

# 2024 Storm Response Inquiry

## Engagement Findings

March 2024



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# 1. Engagement Summary

The following engagement summary offers an overview of the engagement programme design, delivery, and key findings.

## Background

1. The Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee is reviewing several key areas of the 2024 winter storm response, including the adequacy of preparation, forecasting, and alert systems, as well as the resilience of critical infrastructure like water, sewerage, electricity, and transport networks to storm impacts such as flooding and landslides.
2. The Committee sought to hear directly from those impacted by the recent winter storms. To facilitate this, the Citizen Engagement Team conducted interviews with individuals from communities across Wales who were affected by either or both Storms Bert and Daragh.

## Objectives

3. The engagement programmed focused on the following terms of reference in relation to the inquiry:
  - **Alerts and forecasting:** whether preparation, forecasting, warning, and alert systems were adequate.
  - **Infrastructure resilience:** the resilience of water and sewerage systems, electricity distribution infrastructure, and transport networks to storm impacts, including flooding landslips, culvert damage and sinkhole formation.
  - **Community impact:** the role of landowners, community groups, and third sector organisations.
  - **The response of public and private authorities.**
4. The objective of the interviews was to gather firsthand insights and experiences from individuals directly affected by the recent winter storms. This

aimed to better understand the impact of Storms Bert and Daragh on communities across Wales, and to identify key challenges, needs, and areas for improvement in storm response and preparedness.

## **Methodology**

- 5.** The engagement comprised of eight telephone interviews with participants.
- 6.** Interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights from individuals who live in communities directly impacted by storms Bert and Darragh. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the nuanced impacts on communities across Wales and allowed participants to share their personal stories and perspectives.
- 7.** Interviews also allowed for detailed qualitative data to be captured that highlighted the emotional, social, and economic consequences of the storms. By engaging with individuals from diverse backgrounds, the interviews provided a rich variety of experiences and viewpoints, helping to identify common themes as well as unique challenges faced by different communities.
- 8.** Additionally, the interviews facilitated a better understanding of local responses to the storms, including coping mechanisms, community resilience, and the effectiveness of emergency services and recovery efforts. Overall, this qualitative approach contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term effects of the storms on individuals and communities in Wales.

## **Participants**

- 9.** Contributions were made by members of storm affected communities in Carmarthenshire, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Powys and Wrexham.
- 10.** Participants were recruited from a wide variety of sources to ensure diversity in perspectives and include vulnerable residents, business owners, home owners and a sports club administrator.

## **Ethical Considerations**

- 11.** All methods used in this project adhered to the standards set out in the Market Research Society Code of Conduct and complied with relevant data protection and safeguarding legislation to ensure the ethical treatment and privacy of all participants.

## Key Findings

- 12.** Participants highlighted the ineffectiveness of some alert systems or communication channels, and showed concerns about the generalised nature of warnings.
- 13.** Infrastructure vulnerabilities are also a significant concern, with mentions of ineffective storm defences and the need for more resilient infrastructure. Additionally, there are challenges with preparedness and response from authorities, with some participants feeling abandoned by local councils and emergency services. This has added to the psychological and emotional toll of storms, with some participants highlighting the mental and emotional distress experienced.
- 14.** The financial impact and recovery challenges are also emphasised, with long-term financial strain and disparities in support between storms and between residents and businesses.
- 15.** Lastly, participants expressed a desire for long-term resilience planning, with calls for better preparedness strategies to address future climate risk.

Thank you to all the participants who contributed to the engagement findings.

## 2. Engagement Findings

This section outlines the key themes, views, and solutions expressed by the people interviewed.

### Ineffective alert systems and communications

**16.** Many participants mentioned that warnings they received were often too general and untimely, failing to effectively reach those who needed them.

**17.** Those affected most by flooding feel that the warnings, particularly flood alerts, are too often generalised and do not cater to specific geographic locations, which makes it difficult to anticipate when to take action. For example, one participant noted that they regularly receive notifications of flooding which cover the whole of Powys, which often doesn't affect them directly. This therefore leads to a lack of trust in the alert system.

*"We get regular warnings which often don't even affect us. We get warnings for the whole of Powys. If I took notice of every time it went off, I'd never be opening my shop."*

**18.** It was also remarked by some participants that they felt let down by the flood alert systems which they were promised had been improved since the "failings" of Storm Dennis in 2019. Having been told that "fantastic things had been put in place" since this storm, they were disappointed to have encountered the same challenges, such as delayed alerts and inadequate support.

