

Operational Assurance

Post Pitt: the business case for a national flood rescue framework

Following the government's response to the Pitt review, CFO **Paul Hayden**, Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service, details the need to implement a national flood rescue framework

SIR MICHAEL PITT'S REVIEW INTO THE

summer 2007 floods praised the role of many organisations carrying out flood rescue, including the Fire and Rescue Service, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) and the armed forces. Evidence submitted to his review also highlighted the valuable role of voluntary search and rescue organisations such as Rapid UK, Severn Area Rescue Association and Avon and Somerset Search and Rescue.

However, Sir Michael identified that a lack of clarity about who was responsible for carrying out and coordinating flood rescue placed both the public and responders at unnecessary risk. He concluded that timeliness and the effectiveness of the response were diminished since there were no common systems of work or understanding of command, control and risk. Further, a number of voluntary search and rescue organisations experienced difficulty in engaging with the response effort as there was no clear and consistent structure within which they could operate.

Sir Michael's conclusion was that in the event of another wide-area flooding emergency, those responding would still not necessarily have the right resources or training to respond safely. The Chief Fire Officers' Association was a major contributor to the Pitt review, and has long argued for a national multi-agency framework for flood rescue, establishing robust typing and accreditation arrangements for rescue teams and setting standards for equipment and training.

CFOA's evidence to the Pitt review and its own 2006 Major Flood Response report, *Management of Major Flood Emergencies*, argued that these structures, along with statutory clarity and certainty about who was responsible for flood rescue, were essential to enable rescue teams from a range of different services and agencies to be 'plugged' seamlessly into a regional or national response to wide area flooding.

Sir Michael's recommendation No 39 stated that: 'The Government should urgently put in place a fully funded national capability for flood rescue, with Fire and Rescue Authorities playing a leading role, underpinned as necessary by a statutory duty'.

On December 17, 2008, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Hillary Benn, announced the government's response to the Pitt review, covering in detail its response to all 92 recommendations.

National Flood Emergency Framework

Government has accepted Sir Michael's recommendation to establish an overarching flood emergency framework and Defra has issued a consultative document covering the key component elements. These include:

- A new Flood Forecasting Centre jointly operated by the Environment Agency and the Met Office

- A new national flood rescue capability. CFOA's 2006 research identified the benefits of bringing the Met Office and Environment

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Agency together during a major flood event and during the 2007 floods brought both agencies into its National Flood Support Team (NFST). As a result of this, CFOA have now been asked to contribute to the work necessary to establish the new joint Flood Forecasting Centre and of particular interest, will be identifying ways of improving probable warnings and their 'interpretation' to make them of more immediate use to frontline responder organisations. This could include pre-designated 'trigger levels' for action, or simple check lists for consideration.

With regard to a national flood rescue capability and recommendation No 39, the government has accepted the recommendation in principle, setting a challenge for Defra to identify ways of

delivering a significant improvement in flood rescue capability and coordination between the agencies concerned. A decision on Sir Michael's recommendation for statutory clarity around flood rescue supported by long-term funding has been deferred until the initial Defra project has examined existing capabilities and statutory arrangements. Recommendations for change and identification of any long-term investment requirements will be one of the key outcomes from this capabilities work.

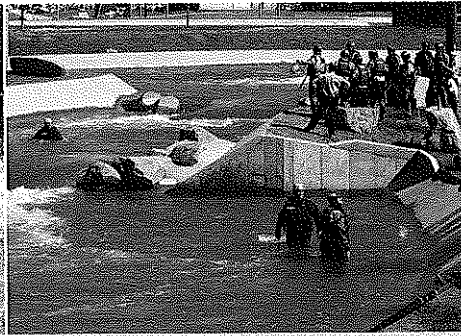
The Defra capabilities project will engage all of the key statutory and voluntary agencies, working with the UK Search and Rescue (UKSAR) Strategic Committee and its Flooding Sub Group, currently chaired by CFOA. This existing multi-agency forum brings together a range of specialists from relevant partner organisations including the Fire and Rescue Service, Police, Maritime and Coastguard Agency, Royal Air Force, and voluntary groups, in this instance, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and Mountain Rescue Council.

Up to £2 million has been made available to DEFRA by government within the current spending review period (ie to March 31, 2011) to carry out the initial project work and deliver any immediate enhancements necessary. CFOA's advice to government on this issue has been that until or unless issues of statutory clarity and certainty are addressed, and the issue of long-term funding resolved, this initial 'one off' investment would best be spent on establishing the foundations for safe systems of work, and identifying ways to improve multi-agency coordination and response. Government has accepted fully that the simple procurement of 'rubber boats' to be left in a warehouse somewhere in the south east would not deliver an enhanced rescue capability on the ground and would continue to leave front line responders at unacceptable risk. Government has therefore challenged the project with delivering flood rescue improvement in four distinct areas:

