

## Flood & Coastal Risk Management

Improving forecasting services

# Collaborating to improve forecasting services

After six months of planning, on 1 April 2009 the new Flood Forecasting Centre in London came into service. A partnership between ourselves and the Met Office, the centre will improve the link between weather events and existing hydrological conditions with potential flood risk of all types, providing more accurate and timely flood forecasts. The CEOs of both partners made sure that each organisation provided senior staff to govern its development, including the appointment of a full-time head of the centre. The centre has its own budget and freedom to operate to achieve the agreed results.

Initially the centre is offering forecasting services to a restricted set of customers. These are emergency response organisations (like the emergency services, local authorities and health bodies) and cooperating bodies (like transport and utility companies) which sign up for the overall service. These groups of organisations are defined respectively as Category 1 and Category 2 Responders in the *Civil Contingencies Act*. These stakeholders need early warning of severe weather events and likelihood of flooding to be able to put into action their relevant contingency plans.

Every day the centre issues national high-level forecasts, including a daily **Flood Guidance Statement**, presenting an overview of the flood risk across England and Wales over five days. These are presented on maps so recipients can identify the levels of risk in their specific regions. Responders can also access the centre's services through a new and independent web portal as well as a dedicated information line.

The centre has also taken over the Extreme Rainfall Alert (ERA) service. At county level, the service advises responders of predicted extreme rainfall events and is currently the closest thing to a surface water flooding alert service.

Different grades of alerts are issued depending on the predicted likelihood of flooding. On receiving an alert, a responder can decide what action to take to tackle the predicted disruption.

The RSPCA received an ERA before the flooding in the north east in early September 2008. A spokesperson later reported *"the RSPCA mobilised five flood rescue teams across the country, particularly to those areas affected by the heaviest rainfall."* They said the service had been extremely helpful, enabling the RSPCA to provide an appropriate response.

In a separate event, Cornwall County Council reported that an alert had led to a pre-emptive deployment of the fire service and as a result they carried out a rescue from a car where floodwaters were rising by one foot every 20 minutes.

In an evaluation of the ERA service, Ipsos MORI received 291 customer feedback forms and conducted 50 interviews. These revealed it to be a good first step and a useful addition to the information already used by emergency responders and planners in their decision making.

The evaluation also identified the need to make some improvements to the service. These include the provision of feedback

on the ERA pilot project, and education and training around understanding the ERA products and impacts of forecast rainfall. This will enable responders to put them into relevant context and take appropriate action.

The centre invites regular feedback about how the new services are helping and how they might be improved. Customers will be asked to verify the quality and accuracy of the forecasts they have received and to confirm whether or not the predicted flooding actually occurred so that prediction methods can be improved.



Flood Forecasting Centre

“Between Friday 5 and Sunday 7 September (2008) severe flooding affected parts of England, with the most affected areas being Morpeth, Rothbury and Ponteland in Northumberland. Following forecasts of exceptional rainfall in the area, the Environment Agency started to alert local authorities and the emergency services on 4 September. Calls were made to prepare vulnerable people and areas, including an old people’s home in Ponteland, which was evacuated well before any flooding took place.”

Hillary Benn,  
Secretary of State,  
Department for  
Environment, Food  
and Rural Affairs.

All feedback will be used to determine the centre’s development programme which aims to improve its capabilities, tools and techniques for forecasting in the future.