*"We have a National Resources Wales (alert), which is your yellow warning which goes off at two meters. I have to be honest when you flood at five metres you don't take much notice of it".*

**19.** Participants also highlighted the disparity they experienced in the alert and warning systems of storms Bert and Darragh. Those impacted by storm Bert noted that the warnings for Storm Darragh were clearer and issued in a timelier manner, therefore enabling the possibility of more effective preparation in advance. This was despite Storm Bert causing significant damage to areas such as Rhondda Cynon Taff.

*“No, we didn’t receive a warning about the storm (Bert). I know it’s difficult to predict a landslide, but it was a lot worse than the storm that came afterwards (Storm Daragh). There was a lot more warning about Storm Darragh than Storm Bert”.*

**20.** Some individuals who experienced damage during Storm Darragh felt that the alert system effectively notified them of the storm's arrival, and the extensive news coverage kept them informed. However, others pointed out that despite receiving the warnings, the system did not provide sufficient lead time for them to prepare adequately for the severity of the storm, leaving them with little time to act before the storm hit.

*“We got the warning, and we were worried, but we didn’t have much time to prepare. We weren’t able to prepare much. We weren’t expecting it to be so bad and that we’d lose power.”*

## **Community support and resilience**

**21.** Across interviews, there is a strong theme of community support, where neighbours and local groups played a crucial role in helping one another. Many noted that a strong sense of community resilience was vital in helping people cope with the immediate aftermath of the storms and in the longer-term recovery process.

*“It’s only through crisis that you come together as a community.”*

**22.** Where there was a lack of official support during and after the storms, participants noted that it was their communities who came together to provide assistance to one another, especially to more vulnerable individuals.

*“The community certainly are the ones who helped us the most. The tractors took us from our house to the village pub. Within half an hour the pub was full. People had brought us clothes and toys for the children. A local company who owns the house we are now living in. They came down with keys for the house. Local people and tractors and diggers were out helping clear the mess.*

*We would have been lost without our community.”*

**23.** Elderly community members in particular relied heavily on local support during the storms. One interviewee for example noted that their neighbours were able to provide them with lamps and lanterns after they lost power during Storm Darragh. Their reliance on neighbours and community members was emphasized due to the inability of carers to reach them due to the storm's impact.

*"Our neighbours had to come over to us with lamps and lanterns to provide light in the evenings. We had a lamp and torch. Without that we would have had no light at all.*

*All our neighbours came together to help each other."*

**24.** Community networks, including WhatsApp groups and social media sites, were highlighted as a key source of information sharing, communication and support. Where communication from official channels or authorities was lacking, it was through these communication channels that residents and business owners received information.

*"We're just here helping each other."*

*"The roads were all blocked around us, but it was the farmers who went out in their tractors to help clear roads. They were ready and prepared to help."*

*"If it wasn't for the guys in the street and family we wouldn't have had hope in hell chance. It would have gotten in the house long before. We kept it (the water) away for as long as we could."*

### **Infrastructure vulnerabilities:**

**25.** Across interviews, many participants noted the lack of infrastructure resilience, mentioning the ineffectiveness of current storm defences. Those affected by flooding in Storm Bert for example, highlighted the weakness of flood

barriers, as well as the council provided floodgate and sandbags that did not function as expected.

*“Our neighbour had started to put his flood gates on, and they had used sandbags which they were given. They are inflatable bags which are supposed to act as proper sandbags in water. Except they floated away. You could see them floating around in the water.*

*The water broke through the floodgates. I question the suitability of them and still haven't had a response from the council on this.”*

**26.** One participant noted that their street was flooded from within the flood barrier due to an ineffective storm drainage system, which creates further challenges when the area encounters heavy rain.

*“The problem you have is, when the river reaches four meters the pipe becomes blocked and there's nowhere for the water to go. So, we get flooded from inside the barrier. The water comes up through the drains.”*

**27.** Other participants noted the adverse effects of losing power for a significant amount of time during Storm Darragh. One interviewee described being left without power for “six or seven days”, whilst another elderly participant described being without electricity for two days.

