

David Cameron in Gloucestershire to learn lessons of the floods

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Local residents talk about the flood water on St Mary's Road, Tewkesbury, yesterday which is under three feet of water as the River Avon and Severn have burst their banks.

VIEW GALLERY

Prime Minister David Cameron was back in the West Country yesterday as he vowed to visit every flood-hit area around the country and "try and learn lessons".

Mr Cameron defended the Government's handling of the crisis and hit back at criticism that he was visiting Gloucestershire and Upton-upon-Severn in Worcestershire, where the Army was deployed after the town was cut in two by floodwaters.

Mr Cameron, who praised the impact of the defences, said it was not fair to suggest the Government was on the back foot over its handling of unprecedented national flooding.

"When the bad weather and flooding started before Christmas in Norfolk, we had Cobra – the emergency committee – meet then. Then it met again after Christmas to talk about the problems in Kent and Somerset. I visited Norfolk and I've been up in Blackpool, here now in the West Midlands, and in the West Country. I'll try to get to every part of the country that's been affected so that we can learn all the lessons."

He added that Government spending on flood defences had been increased to £2.4 billion in the current four-year period – a rise of £200 million over the previous spending period under the Labour Government.

Earlier, Defence Secretary Philip Hammond defended the Government's "proper response" to the storms but he also conceded the military could have been brought in sooner. He said the Royal Engineers would now be sent in to fast-track inspections of flood defences damaged by flooding, tidal surges and gales of up to 100mph which have battered the UK, and left large areas of the South West and the Thames Valley under water.

Mr Hammond, who added that about 3,000 troops have been deployed to assist flood-hit communities, with another 5,000 on standby, went to the Queen's Head in Longford, near Gloucester, to meet local residents who have set up a flood warden scheme.

The Prime Minister spoke with members of the community including David Walker who runs a team of 30 manning the local volunteer water rescue team, the Mercia Inshore Search and Rescue Association. He told Mr Cameron they had been working non-stop, checking on 15 families in flooded homes right on the river, delivering groceries, and transporting an 86-year-old woman to hospital.

"However, while we were busy helping others, sadly our own station in the town was flooded with a metre of water and we've lost a bit of equipment," he said.

The network of volunteer urban, mountain and waterborne search and rescue teams has been playing a large part in the current national relief effort supporting the emergency services, he added. Mr Walker said he felt the Army could have been sent in more quickly, and in future could be better co-ordinated with the existing civil emergency system of gold, silver and bronze commanders.

Another resident, Jackie Surtees, who has lived in the town for 18 years, praised the Environment Agency and the flood defences, which, she said, had done "a good job".

Mr Cameron was told by the Environment Agency's Dafydd Evans that flood defences all along the swollen River Severn had stopped 1,400 homes and businesses from flooding, compared with 2007.

The village of Longford has been flooded several times in the last decade from the nearby River Severn, including most recently last week.

The Prime Minister then went to Gloucestershire Police HQ at Quedgeley, to meet members of silver command, which is co-ordinating the multi-agency response to the floods in the county. The silver command includes police, ambulance, fire service, military, Environment Agency and local authorities.

Later, Mr Cameron spoke of the difference that the investment in flood defence schemes has made, particularly in Gloucestershire.

"Here in Gloucestershire we have seen some major investments in flood defences, which have made a really big difference, and that's why there are so many fewer homes flooded in Tewkesbury, for instance, this time round," he told reporters. "Obviously for anyone who has been flooded it is an absolute tragedy and my heart goes out to those families and businesses. It's a horrible experience and, as the waters recede and you see the real damage done, it's absolutely heart-breaking.

"There are another ten schemes that are already signed up and ready to go over the next few years here in Gloucestershire. But, as the waters recede, we should check all the plans, check all the thinking and see if there is more that can be done."

Mr Cameron also praised the work that has been done to protect important utilities from flooding, such as the Mythe water treatment works at Tewkesbury, which was swamped in 2007.

"In 2007, hundreds of thousands of people were having to have bottled water and, thankfully, that's now only the case for a few people who have been cut off in very rural communities," the Prime Minister said.

"The other thing is how well the defences worked at Upton on Severn. But that's no consolation to the people that have been flooded. There are always lessons to learn and always more things that need to be done. But the most abiding memory is the resilience, bravery, courage and general pluck of people who are amazing at helping

their neighbours, as well as themselves, and have really come together."

Mr Cameron was also asked about plans to build new housing on flood plains, such as a scheme for 570 homes on an already flooded field in Longford, near Gloucester.

"We have a planning system where the authorities have to make a decision and what we have seen is the lowest level of building on the flood plain that we have had for many years," he said.

"And I think I am right in saying that in 99 per cent of cases the advice from the experts, including the Environment Agency... that advice is followed. So this is a matter for the planning authorities and for the appeal system to work through."

Insurance companies are to attend a meeting in 10 Downing Street to discuss their response to the flooding crisis with Cabinet Office Minister Oliver Letwin, the Conservative MP for West Dorset. Sporadic rain is expected in the coming days, bringing fears of the possibility of water levels rising once again, but forecasters are predicting a largely drier week ahead. There are still delays on many rail services, with Arriva Trains Wales, Chiltern Railways, CrossCountry, First Great Western, London Midland, South West Trains, Southeastern and Southern all reporting major delays.

Four of the eight high-volume Dutch pumps which had to be switched off at Dunball, near Bridgwater on Saturday because the force of water they were disgorging was eroding the bank of the River Parrett were expected to be switched back on last night. The Environment Agency says the problem can be overcome and is not a significant problem in its plans to move water from the Somerset Levels.