

Britain: Hundreds of Hull residents still suffering from last year's floods

Paul Mitchell
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A year since Britain suffered heavy flooding nearly 5,000 families are still living with friends or relatives or in temporary accommodation or caravans. Nearly half of those are living in Hull and the surrounding region, with the remainder mainly from the West Country and the Midlands.

Unprecedented rainfall during the summer of 2007 caused the deaths of 13 people and the flooding of more than 55,000 homes and businesses in what was dubbed the largest peacetime emergency since World War II. Half a million people were without water or power, eight motorways and several railway lines were closed and there were 180,000 insurance claims costing £3 billion.

Hull, where 95 percent of properties are at risk of flooding, was particularly devastated. Some of those living in the 7,200 homes affected by overflowing drains and sewers experienced enormous difficulties getting their insurance claims processed.

Campaigners in the Haltemprice and Howden constituency spoke with residents affected by the severe flooding in Cottingham and neighbouring Kingston-upon-Hull.

Although the floods occurred one year ago, some residents have still not been able to move out of temporary accommodation (which in many cases means a caravan parked on their drive-way).

Liam and Jo have lived in the area all their lives and have been in their present house since November 2002. Liam works in a Waitrose supermarket and Jo works for the police.

Describing the flooding of their home in June 2007, Liam said, "The water came up through the floorboards up to three or four feet.

"We stayed at in-laws after that. Next door they stayed at their in-laws. We were out of the house for six months. We had to have the whole floor concreted and downstairs repaired. Our insurance premium has increased."

Jo said that the water in their garden had been waist high. Further down the street the water had been deeper still and the house damage worse.

"There were firemen down here helping but they couldn't

really do anything. There was no point bringing in the water pumps because there was nowhere to pump the water to."

The couple explained that after the floods, there had been a lot of anger directed towards the town councillors and officials. "There was just one meeting organised after the floods, but nothing was done," Jo said.

Liam concluded, "Everyone in power is just after lining their own pockets."

Phil works in the building trade, as does most of his family. He has lived in the area for around 10 years, and although he was not as seriously affected as many others, he felt strongly about the deterioration in the social fabric of the area caused by the floods and its resulting displacement.

"Many people in the area don't know anybody any more. People have moved out. I moved upstairs while my house was being repaired."

Phil had to pay for repairs himself and was fortunate to be involved in the building trade. In the days immediately following the floods, he helped clear the water from the homes of his neighbours.

"I was helping to pump everyone's gardens out for four days solid. I must've only slept six hours in five days."

Phil indicated on a nearby wall, the level to which the water had reached after the flood.

He blamed the local council for problems with the drain infrastructure, "They've not cleaned these drains [Westland Road] in 10 years."

Derren described the difficult conditions faced by his parents, who had virtually been abandoned by the authorities after the deluge.

He described how his father, who is 63 years old, "has to carry a water bucket every day" to a caravan parked outside, which is acting as a makeshift kitchen.

Explaining why the house was still in such a state of disrepair over 12 months after the floods, Derren said there had been problems with the insurance Loss Adjusters, which is delaying any repairs.

"About a month after [the initial flooding] it started to get wet again, even though the floor had been certified dry."

Mrs Walmsley, who has two children, spoke about the aftermath of the floods.

“They haven’t done anything to prevent it from happening again.”

She and her family had only moved back into their house three weeks ago.

“We had no help from the authorities,” she said. “We’ve got two children, yet they did not help us. We have since found that they should have connected us to the main water supply, and that the hose pipe we were using for drinking water is classed as unsafe.”

In the face of the disaster suffered by many families, a review of last summer’s floods commissioned by the Labour government carried out by Sir Michael Pitt seeks to shift responsibility for flood protection from government and big business onto individual householders.

Despite recommending long-term planning and pointing out the advantages of a well resourced, publicly funded flood defence system, Pitt spends a large part of the report saying people have to take more individual responsibility for flood protection.

Pitt expresses some sympathy for the plight of families affected, commenting, “We have observed at first hand extraordinary hardship. Even now many thousands of families are still living in temporary accommodation.”

He also urges the government “to show leadership and urgently set out the process and timescale for improving resilience in the UK,” warning that “the UK could suffer serious consequences, including severe economic damage, grave social disruption or even large scale loss of life.”

There are also other criticisms: Of the absence of a long-term strategy. Pitt contrasts the Deltaworks flood defence project in the Netherlands, designed to withstand extreme flooding that might occur every 10,000 years with the UK’s standard of one in 100 years for river flood defence schemes and one in 30 years for drains and sewers.

He notes that the UK is “one of the world’s most secretive regimes” in relation to dam safety, because the Centre for Protection of National Infrastructure, a department of MI5, restricts access to information as part of the “war on terror”. This lack of information was a major factor in the Ulley reservoir near Rotherham almost bursting its banks during the floods, which could have indefinitely shut down a major electricity switching station in the Sheffield area, and also threatening to destroy the 42-inch gas main serving the city. Pitt recommends that the government relax the rules so that risk assessments can be made about the 2,000 dams and reservoirs in the UK near to which over four million people live.

Nevertheless, Pitt’s report provided an apologia for the government and the water companies.

He makes hardly any mention of the findings of the independent inquiry commissioned by Hull City Council, which found that Yorkshire Water, a subsidiary of the private Kelda Group Ltd, was largely responsible for the severity of the floods. It discovered that over a number of years—more or less the period since the company was privatised in 1989—“a series of clear recommendations” regarding maintenance and replacement of assets were made, but in many cases the company was “unable to produce any evidence to show if any action had been taken.” 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.”

Neither does the Pitt review touch on the issue of improved flood defence systems or make any demands on government to resource them properly, accepting as good coin promises from Prime Minister Gordon Brown to increase funding for flood prevention from the current £600 million to £800 million in 2010, which is grossly inadequate to compensate for decades of neglect.

The vast majority of Pitt’s 92 recommendations barely scratch the surface, and he stresses that flood victims should not expect the state to look after them.

He is quick to praise the “free market private insurance system”, although he notes that 30 percent of the poor are unable to afford any buildings insurance and 50 percent have no house contents insurance. Nevertheless, he states that flood protection should be based on “customers’ preferences, cost-benefit analysis and customers’ willingness to pay”. Local groups contributing to costs themselves rather than central funding should become the rule rather than the exception; with those at risk flood-proofing their homes and preparing emergency kits of torches, wind-up radios, first aid kit, blankets and a mobile phone.

In response to the Pitt Review, Environment Secretary Hilary Benn promised an “action plan” in the autumn and new legislation. He said part of a £35 million spending package announced last year would be used—£5 million on risk assessments and an initial £250,000 sum to carry out a floods drill. The paltry amounts announced by Benn are a fraction of what is required to reverse the enormous decay in the physical and social infrastructure of Britain’s flood defences.



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