*“What we were worried about was the stairlift. We didn't know if it would work. We worried that the (backup) battery would run out. We would go downstairs first thing in the morning and upstairs last thing in the evening.*

*The electricity company provided food for the village. They brought a chip van from Manchester. But they didn't tell us that was happening – we heard from neighbours who got us food. We didn't have any warning or notice about when the power was coming back – we didn't know when it would return at all.”*

**28.** One participant from a rural area described how Storm Darragh damaged the local mobile phone mast, causing the entire community to lose phone signal for over a week. Along with power outages, this made communication extremely

difficult and worsened the lack of landlines, leaving residents feeling isolated and frustrated. Access to phone signal was crucial for receiving information and support through online community WhatsApp groups and mobile phone messages.

*“There’s no way of reporting that the mobile phone mast isn’t working. They will say they know it’s not working but there seemed to be very little urgency in coming to get the mobile signal working again.”*

## Challenges with preparedness and response from authorities

**29.** Interviews revealed a disparity in the support provided by local authorities. While some participants felt “abandoned” by officials, which hindered their ability to recover from the storm's impact, others believed that local authorities responded quickly and effectively.

*“I’ve reached out to the local council and feels like no one cares. I’ve been looking for help in any way shape or form. The response was not helpful. The response was ‘we’ll see what we can do’ and haven’t heard anything.”*

*“The word is abandonment”.*

**30.** Multiple interviews reflect on how inadequate preparedness and slow responses to the storms hindered recovery. Those affected by flooding during Storm Bert in particular, felt that they had been left to manage the short- and long-term impacts of the storm damage alone. They felt that there “could have been more help” from authorities.

*“The first time I saw someone from the council was about 11 o clock and I spoke to him. I asked is there any chance you can help us clear the water? He said no. He’d just come to have a look to report back. Couldn’t talk to us about sandbags or any other help. I said we needed help, and he said we had to wait until the river levels dropped.”*

*They were claiming they (council) were overwhelmed and said they weren't anticipating the bad weather. But I know there was going to be bad weather because they'd cancelled all the rugby fixtures that I organise. I think they're being disingenuous. It's not good enough.*

*It took over a week before they tried to clear the drains. All the muck is still down the bottom of the street now."*

**31.** Despite assurances from local authorities that lessons had been learned from Storm Dennis, many flood-affected participants expressed frustration that local authorities and emergency services were still unprepared to support residents during the storms. For instance, one local authority established a 24/7 emergency flood hotline to provide support and advice. However, the line became overwhelmed with calls during the storm, preventing participants from reaching assistance. One resident who eventually got through was informed that the local authority had been cut off from the depot storing sandbags and was instead advised to "purchase sand from B&Q" and fill pillowcases to create their own makeshift flood defences. This created frustration amongst residents who felt isolated in their attempts to protect their homes and did not know if "anyone was going to come help or do anything."

*"If we're going to be abandoned at least we can get on and make our own informed decisions. We know that if no one else is going to come then we can get on with it."*

*"I was told after Storm Dennis that they were going to try and set up a flood warning scheme. Like a neighbourhood watch but you'd have a central flood warning person who could assess the situation and be in contact with the council maybe, and help prepare people more. That never came of anything.*

**32.** Some participants also expressed frustration with the response and involvement of the emergency services. One participant was stranded in a house affected by a landslide in Storm Bert and was told by the fire service they would have to wait four to five hours to receive assistance. Despite repeated calls, "they

still didn't come". They did however appreciate the kindness of police officers who visited them with toys they had collected for the children personally.

*"I don't think they realised how bad it was. My sister was calling them and once they heard everyone in the house was safe, I don't think they felt it was urgent. But it was because we couldn't get out of the house. They came after an hour in the end. Then they couldn't get us out because of the water. It was the tractors that took us out of there."*

**33.** Another participant was surprised that police officers did not step in to help them during the storm's impact.

*"By 9:30 we were about thigh deep in flood water because we were trying to keep an eye on the river. A police van turned up, stopped, put the van in reverse and drove away. Didn't stop. We were all in the street - they could see it. Our reaction was to laugh rather than to turn around and get angry. Just shows we can't get any help from anyone. And that's that."*

**34.** There were however some participants who hadn't directly tried to engage with the council, but felt that their local authority were "prepared and ready" and that "as soon as the storm happened, they were out and about clearing roads."

## **Disparity in support**

**35.** One interviewee also noted the disparity in support between floods and how they felt that they weren't receiving consistent support each time their business was affected. For example, the participant struggled to dispose of the waste created by the storm damage due to the fees of commercial waste disposal sites.

