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ALL WASHED UP

With the waters rising again from Crossmolina to Clonmel, year after year, heavy rain, high winds and high tides are leading to incidents of severe flooding. With the winter months getting wetter and the country's flood plains being transformed by urban development, Eoin Bassett wonders if Ireland is ready to weather the storm.

It is an annual occurrence by now. Thousands of homes and businesses are left without power and sometimes even destroyed, roads and farm lands are submerged, with transport routes disrupted and hundreds of flights cancelled.

Meanwhile, emergency services and local authorities across the country are left battling the floodwaters. Reports in early December 2006 indicated that most counties in Ireland were suffering from severe flooding. So far this winter, the south and east of the country have been hardest hit.

According to Met Éireann, some of the worst floods in 25 years are spilling into coastal towns and the Minister for the Environment, Dick Roche, has warned local authorities to clear all drains and have sandbags ready in the areas at risk. There are predictions of a

rise of 50 centimetres in sea level over the next 50 years. A worst-case scenario suggests that a metre may be added to the height of spring tides in Dublin when rainfall and an onshore wind coincide, leading to tidal surges.

Met Éireann's head of research and applications division, Ray McGrath said: "The climate is changing. It does look like the winters will definitely be wetter, but that's an average figure, it doesn't rule out having a dry winter and then a very substantially wet winter maybe two years later. Certainly by mid-century – the average weather will be such that the winter months will be wetter. That means a greater risk of flooding, particularly in catchment areas already prone to flooding."

CLIMATE CHANGE CONCERNS

According to the Office of Public Works



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Tom Parlon, Minister of State at the Department of Finance

(OPW), there has been an increase in flash flooding and, while there is no real indication of dramatic increases in the severity of flooding incidents, the effects of climate change are of concern.

The OPW was appointed the central agency over a 15-point plan for the relief and management of flooding in September 2004. A spokesperson for the OPW said: "We have a two-pronged approach; relief from flooding and prevention of future flooding, while also raising awareness of the problem with the general public."

The agency's appointment was the result of a review of national flooding policy, announced by the government in November 2002 and completed in December 2003. Claiming a change in emphasis was needed, the review was to develop a streamlined national flooding policy. According to the OPW spokesperson, "the streamlined national flooding policy has commenced and is progressing on all work programs. These will over a number of years".

The Flood Policy Review Group in its 2004 report said: "The current approach to flood management is largely reactive." But this is no longer the case, according to the OPW. "The OPW has structural and non-structural measures. It believes in managing existing floods and taking measures to prevent future floods. It is both pro-active and reactive, with plans in place for the future," said the OPW spokesperson.

EU FLOODS DIRECTIVE

At a European level, a proposed floods directive is currently in the pipeline, which lays down a framework for flood risk management that will include risk assessments, mapping and management plans. Between 1998 and 2004, Europe suffered over 100 major damaging floods, including catastrophic floods along the Danube and Elbe rivers in 2002. Severe floods in 2005 further reinforced the need for concerted action. Since 1998, floods in Europe have caused around 700 deaths, the displacement of about 500,000 people and at least 25 billion in insured economic losses. The coming decades are likely to see a higher flood risk in Europe and greater economic damage, according

to the European Commission.

In October, Minister of State at the Department of Finance with special responsibility for the OPW, Tom Parlon, launched the website www.floodmaps.ie which highlights flood risk areas. The website includes detailed maps and historical information dating back more than 100 years. It follows the launch of flooding.ie in December 2005, which provides practical information to those at risk of flooding. According to OPW figures, flooding.ie has received 18,000 hits since its launch, while floodmaps.ie has got 12,000.

Parlon said at the launch of the most recent website: "Since I came to office, a major focus of mine has been a total review of national flooding policy and to provide clarity about the State's response to flooding. A key area is raising public awareness of the dangers of flooding and also the education of people with regard to what they can do to protect themselves, their families and their property from the hazards of flooding."

Green Party chairman John Gormley, whose Dublin constituency has suffered badly from flooding, criticised Parlon for failing to provide adequate money for flood defences. While the Irish Insurance Federation welcomed the publication of the maps, they also called on the government to increase OPW funding.

An Taisce is the agency that monitors planning applications. According to its heritage officer, Ian Lumley, in Ireland we're building at faster rates than nearly any other European country. "The number of houses in Ireland is six times what's built in the UK on a 'per capita' basis. As regards the role that development has on flooding, you're talking about a whole series of considerations," he added.

PRECAUTIONARY APPROACH

The heritage officer said there needs to be a more precautionary approach by local authorities due to the need to factor in climate change. "The big problem with local authorities is that when a planning application comes in, they just look at it on very narrow grounds and not how it might have a wider accumulative impact on a wider area.

The emergency response generally features the provision of:

- Sandbags or other defensive equipment where floods are predicted;
- Evacuation of trapped people;
- Co-ordination of medical services;
- Provision of temporary accommodation for victims;
- Control of traffic;
- Emergency works to stabilise or replace walls, footpaths, bridges;
- Checking of electrical and gas systems before the ESB or Bord Gais will restore supply;
- Health and safety; security, waste management and communications.

"We're concerned that the OPW does not adequately assess planning applications going through the system. There are these massive documents from applicants justifying the development and the local authorities are under political pressure to accommodate development. You need an independent agency beyond vested and political interests to take a critical look, like the environment agency in the UK.

"It seems that the OPW needs more money, because when these major technical documents are being launched with planning applications, there's either no response from the OPW or very cursory responses. We need to see that the OPW is on the ball and capable of analysing what's going on and putting its foot down."

Lumley praised the flood plain consultation process with


the OPW, but said "it's way behind" and claimed there is no obvious political will to solve this problem. "We're very concerned about looking at the usual Irish approach of waiting for a fiasco to happen first," he added. "We've already seen that with transport and congestion. There's an equal worry that the chaotic and poorly co-ordinated development without looking at downstream flood impact could cause huge issues in certain areas in the future."

PRINCIPAL AGENCIES

The local authorities are the principal agencies that deal with the immediate response to flooding, while other agencies with suitable equipment are involved through the activation of the major emergency plans. This brings agencies like the fire service, the Civil Defence, the Defence Forces, the Health Service Executive and the Coast Guard into operation. It also enables a local authority to re-deploy staff from core statutory duties such as waste management and road and housing maintenance, to assist in the aftermath of a flooding incident.

A formal debriefing session following an incident has significantly improved performance in the wake of recent flooding events. As with all other agencies, the key issue for local authorities is to ensure the availability of adequate resources.

Local authorities have indicated that, apart from the provision of emergency accommodation, the cost of which they recoup from the Department of the Environment, all other costs in providing an emergency response to flood events must be met from their own resources. This puts pressure on their ability to provide their normal range of services.



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Ian Lumley, heritage officer with An Taisce