, give her a definitive answer, so she decided that the safest thing to do was to keep them indoors, despite the summer weather.

Subsequently, Cheryl had a follow-up visit from the assessors. During this visit, they checked under the floorboards and found that the floodwater had risen up as far as the floor joists and the entire ground floor was condemned due to contamination. The assessors advised Cheryl and the children to leave the property as soon as possible, as there was a health risk. In any event the entire ground floor would need to be removed and replaced, so the property would need to be vacated while this work was carried out. This made it impossible for Cheryl to continue working as a child-minder as she and her family had to move into rented accommodation, where they were still living at the time of the research in mid-October.

**IC 69** – The interim conclusion of the Review is that the Government works towards a single definitive set of flood-related health advice for householders and businesses, which can be used by the media and the authorities both locally and nationally.

#### The role of the media

**7.27** Although media organisations have no statutory responsibility under the Civil Contingencies Act to communicate with the public, they do have a widely recognised role in providing information before, during and after an emergency. Radio and television organisations have a long-

standing agreement to interrupt programming with public safety advice and information in the event of a major emergency. They also support the sharing of information. Journalists and news crews often arrive early at an emergency scene, and the rolling news which follows is a valuable resource for the public and responders alike. Every emergency control centre facility, from COBR outwards, watched live news feeds closely.

**7.28** Many people interviewed for the Review highlighted the pivotal role of the media, particularly local radio, in passing important information to the public during the floods. The information broadcast was

### A guide to working with the BBC in an emergency

'Connecting in a Crisis' is an initiative by the BBC to help ensure the public has the information it needs during an emergency. It is designed to ensure that BBC local radio station producers have established appropriate contacts with emergency planners, the police and other key organisations in their local area. The online guide explains how to access the range of communication outlets offered by the BBC at local, regional and national level. Examples of information provided can include updates from the Environment Agency on river levels, from the police on roads and flooded areas and from local authorities on school closures.

[www.bbc.co.uk/connectinginacrisis](http://www.bbc.co.uk/connectinginacrisis)

often important local news, such as road and school closures. In Gloucestershire, for example, the local BBC radio station received a large number of calls from the public giving live accounts of flooding on their streets and transmitting messages to concerned listeners' friends and relatives whom they were otherwise unable to contact. Staff from Severn Trent Water

came to the station to give specific information on water supplies.

"People can actually ring in and give information and they relay that back to the town, and that was working very well"

**Householder, Cheltenham**

### Case study: Effects on a small business

Timothy Bennett runs a small cake-making company in West Oxfordshire with his wife and business partner and found his business severely affected by the floods. Talking of his life after the floods receded, he described it as: "a struggle to get set up and even bigger struggle to keep your head above water."

The impact of the flooding was both practical and emotional. The flooding destroyed the business workshop and nearly all the machinery and equipment purchased over the past decade. The couple are still working, mainly from the back of their delivery van, in order to meet previous orders and generate enough money to cover their overheads.

Timothy is extremely angry at the low levels of information and assistance he received before, during and after the floods. Most of his anger is directed at the local council who he perceived to be responsible. Before the floods, he received no warning that his business was at risk. During the flooding Timothy says he felt completely isolated and had no one to turn to. After the flooding, he expected to receive immediate advice from the council about the temporary relocation of his business. Timothy did get some assistance, but only a month after he needed the help. Temporary premises were found, which were completely unsuitable. The business whose workspace Timothy borrowed was declared bankrupt days after he relocated to it.

Months after the flooding, the business is still severely damaged by the floods. "Staff numbers have had to be cut from nine people to just the wife and me." Timothy doubts whether things will ever be back to normal and is seriously considering packing the business up. He is also seriously questioning the value of insurance. Because it is a family business, Timothy describes the flooding as 'breaking him and his family'.

“The radio’s been absolutely invaluable – if they can get it all together why can’t others?”

(Householder, East Riding)

**7.29** Local media activity also worked well in other respects. The Review notes the value of a high media profile for local leaders, as achieved by council leaders and Gold Commanders in a number of areas affected by the floods. For example, in Doncaster, the elected Mayor’s high visibility provided reassurance to the public during the severe flooding which affected the city in June. In Gloucestershire, the Gold Commander adopted a similarly successful high profile, using the media as a way of communicating advice to the public and providing visible leadership at the local level.

