


EVIDENCE FOR THE SHORT INQUIRY ON THE
IMPACT OF STORMS BERT AND DARRAGH –
SUBMITTED BY HELEDD FYCHAN MS, PLAID
CYMRU SENEDD MEMBER FOR SOUTH
WALES CENTRAL



When Storm Dennis hit communities across Wales in 2020, I was a Councillor for Pontypridd Town ward. Both homes and businesses suffered devastating flooding, and along with colleagues, community activists, voluntary groups, business owners, staff and councillors from the local authority and town and community councils, I was part of an emergency response providing both practical and emotional support to many.

Seeing first-hand the devastation and trauma led to submit a petition calling on the Welsh Government to instigate an Independent Inquiry into the floods. This received over 6,000 signatures, was debated a number of times in the Senedd but was ultimately rejected. As part of the Cooperation Agreement Professor Elwen Evans KQ was commissioned to undertake a Review of Local Government Section 19 and Natural Resources Wales' reports into extreme flooding in Wales, 2020-21. This was published on August 31st 2023: [Review of Local Government Section 19 and Natural Resources Wales' reports into extreme flooding in Wales, 2020-21](#)

Since being elected to the Senedd in 2021, I have conducted and commissioned research into the impact of Storm Dennis on the communities I represent and have helped many communities in their fights for answers, justice and solutions. Following Storm Bert in November 2024, I have also surveyed the communities affected and on 15 February 2025, held an event in Pontypridd which brought together those impacted by flooding as well as representatives from Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, Natural Resources Wales, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, the National Infrastructure Commission for Wales and the British Red Cross. This work has helped inform the comments submitted for this short inquiry.

Before responding to each of the points you're considering in detail, I would like to offer some personal reflections having been closely involved in this work for the past 5 years.

We need a consistent and national approach to flooding, that involves the communities affected.

When flooding is possible, or after flooding has occurred, it is difficult for residents who are at risk to access support. Amongst the issues raised with me are:

- Residents are passed from agency to agency when they try to seek support or try to seek answers about why flooding has occurred. Agencies often say that they are not responsible for the issue raised, which may be the case. But to residents who are already traumatised by flooding it can seem that agencies are more interested in blaming one another rather than addressing the issues and concerns raised.
- Sandbags are often difficult to obtain, often arriving after flooding has occurred
- Flood prevention measures such as flood gates seem to be randomly allocated. On some streets that were flooded in 2020, some residents were provided with flood prevention measures, others were denied despite all being flooded by the same event. In the case of Storm Bert, the flood gates stopped some properties

being flooded whilst properties that were denied gates were flooded. Three months on, residents who were previously denied flood gates are still trying to find out how they can apply. Due to the constraints placed on NRW's ability to provide floodgates (they require eligibility assessments) the Local Authority in RCT have now agreed that they will provide basic flood gates on request.

- There needs to be a Welsh flood forum, to work with communities at risk of flooding to develop emergency plans and establish flood action groups. Areas where the National Flood Forum has been commissioned to work with residents has led to greater preparedness for flooding. Further evidence to support this is provided below and illustrated in the work being undertaken in Clydach Terrace in Ynysybwl.
- Natural Resources Wales don't seem to have the resources required to do what's needed to cope with the increased risk of flooding as a result of more extreme and unpredictable weather. Modelling work is taking far too long, and processes are extremely bureaucratic.
- We need a whole community approach to flood prevention and flood alleviation, including building resilience. Taking Pontypridd town centre as an example – grants are available for individual businesses to apply for flood prevention measures. A better approach would be to commission a study of what would work for a whole street at a time or even the town as a whole and present a plan to businesses whereby all must sign up to if they are to receive support. This would require pooling small grants into larger grants
- An innovative approach to insurance for both homes and businesses which are at risk of flooding is a must, and a government scheme considered. FloodRE – whilst a help to some homeowners – does not help all, and if people are not insured, it can lead to people living in damp properties which then impacts on their long-term health. There are even more challenges with business getting insurance which leads to small businesses losing everything during a flood.
- Not enough emotional and psychological support is available for communities that have to live with the risk of flooding. The impact on residents of all ages is profound, with many displaying symptoms which are consistent with PTSD. This then has an impact on NHS services, and our economy, as some residents cite missing work because of anxiety whenever it rains heavily and taking psychiatric medications to live with the ongoing stress and depression caused by the effects of previous floods and the fear of future flooding.
- The Section 19 process does not work as a means to identify future improvements and finding solutions for flooding challenges. This needs to be

changed as a matter of urgency. Whilst the focus of the Local lead Flood Authority is taken up with investigations for compiling the Section 19 reports and the flood review reports they are not able to prioritise the solutions and improvements that need to be done in partnership across the Flood Authorities. There is no evidence that Professor Elwen Evans KC's report has been taken forward.

