

UK floods bring further destruction to thousands

Barry Mason
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Storms in December have brought floods to large parts of Wales, northern England and the border areas of Scotland.

Storm Desmond, at the beginning of the month, impacted heavily on Cumbria in northwest England with bridges washed away and many streets in urban areas underwater.

Over the Christmas weekend Storm Eva, while again hitting Cumbria and other areas, mainly affected areas of Lancashire, West and North Yorkshire. The latest floods hit highly populated areas including the cities of Leeds, Manchester, Salford and York. Thousands of people were forced to abandon their homes, including 4,000 in York alone.

The storms are estimated to have dropped an average month's rainfall within a 24-hour period, often falling on already saturated ground, leading to rivers and streams rising rapidly, breaking their banks and flooding houses and businesses.

The cost of damage from Desmond is estimated at around £1 billion, while the cost of Eva's destruction is likely to be at least £1.5 billion, and with further storms forecast the total cost is likely to rise considerably. Accountancy firm Price Waterhouse Cooper said the total cost of the damage nationally could exceed £15 billion.

The flooding over Christmas was accurately predicted, yet nothing was done by the government to assist those who were to be subjected to its ravages.

The weather forecast service, the Met Office, had issued two red weather warnings indicating a danger to life. The Environment Agency, which has responsibility for flood monitoring and prevention, issued 22 severe flood warnings, again indicating danger to life, in addition to 238 standard flood warnings for the Lancashire and West Yorkshire areas

over the holiday period. A standard flood warning indicates people must be prepared to take immediate action to avoid the effects of floodwater.

York regularly suffers flooding, as the river Ouse that flows through the city receives water from the majority of the rain catchment area of North and West Yorkshire. This month water levels reached near record high levels, with the impact heightened by the flooding of the River Foss, which feeds into the Ouse at York. The floodgate that normally prevents the Foss from spilling over had to be left open, after the barrier's pumping station was itself overwhelmed by floodwater, threatening electrical failure. This meant that water from the Ouse backed up the channel of the Foss.

Around 10,000 homes in the northwest had their electricity supply cut off. In Greater Manchester, the River Irwell, separating Manchester from Salford, burst its banks on December 26. This caused the worst flooding in the area since 1946, when 5,300 homes were deluged.

A number of houses were destroyed in working class districts, with Lower Broughton badly hit. A historic 200-year-old public house built on the Irwell's banks was almost completely destroyed. In the Radcliffe area of Greater Manchester a gas pipe ruptured, leading to an explosion. On the main M62 motorway which runs across the north of England, a seven metre sinkhole opened up near the Rochdale junction.

Streets in Leeds city centre were inundated by water spilling over from the river Aire. Kirkstall Road, a major transport corridor to the west, running parallel to the river, became impassable.

Areas around the River Calder were severely hit. In East Lancashire, the town of Whalley was completely inundated. Further down the Calder valley, Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire was deluged. Further down

the valley, the town centre of Mytholmroyd was completely submerged and Todmorden was cut off.

The Conservative government made the usual perfunctory remarks expressing concern for those hit by the flooding, with statements from Prime Minister David Cameron and his Environment Secretary Liz Truss.

During a photo op visit by Cameron to York Monday to survey the damage and praise exhausted rescue teams, one woman shouted out, “No more cuts to public services.”

Following the floods in Cumbria, the government announced a new flood review to be led by Floods Minister Rory Stewart. It is tasked with developing plans to manage a worst-case flooding event and is to publish recommendations in 2016. None of this will resolve anything, with Stewart saying this week, “The underlying central problem I’m afraid is the weather. We have never had rain like this before.”

The truth is that the flooding disaster is the product of the vast cuts in the flood defence and infrastructure budget, compounded by a failure to maintain the UK’s decaying infrastructure over decades.

A *Financial Times* article dated December 15 highlighted the overall scale of government budget cuts to flood protection schemes:

“Whitehall budget cuts and a growing risk of serious flooding are set to stretch the environment’s department’s budget thinly, a committee of MPs has warned. George Osborne, chancellor, cut day-to-day funding for the department by 15 percent over the next four years in last month’s Spending Review, to £2bn a year... on top of a budget reduction of about a quarter over the course of the last parliament.”

The government is only committed to a paltry £2.3 billion in flood defence spending, as announced in 2014 by the previous Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition. The programme is to cover the period up to 2021. It is heavily reliant on private sector investment. £600 million is slated to come from outside organisations, but currently there is a £350 million shortfall, with the private sector only having contributed £61 million.

The *Guardian* on December 29 cited Professor Colin Mellors, head of the Yorkshire regional flood and coastal committee, warning that further government cuts would affect flood preparedness, saying, “With ever tighter budgets, it is clear that there will need to be

even firmer prioritisation, especially in relation to maintenance activity.” In the new year, the committee would have to “consider sites where maintenance might be formally discontinued.”

It emerged this week that a proposed £180 million flood defence scheme for Leeds was cancelled last December.

It is estimated that one in six homes nationally are at risk of flooding. Yet the warning last year by the independent advisory body, the Committee on Climate Change, that three-quarters of flood defences were inadequately maintained, was ignored by the government.

With no adequate contingency plans in place, despite knowing the impact of the forecast heavy rain, the governments’ entire response is to rely on the use of volunteers, such as mountain rescue teams, and to send in a few hundred soldiers with sandbags to already submerged areas. The temporary barriers erected by troops were easily overwhelmed. But such are the levels of cuts that there is even a shortage of such temporary barriers, with around 85 percent of the total currently being deployed in Cumbria.

Thousands of people whose homes are inundated by floodwater now face huge costs to rectify the damage. Those without insurance coverage are threatened with financial ruin. Under current legislation, insurance companies are obliged to continue to offer insurance coverage to current policyholders. However, there is no limit on the premiums they can impose and householders and small businesses are often priced out.



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