

“Learning Lessons from the 2007 Floods

Sir Michael Pitt

The subject was an overview of the report of the enquiry Sir Michael led into the countrywide problems in which Hull, Gloucestershire and the Thames Valley were the worst hit.

He started with the base statistics – 55,000 homes suffering water ingress, 13 deaths, about 500,000 people suffering loss of water and/or electricity, an estimated cost of £3-4 billion and after one year at least 4000 families were still not back in their homes.

The point of reference for the enquiry was the perspective of those most affected. Six areas of concern were identified: the lack of proper warnings, the need for authorities to reduce the risks, loss of or ineffective essential services, poor provision of care and help with recovery, better advice for those living in areas at risk and the need for faster recovery. Sir Michael graphically illustrated each of these areas and gave examples of some of the complex issues involved:

- The lack of communication/co-ordination between local authorities, the Met Office and the Environmental Agency resulted in confusing/ineffective warnings and lack of disaster planning.
- The vulnerability of key infra structures such as water pumping stations and electricity sub-stations.
- Poor application of planning approvals in flood risk areas.
- Failure to refurbish damaged properties in a way that would minimise future problems and speed up recovery.
- Public apathy/denial and failure to do anything about mitigating the risks.
- In the case of earth dams/reservoirs security concerns came above the need to make information available for disaster planning which therefore was less than adequate.

The 400 page report published in June 2008 is available on-line. It makes 92 recommendations all of which appear to have been accepted by the Government and many have already been implemented. A Joint Met Office/EVA Centre is now operating, clear areas of accountability have been established for actions for all stages of future emergencies and flooding established as a major risk on a par with pandemics and terrorist attacks. More stringent requirements for approval of planning applications in flood risk areas are currently being agreed. The flooding in Morpeth in 2008 was an opportunity to test some of the recommended changes and although almost 100 properties were flooded the new approach proved very effective in handling the event.

Sir Michael’s lecture was preceded by a brief overview of the programme for the promotion of science, technology, engineering and mathematics in Gloucestershire schools (STEM) by Simon Kettle. He was appealing for volunteers to become ambassadors to provide experienced support with advice and review of projects within schools. The commitment could be as little as once a year. Further details of STEM can be found at www.stemworks.co.uk.

Given on Wednesday 9 September 2009 at the Ashcroft Centre