- Making more effective use of existing flood rescue capabilities through a comprehensive multi-agency flood rescue framework supported by team typing and accreditation systems, along with national standards for training and equipment (first draft documents by autumn 2009)

- Quantifying current capabilities and rescue capacity to create a national register of capable flood rescue assets (initial register to be completed by May 2009)

by Paul Hayden



The author says FRS professionals should be vocal in support of Sir Michael Pitt's original recommendations. CFO Paul Hayden contends: 'There are only two real choices: to provide a professional rescue response, in which case it must be supported by investment in line with national standards; or to publicly announce that the service has decided to make no rescue response at all'

- Identifying any capability gaps and making recommendations for addressing them (enhancements to be procured before winter 2009/10, long-term recommendations to be formulated)

- Ensuring certainty, clarity and consistency in major flood rescue approach by communicating and testing the outcomes of this project with all Local Resilience Forums, statutory and voluntary flood rescue providers (testing the new arrangements through a national exercise in 2011).

Achieving multi-agency consensus on the best way forward has been assisted by a CFOA organised US/UK Major Flood Response Symposium held in North Carolina in October 2008 (see pg 18). The 60 UK delegates included key partners from Defra, Met Office, RAF, Coast Guard, RNLI and Mountain Rescue Council. FRS had representatives from each English region, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland at firefighter and strategic manager level.

The week-long symposium gave opportunities for delegates to review US and UK tactical and strategic arrangements from a multi-agency, multi-disciplinary perspective in order to refine future objectives. From this and CFOA's previous research, we have been able to quickly reach agreement that an enhanced national capability will only be a reality if we agree, and embed common standards across all the relevant organisations. The proposed single overarching framework will help to deliver this, with responder safety and effectiveness supported by detailed multi-agency flood rescue standards and team typing arrangements, common operating and command/coordination procedures.

Project Deliverables/Outcomes

The overall objective of this initial project is to deliver safer communities and safer responders. Although there is a great deal to be done, it is clear that to be effective, a multi-agency flood rescue framework will need to ensure best strategic use is made of limited specialist resources. Whilst details are yet to be agreed, component elements are likely to include:

- A resource typing system – describing the smallest indivisible rescue units and what they can safely achieve

- An accreditation system – ensuring that all organisations offering typed specialist flood rescue teams are competent to do so

- A credentialing system to ensure that individuals undertaking specialist rescue on behalf of accredited organisations are competent to do so

- A National Asset Register – identifying the rescue assets available from accredited organisations at a local and national level

- Common multi-agency operating procedures in the form of a multi-agency flood rescue/response manual

- Common training, PPE and equipment standards.

Future Work and Limitations of the National Project

Whilst this project will establish robust flood rescue procedures and standards in support of an enhanced major flood response for England, its scope does not automatically extend to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. For many partners on UKSAR this is not an issue as they already have a UK wide remit. Hence, once the project has established robust standards and working arrangements, they can be applied UK wide by groups such as the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, military, RNLI and the many voluntary groups.

However, this provides a number of challenges for FRS, especially in Scotland where the statutory position differs from the rest of the UK. CFOA's inland water strategic and tactical groups includes representatives from all devolved administrations, and therefore will be doing what it can within CFOA and the 'English' project to ensure that a finalised flood rescue framework and supporting manuals are suitable for use more widely, should devolved administrations choose to adopt them.

It should also be remembered that government (in England) has only charged this initial project with making provision for major flood events requiring a national level response. Provision of a response to localised

flooding, or the provision of a more general water rescue capability currently remains unfunded and out of scope. This retains the status quo position, in that fire and rescue services are expected to decide locally through their integrated risk management plan process whether, or not as the case may be, to deliver a rescue service to flood and water related events. However, if it is decided to provide a service, local council tax payers must foot the entire bill.

Whilst it is disappointing that issues of statutory clarity and funding remain unresolved at this point in time, we have an opportunity to ensure that the capabilities programme delivers the robust guidance we are currently lacking and an initial investment in safety, training and PPE.

However, unless statutory clarity and sustainable funding support can be delivered, a direct impact of this programme is that in future FRAs will no longer be able to remain silent on their response to flooding. There are only two real choices: to provide a professional rescue response, in which case it must be supported by investment in line with national standards; or to publicly announce that the service has decided to make no rescue response at all.

Unlike some other specialist activities, such as mountain or cave rescue, flooding has the potential to impact every citizen, and a single event can result in many thousands requiring rescue. I believe that this distinction places flooding into an entirely different category to other currently non-statutory areas of work. Leaving the public to a post code lottery is therefore difficult to justify, especially when a number of separate FRSs could be impacted by a single flood event.

Live 24/7 news coverage of a professional rescue response underway in one area, with the neighbouring area impacted by the same flood receiving no rescue response at all, is likely to result in a political decision overnight. We should not be waiting for this to happen, but continue to make our professional voice heard in support of Sir Michael Pitt's original recommendations.