



Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service

Winter 2013-14 flooding



**Report to the Chief Fire & Rescue Adviser
April 2014**

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Wiltshire is a county that often experiences flooding, and the Fire & Rescue Service is well experienced in managing such incidents, working in partnership with colleagues from within the Local Resilience Forum.
- 1.2. Fluvial flooding issues tend to emanate from the River Avon, which runs from north to south of the county, although the rivers Wylde and Bourne have also posed risks.
- 1.3. In addition, there are significant areas of Salisbury Plain that are vulnerable to groundwater flooding, while many villages elsewhere in the county have been built on land criss-crossed by natural springs.
- 1.4. Urban areas that are always considered 'high risk' include the medieval centre of Salisbury around the cathedral, Bradford on Avon and Malmesbury.



The football ground in Malmesbury has been devastated by flooding over two consecutive winters.

2. Operational context

- 2.1. Wiltshire is a predominantly rural county with 24 fire stations, of which 18 are entirely crewed by on-call personnel. Of the remaining six wholetime stations, three are on the shift duty system and three are day crewed. Only one of these stations has no on-call complement in support.
- 2.2. We have four stations with specialist water rescue capability: Trowbridge and Chippenham (which are also rope rescue stations), and Amesbury and Stratton (which both have animal rescue capability as well). The Service has one rigid rescue boat, which is based at Chippenham, in the centre of the county.
- 2.3. In addition, we have three 'wading' stations, in Marlborough, Malmesbury and Tisbury.



Our water rescue teams carry out regular training on both still and fast flowing waters.

3. Officer support

- 3.1. The Service has 16 trained water rescue managers on its flexi-duty officer rota, and at least one is usually on duty. In the event of a water rescue event, one of these officers is mobilised to provide bronze level incident command and to coordinate both the FRS efforts and any support from partner agencies.
- 3.2. In 2011, in line with guidance contained within the DEFRA Concept of Operations, two Station Managers were trained as Water Incident Managers. WIMs operate at silver incident command level, providing an understanding of the wider implications of an event involving water and liaising with partner agencies to ensure that the right resources are sent to the scene.
- 3.3. Wiltshire experienced severe flooding in November 2012, which had not been forecast. This caused significant issues, especially in the north of the county, and saw FRS resources operating at full stretch for several days.
- 3.4. As a result of the learning from this experience, a further 12 WIMs were trained during 2013, and a Water Incident Manager Forum has been established to ensure that the Service continues to develop its response to flooding.
- 3.5. All but three of our water rescue managers are also WIMs, and the intention is for all water specialists to be able to act at both bronze and silver command level.



A high volume pump from Avon Fire & Rescue Service - one of the national assets for dealing with flooding - was requested when the Bath Road area of Bradford on Avon was badly affected by heavy rains on the night of 23 December.

4. Incidents since December 2013

- 4.1. From the beginning of December 2013 until the end of February 2014, Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service dealt with over 200 flooding incidents.
- 4.2. There were three significant pinch points for the Service – the evening of 23 December (28 incidents attended), during the day on Christmas Eve (50 incidents attended), and 4 January (21 incidents attended), although early February also saw spikes in activity.
- 4.3. On 23-24 December, the flooding was extraordinary because it affected the whole of the county and there was no predictability as to where the next issues may arise. Over a 14 hour night shift, the Control room took some 250 emergency calls (including many duplicates).
- 4.4. During Christmas Eve, the main problems were in Bradford on Avon. As the name suggests, this small market town is dissected by the River Avon, and the main A361 between Trowbridge and Bath crosses the river in the town centre.
- 4.5. This was the first time since 2000 that the river had risen so high that the town centre was effectively cut in two. Access from one side of the river to the other is by footbridge or via the road bridge; the flooding on 24 December meant the footbridge was completely inaccessible, and the road bridge could only be traversed by specialist vehicles. At one point, there were real concerns that the road bridge might be washed away by the force of the water.
- 4.6. On-call firefighters from Bradford on Avon had already worked for much of the previous night, dealing with floods elsewhere in the town, supported by colleagues from Trowbridge and a high volume pump mobilised from Avon FRS. By the end of Christmas Eve, these firefighters had completed near to 24 hours non-stop assistance to the community, which included targeted support to a number of vulnerable people.
- 4.7. Issues on 4 January were more widespread, with much of Wiltshire suffering problems to a lesser or greater degree.
- 4.8. The major fear on this occasion was Cathedral Close, in the centre of Salisbury and on the banks of the River Avon. While water levels didn't rise as much as expected, the Service was prepared to respond, with water rescue assets moved from Chippenham and officers carrying out regular inspections of the properties most at risk.
- 4.9. When it was decided to evacuate the most vulnerable residents from the Close to safer ground, Salisbury firefighters provided assistance to local authority and health service partners to ensure that this was done safely and with minimum distress for those affected.
- 4.10. Flooding issues continued to be a concern throughout January and February, with many areas experiencing unprecedented water levels. The ground saturation meant that many locations remained affected for far longer than would normally be expected.



