

PUBLIC WEATHER SERVICE CUSTOMER GROUP (PWSCG)

MEETING OF NORTHERN IRELAND STAKEHOLDERS

Wednesday 13th December 2023, Stormont, Belfast

Duncan Potts – Chair PWSCG	John Harrison Met Office	Gary Quinn – Dept for Infrastructure
Kim Shillinglaw – Ind Member	Ian Belcher Met Office	James Kelly - Dept for Infrastructure (NI Government Rep)
James Shapland - DSIT	Will Lang – Met Office	Jonathan McKee – Dept for Infrastructure
Paul Riches - DSIT	Lisa Martin – Met Office	Seamus McCann – Dept for Infrastructure
N. Ireland Stakeholders: See Annex below		

Item 1: Welcome

JK opened the meeting and introduced John O’Dowd MLA who welcomed attendees and delivered a short opening address. Mr O’Dowd noted the important work of the group which he recognised from his time as Minister for Infrastructure which included responsibility for flooding policy. Mr O’Dowd also commented on recent flooding events that have taken place and offered thanks to all those involved for their work and advice during such events.

Item 2: Introduction and N. Ireland Department for Infrastructure updates

GQ provided the group with an update on recent organisational changes, including the creation of a water group that sits alongside a transport and planning group within DfI. Overall funding envelopes remain tight which has resulted in a decrease in funding which has had an impact on resilience activity. As is common with many parts of the public sector there remains ongoing challenges with recruitment and retention. Within Rivers, 30% of posts are vacant. In terms of overall N. Ireland Government budget, the Department for Infrastructure has the third highest budget behind health and education respectively. GQ noted that the work of the infrastructure department delivers policy that is a key enabler supporting the economy. There is a current focus on improving their flood risk management strategy capabilities and capacity. GQ reminded the group of the responsibilities of his department. The group were informed about the wider context in which DfI is operating. There are challenges linked to the ongoing recruitment and retention of staff as well as financial constraints on budgets. Longer term planning is more difficult due to the political situation which means budgets are only agreed on a yearly basis. Another impact with there being no functioning Executive is the delay to new legislation.

JMK provided an update on activities within the Rivers Directorate. The main responsibility for the group is looking at the flood risk from rivers and sea. Rivers Directorate have taken a detailed look at their funding needs over the longer term to manage all aspects of Flood Risk. This work has concluded that an annual capital budget of £30M with resource at £8M was needed to provide an optimum Flood Risk Management programme of maintenance and capital delivery. It was explained

that although small geographically, there can be some advantages to their relatively small regional size. Rivers Directorate are also having to deal with ongoing recruitment issues with at present about 140 posts needing to be filled and require a workforce of 466. The group are responsible for 500km of flood risk infrastructure with an approximate value of £700m. JMK noted that the last decade had seen an increase in flooding incidents.

The work of rivers focusses on the 3 P's

1 – Prevention

This includes a strong planning policy that prohibits building on the flood plain.

2 – Protection

Investment in flood alleviation schemes as well as a homeowner protection scheme introduced in 2016. They also have a 10-year asset management plan to capture information to inform maintenance priorities, as well as a programme of capital works such as the Belfast Tidal Flood Alleviation Scheme (BTFAS) which is currently under construction.

3 – Preparedness

They have a well-established emergency response partnership with multi-agency partners and in addition Rivers Directorate is a key player within the N. Ireland Civil Contingencies Group (CCG).

JMK spoke about challenges within the Rivers Directorate, and similar to other Departments, have issues with budgetary and people constraints including recruiting people with the right skills and expertise. The lack of a functioning executive at this time means they also have legislation that is not fully in place on the statute. They have a focus on sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) and climate change impacts. They are implementing their flood risk and asset management plan and have a 6-year strategy they want to implement that will require budgets as outlined earlier. On the capital side the need is £30m of which £20m is in place. One area cited as a requirement in N. Ireland which is currently not provided for would be the equivalent of a Flood Forecasting Centre (FFC) as is the case for England.

Item 3: PWSCG Chair update

DP provided a short reminder of the roles and responsibilities of the PWSCG and reiterated why hearing from engaged users from across N. Ireland is so important for him and the independent Member, KS, to be able to discharge their duties as Ministerial appointees. DP spoke about some of the priorities set out in the customer supplier agreement which he had agreed to move to a rolling 5-year plan. DP spoke about the key themes linked to the overall Met Office strategy of 'stay safe and thrive'. DP explained that this translated to a focus not only on the important safety of life services such as NSWWS but also providing the public with the means to take better everyday decisions which can help underpin the activities of small businesses and the outdoor economy. DP noted the ongoing delays to implementation of the supercomputer programme which has meant knock on impacts to improvements in accuracy as science upgrades to the computer model have been delayed. DP informed the group that the citizen engagement strategy is now being implemented which has set out a clear policy for public reach. Another area of focus is on the economic value of the Met Office study being written by London Economics which will be an important piece of evidence to help secure funding at the next Comprehensive Spending Review. DP spoke about the continued focus of the PWSCG on accuracy, both in terms of actual accuracy and perceived.

