

Public Weather Service Customer Group Annual Report 2008–09

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Public Weather Service Customer Group

Annual Report 2008-09

1 Customer Group

In April 2008 the Public Weather Service Customer Group (PWSCG) entered its second year of operation.

1.1 Membership

Members of the PWSCG were:

- Nick Baldwin, Independent Chair
- Trevor Pethick, Independent Member
- Steve Biddle, Head of Flood Risk Management Process, Environment Agency (EA)
- Alan Goodwin, Deputy Chief Constable, Derbyshire Constabulary representing Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO)
- Damian Smith, Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive, Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service representing Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA)
- Peter Tallantire, Deputy Director Civil Contingencies Secretariat, Cabinet Office
- Derek Turner, Traffic Operations Director, Highways Agency
- Ian Walford, Head of Fire and Civil Contingencies, Scottish Government
- Tom Griffin, Retired Local Authority CEO representing Local Government Association
- Neil Jones, Assembly Resilience Co-ordinator, Welsh Assembly Government

There has been one change to the PWSCG during the year:

- In November, Steve Biddle was replaced by Craig Woolhouse, Head of Flood Risk Management Process, as member of the group for the Environment Agency.

BBC Advisor to the group is Richard Chapman, Editorial Manager BBC Weather.

The group is supported by a small secretariat which was fully resourced throughout the year by Alyson Bedford, Head of the Secretariat, and Clare Simpson, Support Manager.

1.2 Meetings and Activities

The group met 4 times during the year; attendance and engagement by members was good and the PWSCG functioned very effectively.

The main focus of the PWSCG during the year was on the following topics, all of which are dealt with in more details in subsequent sections of this report:

- a. Monitoring Met Office performance against the Public Weather Service (PWS) Key Performance Indicators (KPI) and establishing targets for future years;
- b. Reviewing Met Office performance during severe weather events during the year, including the snow in February 2009;
- c. Conducting consultation with users of various outputs of the service including the Mountain Weather Service;
- d. Reviewing the Broadcast Service; and
- e. Addressing the funding shortfall which resulted from increased International Commitment costs which are funded by PWS on behalf of UK government.

2 Delivery of PWS Outputs

There was one change to the Met Office PWS management team during the year: following the departure of Graeme Leitch, Pat Boyle joined as PWS Assurance Manager.

2.1 Achievement of Key Performance Indicators

The PWSCG Met Office Customer Supplier Agreement describes the PWS Outputs and specifies the KPI, both Critical¹ and non-critical and milestones, set by the PWSCG for the year.

A number of other KPI were also monitored by the PWSCG. These include: R&D milestones to provide reassurance that Met Office research and development programmes are on track; baseline data quality on behalf of other stakeholders; Public Broadcasting KPI relating to the effectiveness of broadcasting of the PWS, particularly warnings, by the BBC; and International Commitment KPI to monitor targets and raise awareness of any issues many of which are out with Met Office direct control.

All the Critical and the vast majority of other targets and milestones were achieved by the Met Office in FY0809. A summary of achievements is provided below.

Public Weather Service Outputs	
Critical KPIs	All Critical KPIs achieved
Other KPIs & Milestones	15 KPIs achieved, 1 missed
R&D milestones	13 completed, 5 missed
Baseline data	All 30 targets achieved
Public Broadcasting of the Public Weather Service	
KPI	All 3 KPIs achieved
International Commitments	
KPI	10 targets achieved, 1 missed

2.2 PWS Output Development Highlights

Several significant improvements have been made to the PWS Outputs during the year, these include:

- The launch of a new Mountain Weather Forecast Service which now includes forecasts for the Peak District and clearly highlights any expected weather hazards. Brief weather forecasts were also introduced for National Park areas not covered by the specialised mountain forecasts and the opportunity to access a weather forecaster made available and promoted to Mountain Rescue Teams;
- Aspects of the National Severe Weather Warnings were reviewed. Following concern about travel disruption caused during the prolonged foggy spell of December 2007 fog warning criteria thresholds were reviewed and changes to these were introduced to include dense fog of 50 metres or less and persistent fog of 200 metres or less for

¹ Critical KPI are those which incur a financial penalty if more than one of the eight is not achieved

a period of at least 24 hours. Consideration was also given to a dedicated Tornado Warning Service but following a review of the benefits it was agreed that any increased risk of tornadoes should be incorporated in weather forecasts;

- A new Emergency Support Website was launched which aims to support Gold Commands during major incidents caused or impacted by the weather. The website, which makes available detailed and event specific weather data and forecasts, is activated during an incident and passwords provided to the affected responder community;
- Forecasts for various tourist and business destinations around the world were made available to the public on the Met Office website; and
- New climate products, including reports on significant past weather events and regional climate memoranda for Wales, Northern Ireland, 3 Scottish and 6 English regions, were made available to the public via the Met Office website.

2.3 . Severe Weather Events

There were a number of significant and high profile severe weather events during the year, most notably the snow during February 2009. Met Office performance during these weather events was reviewed at Customer Group meetings.