The flooding as seen from Salisbury Cathedral spire.

5. Multi-agency approach

- 5.1. During the flooding, the Wiltshire and Swindon Local Resilience Forum held regular Tactical Co-ordinating Group (TCG) teleconferences, which became daily as the issues grew. When the south of the county was considered a particular risk in mid February, a Silver command was established at County Hall with Bronze set up at scene. The Service was represented at all of these meetings, and our officers have been an integral part of the regular inspections of flood affected areas.
- 5.2. In addition to supporting flood-affected communities in our own county, we mobilised crews into Berkshire over two days in February, supported by a water rescue manager, to assist with the flood effort in Maidenhead.
- 5.3. The Wiltshire Council area has two Flood Working Groups – serving the north and south of the county – and each has an FRS Water Incident Manager as part of its membership. These officers work with flood wardens, Environment Agency representatives, elected councillors and others to pre-plan for flood events, developing local solutions as required.
- 5.4. As an organisation, the Service is keen to be seen as ‘in the heart of the community, for the community’, and a great deal of work has been done to cement our role as a community leader.
- 5.5. The village of Great Bedwyn, near Marlborough, has a history of flooding, caused by either groundwater and/or surface water. A year or so ago, local firefighters brought together those households most affected with partner agencies to try and identify solutions to the problem. As a result of this proactive approach, ditches and drains in the area were cleared and occupiers whose homes were still at high risk improved their flood protection by fitting their own pumps. Since this was done, there has been a significant decrease in the number of flood incidents attended by the Service within Great Bedwyn.
- 5.6. The Service hosted a flood managers’ workshop at its Training & Development Centre during 2013. This nationally accredited course was run by an outreach organisation under the umbrella of the Fire Service College, and delegates attended from across Wiltshire FRS and partner agencies, including colleagues from Dorset and Avon FRSs. Over the course of the day, those taking part learned a range of skills to help them deal with the challenges of any large scale flooding incident. The scenarios considered went from localised flooding through to issues at countywide, regional and even national level. A major part of this was developing a better understanding of what resources are available to help at such incidents, and how best to request and position these to best meet the challenges.



A significant issue on Christmas Eve was helping people who had been stranded when the flooded river caused the town of Bradford on Avon to be split in two.

6. Looking ahead

- 6.1. We do not want to be complacent. Flooding will continue to be an issue for communities across the country, and Wiltshire's geological make-up means that groundwater will always pose a threat, quite aside from how the rivers react to heavy rain.
- 6.2. A full internal debrief has been held to consider our response to the flooding, and a report has gone to our Management Board, setting out how we can make improvements for the future. The new Water Incident Manager Forum has been tasked with further research into what additional equipment or training may be beneficial.
- 6.3. We have configured our fire stations to operate in 'communities', which has allowed us to place a greater emphasis on identifying local risks and finding ways of reducing those risks. Three wholetime 'hub' stations have been established in Marlborough, Devizes and Amesbury, with crews supporting their on-colleagues by carrying out risk reduction and community engagement activities. By being in the heart of the community, for the community, we are perfectly placed to assist with the development of local flood plans.
- 6.4. Working with our partners, we are looking at ways of getting essential advice on what to do in the event of a flood to our communities. A section has been added to our website (see www.wiltshire.gov.uk/flooding), and we will use community safety technicians and other personnel to deliver information to 'at risk' homes as and when needed.
- 6.5. Together with Swindon Borough Council, we are piloting a programme of flood warden training in the East locality of the town, which has been funded by DEFRA, and we want to replicate this across the rest of Swindon and into Wiltshire.
- 6.6. The Service is working with Swindon Borough Council and the National Flood Forum on a 'Pathfinder' project funded by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). Focused on the eastern part of Swindon, which is at greatest risk of flooding, the project has been running for a couple of months and included a 'flood fair' in December. In February, Stratton firefighters spent the day with students from Dorcan Academy, where a junior flood action group has been set up, helping to build up the students' confidence, communication skills and team work.



Members of Dorcan Academy's junior flood action group experienced water rescue skills as part of a team building day organised by local firefighters.

- 6.7. As well as the daily Tactical Co-ordinating Group discussions held by the Local Resilience Forum, the LRF Executive Board has held teleconferences to consider the wider strategic implications of the flooding. As a result, a piece of work has been commissioned to look to the future and identify what issues need to be planned for – this is being chaired jointly by Chief Fire Officer Simon Routh-Jones and Maggie Rae, Corporate Director (Public Health) at Wiltshire Council.