

# FLOODING: HOW THE RISK CAN BE MANAGED

**It is likely that we will face more volatile and extreme weather events in the future. Ensuring that we manage and plan against the risk of these effectively will be crucial to the impact they have.**

**As the body representing professional risk managers, the Institute of Risk Management (IRM), we outline below how we can better prepare for, and handle, flooding risk.**

## Understanding Flood Risk

- Flood risk is not a risk when you are wader deep in water around your property. That is when the risk has materialised and has become an issue. Flood risk is in the future - by definition it has not yet happened. While the worst rain in 250 years might sound like a 1 in 250 year event, flooding still takes place all over the country for a variety of reasons. **We need to start thinking about the next flooding incident now.**

In preparing for this, risk management would suggest we need to do two things:

- Understand the likelihood of flooding happening at any given time and work out what we need to do to reduce that likelihood. There are lots of ready prescriptions and this has to be a science led, fact based exercise. Local populations need to be educated as to what is being done to make flooding less likely in their areas. As resources are finite, assessing and managing the risk will help ensure that the money available is spent in the most effective way.
- We need a plan for failure. If the flood does materialise, how do we build resilience into the system? We need to make sure that flood proof doors are fitted, that an alternative to sandbags can be deployed rapidly and that public transport will not collapse. The public need to know that we are building in resilience ahead of the flood so that the damage is minimised.

## Information Is Essential

- Information is critical for householders and businesses as it enables them to plan ahead and protect their property. They want to know how high the river level is likely to get, how long the levels will go on rising, when the peak flow is likely to have gone past their stretch of the river, that their local authority and the Environment Agency are aware that the water has burst the banks and is heading towards their property and that proper flood plans are being activated at the right time.
- The Environment Agency will tell you in roughly hourly intervals the river levels at a measuring point somewhere near your house, but that is historical. What we want to know is what is going to happen but they won't provide us with forecasts as these might be wrong and they do not want to be held accountable for erroneous forecasts. We all know that forecasts can be wrong, but a sense of the direction gleamed from the best available forecasting information would help people to help themselves. It would put control back in the right hands: those of the home and business owners so that they can respond.
- Information is critical. It can help you to decide whether or not you should move the car or take your furniture upstairs. What we need is the best available forecast information for local flooding.

## Frenetic Activity Does Not Help

- Visits from politicians, new policies and spending pledges may make politicians look like they are in control but they achieve nothing in the long-run. Who remembers that the last flooding enquiry said that sandbags are useless and inefficient as a flood protection device and yet politicians are happy when there are pictures of soldiers carrying sandbags? Planning and rehearsing flooding plans obviates the need for frenetic but useless activity.

## Personal Responsibility: An Unavoidable Truth

- Householders have expressed frustration at the lack of forecasting information from the Environment Agency and, at times, with the appropriateness of the level of response. It would be unfair, however, to expect the State and the Environment Agency to take the full weight of responsibility for the floods and the response without any weight given to the decision made by households to live in the flood plains. It is a hard truth, but only by accepting responsibility will flooded communities be able to resolve their angst and replace it with common purpose, acting together against the floods.

## Risk, Resilience and Recovery

- By its very nature risk management is dealing with uncertainty: the timing, likelihood and impact. The worst could always happen. To prepare for this, local people must be well prepared; be empowered to do the 'right thing' when a flood hits and are aware of their responsibilities, particularly when to put their own flood plans into place.

## Change Is Needed: Government Must Consider Risk

- In real life as one thing hits, another does straight after, and another and another. The interdependence and our vulnerability to multiple events needs to be managed far more professionally, particularly at Government level. Currently in Government, most risks are considered in isolation of other risks materialising, and routine risk thinking tends to be handled at a very junior level in government. It doesn't have to be this way.
- Today, we understand how to manage risk better now than we ever have in the past. Risk management can help us plan ahead when we do not know what is going to happen in the future. Government needs to build its risk management capabilities so that we prepare, we develop information, reduce likelihood, build resilience where possible, and above all we plan for when we have got those two wrong.
- In order to help ensure we are better prepared for the future, the Government should:
  - Appoint a Head of Profession for risk management, possibly based in the Cabinet Office
  - Every department should have a senior civil servant who is responsible for risk management
  - Risk management should be a core competency for all civil servants with training and certification to an appropriate level for their principal roles
  - Appoint a panel of experts and interested parties to learn the lessons from the current flooding incidents. These lessons should be fed back into the Cabinet Committee on Flooding and to all senior Ministers and departments.
  - Commission an independent review of how risk is managed at departmental level.
  - Appoint a panel of experts to ensure that modern risk management thinking is appropriate to government and embedded appropriately
  - Review scenario plans to ensure that the interdependence of risks is considered across government rather than each risk being considered in isolation.

**For more information on the management and control of risk and how it might be applied to flooding, please contact: Carolyn Williams, Technical Director, Institute of Risk Management on [carolyn.williams@theirm.org](mailto:carolyn.williams@theirm.org)**