

Friday 12 October 2007



Dear Sir or Madam

Request for information for the Water UK Review Group on Flooding

Through Water UK, the UK water industry has embarked on a review of the flooding events that affected parts of the UK during 2007. This review is intended to examine the experiences of those who were involved in the exceptional events, and will consider from the point of view of the water industry and its customers what went well, what went less well, and what lessons can be learned for the inevitable next time when drinking water supplies and waste water services come under threat from extreme weather events.

The review is not concerned with awarding praise or blame in relation to any of the people or organisations caught up in the floods, but will be focussed on the issues of how to ensure that the impacts of the floods on water customers can be further mitigated next time. The Review Group will also look at wider policy issues such as the vulnerability of services and infrastructure to climate change and rising customer expectations about the reliability of water supplies and reduction of risk.

The terms of reference for the review are:

1. To consider the UK water industry's emergency response to the flooding.
2. To identify the impact and effectiveness of mutual aid and where this might be improved in future.
3. To identify medium and long-term policy issues (e.g. infrastructure resilience, dual/alternative supplies, drainage, disaster management, regulatory and financial impacts).
4. To understand the impacts of the flooding on public expectations and the reputation of the UK water industry.
5. To consider how we might have communicated better as an industry, with the public, the media, regulators, Government and MPs, and each other.
6. To make recommendations based on the above.

We are contacting you to ask if your organisation would share with the Review Group its experiences, any feedback you may have had from customers, other organisations caught up in the floods, and the public, together with any new thinking on planning you are undertaking as a result. We attach a list of topics in which the Review Group is particularly interested to help shape your thoughts. We are particularly interested in any top-level thoughts or strategic experiences and would welcome ideas for change or any other issues you think the review should address.

In the first instance, it would be helpful if you could let us have your contribution in writing. Later, the Review Group would hope to meet with key players to pursue points raised in a discussion.

If you have submitted evidence to the EFRA Committee, the Cabinet Office inquiry or the Ofwat review and feel that such a submission would cover the topics raised in this review then please feel free to use that as the basis of your contribution. Of course we are particularly interested in views and issues relating to the water industry rather than to all the other agencies involved in the floods.

Our deadline for receipt of statements is Friday 16 November 2007. We hope to produce an interim report around the end of the year dealing with industry's immediate responses to the flood emergencies and the recovery of normal services, with a later report addressing the wider strategic, infrastructure and policy issues. Please respond by e-mail to floodreview@water.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Baker', written in a cursive style.

Sir John Baker
Chair of Review Group on Flooding

Topics for the basis of responses

The following topics will be addressed by the review. Whilst the review is not limited to these topics they do form a structure for the basis of a response. Please note that the review is not looking at individual water company performance in relation to specific events but the response and performance of the water industry as a whole.

1 - The water industry's response to flooding events

The water industry already has emergency plans to deal with risks to drinking water supplies and sewage services. How well did this stand up and are changes needed to the assumptions on which these plans are based? How well did implementation of the plans work, including the water industry's mutual aid system allowing water companies to gain support from neighbours and others? Managing public health is the key priority for any event of this nature. How well did we address this? How well did companies across the UK co-ordinate their efforts and liaise with the emergency services and armed forces where necessary?

2 - Customer impacts and expectations

Customers, business as well as domestic, bore the brunt of the flooding, either through disrupted supplies or property flooding. The water industry is geared up to respond to disrupted drinking water supplies but there may be questions as to the volumes of emergency supplies of water that are deemed necessary and where and how this water is made available. There is an issue as to returning water to supply in a state fit only for sanitation or a in a fully potable state. In all cases communications with the public are vital: were the industry's communications to customers as events unfolded clear, appropriate, timely and effective?

3 - Climate change and future event frequency

The weather events that lead to the recent flooding were said to be exceptional. However climate change predicts that extreme and unpredictable weather will become more frequent. The water industry may need to build progressive adaptation to meet extreme events into service provision and business planning. Do assumptions as to the frequency and severity of extreme events need to be revisited? Do standards of resilience need to be redefined further for health or economic reasons or to respond to rising public expectations?

4 - Policy and procedural frameworks

It needs to be asked whether the water industry's ability to respond to such events is inhibited by existing policy and procedural frameworks.

Are there lessons to be learned and is a more flexible and innovative policy and regulatory approach required?

5 - Infrastructure resilience

The floods brought into focus the susceptibility of sewerage infrastructure to cope with exceptional events, particularly in relation to combined sewers. Questions may need to be asked over managing the resilience of the network. Customer expectations may change and tolerance towards such events may diminish. Options for long-term protective investment may need to be considered, both in terms of improving the quality of the water industry infrastructure and the infrastructure of other organisations (such as electricity supply) on which the water industry itself depends. Is the water industry adequately preparing to address these strategic issues, some with possibly profound expenditure implications? Is there adequate interaction with other relevant parties?

6 – Central responsibility

National and local responsibilities and duties in the area of drainage and flood risk management are somewhat blurred. Many organisation and agencies have a role to play. Do the summer's flooding events or their management suggest any redefinition of roles is required?