



**Belfast City Council**

<b>Report to:</b>	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
<b>Subject:</b>	Belfast Flooding Emergency June 2012 – initial learning points
<b>Date:</b>	10 August 2012
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1	Relevant Background Information
1.1	Members will be aware of the heavy rain on the night of Wednesday 27 June 2012 which caused severe flooding across the city. Officers first became aware of the situation when they started to take calls of flooding in west and east Belfast at 7.30pm. The Emergency Coordination Officer opened the emergency room in the city hall and the Council's emergency plan was activated at 8.10pm. This was used as the coordination centre for planning how agencies should respond to the problems throughout the city.
1.2	Agencies worked well together in the emergency room and on the conference calls held throughout the event.
1.3	Detailed advice and information was placed on the Council website on the Wednesday night and further information was provided via press releases which were issued throughout the night and into the following week.
1.4	A Council emergency call centre with a freephone number was opened at 9.00am on Thursday 28 June. Any vulnerable people identified via the call centre were referred to Red Cross and to Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.
1.5	As a result of the flooding incident, the Council received 1,463 requests for service and made payments under the Department of the Environment (DOE) financial assistance scheme to over 720 households.
1.6	Inspections of flooded properties began on the Thursday morning and involved providing information packs, assessing houses for financial assistance, organising cleanup, electrical checks and the provision of dehumidifiers. Cleansing Services began cleaning debris from flooded streets from early morning, bulky waste collections started and sandbag deliveries continued. The Council delivered 7,000 sandbags in total. The first cheques issued under the DOE scheme of financial assistance were available for collection on 29 June.
1.7	A major flooding incident of this type causes widespread devastation and distress to residents and businesses in the city; it is important therefore to ensure that everything that can be done is being done to prevent properties flooding in the future. It was in this context that the Lord Mayor, party group leaders and the Chief Executive held a meeting with the agencies involved in the response on 4 July to discuss a number of key learning points relating to communication, coordination, sandbag distribution and flood alleviation measures; and to agree actions in moving forward.

1.8	This is an interim report, pending a full review/debriefs which will include Councillors, staff and other agencies.
1.9	It should be noted that the NI Executive have requested the Performance and Efficiency Unit of DFP to review the performance of the responding agencies to this flooding, with a report due by the end of August.

<b>2</b>	<b>Key Issues</b>
	<p><b>Coordination and Communication</b></p> <p>2.1 The Council activated its plan quickly and assumed an initial coordinating role. Agencies were invited into the emergency coordination centre at an early stage and those that attended on the night of 27 June included the Police, Ambulance and Fire and Rescue Services, Northern Ireland Water, the Housing Executive, Belfast Health and social Care Trust, NIE, Roads Service, and the eastern area councils' Emergency Planning Coordination Officer. Contact was made with Rivers Agency, Met Office, Flooding Incident Line, central government and others by conference call.</p> <p>2.2 In the early stages of a flooding response, identifying areas of the city that have been affected requires rapid sharing of information across agencies. This is difficult to do in a short time period, and a review of sharing data across the various systems and call centres is needed to improve the process in future.</p> <p>2.3 The conference calls and the presence of liaison officers in the emergency room helped communication but it was agreed at the meeting that further work needs to be done to improve initial communication and coordination of information during flooding emergencies. Agencies agreed, where possible, to be represented at an appropriate senior level in the Belfast City Council Emergency Coordination Centre during emergencies coordinated by the Council.</p> <p>2.4 The Belfast Flood Plan will be reviewed and further developed by the existing multi agency flood group to incorporate improved coordination and communication arrangements.</p> <p><b>Communication with the public</b></p> <p>2.5 The initial point of contact for members of the public in a flooding emergency is the Flooding Incident line, which is operated by the Department of Finance and Personnel. The Flooding Incident line did not appear to operate effectively during the recent flooding event as it was not staffed up quickly enough. This resulted in the Council receiving many repeat calls from irate residents who had been directed to the Flooding Incident line but were unable to get a response. The Health and Environmental Services out of hours duty officer received more than 45 calls in less than an hour on 27 June and many more were received by City Hall Control Room staff.</p> <p>2.6 The Council was able to get information onto its website very quickly on the night of the flooding and keep the public updated using social media. However it was agreed at the meeting that there is a need for better communication with the public in terms of the help available when flooding takes place. A number of short term actions are being considered, for example including the existing wallet sized fold up flooding information leaflet in the June and November editions of City Matters every year; wider and more proactive distribution of the Household Emergency Lifesaving Plan (HELP); a copy of this is attached in appendix 1. In the longer term, Belfast Resilience is working on developing a mechanism for warning and informing the public in advance of and during a major emergency and the Council will ensure the learning from the June flooding incident is fed into this process. The Council, in conjunction with Belfast Resilience, is also supporting communities to develop specific local area emergency plans and will ensure that information on access to the help available during flooding is incorporated within these plans.</p>

