

After Sir Pitt's review

David Lane of Lane, Jefferies and Associates, writes about the future communications challenges in making the UK nationally resilient at times of wide-area flooding.



Pitt concluded that in another wide-area flooding crises responders would still not necessarily have the right resources or training to respond safely.

Additionally, Pitt clearly saw an existing lack of clarity about who was responsible for carrying out and coordinating inland flood rescue. He concluded that timeliness and effectiveness of response were diminished as there were no common systems of work or understanding of risk management and ICS.

The UK FRS's stance, evidenced in the Chief Fire Officers Association's (CFOA) own *2006, Management of Major Flood Emergencies Report* argued that these structures were essential to enabling rescue teams from a range of different services and agencies to be integrated into a regional or national response to wide area flooding.

On 17th December 2008, Hillary Benn, Secretary of State for DEFRA, announced the Government's response to Sir Michael's Review.

Accepting Pitt's recommendations for a Flood Emergency Framework through DEFRA, the Government issued a consultative document covering the key component elements. Those included a new Flood Forecasting Centre jointly operated by the Environment Agency and the Met Office; national flood rescue capability; and mapping programme to assist planning for reservoir or dam failure.

Research identified the benefits of fusing Met-Office information and Environment Agency flood information and telemetry capacities together both prior to and during a major flood event. The project should identify ways of improving probabilistic warnings and their interpretation to make them of immediate use to first responders and their managers, and include pre-determined response/trip levels for action.

Regarding the national flood rescue capability, the Government formed a DEFRA-led National Project to engage all of the key actors. In delivering the objectives, the National Project Group is to work with the Flooding Sub-Group (currently chaired by CFOA) of the UK Search and Rescue Strategic Committee (UKSAR). UKSAR's

multi-agency forum has a wide spectrum of specialists from relevant stakeholder organisations including the Police, FRS, MCA, RAF and all voluntary groups, represented by the RNLI and Mountain Rescue Council.

National Flood Rescue Capability – the project

£2 million has been made available to DEFRA to facilitate this initial project work and deliver any immediate enhancements necessary. The outputs set by Government for the project are in four separate areas:

- Improved effectiveness in use of existing flood rescue capabilities through a comprehensive multi-agency flood rescue framework supported by Team Typing and accreditation systems.
- Quantifying current capabilities and rescue capacity to create a national register of flood rescue assets.
- Identifying any capability gaps and making recommendations for addressing them.
- Ensuring certainty, clarity and consistency in major flood rescue.
- Safer communities and safer responders must be the overall objectives for this project to deliver, effectiveness will be underpinned by a multi-agency flood rescue framework that ensures best strategic use is made of limited specialist resources.

Given "the four realities" of major flood events, floods by their very nature are: multi-agency events; multi-jurisdictional events; HazMat and public health events; long term events, exhausting responders and community members emotionally, mentally, and physically.

There are additional challenges to that of this project's completion. Regarding communications we know from reports conducted after 2007 that vital areas of concern included: a national capability to mobilise the nearest appropriate resource regardless of ownership; interoperability and resilience and; backlog of calls waiting in the 999 system.

Clearly adequate response to any large-scale, multi-agency emergency eg flooding depends on the efficiency of communications networks and the ability of all the responders and stakeholders to communicate with one another both technologically and organisationally. Add then synthesizing and communicating of the information generated eg by the Flood Forecasting Centre live into the networks and onwards to the responders and their managers via Bronze to Gold and back.

Then factor in the event of another 1953 North Sea-type disaster for the rescue of up to 45,000 people, and how we as a developed nation give or receive international assistance, in a pre-planned way within a communications structure. Now you have the full extent of the challenges ahead, together with making it nationally resilient.

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David Lane (centre), directing filming in front of an NC Air National Guard, Blackhawk helicopter during the USA/UK Major Flood Response Symposium, Charlotte, North Carolina, 2008. Top: surrounded, Upton upon Severn, Worcestershire, 2007.

Photographs by David Lane and Dwayne Woodward (Charlotte Fire Department, NC, USA).