This leads me to conclude that not enough lessons have been learnt following previous winter storms, and that progress in learning those lessons is not happening quickly enough. Whilst we wait for this work to take place – and for the government to decide who will lead this work – communities live in fear every time it rains heavily, or a storm warning is announced. This is not good enough, and I hope the short inquiry will prompt the action that's so desperately needed.

In response to the specific questions raised by the Committee I refer you to comments made by residents and business owners in a recent survey I undertook and in comments made directly to me.

- **Whether preparation, forecasting, warning, and alert systems were adequate.**

Many of the people I have spoken with reported that they did not receive flood warnings in time both for Storm Dennis and Storm Bert. NRW have confirmed that the speed of the rivers rising was surprising and this meant they did not issue the alerts in time to give local people adequate warning and for services to be on the ground in time to help people. I am told that the threshold for triggering an alert has since been adapted.

People told me:

“Council would not answer the phone when rang for sandbags. Alert received too late”

“A quicker response in the event of a flood from local authorities would be helpful. Our sandbags arrived 2 weeks after the flood from the storm”

“Our flood warning came one hours before we flooded”

“I think if sandbags came earlier and drains were cleared away we may not have had any flood into house”

“Received a message at 6.18am on the day of the flood. It was too late as water had already entered the property....We have 2 children and I am pregnant so it was extremely difficult trying to save furniture when water was entering the property”

“By that time (receiving the warning) it was too late. We managed to save a few possessions but within 20 minutes we were being told to leave our home and the water had reached the driveway”

“We have less trust in the authorities as they only came when it was too late. We called the emergency services and they said they had too many people to help”

“Why didn’t the rising river cause an alert during Storm Bert”

“We had a warning but it wasn’t until 12 midday when the water was already in”

The resilience of infrastructure such as water and sewerage systems, electricity distribution infrastructure, and transport networks to storm impacts, including flooding landslips, culvert damage and sinkhole formation.

As we have seen from past experience, the main focus of the investigations reports following flooding is to ascertain whether each Flood Risk Authority’s infrastructure worked as planned.

However, working as planned means to reach a certain threshold – e.g. the culvert or wall must reach the standard of 1:100 year storm of 1:200 year storm etc.

Therefore, when a storm is deemed to be of greater strength and rainfall than this standard the infrastructure was not expected to operate efficiently, and this is how the issue is reported. These standards need to be revised to take account of Climate Change and the fact that what was once a 1:200 year event is now being seen every 5 - 10 years and may indeed be even more frequent in the future.

Measuring the success of culverts, walls and other flood defences and buildings by out-of-date standards is not going to lead to a rise in the standards we need to see to make communities resilient.

It is recognised that the drainage system in many of our towns and villages is very old and continues to allow combined water/sewage waste when there is heavy rainfall. Despite the placing of a new SUDS system for part of Pontypridd town centre after Storm Dennis it is unclear whether this had any impact at all as the wastewater pipe was exiting under the level of the river and was unable to leave the area.

The impact on communities, and the role of landowners, community groups, and third sector organisations.

During Storm Dennis in 2020, I reported about the incredible way a network of volunteers from local churches, councillors, members of the public, cleaning companies, security companies and many others that came together to organise a community wide response that did whatever needed to be done to support people who had been flooded.

They supplied mobs, buckets, cleaning products, access to IT, food vouchers, clothes and shoes, food and meals, people who went into homes to clean and remove damaged items.

The Local Authority were involved in dealing with the damage to infrastructure, and were also seen to be active in supporting people with housing issues. They also distributed grants to people, and after a couple of weeks they started to work closer with the networks of volunteers and stored equipment and food for distribution.

Sadly, we were still in touch with families in 2022 who were not back in their homes following this flood or who were still experiencing distress and ongoing mental and physical health challenges.

