



Belfast Flooding 16 August 2008

Belfast City Council
Emergency Planning Section
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1 Background

The risk of severe weather in the form of heavy rainfall is a growing one. This is the second year running that Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland have experienced pluvial and flash flooding. In the week leading up to this major flooding emergency there had been a number of severe weather warnings. However, apart from a number of known 'hotspots', it is difficult to predict in a situation like this exactly where the problems are going to occur and what can be done to prevent them.

The Met Office Public Weather Service Advisor (PWSA) indicated on Friday 15 August that he was very concerned about the weather on the following day, Saturday 16 August. The PWSA requested the activation of the Multi-Agency Belfast Resilience Severe Weather Risk Assessment protocol. An audio conference call was set up on the afternoon of Friday 15 August and chaired by the Belfast City Council (BCC) Emergency Coordination Officer (ECO). During the call the PWSA explained the forecast to the various participants, highlighting the likely impact on the community and infrastructure. These included emergency services, drainage agencies, central and local government representatives and various NI Utilities.

The majority of flooding responders on the conference call were already aware of the potential for severe weather and had begun the process of ramping up their emergency response arrangements. All participants gave assurance that they were as prepared as they could be and that they would be contactable via their previously supplied emergency out-of-hours contacts over the weekend. Some local officer mobile contacts were exchanged at the end of the conference call.

During the morning of 16 August the rainfall was heavy and persistent. The BCC ECO kept in regular contact with the NI Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS) Regional Control Centre (RCC) in Lisburn to ensure that any early indications of property flooding via 999 calls would be picked up and acted upon as quickly as possible.

Just after 3:30pm The NIFRS RCC notified the ECO that it was responding to a number of reports of flooding to properties across Belfast. BCC's Emergency Management Room (EMR) at Duncrue was activated at 4.00pm to help co-ordinate the response to

the flooding in support of the emergency services.

An Emergency Management Team (EMT) was established by 4:30pm, led initially by the Director of Health and Environmental Services and then as the situation escalated by the Chief Executive. PSNI established a Gold Command and despatched a Police liaison officer to the BCC EMR. NIFRS established a Silver command in its Eastern Area HQ and also despatched a liaison officer to the BCC EMR. Reports of flooding were being received from various locations across Belfast and it was difficult to establish how widespread the incident was.

After a number of hours, Gold Command requested that the Council coordinate the multi-agency response because the situation was moving mostly into recovery activities. A series of conference calls between all the relevant agencies were set up and chaired by the Director of Health and Environmental Services.

The Grove Wellbeing Centre and Avoniel Leisure Centre were designated as Emergency Reception Centres (Rest Centres) to facilitate families who required shelter and welfare. Around 30 people made use of the facilities at Grove but Avoniel was not required and so was later stood down. The Belfast Health & Social Care Trust made arrangements for food and refreshments at Grove and also deployed staff to Avoniel to assist as required.

Unfortunately part of the Grove Wellbeing Centre also flooded and NIFRS determined that it was not safe to accommodate people there overnight. An alternative rest centre location was identified at Jennymount Methodist Church; however in the end most people made their own arrangements for alternative accommodation.

BCC staff attempted to contact all Members by phone on Saturday night to inform them of the situation and provide details of the BCC Emergency Floodline. Voice messages were left detailing all the relevant information where there was no response.

BCC's Floodline (freephone number) was opened on Sunday 17 June at 9:00am and a press release advertising the number and information was sent out on Saturday night. Web pages containing information for the public were put in place from Sunday evening using the web address www.belfastcity.gov.uk/floodaid

Around 165 calls were received between 9am and 6pm on Sunday and staff from the council's Health and Environmental Services Department began inspections of properties on Sunday afternoon. By Monday morning 38 officers were on duty visiting homes across the city. A major street cleansing operation was also put into action from 5:00am on Sunday to clear silt and debris from affected streets across the city.

On Monday 18 August, a Community Assistance Centre was established at Grove Wellbeing Centre as early indications suggested that the York Road area had the greatest concentration of people displaced from their homes. Two further advice centres were opened on Tuesday morning, at Andersonstown and Avoniel Leisure Centres. These three centres provided residents with a base to get information, advice and assistance from BCC staff and other agencies including the NI Housing Executive, Social Services, NI Electricity and Citizens' Advice.

