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INDEPENDENT REVIEW ISSUES CALL TO ACTION ON FLOOD RISK

“Despite the impressive efforts of emergency responders, much work needs to be done to avoid emergencies of the scale we witnessed this summer happening again.

“The country was fortunate that the impact was not much more severe.”

Sir Michael Pitt, December 2007

The summer floods were a “wake-up call” for the country, says the interim report of the Independent Review commissioned by the Government to learn lessons from the events. It urges immediate action in a number of areas by government departments and agencies, local authorities and other stakeholders, as well as members of the public, to ensure we are not caught out again by events like the flooding of June and July.

The author of the independent Review, Sir Michael Pitt, one of the country’s most respected and experienced figures in local public service, was asked by Ministers in August to identify the lessons to be learned from the emergencies and to make recommendations that would help the country adapt and deal more effectively with flooding on the unprecedented level of last summer.

The publication today of the Review’s interim findings has three main objectives:

- To identify issues requiring urgent action;
- To set out the direction for the remainder of the Review; and
- To provide a document for consultation prior to publication of the final report next summer.

The Review makes 15 “urgent recommendations” to be implemented as soon as possible to reduce the impact of any flooding that might occur in the near future. These cover the areas of managing flood risk, groundwater monitoring, local and national planning and response, public information, and public preparedness.

Additionally, the Review draws 72 interim conclusions, awaiting further information and evidence before being put forward in firm recommendations next summer.

The report is written from the standpoint of flood victims, highlighting the devastation to lives and livelihoods and the necessity for the authorities to reduce the risk and impact of future events. It includes contributions from affected communities and businesses, and key stakeholders, such as the emergency services, local authorities, and public and regulatory bodies.

Sir Michael personally visited many of the flooded areas – including Doncaster and Sheffield, Hull and East Riding, Barnsley and Rotherham, and Gloucester and Tewkesbury – meeting members of the public affected by the emergencies, as well as representatives from the emergency services, local authorities and other local organisations.

The floods were the result of the wettest summer since records began, and were of a different scale and type to previous events – the majority being due to surface water flooding, for which no warning system was in place – with drainage systems being overwhelmed.

It could have been even worse. “The country was fortunate that the impact of the emergencies were not much more severe,” says Sir Michael. Several major disasters were only narrowly averted. For example, had Walham electricity switching station near Gloucester failed, 500,000 people would have been without power. Better protection for critical infrastructure and national communications installations is among the Review’s key interim recommendations.

Overall, the Review finds that the Government responded well to the emergencies, with effective collaboration between departments and agencies. However, Sir Michael concludes that the country was not as well prepared as it should have been. He warns that “flood risk is here to stay,” and the signs are that similar extreme events are likely, underlining the need for better preparation.

Flooding is a national issue, and the Review says the Government must take the lead in making the case for adapting to climate change, particularly in reducing the potential impacts on communities. A clear strategy and action plan should be

developed to deliver the provisions of the Climate Change Bill and support adaptation to more frequent extremes of weather. Flood legislation should be streamlined and updated to clarify responsibilities, address all sources of flooding, and reflect the modern, risk-management approach.

With around two-thirds of the floods caused by surface water, there needs to be a new emphasis on guarding against this type of flooding. Sir Michael says the Environment Agency is best placed to develop a national approach to managing surface water flood risk, including development of surface water mapping and warning tools; and it should no longer be a right of householders and businesses to lay impermeable surfaces as they wish.

Sir Michael also calls for stronger local leadership and forward planning. He found there was no clear allocation of responsibilities at the local level for assessing the possible impact of severe weather or for triggering the appropriate multi-agency response. He recommends that “upper-tier” local authorities lead the planning for weather emergencies, and that the police be responsible for co-ordinating the emergency response.

Over the next two days, Sir Michael Pitt will be visiting some of the areas most badly affected by the flooding in Yorkshire & Humberside and Gloucestershire. Then, in January, a three-month consultation period will begin. The additional evidence gathered will be fed into the recommendations of the final report, to be published next summer.

Notes for editors

1. The interim conclusions of The Pitt Review - Learning Lessons from the 2007 Floods are published today, 17 December, at 09.00, and can be viewed online at: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/thepittreview>

2. The interim report makes the following “urgent recommendations”:

REC 1 – The Review recommends that more frequent and systematic monitoring of groundwater levels at times of high risk should be undertaken by the Environment Agency, which should begin as soon as possible to predict and mitigate further serious ground water flooding from this winter onwards.