Item 4: Met Office update

IB provided the group with an update on the activity delivered under the PWS over the last year and a forward look to future improvements. Under the Citizen Engagement Strategy (CES) MO has worked in collaboration with another provider in the marketplace, Windy who are now taking Met Office model data with attribution to MO as the provider. IB noted that Met Office's role within the UK government civil contingency framework had been formalised with MO officially designated as a Category 2 responder. MO were in effect already operating in that way in terms of their role and collaboration with other agencies, but it is beneficial to have this recognised within the Civil Contingencies Act. IB spoke about recent improvements to both Beach and mountain safety forecasts in both the App and website. Specific beach safety forecast information is much more prominent and easier for the public to access for specific beach locations in the App. For N. Ireland, 12 beach locations have been included and there was an ask of the group to confirm whether they agree that these are the beaches that should be covered with the beach safety information or are there others that are missing.

Action: Met Office to share the current list of 12 N. Ireland beach locations that have beach safety information with attendees to gather feedback on whether these are the best locations or whether others should be included.

For the mountain forecasts, information has been made available in the App with a focus on an improved user journey between the information pages to aid user understanding of the information. Research has shown that casual hikers or walkers are the groups most likely to benefit from the enhanced information rather than experienced climbers.

IB informed the group of another priority which is to make more of the civil contingency products available to a wider set of organisations and open up access to voluntary and resilience groups. IB updated the group on the deliverable to provide a 14-day forecast. There is now a long range forecast available on the App which consists of a video forecast and text that is currently undergoing beta testing with 4500 recipients. The group were told that with the focus of the PWSCG on accuracy that new post processed data would be rolled out from March. On the development of an extreme cold warning, IB updated the group that the PWSCG had endorsed enhancing the communications around specific scenarios of cold weather rather than a full extreme cold warning service. MO are keen to hear from attendees who they can work with in N. Ireland to ensure enhanced cold weather communications reach the community.

Action: N. Ireland stakeholders to provide names and organisations the Met Office should work with in N. Ireland to ensure Reach of enhanced comms in times of extreme cold weather.

LM provided the group with an update on the achievements to provide a comprehensive set of advice statements to accompany warnings. This area of activity was agreed as there was currently minimal advice provided to the public on what action to take when warnings are issued. Evidence points to action taken being low and that people were not always clear about what action to take. The group were also given some headline figures for N. Ireland from the quarterly tracker survey. One notable figure was the 75% trust score for N. Ireland that is lower than previous surveys and came out low compared to many other parts of the UK (Av 83% at Nov 2023).

The group noted the updates and discussed some of the findings from the tracker results. DP remarked about the relatively high percentages recorded for people in Scotland taking action during Storm Babet which sat at 89%. JMcC enquired about why the MO thought the trust score was lower for N. Ireland this time. There were a variety of views expressed as to the cause, sometimes during a period of fewer warnings trust can dip and others wondered if there was some link to the fact that there is another Met Service, Met Éireann that will be used by some residents as a dual source of forecast and warning information which is unique to N. Ireland compared to other parts of the UK. An example was given where advice issued during a particular event was markedly different in each country with a do not travel advice being issued in the Republic of Ireland for border counties which will have an impact especially on workers commuting across the border to work. The MO noted that they work very closely with Met Éireann and initiatives such as Storm naming has seen enhanced collaboration and cooperation over recent years.

Action: LM to provide some additional context and figures around the trends for N. Ireland and trust scores.

Item 5: Review of weather events

ES provided Met Office the group with updates from within the Met Office team. The importance of the Civil Contingency Advisors (CCA's) maintaining local knowledge, and that members of the Expert Weather Hub (Chief Forecasters) are from Northern Ireland.

An overview of the relationship between the Met Office and Met Éireann was summarised, including the Storm Naming consortium and that the CCA's now attend a Monday morning briefing. The Met Office look forward to building on the current relationship.

107 warnings had been issued to date from the 01st of December 2022 to 30 November 2023, showing the range and complexity of the Northern Ireland weather, and a breakdown per season/weather type was reviewed, with seasonal highlights provided. ES continued with a review of high impact weather events during the course of the year, highlighting some of the key impacts including flooding, power and transport disruption.

The group discussed these recent events and for the warning that was issued for 30th October there was a question on when the last high impact warning for heavy rain had been issued in N. Ireland. JW didn't think there had been a high impact warning issued for NI since August 2017. WL noted that it was encouraging to see that responders were looking at the nuance of events and picking out that it was a high impact event in the warning matrix.

Item 6: In camera session

The group provided some additional feedback and discussed overall performance of the Met Office in Northern Ireland. JMK noted how important the relationship was with the NI MO advisors citing JW and ES as a core part of the service they depend on - a view which was endorsed by many others around the table. In wider commentary around events, there was a question about the 22 July event at Castlederg as there was no warning issued but a substantial amount of flooding. There was a yellow warning across the border but no warning for the Castlederg area. JMcC noted another event which occurred on Sunday 12 November 2023, when Met Éireann had issued a RED Wind warning for the Cork area which extended up to Co Louth – just bordering Co Armagh. Whilst a Yellow warning had been issued for NI, the increase to Amber at short notice meant further LIACs had to be held on the Sunday evening – again at short notice.

