Britain: Thousands still displaced from homes flooded last summer

Paul Mitchell
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Thousands of people in Britain are unable to return to their homes months after they were flooded last summer. Latest estimates suggest over 9,000 families are still living with friends or relatives or in temporary accommodation and that 2,000 of them spent Christmas in caravans.

The misery is made worse by the sight of rising river levels threatening their homes this week because of heavy rainfall. The Environment Agency has issued hundreds of flood warnings and flood watches with its spokesman David King saying, "We're particularly worried about the Severn Valley—from Shrewsbury right through Gloucester—but also the North, particularly Yorkshire, Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire."

The most terrible consequence of last summer's floods was the loss of 13 lives. Many more could have died had it not been for rescue efforts of the emergency services in what was described as "the worst peacetime disaster in living memory." More than 55,000 homes and businesses were flooded and essential services collapsed. Yorkshire and Gloucestershire, where 140,000 homes were left without water for up to 15 days, were among the areas worst hit. London was badly affected, with southwestern areas of the capital under two feet of water. Eight motorways and several railway lines were closed.

Hull, one of the most deprived cities in England, saw tens of thousands of houses and hundreds of schools seriously damaged. David and Lavinia Thomlinson recently explained to reporters how they and their five children are trying to survive in their caravan.

"We were told at first it would take six weeks to dry out and another six weeks to do the repairs," David Thomlinson said. "So we thought it would be okay—the kids were off school for the summer holidays and we were going away on holiday for a week anyway.

"We thought that 12 weeks in the caravan would not be that bad. But 12 weeks became six months. We've just been waiting and waiting. Nobody returns your calls. All you get every day is the buck passed."

The building contractors have told the Thomlinsons they should be back in their home by March, but they need to dry it out a second time because of damp caused by the cold weather.

Further south, in the town of Reading, another family, who wished to remain anonymous, complained about the time it has taken for insurance companies to help them return to their home. "At the moment, not much is happening," the father said.

"We have been waiting for six months and it looks like it's going to be mid-February before anything is sorted out. We had our Christmas dinner in that freezing cold, tiny caravan and it was bloody awful.... We feel very let down," he added.

"The money the council was giving out was a paltry amount, hardly enough to buy a packet of mince pies, but we weren't even allowed to have that. We just want a bit of compassion. We want things to move on and people to realise how serious this matter is for us and how frustrating it is."

The psychological effects of flooding should not be underestimated, according to flood expert Paul Hendy. "People are literally falling apart...We are now seeing real signs of stress and aggravation. It took a year for this to happen in Carlisle [the location of floods in 2005] but here it has happened in six months."

He explained, "Flooding impacts on people in a way very few other disasters do, because it is such a personal loss.... People lose things they have saved all their lives, pictures of loved ones which can never be replaced.... All they want to do is get back to normal, but it's impossible."

Hendy also pointed out that people are sinking into "horrendous debt." He said it was bad enough in relatively well-off Carlisle after the 2005 floods when some people ended up in as much as £20,000 in debt, but "the difference in Hull is that many people don't have the money to start with."

A government Audit Commission corroborated Hendy's observation, saying that the flooding "disproportionately affected poorer households ... which were far less likely to have contents insurance." Many have been forced to rely on charity handouts, such as the 16 poor families in Oxford who received £1,250 each from the Red Cross. The callous attitude of the government was expressed by the minister of state at the Department for Communities and Local Government, John Healey, who made great play of his announcement to make an extra paltry £1million available to councils "to help the most vulnerable people and those in the most need through the winter months while they are not in their own homes."

Great play has also been made of the unprecedented nature of the storms—the worst since records began over 200 years ago—and the effects of climate change. However, this has not been able to deflect attention from the malignant role played by a chaotic economic system propelled by the drive for profit. Perhaps the most graphic example of this is the way over 2 million homes and

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small businesses in the UK have been built in areas considered at risk of flooding. Property developers have the absolute right to connect to public sewers free of charge and bear no cost for the construction of flood defences.

