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Editorial

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The events over the past couple of years, starting with the fuel crisis in the autumn of 2000, followed by the severe flooding in the winter, the outbreak of foot-and-mouth in early 2001 and the terrorist attacks in the USA on September 11 of the same year, have all conspired to give emergency planning a renewed focus and impetus. The ongoing concerns and impacts of climatic change and the American President's declared 'War against Terrorism' further indicates that the events over the past couple of years, rather than just being an unfortunate series of occurrences, stand to be the initial symptom of a longer-term trend.

The need for a renewed focus on emergency planning has been identified by the Government which has expressed itself as being committed to 'developing proposals for new civil contingencies legislation, as part of a modern, comprehensive framework for civil protection and emergency management'. The Local Government Association (LGA) has acknowledged that the emerging policy themes from this work are: 'A new duty on local authorities and possibly others to plan a role for the regional tier of government and a desire for legislation which gives a structured framework for emergency planning but which is not too prescriptive.' At the time of writing, the LGA is about to convene a meeting of local authority representatives to assist in an ongoing review of the LGA's emergency planning policy. The above clearly demonstrates the level of importance now being placed on civil emergency planning—if not the greatest emphasis ever, then certainly the greatest since the cold war days of the 1950s and 1960s, and either way with a far more scientific and professional approach than previously used.

Emergency planning, like many areas, has always had to fight hard for the limited resources available. When, say, the need for a new radio communications system or a new training programme for emergency planning was competing for funding in a round of budget restrictions against the possible closure of a children's home it is not difficult to guess in what direction the funding went. These financial pressures, combined with the loss of 'the old enemy' following the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989, have resulted in a loss in focus of emergency planning over the past decade. Local authorities frequently relied on their own in-house DSOs to provide their emergency responses yet in many cases through the CCT programmes of the 1980s and 1990s these have been externalised and the in-house capacity is no longer available. The contractors who have

replaced the DSOs, invariably by lowering their costs through economies of scale in providing services to several authorities, would be stretched to the limit if an emergency situation occurred that encompassed a greater area than one or two boroughs in an urban environment. Yet there are authorities where emergency planning procedures have not been adjusted to take account of these changes in circumstances.

Clearly the time is now right for those officers leading on emergency planning within local authorities to use the recent events to make the case for the resources needed to do the job properly, combined with the development of a realistic, deliverable and rehearsed emergency plan.

Contrary to the sentiments contained within some clever advertising for a well-known breakdown recovery service, I would argue that the true 'fourth emergency service' is in fact the local authority. Within that, the municipal engineer working alongside the emergency planning professional is key, not only in the development of the emergency plan but also in its delivery if and when the time comes.

The need to ensure properly planned and coordinated emergency responses cannot be overemphasised. For local authorities these extend far beyond the immediate response to address and mitigate the problems caused by the initial event. The local authority's role continues long after the initial shock wave, ensuring that the support mechanisms are in place to allow life to return to normal as soon as possible for those affected.

In this edition of the journal Laurence Abbott, an emergency planning officer, sets the scene for the role of local authorities in the emergency planning process. His paper emphasises the need for proper planning, communication, training and the role of the local authority in the management of the recovery phase after the initial impact of the disaster has been dealt with.

Peter Harvey and Stephen Wearne's papers further develop the aspects of emergency planning in respect of issues around 'the response' to an emergency situation. Peter Harvey describes the need for rapid assessment and prioritisation in an emergency situation and how this should take place, while Stephen Wearne discusses the management of urgent emergency engineering projects. Both papers add valuable knowledge to the way in

which the response to emergency situations should be assessed and handled based on practical experience.

The need for well tried and tested methods as part of an emergency planning response is probably most frequently seen in the winter maintenance arena. In this area of work, what would be recognised as extreme weather conditions is to a certain degree a relative issue. For example, for a shire county in southern England to plan and prepare to mobilise for snow clearing at the same level as a Highland authority in Scotland would probably be regarded as excessive. Yet freak weather conditions do occur which can plunge the southern authority into depths of snow equal to those experienced in Scotland. The two papers by Douglas Kent and Mike Stephens describe and contrast the approaches to winter maintenance used in just these circumstances. Douglas Kent describes his experiences and approach on the A9 in Perthshire, while Mike Stephens describes the approach in Kent.

The second half of the journal focuses on issues appertaining to flooding. William Howarth describes an authority's legal responsibilities with regard to issues surrounding flooding and its prevention. Interestingly, he draws into his discussion the potential difficulties that may arise in this field through the application of the Human Rights Act. As there is currently little case law in this area, but the possible impacts are far-reaching, the situation will need to be carefully monitored by any engineer working in this field. Unlike other nations, there are no powers of general competence to be enjoyed by UK local authorities. So, particularly in dealing with disasters and emergencies, a public authority's ability to act can be fettered. In this context Jane Milne puts forward the UK insurers' perspective towards better flood management.

Terry Oakes' paper builds on these earlier papers regarding the legal and insurers' perspective on flood management to describe what in practice local authorities and engineers may currently do in respect of flood defence. He further highlights the issues and complexities in this area which are exacerbated by the mix of central and local control.

Andrew Pepper *et al.* describe the particular difficulties experienced by an American city, which has developed and

grown within a river basin. The philosophy adopted to manage the severe danger of flooding in this city is to prevent further development in the areas most likely to flood, and in some cases to even consider the removal of existing developments. This 'surrender the land' approach is currently a topical issue with local authorities, central government and the Environment Agency in the UK, where the cost of long-term protection is not considered viable. At the time of writing, a sea wall on the River Blackwater in Essex has just been deliberately breached in several locations to allow the encroaching tide to turn the current arable land back to salt flats. In Britain, where the pressure on land is far greater than in the USA, particularly in the south-east, it is much more difficult to just 'surrender' developable land. However, realistically, where developments do take place on say floodplains, is the developer really paying the commercial cost of protection or simply passing the long-term costs of protection on to other authorities. PPG25 tries to address these issues.

Stewart Sim explains British Waterways' role in both flood mitigation and its emergency response to the threat of flooding on its canal system. The final contribution on the flooding debate in this edition is by Dr Khatibi. Dr Khatibi draws together a number of the points made in the earlier papers and puts forward an argument for flood forecasting to assist and secure sustainable flood defences.

The papers within this journal clearly demonstrate the importance and the role the municipal engineer still has in planning for, and responding to, civil emergency situations within the UK. Whether the emergency or disaster is man-made or natural, the quality of the analysis, planning, management and execution of the response is key to successfully ensuring that the impacts are minimised for the community which we serve. The challenge is yours!

REFERENCES

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2. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION. LG Alert 349/02, 23 October 2002.