



OFFICIAL



PWSCG Northern Ireland

Friday 17 January 2025 – James House Belfast, 09:30 until 13:00

Item 1: Welcome and Introductions

GQ welcomed all attendees and round table introductions were given.

Item 2: N. Ireland Departmental Updates

The group were provided with an update on the key changes within the Government of Northern Ireland over the last year. John O'Dowd remains the responsible Minister for this area of work. The restoration of the Assembly since the last meeting has enabled work to progress and improved work planning as the cycle of short-term budgets was constraining long term planning. There are still some challenges with staff resourcing in the Department, whose key functions include Water, Transport and Planning, including the availability of hydrologists for Rivers Directorate given the highly competitive market. In terms of the weather and the environment, there continue to be environmental issues with water quality in Lough Neagh and greater scrutiny and improvements to flood risk management in response to the Autumn 2023 floods.

The group were informed about general challenges experienced over the last year including constrained finances and the impact that 1-year budgets were having on being able to secure and engage contractors for infrastructure projects. The absence of Ministers had inevitably slowed up decision making. The Department is facing some challenges in terms of delivery and meeting obligations under the climate change act and how that can be delivered in the flooding policy environment.

In his role as Director of Operations, GQ also spoke about the main role and responsibilities within the Department's Rivers Directorate which centres on flood risk management. It was noted that last year was challenging with 12 to 13 named storms, and the impact of a changing climate. The group were informed that the Southeast flooding event in 2023 was a game changer, and it altered perceptions higher up in the devolved administration about the impact of flooding and future resilience. Northern Ireland has seen a big increase in infrastructure investment noting the £30m+ for the recently completed Belfast Tidal Flood Alleviation Scheme along the river Lagan. Other schemes have or are being implemented including at Portadown and Newry. There has been a focus on local flood prevention schemes, the establishment of new resilience groups in rural communities and overall, there are almost 50 established community resilience groups.

The local council reported over £40m worth of damage occurring in the Newry floods in Autumn 2023. Local people and businesses are helping to work on solutions in partnership with government through the establishment of a new business led Community Resilience Group.

Momentum is also growing due to Politicians now acknowledging the need for action and recognising the challenge.

KS enquired about the response and follow up activity in Newry given the expectation of businesses mentioned and community engagement needed to develop solutions. GQ explained there was a joined-up approach across the multi-agency partners with no finger pointing or blame game in the aftermath. The flooding event wasn't exacerbated by any single issue; there were a range of factors at play across all of the drainage functions in the city. Improvements have been realised with the introduction of a revised application process for those seeking better property level protection for homeowners. There has been a general sense of the Community trying to help and businesses wishing to bring additional money to the table.

Item 3: Chair of PWSCG Update

DP reminded the group of the importance of these meetings in allowing him and the rest of the PWSCG to have the mandate to ask for improvements from the Met Office. DP explained that meeting with the community in N. Ireland allows for a greater understanding of the challenges and issues facing them that may be unique and not the same in other parts of the UK.

DP explained the governance and makeup of the PWSCG before moving on to highlight the enduring priorities which focus on accuracy and explain some of the current priorities which include mitigating the delays from the supercomputer implementation and improvement to Met Office direct channels. It was also noted that as the Met Office go through the spending review process that the PWS Customer Supplier Agreement will need to be realistic and reflect the relevant funding outcome for PWS.

The update provided an opportunity for questions, most notably on the Met Office approach to Artificial Intelligence (AI). It was noted that the Met Office believe that there will certainly be a hybrid approach to the use of AI in weather forecasting and that there will still be a clear case for physics-based modelling. The Met Office view is that AI will help to bring forward increases in accuracy given the previous advances that saw a day per decade improvement in the accuracy of forecasts plateau in recent years. KS pressed on the point about Moore's law and whether the Met Office could offer more insight into how AI might accelerate the gains previously witnessed under Moore's law. Another view centred on a possible limiting factor of AI and machine learning linked to the changing climate as ML learns from what has happened previously so won't include outliers that may be more common in future. There will still be a demand for human expertise in the equation as it will be hard for AI to interpret how someone thinks. Personal relationships still key. Another view raised the issue of trust and what is currently being seen in the population's trust of AI generated services and content.