**IC 70** – The interim conclusion of the Review is that council leaders and chief executives play a prominent role in public reassurance and advice through the local media during a flooding emergency, as part of a coordinated effort overseen by Gold Commanders.

**7.30** National television coverage, especially the rolling news channels, was regarded more cautiously. The public felt that reports tended to move away from the local level too quickly, focusing instead on the regional or national picture and sometimes coming across as sensationalist. A number of affected people were dismayed by footage of ‘reporters in Wellington boots’ standing in flood water and regarded such reports as unhelpful unless supported by local facts and practical advice. But where that advice was forthcoming, television was a powerful medium.



A local newspaper floats in flood waters at Otney Island near Oxford © Getty Images

“I personally think the media have done quite a bit but unfortunately the national media forgot about us when Gloucester went.”

(Business, Rotherham)

“They wanted a sensational picture and you slagging off the council basically – that’s news.”

(Business, Wakefield)

**7.31** However, the events of the summer have highlighted inconsistencies and limitations in the way in which the media fulfil this public information role. Media organisations struggled at times to engage with emergency responders during the floods. While they acknowledged the



A TV camera crew report in a flooded street © Getty Images

enormous strain on responders caused by the unprecedented scale of the events, they were often unable to get the information they felt they needed to meet the public's concerns. This, in part, reflected genuine concern on the part of local responders that sensitive operational matters should be dealt with away from the glare of media coverage, as well as experience of other emergencies during which media coverage inhibited action or decision-making.

**7.32** The Review believes that in any realistic analysis of local media involvement during emergencies, the benefits far outweigh the costs if the involvement is properly organised and structured. Local media should be supported in developing

their public information role at all stages of an emergency. Reluctance to involve the media is outdated, betraying a lack of understanding of both modern news coverage and the ability of news organisations to operate effective 'Chinese walls' between production staff and journalists. This relationship-building needs to happen at the local level, although the Review is aware of general work under way by Regional Media Emergency Forums to develop links between broadcasters and the responder community, and this work should also draw upon experiences of the floods. Effective engagement with the media in many areas needs to be replicated in all, as do the opportunities such engagement offers for stronger public leadership.

**REC 13** – The Review recommends that Local Resilience Forums urgently make arrangements to involve local media representatives in local preparedness and response to support their public information role.

## The Role Of Communities And Individuals

**7.33** Much of this Report has been about the roles of public and private bodies. However, the Review considers the actions of the public to be just as important – and in some aspects more so – to effectively coping with emergencies like those of summer 2007. The Review has received many comments demonstrating that in every area affected, the extent to which communities came together to respond to the flooding events was both heart-warming and commendable. We have collected many stories which illustrate how active local leadership and positive action, by both individuals and local organisations, helped to minimise the extent of the damage to communities – and post-flood, have also helped to engender a sense of enhanced community spirit and cooperation.

“People in our community went round every home and collected medications and prescriptions and kept people up to date. But that’s from people in our community, no doctor came.”

**(Householders, Toll Bar, Doncaster)**

“It was the community that came into its own as everyone was looking after everybody else.”

**(Business, East Lindsey)**



The RNLI evacuate Francis Jarvis, 78, a resident from Abbeyfield House, Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire © Rex Features

## Actions the public should take

**7.34** So responsibility does not lie with Government or other authorities and organisations alone. The response to a major emergency is stronger if all parties work together, including communities and individuals. In major emergencies where responders are severely stretched, community resilience has an important part to play, both before, during and after the event. In preparing for an emergency, communities have an important shared local knowledge – for example, the location of doctors, vulnerable people and temporary shelter and where useful equipment is stored.

“When the flooding first happened, I wish I’d known more about how long before the flooding receded and how long it would be before I could move back into my house. If I’d know that I could have prepared myself better and I wouldn’t be in the situation I am in now.”

