



What we would do if ... there was a severe flood

The centres of Bedford, Luton and Leighton Buzzard were completely under water, Biggleswade Hospital was flooded and hundreds of people had to be evacuated from their homes. A section of the A1 in Bedfordshire collapsed, and many people were reported missing – some feared dead.

Fortunately, these weren't real events on Tuesday (8 March) but instead a scenario designed to test emergency responses to severe flooding across the county.

'Exercise Watermark' involved all local authorities, police, fire and rescue service, the Environment Agency and the full range of NHS, ambulance and hospital trusts coming together to ensure they are prepared for any situation.

Together, the organisations make up the Bedfordshire and Luton Local Resilience Forum (BLLRF), the partnership created to ensure the best possible plans are in place should a major emergency occur.

BLLRF's '*What would you do If ... ?*' campaign aims to help everybody living or working within Bedfordshire and Luton prepare themselves and feel confident about the level of service they will receive during an emergency.

And on Tuesday the partners themselves faced the question – what would you do if ... there was a major flood?

It all started on Monday at 4pm when an extreme rainfall alert put partners on standby. They swung into action, but the scales of the challenges facing them as a 'major storm' broke over the following 24 hours were designed to test them to the limit.

By 6am on Tuesday the Great Ouse, River Ouzel, Ivel and their tributaries were on flood alert and road closures were brought into place at Harrold, Oakley, Felmersham and Radwell.

As the morning progressed river water levels rose across the region and by 9.30am the scenario had at least 50 houses and businesses under water at Clipstone Brook, Leighton Buzzard.

The A1 was gridlocked with sections of road flooded. At the Roxton turn a section of the carriageway collapsed, bringing a fatality into play.

Further reports of traffic accidents and flooded roads and buildings tested partners in every conceivable way.

Challenges included:

- A farmer's herd of 40 cows needed rescuing from rising flood water in Leighton Buzzard.
- Many of the 50 barges moored at Grove Lock, Leighton Buzzard, had broken free and were travelling downstream.
- Children and staff at a school in Kempston were stranded.
- Reports of missing people were coming in regularly from across the county – including elderly or vulnerable people and a child thought to have fallen into the river in Bedford.
- A culvert collapsed at the River Lea in Luton, threatening a building and causing a power failure at The Mall.
- Biggleswade Hospital reported raw sewage seeping out of the drains.
- Trees came down in Kempston and were blocking the bridge.
- A hotel with 24 non-English speaking guests sought advice about being cut off by floodwater.
- Bedfordshire fire headquarters flooded.
- 250 people at an emergency evacuation centre were unable to go home overnight.

As well as dealing with the operational aspects of the emergency, the exercise also tested how BLLRF partners would communicate with the public, respond to media enquiries and maintain general services alongside the developing drama.

Chairman of BLLRF, Assistant Chief Constable Katherine Govier from Bedfordshire Police, said: "Recent and widespread incidents of flooding across the globe would suggest that flooding may be unavoidable in the future so we must take steps now to analyse the risk and plan ahead.

"Exercise Watermark raised many questions of 'What would you do if?' and provided a real test of our ability to deal with flooded rivers and surface water flooding. The effects of flooding can be devastating so it is essential that we are all prepared to deal with the risk.

"For the partners the exercise was a powerful reminder of the need to remind everyone in Bedfordshire and Luton that when a severe flooding incident occurs the priority is to save lives before property, and that once an incident starts it's far too late to think about being prepared. There is however much that everyone can do in advance."

For more details of how you can ensure you are prepared for flooding visit the 'What would you do if?...' website – www.whatwouldyoudoif.co.uk

FACT BOX:

Being prepared for flooding could save your life and your property.

- If you believe that your personal safety is at risk from a flood, or the inside of your property is about to be flooded, then please call the fire and rescue service via 999.
- Find out about the [flood risks in your area](http://www.bllrf.org.uk) at www.bllrf.org.uk
- Make up a [flood kit](#) including key personal documents, insurance policy, emergency contact numbers, torch, battery or wind-up radio, mobile phone and charger, rubber gloves, wet wipes or antibacterial hand gel, first aid kit and blankets.

- Make sure you have adequate insurance. Flood damage is included in most buildings insurance policies but do check your home and contents are covered.
- Keep vital possessions, such as financial and legal documents and items of sentimental value, upstairs or stored as high as possible in waterproof containers and have plans in place to move items at short notice.
- Make a list of useful numbers you may need, such as your local council, the emergency services and your Floodline quick dial number.
- Make sure you know where to turn off your gas, electricity and water. If you are not sure, ask the person who checks your meter when they next visit. Mark the tap or switch with a sticker to help you remember.
- Contact the Environment Agency to be registered on their Flood Warnings Direct scheme (however, this does not apply to surface water or sewerage flooding and you should remain alert to weather forecasts).
- For businesses, make sure you have a continuity plan addressing, among other concerns, evacuation procedures, power failure, short-term plans and the recovery process.