My previous reports have detailed how communities felt lost and forgotten about. They did not have a plan in place on what should happen if their street flooded, they did not know who would come to help and who would do what, they did not know who to contact for different problems and when they did contact agencies – they often could not get through.

During the Storms in 2024, the presence of a network of volunteers (largely the same people who came together in 2020) was revived and were yet again able to offer practical support for those who were flooded. The degree of cooperation with the Local Authority and with the town council in Pontypridd was more evident and the response was quicker and better than during 2020, though it must be noted too that less homes and businesses were impacted. Skips appeared on streets for the clean-up much quicker, there were more local authority staff around, visibly door knocking and there was some partnership working with the new British Red Cross team locally who are able to respond across RCT with 2 teams of volunteers deployed. They were able to support 52 households and gave out around £8,400 in cash-based assistance.

What is still missing is the joint understanding between all those involved in flood response and flood management on what is everyone's role and how the community knows what will happen in a flood event. There is lack of joined up planning and working, which is something that does work in other areas that have taken considerable steps to tackle the threat and impact of flooding.

There is a significant disconnect between the statutory flood risk agencies and the local communities, volunteers, local businesses that are suffering and are at risk. There is a lack of awareness amongst the public of what the emergency plan is for their area, what help they can expect and when that help will come.

The failure to not engage at risk communities about flooding must be addressed. They are the people who are obsessively watching river gauges in their area, they are staying awake when the rainfall is heavy, they are alert and ready to knock their neighbours doors at any hour of day or night. They are the ones who will knock on the door of elderly neighbours, offer to move their furniture or move their car. However, they are not routinely part of the planning process and hence feel forgotten about and resentful towards authorities.

Local people's observations and experiences often offer answers and solutions as well. Both Local Authorities and NRW rely heavily on testimonials and pictures and videos

given by flooded people for their reports. Yet they are not given an opportunity to formally be part of planning for flooding and planning for flood alleviation measures. Also they are often not aware of whether or not any flood alleviation works are being done that could benefit their community unless it is some visible infrastructure project.

Whether the relevant organisations have learnt lessons following previous winter storms, particularly Storm Dennis in 2020, and how these lessons inform the current approach.

Following the event I organised on 15 February 2025(see above) I asked attendees to share what concerns they still had after hearing presentations from RCT Council, NRW, Dŵr Cymru, NICW and the British Red Cross.

I am aware that all of the agencies mentioned can show evidence of lessons learned and progress made and this is welcomed. However rather than speculating on this I would like to share comments made by resident and business owners directly to me.

“What has been spent or done so far to alleviate flooding?”

“What areas of flood protection is planned for the future?”

“What specifically has been done in the last 5 years to protect residents of Sion Street?”

“....we were told that money had been allocated to provide flood prevention equipment, including non return valves for drains. What has this never happened”

“More water is coming down from the mountain due to vegetation removal and expansion of the quarry – what’s been done about this?”

“Why hasn’t the drainage system been updated?”

Using the case studies of Storms Bert and Daragh to gain an overarching view of the current storm preparation and response framework in Wales and identifying any gaps.

Understanding and Supporting the Psychological Impact

This area is one of the clearest gaps that I have encountered and where I have seen least progress over the past 5 years.

Recently the Ynysbwl community council provided funding to enable a group of residents in Clydach terrace¹ to have time with a psychotherapist due to the ongoing

¹ Natural Resources Wales (NRW) says the community of Clydach Terrace has a unique flood risk due to its position. When it floods, it does so quickly and to a great depth, which means there is a risk to life. There are currently no flood defences in Ynysbwl.

The Welsh Government has instructed Natural Resources Wales to undertake a full Business Case process to manage the risks for residents in Clydach Terrace - which will conclude in 2029.

psychological impacts they are facing in this community as a direct result of flooding.
(For further details on Clydach Terrace see Appendix 1)

The conclusions of the therapist was alarming and needs to be heeded and recognised.

I was told that the community had experience two extremely difficult floodings, during which they feared for their lives. Though there was no fatality reported, they reported near misses that could have led to life threatening injuries.

(the residents) ***had subsequently developed symptoms that I would class as symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, including:***

They were now becoming hypervigilant towards any adverse weathers, to the extend that their lives had been disrupted significantly when there was a severe weather forecasted.

They had also internally avoid remembering the events as well as feeling detached from their houses, describing their house no longer felt like homes.