(Householder, Hull)

**7.35** The public need to educate themselves about flood risk. As noted above, the Environment Agency estimates around 75 per cent of people who receive a flood warning currently take some form of action. While this is encouraging, it also indicates that one in every four people

aware of the warning does not take effective action to limit the impact on themselves and their families. With climate change likely to lead to more varied weather patterns and a greater risk of flooding, householders and businesses need to take greater ownership of the risks and take precautionary action in the same way as they do against other hazards, for example fire. However, the Review acknowledges that the actions people need to take in a flood are different to other risks. The Review will return to this matter in its final report.

**7.36** A large proportion of property owners and tenants do not know if their property is on a floodplain and there is currently no

### Case study: Community assistance at the Holy Trinity Church, Tewkesbury

As the water levels rose, bursting the banks of the local rivers and tributaries around Tewkesbury in the early evening of Friday 20 July, members of Holy Trinity Church realised that they would have to cancel their planned barn dance. By 10pm, as the build-up of traffic coming into Tewkesbury trying to find a way around the congestion on the M5 came to a standstill, church members were out on the streets encouraging drivers still sitting in their cars to return the way they had come or find somewhere to spend the night, (Council offices and Tewkesbury Abbey had opened up to take in stranded travellers). By this time, the water level on the road towards the motorway was approximately 1 metre deep and was impassable to most vehicles.

The next morning, church members realised that many people had spent the night in their cars in the town centre car park and opened Holy Trinity Church for toilets, washroom facilities, free food and hot drinks for anyone who needed them. They fortunately had food already in the church in preparation for the barn dance that had been cancelled the night before.

Throughout that wet Saturday the church became used as a place of refuge and refreshment for those who were trying to leave the town before the water levels cut off any exit. They set up TV and radio communications so that people could access the latest information through BBC and Radio Gloucester news bulletins. This was a vital means of enabling people to decide whether to risk venturing out of the town or to stay put.

During the afternoon, films were put on the big screen in the church, giving stranded families the opportunity to relax in some degree of comfort and provide some entertainment for their children. As evening approached, the Red Cross delivered bedding for those unable to return to their homes. Over the next few days working in conjunction with the Town Council, the Salvation Army and the local Scout Troop, the church kept its doors open around the clock to provide food and overnight accommodation.

### How did the public respond?

“...There was a great deal of confusion and uncertainty about what action to take....Some chose to contact emergency services, and were often unable to make contact, or were told that they were a lesser priority. Many were engaged in procuring sandbags from the council, often with limited success...sandbags were seen as essential in mitigating against the effects of the flooding.”

“There was a great deal of mutual support within communities... with neighbours assisting each other in the cleanup efforts.”<sup>2</sup>

requirement for people purchasing a property to be informed about flood risk by estate agents, lawyers or the previous owner. When purchasing a house or business premises, prospective buyers or their conveyancers should find out whether the property is at risk of river or coastal flooding. If a survey is being carried out on a property, the surveyor should be asking whether the house has ever been flooded, especially if the property is near a river or in a known flood risk area. With this information, purchasers can ask more informed questions – not only of the property owner, but also of the Environment Agency or local authority – such as what flood defences exist locally and whether flood warning is available.

**7.37** The Government recently decided not to include flood risk as a mandatory search in the new Home Information Packs (HIPs). This decision has been challenged by several submissions to the Review on the basis that its inclusion could help boost awareness. The Review also sees merit in its inclusion. The Review understands that the Government plans to monitor this issue and look again at the decision once the system has been in operation for a year.

When we bought the house in 1999, the solicitor didn't tell me it was on a floodplain, but then you speak to people that lived here years and know Catcliffe, and the worse thing they say to you is 'oh, I could have told you that'.”

(Householder, Rotherham)

**IC 71** – The interim conclusion of the Review is that flood risk should be made part of the mandatory search requirements when people buy property and should form part of Home Improvement Packs.

**7.38** Property owners need to share responsibility for protecting their homes and businesses. As set out in Chapter 4, improving the resilience of property at risk from flooding would help reduce the impact of future flooding events. Immediate examples of steps that members of the public could take to increase property resilience include greater uptake of products such as door guards, air brick covers and toilet non-return valves.

<sup>2</sup> Source: GfK NOP Qualitative research undertaken during October 2007 in areas affected by the 2007 summer floods

“What I was waiting for was for someone to knock on the door and say, can we help, here’s some information for you. I didn’t have any of that and had to rely on neighbours.”

