

Environment Secretary statement on flooding and Storm Dennis

Madame Deputy Speaker, with permission, I will make a statement to the House on recent flooding caused by Storm Dennis which followed Storm Ciara and affected many parts of the country.

I would like to begin by extending my condolences to the families and friends of the five individuals who have sadly lost their lives through the storms. I am sure the thoughts of the whole House are with those grieving families, today.

Our thoughts are also with all those who have suffered damage to their properties as a result of the storms.

To have one's home flooded is an incredibly traumatic experience, and I am conscious that some have flooded repeatedly over recent years.

Storm Dennis cleared the UK during the course of Monday 17 February. However this remains a live incident, and I would urge people in at-risk areas to remain vigilant. We are monitoring the situation closely, and most areas are moving into recovery phase. However, rainfall over the last few days is still leading to higher water levels – so we will continue to see effects this week.

Communities have been affected across our Union.

Madame Deputy Speaker, we have had an incredibly wet winter. Some areas have already received almost double their average rainfall for February, with others experiencing a month's worth of rain in just 24 hours. Records have been broken.

Eighteen river gauges across 15 rivers recorded their highest levels on record during or triggered by Storms Ciara and Dennis, including the Colne, Ribble, Calder, Aire, Trent, Severn, Wye, Lugg and Derwent.

Storm Ciara flooded over 1,340 properties. And the latest number of properties flooded by Storm Dennis stands at over 1,400. Wales has also seen significant impacts and we are in close contact with the Welsh Government.

In anticipation of the storm we stood up our national flood response centre on Friday 14 February. The scale of the response has been huge – from setting up temporary defences to knocking on doors and issuing residents with warnings.

The Environment Agency issued 348 flood warnings for Storm Ciara and 514 flood warnings for Storm Dennis. On 17 February we saw a record concurrent total of 632 flood warnings and alerts issued in a single day.

Two severe flood warnings, 107 flood warnings, and 207 flood alerts remain in

place in England. There are an additional 13 flood warnings and 39 flood alerts that remain in place in Wales and one flood warning in Scotland.

We have been sharing information with the public, so people can prepare for flooding wherever they live. We have deployed over three miles of temporary flood barriers and 90 mobile pumps and we have been keeping structures and rivers clear of debris. Over 1,000 Environment Agency staff per day have been deployed with the assistance of around 80 military personnel.

In Yorkshire, the military helped deploy temporary defences in Ilkley, and kept the road open between Mytholmroyd and Hebden Bridge in Calderdale.

I would like record my thanks to all the response teams– including the Environment Agency, local authorities, our emergency services, and the military. They are still working hard, with over 20 government bodies, local authorities and volunteers at work across the country.

The Government acted swiftly to activate the Bellwin Scheme to help local authorities cope with the cost of response in the immediate aftermath. On Tuesday 18 February we also triggered the Flood Recovery Framework – to help communities get back on their feet.

I am working alongside the Secretary of State for Housing to help households and businesses recover. This includes making available hardship payments, and council tax and business rate relief. Households and businesses will also be able to access grants of up to £5,000 to help make them more resilient to future flooding and a ministerial recovery group is coordinating efforts across Government.

Storms Ciara and Dennis affected thousands of acres of farmland so we will consider the need to extend the Farming Recovery Fund, once we have all of the necessary data.

Madame Deputy Speaker, investments made in recent years have significantly improved our resilience – but there is much more to do. We are investing £2.6 billion in flood defences – over 1,000 flood defence schemes to better protect 300,000 homes by 2021.

To put this into context, in the floods of 2007, 55,000 properties were flooded, but with similar volumes of water in places this year, thankfully far fewer properties have been flooded and flood defence schemes have protected over 90,000 properties in England this winter.

Our manifesto commits us to a further £4 billion in new funding for flood defences over the next five years. Since the incidents of 2015, we've strengthened and improved our system of flood warnings.

In 2016 we introduced the Flood Re scheme so insurance cover for floods is accessible for at risk properties. An independent review of the data on insurance cover will help us ensure that it's working as effectively as possible.

Of course, we recognise that none of these steps will take away from the

anguish of those who have suffered flooding in these most recent storms. Climate change is making the UK warmer and wetter, with more frequent extreme weather events. We need to make nature's power part of our solution alongside traditional engineered defences.

We are already investing £10m to restore our peatland habitats, planting enough trees to cover an area the size of East Anglia with a new £640m Nature for Climate Fund and supporting farmers to be part of preventing flooding through our new Environmental Land Management scheme to reduce and delay peak flows in our landscapes.

Later this year, we will set out our policies to tackle flooding in the long term and the Environment Agency will be publishing their updated Flood and Coasts Strategy.

Madame Deputy Speaker, this country will also lead global ambition as hosts of COP26, urging the world to achieve net zero in a way that helps nature recover, reduces global warming, and addresses the causes of these extreme weather events.

And I therefore commend this statement to the House.