Dear Neil,

Thank you for your letter regarding the recent flooding in Lancashire and Cumbria. We set out the detailed answers to your questions below.

It's important to say at the start that whilst we always aim to protect the maximum number of people and properties against flooding, there is no such thing as 100% guaranteed protection against flooding. What we can and do seek to achieve is to provide the best possible standard of protection, warn and inform communities when flooding threatens, minimise the risk and extent of any flooding that does occur, and help communities recover quickly afterwards.

November 2017

On 22 and 23 November, around 350 properties flooded in Lancashire and Cumbria as a result of heavy rain across the North West. Our flood defences and operations successfully protected another 8,300 properties in the region.

The potential for disruptive rainfall was first highlighted five days in advance on Saturday 18 November. At this stage, the Flood Forecasting Centre (a partnership between the Environment Agency and the Met Office) indicated that minor impacts were possible in the north of England. This was communicated both to our professional partners through the daily Flood Guidance Statement and to the public (via the 5-day flood risk for England and Wales service on GOV.uk). This covered both river and surface water flooding.

As the event drew closer we had more detailed rainfall forecasts. On Monday 20 November, we issued a yellow Flood Guidance Statement showing that significant and minor flood impacts were forecast. We communicated this message consistently through the run-up to the flooding.

Multi-agency planning began on 20 November to respond to the potential for flooding. Meetings with emergency responders, including local authorities, were convened daily until 23 November.
We ran a proactive media campaign to all communities from Monday 20 November and maintained this throughout the period. Early on Monday 20 November 2017, the Environment Agency emailed all media outlets reminding them of where to find information about flood warnings, river levels and our response.

In our media statement on 22 November, our local spokesperson, Jim Ratcliffe, said:

"Persistent rain has now arrived over Cumbria and Northern Lancashire and will stay for the next 24 hours. This rain is falling onto already wet catchments and there is potential for some flooding later today and on Thursday. In preparation for this weather the Environment Agency has been and continues to constantly monitor rain and river levels, we have teams out clearing debris from key locations and are working closely with local organisations. We encourage people to be vigilant, sign up for flood warnings, tune in to local TV and radio stations for the latest information and check GOV.uk."

We worked with public sector communications partners, including local authorities, and relevant local resilience forums to share information. We also regularly shared images with outlets to increase the awareness and quality of coverage on flood risk.

On social media, between 19 and 23 November, our warning and informing messages were seen by over 191,000 customers, our messages signposted customers to our online resources 2,488 times and we received 419 retweets.

We contacted all community Flood Action Groups likely to be affected across Cumbria and Lancashire on 21 and 22 November before flooding started.

We updated local MPs regularly and undertook over 35 media interviews to warn and inform the public. At the peak of the incident we issued 18 flood alerts and 22 flood warnings.

The location with the most significant impacts was Galgate, south of Lancaster. The rain gauge at Lancaster University, close to Galgate, recorded the highest rainfall in the 50 years of its operation. The rainfall was higher and more intense in this catchment than in Storm Desmond in December 2015. Local residents have described this as the worst flooding they had witnessed.

Throughout the event we deployed over 300 staff and contractors to prepare and respond across Cumbria and Lancashire. In preparation we undertook additional activities, including checking our flood defence assets, clearing grids and trash screens. We operated our two flood basins in Lancashire in advance of the flooding which helped to protect over 250 homes. We deployed temporary barriers at Braithwaite in Cumbria and Tyne Green in Hexham as well as deploying 6 additional pumps. Across the country, we had staff rostered and available to prepare for and respond to the forecast rainfall. In affected communities our flood support officers were out on the ground following the flooding and attended community meetings, particularly in Galgate.

Our thoughts are with everyone who was affected by the recent flooding. Our Executive Director of Flood and Coastal Risk Management, John Curtin, met local residents in Galgate, and the CEO of Lancaster County Council, on Monday 27 November. He received positive feedback from residents about the Environment Agency’s response.

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Possible East Coast storm surge

At the time of writing, we expect a possible surge on the East Coast on Thursday and Friday (7 and 8 December). Should the situation escalate, our flood warning service will let people know where the danger is so everyone can prepare and keep families, homes and businesses safe.

Flood recovery and investment since 2015/16

Following the 2015/16 floods we completed all the necessary recovery activities, such as repairing flood defences, by the end of 2016. We have improved our response and resilience capabilities, including regularly training and exercising with the military and our contractors, and have invested in new equipment available at strategic depots ready to be moved where needed.

Over the past two years, the Environment Agency has completed more than 350 new flood schemes, protecting an additional 100,000 homes. This includes more than 16,000 in Cumbria and Lancashire, 10,000 in Yorkshire, and 9,000 in the South West – all areas hit by flooding in recent years. In addition, we are progressing flood defence schemes in Yorkshire and Cumbria following the extra investment announced in the 2016 Budget and Autumn Statement.

I hope this addresses the Committee’s concerns. If you have any further questions please contact my office.

Very best wishes,

Emma Howard Boyd

Chair