An independent review commissioned by Hull City Council has blamed Yorkshire Water Services (YWS) for the severity of the floods. The city is one of the few in the UK that lies below sea level and requires continual pumping of water up and over the sea defences if it is not to be submerged. The review discovered that over a number of years—more or less the period since privatisation in 1989—several investigations into the condition, design and operation of the drainage systems had made "a series of clear recommendations" regarding maintenance and replacement of assets, but in many cases the company was "unable to produce any evidence to show if any action had been taken."

In the Bransholme area of the city, where there is a large estate housing over 35,000 people, a 1996 report recommended the company carry out a "thorough review" of the pumping station that drains the area and consider the construction of a second pump as backup. A September 2001 investigation concluded there was a "high risk of asset failure" due to the poor condition and unreliability of the pumps. None of these recommendations were addressed and when the pumping station became submerged during last summer's floods the main bearings failed, devastating Bransholme. YWS refused to allow the workers who manned the station to appear before the inquiry.

And the problems did not just occur with YWS's "old" assets. It was also revealed that a 2004 report warned that a new super sewer built in 2001 to prevent flooding was so badly designed that the city "is now subjected to the risk of area flooding at rainfall events well below the original design criteria." The new sewer actually reduced the ability of the drainage system to cope with very large storms of the type that occur every 30 years and was only able to deal with the more minor floods that happen every two years or so. In a further report in 2006, the consultants Ove Arup concluded that YWS "are not providing the required level of protection for area/property flooding to Hull."

The Hull inquiry concluded that "until a permanent solution is built, Hull is served by an under capacity, substandard modern system helped out by two 40-year-old pumping stations."

YWS disputed the inquiry's findings, saying, "This report should have been a catalyst for change and better cooperation and we are disappointed that the independent review body has chosen to focus instead on the shortcomings of our pumping infrastructure rather than the bigger picture of protecting Hull from future flooding and the effects of climate change. We feel that this is a missed opportunity."

But it is not just Yorkshire Water that is at fault. The Hull report complains that not a single organisation "accepts responsibility for any elements outside their own terms of reference nor have they historically allowed others to influence their own obligations. This is a recurring theme—one of inadequate consultation, cooperation and unity between agencies."

For example, back in 1998 a Parliamentary Agricultural Select Committee inquiry into flood defences was told that inadequate funding of a national strategy was made worse by the existence of many organisations—240 in coastal defence alone. And yet 10 years later a common theme of the reports into last summer's floods was the plethora of responsibilities for a simple watercourse as it makes its way from the hills to the sea—including landowners, farmers, local authorities, land drainage boards, the Environment Agency, the Highway Agency and the water companies. All of them have responsibility to maintain (or not) their own little patch and are able to make changes with scant regard to what happens upstream or downstream.

Following the devastating floods in 2000 the head of the Confederation of British Industry compared Britain to a "banana republic." In response, former Prime Minister Tony Blair promised, "We have to put in the right protection for people against the possibility of floods," and commissioned the Foresight report that became the basis of the 2005 Making Space for Water report.

But reports, as the Chartered Institute of Water and Environmental Management has noted, often become "occasions to note what has happened previously" and forget it. Last summer's floods occurred because "lessons have not been learnt," the organisation adds.

Evidence to the parliamentary inquiry into the floods says that recommendations from previous floods were "unfunded" and "organisational changes needed to address the problems not made." The Public Accounts Committee concludes that "the state of flood defences in England has not improved markedly."

Prime Minister Gordon Brown has also promised to increase funding for flood prevention from the current £600 million. As one commentator noted, however, "The prime minister's claim that flood defence spending is going up by £800 million a year is a mere half truth. It isn't £800 million now, it is £800 million in 2010 and that is just not good enough. This amounts to little more than an inflationary increase."

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