(Householder, Gloucester)

“Quarter to 12 at night the police knocked on my door to tell us to evacuate, we were out in 15 minutes, with nothing more than the clothes we were stood in.”

(Business, East Lindsey)

**7.39** Individuals and families also need to be more personally resilient. There are a number of practical measures which members of the public, including business owners, can and should consider taking to prepare for flooding. All of these require only minimal action yet can make a real difference to the impact of flooding. Some of these practical measures are outlined below and the Review recommends that

the Government consolidates these, with other measures, into a single definitive set of flood advice, which is then used to support a public information campaign.

**IC 72** – The interim conclusion of the Review is that the Government launches a public information campaign which draws on a single definitive set of flood prevention and mitigation advice for householders and businesses, and which can be used by media and the authorities locally and nationally.

**REC 14** – The Review recommends 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.

### To what extent was the public prepared for flooding?

“There were very low levels of prior awareness of the risk of flooding amongst those affected. With the exception of farmers and some rural businesses, there was a generally complacent attitude towards the risk of flooding. Responsibility for managing flood risk was deferred to the authorities, and even those who had previously experienced flooding had the expectation that some action would have been taken by the authorities to prevent a recurrence. None had taken any action themselves in preparation for the advent of flooding.”

“In the hours and minutes before the flooding took place, there was a polarisation in awareness of the risk of flooding. Farmers and rural businesses were more likely to monitor the state of the weather and of the land around them, and were most likely to have been aware of the risk. Many others, often householders, were less aware. There were mixed experiences in relation to warnings. Some received flood warnings but disregarded these. Others sought information, and were reassured that there was no risk of flooding. Others did not seek or receive warnings, and remained unaware of the risk. Few, except farmers and some businesses, took any action... For many, seeing the water coming into their homes or businesses was the first awareness of the real risk of flooding.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Source: GfK NOP Qualitative research undertaken during October 2007 in areas affected by the 2007 summer floods

**REC 15** – The interim conclusion of the Review is that members of the public increase their personal state of readiness and resilience to floods by following the Environment Agency’s practical advice, where appropriate, as summarised below:

- Make sure you have adequate insurance. Flood damage is included in most buildings insurance policies, but do check your home and contents are covered.
- Access the Environment Agency’s website to check flood risks to property (this can be followed up by advice from the Agency, for example whether the property in question is protected to some degree by physical defences).
- Contact the Environment Agency to be registered on their Flood Warnings Direct scheme (however, this does not apply to surface water or sewerage flooding and people should also make sure they remain alert to weather forecasts).
- Keep vital possessions, such as financial and legal documents and items of sentimental value, upstairs or stored as high as possible in waterproof containers and have plans in place to move items at short notice.
- Make a list of other useful numbers you may need – your local council, the emergency services and your Floodline quick dial number.
- Make sure you know where to turn off your gas, electricity and water. If you are not sure, ask the person who checks your meter when they next visit. Mark the tap or switch with a sticker to help you remember.

### Case study: Raising awareness – individual preparedness

Gwyneth Oxley lives in Sheffield with her husband in the house they have owned for many years. They were severely affected by the floods. The downstairs of their home was submerged in two feet of water on Monday 25 June, and the practical and financial affects of the floods were still being felt more than four months on.

The floodwater ruined all of the carpets downstairs, which needed replacing, and the kitchen had to be completely refurbished. Furthermore, the family’s cars were written off due to flooding in the garage.

But the impact extends beyond financial and practical considerations. Gwyneth and her husband left their home for a number of weeks to live with a relative. They did not want to face what they described as ‘the carnage’ left behind. Despite living in a location at risk of flooding, no preparation had been made for potential flooding and this exacerbated the impact of the floods. Despite the damage caused by the flooding, no future plans are in place or being considered in the event of future flooding.

For Gwyneth and her husband, nothing like this type of flooding has happened before and they feel it is very unlikely to ever occur again. Gwyneth feels that any preparation would be both costly and ineffective. Both Gwyneth and her husband firmly believe that there is ‘nothing anyone can do to stop things like this...you just get on with it’.