The Department of Environment (DOE) informed Councils of its new Scheme of Financial Assistance at lunchtime on Monday 18 August and arrangements were put in place to action this. Many inspections were made over and above the number of calls received and flood information packs were left at over 500 homes across the City. BCC also engaged contractors to help people with cleaning and drying out their homes, and to carry out safety checks on electrical and gas installations. The first emergency hardship payments were made from 3.00pm on Tuesday 19 August with the majority being completed by Friday 22 August.

Various areas across Belfast were flooded on 16 August 2008 in contrast to 12 June 2007 when the flooding was mainly confined to East Belfast. In addition the flooding of the Broadway underpass on the Westlink and major flooding in other parts of Northern Ireland made the response more difficult to manage. The resources that had been put in place for the response by the responding agencies were eventually overwhelmed.

From a BCC perspective initial analysis suggested that the areas of response which worked well were:

- Rapid activation of the BCC EMR and the EMT in an out-of-hours situation.
- Rapid response from BCC Leisure Centre staff in setting up Rest Centres.
- Rapid response from teams of inspectors visiting homes.

- Set up of Floodline and back office recording system in less than 24 hours.
- First £1,000 hardship payments made within 28 hours of the Financial Scheme being confirmed by DOE.
- Rapid response from BCC Cleansing Services in cleaning streets and lifting bulky waste.

Various BCC internal debriefs and a multi-agency debrief have taken place in the weeks and months following the flooding to capture all of the learning points. This report contains recommendations from those debriefs.

2 Strategic Overview

The impact of the flooding was widespread throughout the City with the worst affected areas being:

- Multiple streets off York Road near the Grove Wellbeing Centre
- Shore Road
- Rodney Parade off Donegall Road
- The Broadway underpass on the Westlink
- Beechmount area
- Carrington Street off Ravenhill Road
- Orangefield and Castlereagh Road areas

BCC properties affected

- Grove Wellbeing Centre (used as an Emergency Rest Centre and Community Assistance Centre)
- Olympia Leisure Centre
- Suffolk Community Centre

Emergency payments were paid to 347 homes in the BCC area and while this was significantly less than the 609 homes affected during the June 2007 flooding the impact was more widespread and difficult to manage.

The speed of response was impressive, no doubt due to the emergency services and agencies being put on a heightened state of alert by the Met Office. However, it is imperative that there is greater inter-agency co-ordination and response when flooding occurs. Out of hours resources and response ability of the main flood response agencies needs to be addressed and information sharing needs to be prioritised.

Work also needs to be carried out to identify the high risk areas and causes of those risks and then to prevent or mitigate these risks and to support those who live in high risk areas.

There is an acceptance through the Belfast Resilience Forum that BCC will not only participate in the response to flooding by providing Emergency Reception Centre facilities but will also lead multi-agency coordination for the recovery aspects of flooding.

In taking this work forward it is proposed that BCC establishes a member group, representative of all the party groupings, to oversee the work with other Agencies in order to put in place prevention measures to mitigate against the risk of future flooding. It is also worth noting that the Rivers Agency is in the process of setting up a Flooding Stakeholder Group and has invited the BCC Emergency Coordination Officer to be a member of that group. Linking into this group will help to ensure that local preventative work is aligned with regional strategies to reduce the risk of future flooding in Belfast.

A proposal by Rivers Agency to supply stocks of sandbags that would be stored at various BCC depots around the City is to be welcomed and is being assessed operationally. This would help to free up critical sandbag resources held by the Agencies and provide greater speed of response in sandbag deployment to affected homes.

One of the main learning points to arise during this response is the role that members can play both in planning for and in responding to an emergency and hence many of the recommendations outlined in section 3 focus on ensuring that members will have access to up to date information and support to enable them to undertake these roles effectively.

There are also recommendations relating to improvements with role clarity by BCC staff, improvements to IT systems and reception centres / community assistance centres.