2.7	<p><b>Distribution of Sandbags</b></p> <p>Many Councillors were contacted by members of the public who were in desperation trying to get hold of sandbags to prevent water entering their properties. It was evident that there needs to be a much more joined up approach to sandbag distribution across agencies and the Council. On 27 June the Council brought in a contractor to deliver whatever sandbags it was able to acquire from the drainage agencies to identified areas which were severely affected by flooding. Over the following days the Council secured more sandbags from the Rivers Agency and in the end delivered approximately 7,000 to 443 properties. Other agencies also delivered sandbags. It was agreed at the meeting on 4 July that the Council would draft a temporary protocol on the coordination of the distribution of sandbags to the public during future emergency situations. This was done and a copy is attached in appendix 2; the eastern area councils have also signed up to the protocol. It will be further developed if necessary following the multi agency and internal reviews of the June flooding being carried out this month.</p>
2.8	<p><b>Flood alleviation measures</b></p> <p>It was agreed at the meeting that the Council would convene a working group to identify the main areas in the city prone to repeated flooding; to consider the causes of the flooding and establish if work is planned (direct or indirect) to alleviate it and in what time frame. Carrying out this type of mapping across the city in a collaborative, coordinated and systematic way will help to develop a better understanding of the priority areas and to identify if there are opportunities to bring forward improvement projects or implement interim flood alleviation arrangements, similar to, for example, the arrangements being considered in the Connswater, Sydenham area.</p>
2.9	<p>Bespoke flood defence mechanisms for individual properties were also discussed at the meeting. Rivers Agency has commissioned a report on the effectiveness of such devices and has agreed to share this information with the Council. If such mechanisms are shown to be effective the Council will consider whether it can contribute in some way to the provision of such devices to homes under threat of flooding. Council officers have also raised the issue of the provision of individual flood defence equipment with the Department of the Environment and the Department of Finance and Personnel, recommending that they be considered at a regional level.</p>
2.10	<p><b>Future work</b></p> <p>Following the ongoing multiagency and internal reviews taking place this month, a flooding incident report will be produced with recommendations and actions for the Council to take forward over the incoming months. The report will be presented to this Committee in due course.</p>
2.11	<p>The learning points, recommendations and actions identified by this process are also being shared with DFP to inform its review on behalf of the NI Executive.</p>

<b>3</b>	<b>Resource Implications</b>
3.1	<p>The resource implications of the emergency response will be highlighted in the flooding incident report. Many of the actions taken by the Council which are over and above normal duties are costed and will be included in a claim to the DOE under its Scheme of Financial Assistance.</p>

<b>4</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
4.1	<p>Members are asked to note the Council's effective response to, and recovery from, the severe flooding which occurred in the city on 27 June and the volume of work that it generated.</p>

4.2	Members are also asked to note the temporary sandbag protocol and the high level actions arising from the meeting on 4 July between the Lord Mayor, party group leaders, the Chief Executive and a number of key agencies involved in the response.
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<b>Decision Tracking</b>
Suzanne Wylie to put before to Committee a draft of the flooding incident report when it is available

<b>Key to Abbreviations</b>

<b>Documents Attached</b>
Appendix 1      Household Emergency Lifesaving Plan (HELP)
Appendix 2      Temporary protocol on the coordination of the distribution of sandbags