*"In the first flood, I was given support to get into the dump free to get rid of waste. This time there was none of that. There's inconsistency in support between floods."*

**36.** A sense of unfairness is echoed in the broader discussions around both storm's recovery and support processes, with people feeling that some groups or areas received more attention than others during recovery efforts.

**37.** Some participants, as residents, felt they received an unequal distribution of resources and support compared to the businesses affected in their area. One interviewee felt that the council was more “focused on business recovery”, getting high streets looking “beautiful” again.

**38.** One participant also mentioned that big businesses who were affected by Storm Bert were able to bring in external help, which allowed them to reopen more easily. In contrast, their smaller, independent business took longer to recover from flooding impact due to a lack of external support.

*“The big businesses around here were able to get outside firms in to deal with it and could reopen when they were ready. Whereas with me, I was left to deal with it all on my own. It was just my family helping out.*

*People were supportive online, but nobody came to help in person. I can't say they weren't supportive, but I didn't see much of it in action.”*

## **Financial impact and recovery challenges**

**39.** Several interviews mentioned the financial strain caused by storm damage, including damage to property, sports equipment and loss of earnings.

*“I lost about 20% this time of what I ran out of time to save. Everything I pay out of my own pocket, and I've estimated I've lost £15,000 in terms of stock loss, loss of earnings and cleaning etc. This time round had to get an electrician in to rewire everything. That's a big cost I had to find. The main thing for me is not the actual flooding that's the annoyance - it's the weeks and months afterwards trying to get the shop back together. That's the biggest impact - having to close to clean up.*

**40.** One interviewee emphasized the urgent need for accessible recovery funding, noting the significant positive impact that receiving financial assistance had on their ability to promptly and effectively repair damaged sports equipment and storage following Storm Darragh. With support from a grant by Sports Wales and contributions through a GoFundMe campaign, their sports club was able to recover the financial losses incurred. However, they also expressed

disappointment at the lack of financial support from their national affiliated clubs, despite their members paying an annual membership fee.

*“We heard about the (Sports Wales) grant and put a bid in.... it was quick, effective and settled very quickly. I was not expecting the full amount. Without the grant we would have been scrabbling around to find extra storage. Can’t say thank you enough to Sport Wales.”*

- 41.** Another participant was very pleased to have received a surprise cheque for £640 for disrupted electricity service in their area which they “weren’t expecting at all.”
- 42.** Some interviewees affected by flooding also received financial aid from the local authority but claimed that £1,000 “doesn’t scratch the surface” when it comes to damage repair.
- 43.** Those participants who have been repeatedly affected by flooding because of storms also stressed the financial implications on their ability to sell property, affecting their ability to recover financially.

## **Psychological and emotional toll**

- 44.** Several participants spoke about the emotional toll caused by the storm damage they endured. Multiple interviewees highlighted the ongoing challenges posed by repeated flooding, particularly the strain it places on both businesses and residents. They described the mental burden of coping with the aftermath of the damage and the persistent uncertainty surrounding extreme weather events, especially for those who face these disruptions time and again.
- 45.** One participant stressed the toll the flood damage from Storm Bert had on them, and their partner’s, mental health. They emphasized the need for better mental health support for those whose homes are repeatedly damaged.
- 46.** Two participants also described the emotional distress felt by their children because of the storm impact and damage.

*“My little boy was crying his heart out. My eldest boy was very distressed after Storm Dennis because he lost all his toys. They don’t understand – they don’t know if they’re going to have to leave the house.”*

*“To start with (after the storm), even putting the kettle on frightened them. My middle child who’s six was in the kitchen when the wall came down so she’s been really frightened. They still don’t like being in rooms by themselves.”*

## **Need for long-term resilience planning**

**47.** Several interviewees stressed the importance of long-term planning to prepare for future storms to address the issues raised during Storms Dennis, Bert, and Darragh. This includes improving physical infrastructure as well as strengthening community resilience. Several participants noted their concern around the uncertainty of the response and support that will be available to them in the future.