Item 4: Met Office Update

JH provided the group with an update on Met Office activity and specific insights into performance in weather events for N. Ireland. Recent national severe weather warning service (NSWWS) survey results show that awareness and usefulness scores for warnings remain stable with scores for action taken as a result of a warning increasing, this being a similar picture to the rest of the UK.

Met Office are aware of recent feedback on clarity of warnings and are mindful of keeping the warnings landscape uncluttered and easy to use. It was noted that in an international context

the approach by the UK Met Office points to them being world leading in the delivery of NSWWS and in particular on partnership working.

JH updated the group on the work that focuses on the 'thrive' aspects of the Met Office strategy which is more about the everyday use cases of the forecast to drive growth in the economy and confident decision making. JH touched on the work that has stemmed from the Citizen Engagement Strategy (CES) and that maintaining a presence with direct Met Office channels is key.

JH went on to highlight some of the improvements introduced over the last year. The pull through of a new data source, the Blended Probabilistic Forecast, that feeds the web and App. The introduction of 14-day forecasts which is something a number of competitors had started to offer. Enhanced forecasts for mountain weather were also highlighted.

JH informed the group about the London Economics report commissioned by Met Office and supported by DSIT which assessed the value of the Met Office to the UK. The key figure being a 19:1 return on every £1 invested.

In N. Ireland trust in the Met Office as the UK's national Met Service is high at 81%.

The group enquired whether the action taken could be broken down between businesses and the public and to understand the baseline for N. Ireland. The group cited some research by Professor Caroline McMullan, Dublin City University (DCU), which has been shared to help provide some additional context for Northern Ireland. There were examples given of the added dynamic of managing the communication of warnings with residents in Border communities given the TV viewership of RTE and warnings issued from Met Eireann which still operate a threshold-based system. In border communities the group felt there was a sense of a cultural aspect with many watching RTE and the fact that the broadcaster shows both Met Services warnings.

Action: Met Office to interrogate the Caroline McMullan's research to try and unpick any additional trends and evidence that may be useful to consider.

Other remarks made included that recent storms have impacted both nations with big events on both sides. There was a general sense that aligning the two warning systems would be a positive move going forward and good to hear that Met Office have a positive engagement with Met Eireann. Certain differences were noted such as N. Ireland not receiving flood and heat health warnings in the same way as in England where they are issued by separate agencies. On warnings in general they pay close attention to the box on the warning matrix. Very positive feedback was put forward about the Met Office YouTube channel saying the output is excellent.

Item 5: Review of Weather Events

IH provided a summary of the engagement in N. Ireland over the last year and appointments into the team. A very useful NI responder meeting took place last February and a constructive visit to Met Eireann.. Other important developments included the publication of the climate attribution study and convective notification documents in summer 2024. The local authority climate service was a welcomed addition.

IH summarised the weather headlines for N. Ireland over the period including 7 named storms, 37 wind warnings, 7 ambers for wind. It was noted that only ambers for wind had been issued

compared to only 1 amber in total the year before. IH noted that in total 82 warnings were issued for N. Ireland in 2024, which was down 11% on the previous year.

Challenges were cited with last January being a very busy period which coincided with industrial action. After that it was a quieter year for N. Ireland over the summer months. No calls or Local Impact Assessment (LIAC) calls between April and Oct. Examples of the main storms experienced over the year were discussed, most notably Isha and Jocelyn with Isha being one of the strongest in many years.

The group discussed the events witnessed and performance during these events. One question focussed on whether they felt they were seeing less predictability in the nature and severity of events experienced. The general view was not, but that storm Bert was challenging as it had been so dry beforehand, so those antecedent conditions added to the complexity in assessing the severity of impacts. Met Office did note that more variability and extremes are the trend. The group picked up on the use of the term multi-hazard event and how well that was understood. The group were asked about whether the emphasis on the weather types was right in such an event i.e. when the forecast is predicting hazards from rain, snow and wind is the small-scale detail about which is the most damaging being picked up e.g. for Storm Bert the warning was for Wind but the Rain experienced had the bigger Impact The group stated that some concentration on the wind aspect was helpful and that the calls with the advisors helped to convey what to expect. There was a general view that they did receive a particularly useful steer about how the timings may change during the event. This was picked up more widely by the group as a preference where possible to consider issuing warnings for N. Ireland as separate to mainland GB as it provides greater clarity on the end time of the event.