Significant severe weather events during the year included:

- Heavy rain which culminated in three severe, disruptive rainfall events, the first of these, on the 1 August, caused severe flooding in Ayrshire with parts of the town Kilbirnie under a metre of water. The second caused widespread flash flooding on the 13 August across Northern Ireland and Scotland. On the same day unseasonably strong winds affected Southern England. The final event of the month took place in Northern Ireland after renewed heavy rain on the 16 August, causing widespread serious flooding from both pluvial and fluvial sources. A detailed report on the events was presented at the October PWSCG meeting;
- Flood events continued into September impacting several roads across South Wales in the first few days of the month. A precautionary Gold Command was set up in Gloucester on 5 September however attentions soon turned to the North East and support was given to Northumbrian Council for several days after the Morpeth event;
- Towards the end of October localised flooding impacted on a two-day fell race in Cumbria. There was considerable media coverage of this event which was abandoned on the afternoon of the first day due to flooding. A very localised and extreme storm affected the village of Ottery St Mary in East Devon on the 29 October. Around 25 people had to be rescued from flooding and up to 1ft of hail fell in less than two hours;
- November saw several small tornadoes leave a trail of minor damage in parts of Suffolk;
- During December heavy snow fell over parts of Northern England and Scotland which resulted in several road and school closures with 3000 homes in North Yorkshire going without power. Widespread flooding and disruption took place on the 13 & 14 December across Devon, Somerset and Dorset;
- In January severe gales swept much of the Western side of the UK and Northern Ireland on the 16 & 17 January. An emergency flash for storms and gales of up to 100 mph was issued for the Scottish Islands, Northwest Scotland and Northwest Northern Ireland; and
- In the first two weeks of February snow affected virtually all of the UK, it was the most severe and widespread snow recorded since 1991. Estimates have put the cost to the UK economy to between £1.5bn and £3.0bn.

Most of these weather events were well forecast with PWS Advisors heavily involved with responders. There were encouraging signs of a more proactive response based on warnings

e.g. Gloucester called a precautionary Gold Command in advance of heavy rain in September and authorities in the Scottish Islands closed public buildings and deployed ambulances in advance of the gales in January.

Prediction capability for the intense thunderstorms which caused hail and flooding over Ottery St. Mary in October is still limited. Forecasts indicated the potential for thunderstorms in Devon and Cornwall but there was insufficient detail on intensity, location or timing so early warnings were not issued.

Early warnings for the February snow ensured people were well informed though there was still widespread disruption. PWS Advisors were in contact with Gold and Silver commands and the Cabinet Office throughout the period. Met Office Emergency Support web service was activated and proved an invaluable tool with probability and disruption maps available for users.

Although well forecast there were some lessons to learn from the February snow. For example there were issues with the detailed distribution and amounts of snow e.g. Devon had motorists stranded overnight on the A38 south of Exeter. Feedback on the snow warnings was mainly positive though at times the number of warnings and presentation on the web caused some confusion.

3 Public Consultation

During FY0809 the following consultation was undertaken:

- In June and November Public Satisfaction Surveys were carried out by GfK NOP. The results of the two surveys were very similar and they were also consistent with previous surveys. Headlines were that 90% found weather forecasts useful, 78% found them accurate, more than three quarters of people saw forecasts mainly on the TV and more than 80% of people watched a forecast at least once a day. This survey will continue in FY0910 but will be reduced to one per year;
- GfK NOP also carried out seven public surveys related to severe weather events; these were short telephone surveys conducted immediately after severe weather warnings to ascertain people's awareness and use of them. Five were carried out after events with Early Warnings and two were carried out when no Early Warning had been issued. Results of these surveys were much more variable than the Public Perception Surveys. They highlighted the importance of Early Warnings: respondents were significantly more likely to have heard or seen the warning if it was preceded by an Early Warning (76%) rather than being just a Flash Warning (57%). They also showed marked differences between types of weather warnings: those warned about snow were much more likely to take action than those warned about rain. These surveys will continue in FY0910;
- During February Ipsos MORI undertook a Responder Satisfaction Survey via telephone calls to 400 responders. The results were very pleasing with 100% of responders saying they understood the warnings and over 90% saying that the warnings were relevant, timely and contained the right amount of appropriate information. Overall responders were 95% satisfied with the warnings, 96% satisfied with PWS advisors and 97% satisfied with the entire service;
- Consultation was carried out to support the Mountain Weather Review during June, July and August. Surveys were completed by members of the public online and at Youth Hostels and National Parks. There was also consultation with members of the mountain community including the Mountain Rescue Teams and Mountaineering Councils. The results of this consultation formed recommendations that were taken forward to produce the new Mountain Weather Service which was launched on the 30 March 2009;

- In September an on-line 'Suggestion Box' survey resulted in over 1400 suggestions and comments being received by users of the Met Office website. These have and will continue to be used to aid improvement of PWS Outputs; and
- The Met Office Public Open Days were also used as a source of consultation; interactive presentations were given at the November and January Open Days.
- A comprehensive review of the PWS Broadcast Service was conducted. Ensuring that the reach of PWS, both forecasts and warnings, is maintained in the future when audiences are becoming more fragmented across more TV channels and viewers are spending increasing amounts of time with other media, especially the Internet and mobile phones, will be a challenge. The review considered the benefits of the current system whereby PWS is broadcast through the BBC and good value options to provide the service effectively in the future.

4 Financials

The end of year financial position for PWS fell just below the 3% efficiency for the year. Operational and R&D costs were slightly overspent. International costs were slightly overspent in year. This overspend will be carried forward to FY0910.

5 Stakeholder Consultation

Monthly reports for the PWSCG were provided to the CAA and MCA during the year along with the Annual PWSCG Report. End of year meetings were also proposed with CAA and MCA to update them on PWS activities; these are expected to take place early in FY0910.

Reports to CAA and MCA were also provided by the Met Office outlining the investment, research and development being funded by PWS which will lead to improved services for Civil Aviation and improvements in maritime safety.

6 Plans for FY0910

PWSCG activities and ambitions for PWS for FY0910 include:

- A major review of the National Severe Weather Warning Service including workshops for the responder community and public focus groups;
- Review of the requirement for risk and confidence information in public weather forecasts;
- Major upgrade of the Met Office website weather pages;
- Review of the incentivised pricing terms of the PWS Customer Supplier Agreement; and
- Agreement on a long-term solution to the provision of funding for International Commitments.