They had intrusive memories and rumination of what happened.....

They also reported changes of personality, some becoming anxious, reporting low mood as well as having further physical health issues associated with stress and mood disorder. These symptoms have lasted for years.

This professional psychotherapist is of the opinion that the seriousness of the situation, should be considered as a public health issue due to the prevalence and scale of the impact.

When meeting people flooded during Storm Bert, residents told me:

“I had to move out for 9 months. It’s traumatic to have to do the same again. Many tears and our nerves are on edge every time we get rain”

“My partner and myself have both been very stressed.”

“The whole family are very anxious and very stressed every times bad weather is forecast. Enough to keep them up at night, the upset is unmeasurable”

National Welsh Flood Forum

The experience of seeing how the flood form from England has been able to support and brings all community members and flood risk authorities together in the case of Clydach Terrace locally has shown the key role that such a body can play and the difference it makes to those at risk of flooding.

This is a growing gap and the continued necessity of seeking funding to use expertise that we must bring into Wales on a case by case community is not leading to a growth in expertise in this sector within Wales.

The model of a flood forum has proven to be one in which the voice of the community can lead and do-produce solutions that better serve people and businesses.

Conclusion

Sadly these words spoken after Storm Dennis are as true today as they were then:

“How are we supposed to relax in our own homes again when there’s bad weather? We can’t trust NRW or RCT for that matter. My sense of safety in my home has been robbed from me and my family. We’ve been moved into an unfurnished flat in a strange areawe literally have a bed and a TV because we lost everything else and then with lockdown getting furniture was practically impossible. Then on top of all the stress we have the stress of trying to rebuild our houses and lives, deal with insurance companies who are basically soulless monsters in some cases, source 2 new cars. If I ever had to go through this again ... well I don’t think I could. I’d be in a psychiatric hospital. They need to protect us before they take more of us and more from us than they already have, we can’t survive another instance like this.”

(Evidence from a resident, flooded in February 2020)

Not enough lessons have been learnt following previous winter storms, and progress in learning those lessons is not happening quickly enough. Whilst we wait for this work to take place – and for government to decide who will lead on this work – communities live in fear every time it rains heavily, or a storm warning is announced. This is not good enough, and I hope the short inquiry will prompt the action that’s so desperately needed.

“How long is it going to take to put practices into place?”

“I am concerned about the lack of urgency, we need a community plan for every community at risk”

“There is no plan of action for us after 5 years”

“I feel like nothing is going to change”

“I am concerned about the bureaucracy and timescales. Residents have PTSD and there is no support”

“There are lots of apologies but no immediate actions to prevent further flooding”

“We need a body responsible for all flooding”

Appendix 1

Clydach Terrace

Clydach Terrace is a street in Ynysybwl. On 16 February 2020, because of storm Dennis, 19 residential properties were flooded internally. It's a miracle that no one died during the event, as many residents had to swim to safety and one resident was very nearly swept into the river. Since then, residents have been told by Natural Resources Wales that the street has been identified as the street with the highest risk to life in the event of a flood in Wales.

Residents have had to fight for action to be taken to support them, and thanks to their advocacy – alongside that of local elected representatives – both Welsh Government and NRW are now actively undertaking studies to look at options to either build a flood defence or potentially buy-out the street. This issue to be presented to the Deputy First Minister imminently. Even after a decision is taken, residents have been told that a resolution to the situation isn't expected until 2029.

Their suffering is considerable, and many describe the not knowing coupled with the fear of dying their homes as being intolerable. A psychologist that met with a group of residents recently believes that they are suffering from PTSD and has recommended that greater support is provided to them whilst they wait.

Because of the risk to life, and how long the process of developing options is taking, I asked the then minister, Julie James, for funding for the National Flood Forum to work with the community to establish a flood emergency plan and to establish a flood forum. This has been done, and a plan nearly in place, but funding for this work is due to end in March 2025. My belief is that support should continue until a solution is found.

In the meantime, homes are also becoming uninhabitable as they are damp, with black mold becoming an increasing problem. House prices has dropped dramatically, meaning that residents who want to move are no longer able to.

Channel 4 recently revisited the street and spoke to residents. I would recommend that the committee watch this 6 minute clip, which conveys the nightmare situation which residents live with, day in day out: [Wales flood: residents living in fear years after Storm Dennis - YouTube](#)