Action: Met Office to note that users in N. Ireland expressed a preference to warnings being issued as separate polygons where practical as it provides enhanced clarity when an event will start and finish specifically in N. Ireland which is helpful when planning recovery activity.

DP enquired about the 'thrive' aspects of the forecast, do they do much with tourist sector? How much interface is there with the outdoor economy e.g. Portrush. While mostly the focus is from a resilience side Met Office has provided commercial forecasts to the Open Golf Championships. WL confirmed that the link in would be in through resilience colleagues for the big events so it would feed through. IH confirmed that civil contingency advisors work well with the local authorities and maintain a list of all the sizeable public events, and this was also recognised by delegates.

JM noted that on layer and tactical calls they would link through to events through the multi-agency structures and to partners. Belfast City events planning group are joined up on civil contingency arrangements. They use long range forecast from Met Office and the scenarios that might occur. In local councils they get information in the planning stage to mitigate any risks e.g. what surface to put down e.g. bark. More information and guidance for travel is put out for indoors events. That is increasing the do not travel advice.

Item 6 In camera session (No Met Office colleagues present)

The general message from participants is that the Met Office are doing a really good job for N. Ireland. They cited the expertise in the advisor team of IH, JW, and recently joined BD who with her background in marketing and communications which they feel is a real asset. They cited clear and useful updates around Strom Darragh as good, and their understanding of the local

geography is brilliant. They work very closely with the advisors, and the extent of their involvement is widely recognised and appreciated. There was a reiteration of the point about wider warnings having a N. Ireland focus with an example of the cancellation of the warning for New Years Day in advance of New Years Day. This was recognised by delegates as a self-confident/mature decision.

They felt that they do try and home in on the aspects that will affect 'thrive' and they are good at bringing in government colleagues like DFI's emergency planning lead, Seamus McCann, into the conversation.

The other area to keep up the focus is on the unique border community challenge.

DP sought clarity on whether it was an Amber that triggers a decision in activating resources. The group were absolutely clear that it wasn't and that they pay close attention to which impact column of the matrix the warning is in, and a higher impact yellow will trigger preparations as they know it could move up the impact column. They acknowledged that this distinction wasn't the same for the public who generally react to the colour of the warning. The group are keen to see the development and improvement of the App as they often use that at the first point of call before seeking or being signposted to additional information on the website or Hazard Manager. With the Impact being more important than the colour, the point was made that the impact category on the matrix could be made more prominent on the App as that is what many local authority responders use as their primary source of Met Office engagement. Positive views about the map view for temperature on the App.

Item 7: Review of the multi-agency severe weather framework

JM provided the group with an update on the work that has been undertaken to develop the revised NI multi agency severe weather framework. The core components of the framework were explained and how agencies and organisations worked together to provide a comprehensive review. Relevant organisations completed 'action cards' outlining their internal responses to the activation of the framework. The group were informed that the master copy will be available on Resilience Direct. DP noted it was very encouraging to see such a clear end to end process to deliver under pressure at short notice.

Item 8: DfI Major Emergency Response Plan (MERP)

DM explained the governance set up and roles and responsibilities in the development of the plan. The Key activities centre around water, transport and planning. DM provided more detail about the MERP and the actions to be taken in the event of responding to a major emergency. The plan helps responders and guides on actions to be taken. DM updated on the NI civil contingency risk register.

The group noted with interest both presentations. It was stated that the MERP was going to be used to rehearse an event of hitherto unseen rainfall proportions to exercise the process and local multi-Agency response.

Item 9: Feedback from in camera session

DP summarised the key overall messages that came up in the in camera session with a focus on communication and communities in the Border area, the dependency on the App by local authority responders to get the first glance at what an event might look like and the request to

issue warnings for N. Ireland specifically as this provides greater clarity on start and end times to inform response and recovery phases and to maximise efficiency in deployment of resource.

Item 10: AOB

N. Ireland colleagues raised the prospect of inviting Met Office colleagues to join Local Impact Assessment Call (LIAC) when weather is the only component being discussed. Met Office advisor team were open to considering that invite.