
Written Ministerial Statement

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Environment

Extreme Rainfall: Help for Householders

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Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):

Members will be aware that the exceptionally heavy rainfall since last Sunday has led to many homes being flooded in different parts of Northern Ireland and presented major challenges for not only the local people who have been affected but also the numerous agencies that have come to their rescue.

We are still, to some extent, in a response and recovery phase and trying to collate information, as a result of the significant adverse weather and rainfall. However, I wish to update Members and draw their attention to the action taken by DOE and District Councils to date.

I was in Beragh, near Omagh, yesterday where the river burst its banks and left people trapped in their homes. Eighteen people, including children, had to be rescued by boat from flooded houses and brought to safety by the Fire and Rescue Service. Their homes have been badly damaged by flood water. This was a terrible scene to witness and it is likely to take many months to repair these houses, leaving residents struggling and having to live in temporary alternative accommodation.

I also visited the local gaelic club 'Red Knights' to inspect the severely damaged club premises which are some of the best in the land and have been flood damaged for the second time in four years. The damage to homes and community facilities is severe not least in a town which needs homes and community facilities. Following my visit to Beragh, I spoke to Minister Kennedy and Minister O'Neill. I gave them an assessment of the situation and my judgement beyond

immediate support for individual householders and local councils. There is an urgent need for short term mitigation of the risk and an immediate term solution to the flooding threat.

As a result of this case and many other flooded homes, I have taken the decision, along with the Department of Finance and Personnel, to make emergency funds available to local councils to help those affected by the recent floods. Councils can offer a range of practical help and guidance, including collection, retention and disposal of damaged household contents, assistance in making arrangements to clean up homes and gardens and by providing dehumidifiers to dry out homes.

It is also important that the Executive demonstrates that it wants to help those most severely affected to get them back on their feet again and to assist them in ensuring their homes are habitable. Therefore, in addition to receiving practical help from councils, individual householders who suffer severe inconvenience as a direct result of the floods will be eligible for a £1,000 payment. This is intended to help alleviate immediate hardship; it is not a compensation payment.

The Department will be writing to Local Government Chief Executives to confirm that I have activated the "Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance to District Councils". Working with and through Councils, the aim of this scheme is to ensure that practical and financial help is delivered where most needed as quickly as possible.

The Department will reimburse Councils for expenditure incurred as a result of taking immediate action following this emergency situation. Expenditure deemed eligible will be categorised under one or more of the following headings:

- i Payments to Individual Householders;

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- ii Direct Costs Incurred by Councils; and
 - iii Services Contracted out (indirect costs).

Individual householders can apply for payments where there is evidence of significant flooding of homes, damage to septic tanks caused by flooding, damage to oil tanks, resulting in non operation of heating systems, flooding of garages/utility areas where household utilities are installed and for apartments where there is evidence of flooding of basements containing storage rooms and also the flooding of caravans where these are the main place of residence.

Householders eligible for payment must produce evidence that the property for which assistance is being claimed is their main place of residence. They must notify District Councils within 21 calendar days of the last recorded date of the flooding incident and allow for their home to be inspected by a senior official such as an Environmental Health Officer who can obtain evidence that complies with the Scheme.

As I have mentioned, Councils will be entitled to financial assistance where it has incurred direct or indirect costs helping people make their homes habitable. Councils have knowledge of the processes, having unfortunately been in this situation before, and I have every confidence that they will expedite the Scheme to ensure payments are provided to those in hardship soon.

It is appropriate that I acknowledge the work of the councils in regard to the flooding, particularly their emergency planning officers and direct labour force who have been working around the clock since last Sunday when it became apparent that local people were in difficulty from the extreme rainfall.

Key to the ongoing successful management of the emergency response and recovery has been the co-ordination protocols led by the Local Government Emergency Management Group supported by Belfast City Council's Emergency Planning Staff.

In addition, I commend the work of all the responding agencies that have played a significant role in providing emergency assistance to the Northern Ireland public affected by this exceptional weather.

Whilst the weather situation is improving over the next few days, the effects will be around for weeks and months to come and it was only right, as a locally elected administration, we

moved in a way to help local people when they needed it most.

Once again I am grateful for all those agencies involved. I will continue to monitor the situation with my officials and work through the local government structures to ensure people and communities are effectively assisted during this weather emergency.