3 Recommendations

Recommendations from the series of flooding debriefs are listed below. **The specific recommendations proposed by Members are detailed in points 1 to 7**

Flood Prevention Work

1. BCC in association with other Agencies will analyse flooding and topographical data to identify areas in Belfast that are at risk from pluvial, fluvial and flash flooding. Likely causes and mitigation measures should be identified to help prevent future flooding. A strategy for the delivery of sandbags and/or flood protection measures should be considered for areas that have recurring problems. The Council is currently in the process of appointing environmental consultants to take this work forward and a report of their analysis will be completed by April 09. An internal cross-council officer flood group is being established to develop a strategy for the use of sandbags and other local flood related issues.
2. The Council will highlight flooding issues with appropriate Stormont Ministers including the need to have flood protection measures. The Emergency Co-ordination Officer will provide relevant briefings and information as required.

Oversight

3. It is proposed that the Council establishes a Member group, with representation from all political parties to oversee implementation of these recommendations and the work with other agencies in putting in place prevention measures to mitigate the risk of future flooding. The Member Group will be time limited
4. The emergency planning team will organise an internal cross council flood working group to address specific flooding issues that involve different council departments, e.g. sandbag logistics, flood risk mitigation activities, etc. The work of this team will link directly with that of the Member group.
5. Members will be provided with information regarding areas at risk of flooding to enable them to identify relevant constituents' issues for consideration by the proposed Member group.

Information for Mambbers and Public

6. BCC Emergency Planning and Members' Services will develop a robust emergency contact system to alert and update Members on any emergency issue. This system will be tested and reviewed on a six monthly basis. A new emergency contacts directory for members has already been issued.
7. BCC will develop a programme in the coming months to raise public awareness about building and contents insurance and also the need for flood protection measures in flood risk areas. As a first step a leaflet with basic information is being produced and will be distributed with the Easter edition of City Matters to every household in Belfast.
8. It is recommended that Central Government should establish a single multi-agency point of contact for the public. Where there are reports of properties flooding then an alert message using various methods should be cascaded to emergency managers and key contacts in the appropriate agencies.

More Effective Inter- Agency Working and Coordination

9. The BCC Emergency Coordination Officer to participate in the Flooding Stakeholder Group being established by Rivers Agency.
10. All Agencies holding flooding and flood risk data for Belfast should share this data with other relevant Agencies, including the Council.
11. All Agencies should ensure that silver, gold and agency specific control rooms are pre-activated as appropriate according to the level of risk.
12. Agencies should agree leadership and coordination responsibilities during the severe weather risk assessment conference call.
13. All Agencies should review arrangements for standby and mobilisation of large numbers of staff, especially when a severe weather warning is given for an out-of-hours period.

14. BCC to establish a multi-agency emergency coordination centre for local tactical emergency management.

Mutual Aid

15. An inventory of specialist equipment owned by each agency should be developed as it may be useful in the future, e.g. power washers for loosening up silt to enable street sweeper vehicles to operate effectively.

Communication

16. Belfast Resilience to promote amongst participating agencies the use of the national resilience extranet platform for sharing situation reports and public information.
17. Any agency hosting a conference call should state the intended level of emergency management, strategic, tactical or operational, thus enabling agencies to provide the correct level of participation.
18. BCC to forward severe weather warnings to leisure centre managers and BCC call centre managers using the emergency management room automated procedure.
19. BCC should ensure that there is a coordinated supply of information from agencies at emergency reception centres and community assistance centres channelled through a Public Information Manager to affected families as quickly as possible.
20. The BCC emergency CRM system should be further developed to include work allocation and user friendly reporting of follow-up activities. It should also be linked to a premises address based Gazetteer and Geographical Information System (GIS) to show a mapped representation of areas affected.
21. The BCC emergency contacts directory should be reviewed to include comprehensive contacts for all aspects of emergency response including relevant contractors and catering franchises.
22. The Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB) in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) should review its out-of-hours contact arrangements.

Community Assistance Centre

23. Emergency Reception Centres need to be opened as soon as possible and should be prepared to receive displaced families even if the centres are not used.
24. Voluntary organisations such as the Salvation Army and Red Cross need to be involved at an early stage in Reception and Community Assistance Centres to assist with both response and recovery activities.
25. BCC and the Belfast Health & Social Care Trust to finalise arrangements with the larger supermarkets for access to emergency food and clothing supplies.
26. Belfast Health & Social Care Trust and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) should review the out-of-hours response for temporary accommodation where there are much larger scale incidents such as flooding.

Miscellaneous

27. DOE to be advised of difficulties experienced with criteria set for hardship payments.

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