REC 2 – The Review recommends that the Environment Agency, supported by local authorities and water companies, should urgently identify areas at highest risk from

surface water flooding where known, inform Local Resilience Forums and take steps to identify remaining high risk areas over the coming months.

REC 3 – The Review recommends that the Environment Agency should urgently develop and implement a clear policy on the use of temporary and demountable defences.

REC 4 – The Review recommends that all Local Resilience Forums urgently review their current local arrangements for water rescue to consider whether they are adequate in light of the summer's events and their local community risk registers.

REC 5 – The Review recommends that all Local Resilience Forums should undertake an urgent review of designated rest centres and other major facilities to ensure either that they have the necessary levels of resilience to enable them to be used in the response to flooding and other major emergencies, or that alternative arrangements are put in place.

REC 6 – The Review recommends that the Cabinet Office, with other departments, should urgently consider the costs, benefits and feasibility of establishing arrangements for the urgent acquisition of supplies during a major emergency, including the use of call-off contracts or the creation of national or regional stockpiles of equipment and consumables.

REC 7 – The Review recommends that Department of Health guidance clarifying the role and accountabilities of organisations involved in providing scientific and technical advice during a major incident should be implemented as soon as possible and understood by Gold Commanders.

REC 8 – The Review recommends that the guidance currently under preparation by Cabinet Office to provide local responders with advice on the definition and identification of vulnerable people and on planning to support them in an emergency should be issued urgently.

REC 9 – The review recommends that, in order to effectively fulfil its Lead Department role for flood risk management and emergency response, Defra needs to urgently develop and share a national flood emergency framework.

REC 10 – The Review recommends that Category 1 responders should be urgently provided with a detailed assessment of critical infrastructure in their areas to enable them to assess its vulnerability to flooding.

REC 11 – The Review recommends that the Environment Agency should work urgently with telecommunications companies, consulting the Information Commissioner as necessary to facilitate the roll-out of 'opt-out' telephone flood warning schemes to all homes and businesses liable to flooding, including homes with ex-directory numbers.

REC 12 – The Review recommends that Local Resilience Forums urgently develop plans to enhance flood warnings through 'door-knocking' by local authorities based on an assessment of the post code areas likely to flood.

REC 13 – The Review recommends that Local Resilience Forums urgently make arrangements to involve local media representatives in the local preparedness and response to support their public information role.

REC 14 – The Review recommends that members of the public make up a flood kit – including key personal documents, insurance policy, emergency contact numbers (including local council, emergency services and Floodline – 0845 988 1188), torch, battery or wind-up radio, mobile phone, rubber gloves, wet wipes or antibacterial hand gel, first aid kit and blankets.

REC 15 – The Review recommends that members of the public increase their personal state of readiness and resilience to floods by following the Environment Agency’s practical advice, where appropriate, as summarised below:

- Make sure you have adequate insurance. Flood damage is included in most buildings insurance policies but do check your home and contents are covered;
- Access the Environment Agency’s website to check flood risks to property (this can be followed up by advice from the Environment Agency, for example whether the property in question is protected to some degree by physical defences);
- Contact the Environment Agency to be registered on their Flood Warnings Direct scheme (however, it does not apply to surface water or sewerage flooding and people should also make sure they remain alert to weather forecasts);
- Keep vital possessions, such as financial and legal documents and items of sentimental value, upstairs or stored as high as possible in waterproof containers and have plans in place to move items at short notice;
- Make a list of other useful numbers you may need – your local council, the emergency services and your Floodline quick-dial number.
- Make sure you know where to turn off your gas, electricity and water. If you are not sure, ask the person who checks your meter when they next visit. Mark the tap or switch with a sticker to help you remember.

4. The consultation period on the Interim Report recommendations will run from January to March 2008.

Consultation activities are likely to include:

- Public meetings in affected areas.
- A call for written submissions from stakeholders
- E-consultation *via* the Pitt Review web site:
<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/thepittreview.aspx>
- Practitioner Panels or Industry-Government Forums

All the information gathered during this exercise will be analysed and fed into the drafting of recommendations for the Final Report, which will be published in summer 2008.

**Issued on behalf of the Pitt Review Team by
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**For further information,
contact Simon Holder on 020 7261 8342; 078120981161;
simon.holder@gnn.gsi.gov.uk**