*“I’ve noticed in the three times I’ve been flooded the water has gotten higher each time. It’s definitely getting worse. The water is getting higher and higher every time we get flooded. They used to dredge the river every year. Prior to the first flood there hadn’t been a flood in 35 years and they’ve stopped dreading the river. Is there anything else that can be done to stop flooding? Raising banks, fortifications. I don’t feel anyone’s looking at it.”*

**48.** One participant stressed the need for overhead cables to be placed underground to avoid the risk of power outages and highlighted the importance of ensuring infrastructure is adapted for more extreme weather.

*“We had huge areas without electricity because we’ve got the cables overhead on poles. As we see more and more weather as a result of the climate crisis, we need to be thinking about cables underground. That will be far more beneficial as we get more and more storms.”*

**49.** This participant also emphasised the need to build community resilience to better equip businesses and residents with the knowledge and understanding of how to handle more extreme weather. “Spreading more information about who the right people to contact are” is one way of ensuring better preparedness strategies that account for worsening climate conditions

*"It made me realise that we need to be much more resilient....The way I see it - as the climate catastrophe gets worse, we're going to have to rely more on each other and less on the council because it's going to be too big a problem for local authorities or the Senedd to deal with. So, we need to have built community hubs to deal with it and to know who the right people are who can help. I don't know how you build community resilience, but we need to be more prepared - not sure how we do that. Maybe build community hubs."*

### 3. Solutions

In this section, we present a collection of ideas suggested by participants during the engagement sessions. These ideas represent diverse perspectives aimed at improving the current situation.

**50.** The following ways forward were proposed by participants as potential pathways for positive change and are shared here to inspire further dialogue and consideration regarding future storm responses:

- 1. Targeted flood alerts and improved communication:** Flood alerts should focus on specific areas for greater relevance, while enhanced communication systems ensure timely, localized information reaches those in need. There is also a need for prompt warnings and effective dissemination of support service details during severe storms.
- 2. Empower communities:** Participants felt the need for increased community resilience so that they can take an active role in storm recovery. This includes encouraging and supporting community networks for mutual aid and preparedness by ensuring that people know who to turn to for help and support.
- 3. Streamline and equalize support:** Ensure that there is equal support provided to all areas affected to guarantee fairness in the recovery efforts of both residents and businesses.
- 4. Invest in resilient infrastructure** to minimize damage from future storms. This includes dredging rivers, moving overhead cables underground and protecting phone masts.
- 5. Better support from local authorities:** There was a call for better assistance from the community and local council, especially in waste disposal and post-flood recovery efforts.
- 6. Ensure better preparedness and coordination of emergency services** to respond effectively.
- 7. Develop long-term resilience planning** to address future climate risks.

## Annex 1 : Interview questions

The following questions served as a flexible guide for the focus groups and interviews.

### 1. Preparation, Forecasting, Warning, and Alert Systems

- Before the storm, did you receive any warnings or alerts from local authorities or other sources? How clear and timely was the information you received?
- How well do you think the preparation and forecasting systems worked for this storm? Were they adequate to help you take the right actions in advance?
- In hindsight, is there anything about the warning and alert system that could have been improved to make you feel more prepared?

### 2. Resilience of Infrastructure

- What infrastructure (e.g., water, sewage, electricity, roads) in your area was most affected by the storm? Were there any services that were disrupted for an extended period?
- How well did the local infrastructure hold up against the storm's impacts? Were there specific weaknesses (like flooding or landslips) that made it harder to recover?
- How did damage to infrastructure (such as sinkholes, culverts, or damaged roads) impact your daily life and mobility during and after the storm?
- Did you face any major challenges due to the loss of utilities (like power or water) after the storm? How long did it take to restore these services, and how did this affect your community?

### 3. Impact on Communities and the Role of Landowners, Community Groups, and Third-Sector Organisations

- How did the storm impact your community as a whole? Were there specific groups (elderly, families, low-income households) that seemed more vulnerable or affected?

- What were the short- and long-term impacts of the storms?
- Were there any private organizations (e.g., businesses, landowners) that played a role in supporting your community during or after the storm? How did they contribute to the recovery process?
- Did you see any support or assistance from community groups (e.g., local volunteer groups, neighbourhood associations) during the storm or in the recovery phase? How helpful was this support?
- How did third-sector organizations (for example, charities) help your community during the storm or in the aftermath? Did you receive any direct aid from these organisations?
- Looking back, were there any gaps in community support or services that you feel should have been addressed? How could landowners, community groups, or third-sector organizations have been more effective?
- Were there any efforts made to rebuild or support those who suffered the most from the storm? How did the community come together to recover?