

Environment Secretary statement on flooding and Storm Ciara

Mr Speaker, with your permission, I would like to make a statement about the significant flooding caused by the heavy rain and severe gale force winds brought by Storm Ciara.

First and foremost, I want to extend my condolences on behalf of the whole House to the family and friends of the man who lost his life in Hampshire earlier today ... our thoughts are with you.

I would also, Mr Speaker, like to express my support and sympathy to all those whose homes or businesses have been flooded over the weekend. For each individual affected, flooding can have appalling consequences and I want to provide the assurance today that the Environment Agency, that local government, and that the emergency services are working hard to keep people safe in all of the areas affected by this devastating storm.

Storm Ciara brought rainfall ranging between 40 and 80mm in 24 hours across much of northern England.

The highest levels were recorded in Cumbria with 179.8mm of rain over the course of the day. Particularly severe impacts have been felt in Yorkshire along the River Calder, in Lancashire along the River Ribble, in Greater Manchester along the Irwell, and in Appleby on the Eden.

Regrettably four of these communities – the Calder Valley, Whalley and Ribchester, the Rossendale Valley, and Appleby – were flooded in 2015.

The current estimate is that over 500 properties have been flooded but this number is expected to increase as further information is collected. The latest number of properties confirmed to have been flooded are:

- 40 in Cumbria
- 100 in Lancashire
- 150 in Greater Manchester
- and 260 in Yorkshire.

Defences in Carlisle have held.

There is local road disruption across the affected areas and a shipping container is stuck under a bridge in Elland Bridge. One severe flood warning was issued over the weekend to communicate a 'risk to life' along the River Nidd at Pately Bridge.

This has now been removed, flood defences were not over-topped, and no properties were flooded.

Our coastal communities have also been affected in parts of the South, West, and North-East of England, where high tides, large waves, and coastal gales

have occurred.

The weather is expected to remain unsettled and 97 flood warnings are currently still in place. While river levels in West Yorkshire and Lancashire are now receding, we must expect high river levels further downstream in South Yorkshire over the next few days.

So we urge people in at-risk areas to remain vigilant, not to take unnecessary risks, and to sign up to receive Environment Agency flood alerts.

Less serious coastal flooding is probable tomorrow but is not expected to be in the more serious category.

There is extensive work taking place in the impacted areas including clearing debris that can block up river flow.

Environment Agency teams have been deploying temporary flood barriers where necessary.

And I would like to pay tribute to all the dedicated professionals who are working so hard on the emergency response to this situation, operating flood defences, supporting communities and keeping people safe.

That includes the hardworking staff of the Environment Agency, along with local authority teams and of course the police and fire services.

I'd also like to thank all the volunteers who are part of Local Flood Action Groups helping the response effort.

Mr Speaker, every effort is being made to keep people safe and I can confirm this afternoon that the Government is today activating the Bellwin scheme.

This will provide significant financial support to the local authorities in the areas affected by Storm Ciara, helping them fund the costs of recovery.

I would encourage councils in the areas affected to consider applications to the Bellwin fund.

Mr Speaker, in a changing climate, we all want our country and our communities to be better protected from flooding and more resilient when severe weather occurs.

There areas hit by flooding at the weekend, there at least 25,000 properties and businesses have been successfully protected by flood defences.

But we know that more needs to be done and we are determined to deliver.

Since the incidents of Boxing Day 2015, we have been taking action to deliver a range of schemes to strengthen defences and improve resilience. We are investing more than ever before in these defences in a £2.6 billion programme up to 2021 to manage flood and coastal erosion risk.

This will enable better protection of over 300,000 properties.

Early in 2016, we committed an unprecedented £35m to improve flood protection for homes and businesses in Mytholmroyd, Hebden Bridge, and across Calderdale.

Construction in Mytholmroyd is progressing and we expect defences there to be completed in the summer.

We have built 25 new flood defences in Cumbria and Lancashire protecting 23,100 homes and 59 new flood defences in Yorkshire protecting 13,200 homes.

In the autumn I announced an extra £60m to boost flood schemes in the north, including £19m for the Calder Valley.

Our manifesto commits us to a further £4 billion of new funding in the five years up to 2026. In 2016 we introduced the Flood Re scheme to make insurance cover for flooding more affordable and more accessible.

Following the flooding in November I announced an independent review of the data on insurance cover to ensure that the scheme is working as effectively as possible.

Since the incidents of 2015, we've strengthened and improved our system of flood warnings.

And we have established a Flood Recovery Framework to prepare for and guide flood recovery schemes.

Mr Speaker, this Government is determined to maintain and enhance our readiness to respond when extreme weather hits our country.

Our swift activation of the Bellwin scheme today and our investment in the biggest ever programme of flood defence improvements illustrate that determination.

We stand ready to help communities recover from flooding.

We are investing in the defences needed in the warmer, wetter, less predictable climate that the scientists tell us we must expect in the years to come.

And I commend this statement to the House.