Action: It was agreed for the PWSCG Secretariat to raise the Castlederg flooding event with the Met Office to review.

As part of the routine review into performance of warnings, JS explained the subjective verification process and noted that it was important for the Secretariat to hear from stakeholders in N. Ireland via their PWSCG member (JK).

Action: PWSCG Secretariat to prompt DA representatives more regularly to seek feedback on the performance of warnings that cover their jurisdictions.

The group discussed the unique situation for border communities in particular where they receive forecast and warning advice from two different Met Services. It was agreed to raise this with the Met Office to explore what further could be achieved to provide clarity and coherence across the border. KS noted that the collaborative approach and working together is very impressive and with lessons to learn for other parts of government.

Action: Secretariat to speak to PWS team to highlight the importance the group places on messaging for border communities.

The group were keen to understand more about the work LM presented on behaviour change and how that could help improve outcomes in Northern Ireland. The group noted that the advice statements in warnings were a very positive development. SMC also commented that there is a role for elective representatives to help push the messages to the public and that having the advice information written down was a useful addition and helps remove ambiguity.

The group referenced the Storm naming initiative discussing whether they thought enough people understood why naming was introduced. There was a question posed about the decision-making process and why some storms are named and not others.

Eg Castlederg event 44mm in 2 hours was not warned. The Halloween event where Storm Babet had prewet the ground for October flooding 18-21 Oct >100mm in South Down. Worst of flooding was not associated with Storm Ciarán.

On the subject of flooding, the group discussed the fact that there isn't an equivalent of the Flood Forecasting Centre (FFC) in Northern Ireland. JMK noted that the focus in NI had been on building up community resilience and utilising existing flooding risk information. This was due partly to the smaller river catchments in NI which ultimately means river levels can respond much quicker and the benefits of the regional community resilience approach in NI. He noted that, since community resilience is well developed now a FFC is a necessary next step, but recent budget allocations didn't enable this to go forward. The approach and methodology for any FFC for NI would have to incorporate the issue around catchment size whilst integrating with the well-established community resilience groups. CC spoke about the cross-border forum and noted that when warnings come with short lead time it is harder to put all the planned mitigation in place. Where citizens and responders are reliant on the severe weather warning then there is a dependence which does not activate until a warning is announced. This dependence inadvertently leads to a **bigger** impact for short notice warnings than had they been longer notice. This is due to dependence/reliance on the warning service. This should be considered in the notification of short notice warnings ie: potential for a bigger impact rating. For flooding related incidents, the short river catchments in Northern Ireland provide an additional challenge.

The group spoke about how important the Met Office advisor relationship is and noted that over the year during the periods of industrial action there were some impacts. It was fortuitous and by chance that this action did not coincide with severe weather. There was some discussion about what activities get prioritised during times of industrial action. DP stated that he would talk to the lead Director at the Met Office about the services that get prioritised.

Item 7: Northern Ireland Electricity Networks

AH presented to the group on the work of the NIE Networks and the unique infrastructure present in N. Ireland. The province has the highest proportion of overhead power infrastructure compared to other regions of the UK. AH highlighted the progress they have made tackling customer faults with stringent targets to reduce further over coming years. They have built up resilience in the workforce as all staff have an emergency role. AH explained the set up within the organisation for dealing with incidents and the reporting onward of this information to the multi-agency partners through the LIACs. NIE Networks has a commercial contract with the Met Office taking the forecast for planning purposes and with a particular interest in:

- Planning Forecasts
- Main Gust Warnings
- Ice Accretion
- Lightning/Thunderstorms

AH also spoke about increasing resilience across the network and looking to ensure they are future proofing against longer term climatic change. The organisation has been upgrading transformers to cope with increasing heat and improving flood protection measures around key infrastructure.

Item 8: Belfast Tidal

The group were presented with the background to and the progress of the Belfast Tidal Flood Alleviation Scheme (BTFAS) including the programme of work that has been undertaken (and is ongoing) and the design which has included for possible future construction in line with climate change projections to 2080, with the walls further capable of being raised to 2117 predicted levels as secondary intervention. The risk of flooding in Belfast City Centre has increased over the recent past with the highest recorded tidal flooding events having occurred in the last 20-30 years. The most significant event occurred in January 2014 when the existing quay wall came within centimetres of being overtopped and resulted in an extensive multi-agency pre-emptive approach led by the PSNI. Construction of the scheme commenced in July 2022 with various stages completed to date. Works are nearing completion in the Belfast Harbour Estate at present.

Item 9: Feedback from In camera session

DP provided a summary of the key points discussed during the closed session from earlier in the meeting. DP noted that the group had reiterated how important the work of the MO advisors are to stakeholders in Northern Ireland with JW and ES name checked. DP noted that the cross-border relationship was important, and WL spoke about wanting to maximise the opportunities from working with Met Eireann. The group were supportive of MO aiming to work more closely with Met Eireann.



Annex

PWSCG meeting in NI Attendees –

Name	Organisation	Email
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