

Leader of the Council
Councillor D Hitchiner

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Our Ref: DH/md
Please ask for: Councillor D Hitchiner
Direct line / Extension: 01432 260046
E-mail: David.Hitchiner@herefordshire.gov.uk

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Dear Prime Minister,

Following Storm Dennis, we thought it important to write to you to set out our request for vital support.

The Impact of Storm Dennis in Herefordshire

Herefordshire has been severely impacted by Storm Dennis with flood damage having been inflicted on more than 386 residential properties and businesses, (322 residential and 64 business) in the county at the latest count. In response to this major incident and as part of the multi-agency response, Herefordshire Council has mobilised its resources, alongside those from our communities, to keep our residents safe. We are continuing to clean up the County and this recovery operation will have to continue for some time. Clearly, both the council and the community that it serves, is now left with the financial consequences of the widespread flooding. It is good that government have activated the Bellwin Scheme and various grants for those affected but we believe the government can do much more.

Bellwin

Given the scale of impact we are calling for the Bellwin period to be extended to 3 months. Further, Bellwin is restrictive in covering all genuine recovery costs. Much of the damage to the highway network which in a county as large as Herefordshire means significant pressure put on our budgets is not covered by this scheme. This damage places a significant strain on a rural community that is dependent on its local roads to go about daily life. The scope of Bellwin needs urgent review to cover more infrastructure costs if the impact of Storm Dennis is not to unduly impair Herefordshire's ability to thrive. A huge capital investment is now required in our Herefordshire highways to address the impairment, in what is also a nationally important asset, our local roads.

We anticipate the bill for repairing the immediate impact of Storm Dennis to be c£10 million, for which we have no provision.

Resilient Infrastructure

More infrastructure funds need to be made available in the longer-term for the management of bridges, roads and drainage assets that have been put under severe pressure by not only this storm, but the events that are yet to come. We have been at the forefront of asset management practices in the UK highway sector and as a result have improved the overall condition of our roads through our sound asset management strategy. However, we will now not be able to maintain the improvement made, without an enhanced and sustained investment in our infrastructure assets.

We have £336 million of accumulated depreciation in our highways, a £4.3 million asset and each year we receive only c£11 million to invest in the maintenance of this asset. This sum must increase if we are to sustain the County's local roads in a, not perfect but resilient state. Sustained capital investment of a minimum of an additional £10m per annum funded from Government is essential.

Ministers will also be aware that regular routine maintenance of highway and drainage assets is essential to the resilience of the network. After many years of reductions in revenue funding at local and national level this must be halted and reversed. Government needs to support local government in also addressing this through the provision

of dedicated revenue funding for essential maintenance across the network. For Herefordshire we have estimated that £3 million is needed on an annual basis to plug the shortfall in current available funding.

Financial Support for Residents

Grant funding is useful but to only offer £500 for a residential property that has flooded is unrealistic. In many cases, this will hardly cover the immediate cleaning up of a property never mind the longer-term impact. Many properties that flood are difficult and expensive to insure and are occupied by the less well off, elderly or vulnerable people who are in greatest need of additional support.

More should be offered to those in the greatest need: could the sum on offer for the vulnerable and elderly be doubled?

Financial Support for Businesses

The level of support to businesses is low and in a County like Herefordshire, where the economy relies on a huge number of SMEs, the funding available is insufficient to save some businesses from failing entirely due to the impact of flooding. Offering business rate free periods does not help a small business that is under the valuation threshold and therefore does not pay rates. Herefordshire Council has a hardship fund to help individuals with severe financial difficulties but that is insufficient to cover all costs.

Government should do more to assist: could a grant be made available to a maximum value of £10k, aimed at covering rents for 6 months for those businesses that have had to decant to new premises as a direct result of flooding?

Financial Support for Agriculture

Agriculture is a hugely important sector in Herefordshire. Storm Dennis will have a long and far reaching impact on farmers who will not be able to cultivate their land, or have had crops destroyed by flood waters. Farmers are suffering as a consequence and as a sector that is often ignored as attentions are focused on alleviating the impact of flooding in the country's cities. We all want to be fed and in Herefordshire our farmers grow and rear a most diverse range of crop and livestock. They are farmers of World renown, not just for our orchards and famous cattle, and deserve support. Following flooding in October the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) announced a Farming Recovery Fund to support the many farmers in neighbouring Worcestershire badly affected by the recent flooding. Through this scheme, farmers and land managers who suffered uninsurable damage to their property were previously able to apply for grants of between £500 and £25,000 to cover repair costs. We hope you can now make a similar announcement for Herefordshire's farmers.

Landowners also have a key role to play in our resilience to flooding, we are working with many of them as part of our Natural Flood Management (NFM). We know that the agricultural community across Herefordshire will do all they can to improve the resilience of this county to flood, but we must recognise that they need to sustain a living by bringing their harvest to market.

Could Government now help sustain NFM in Herefordshire by building on the £0.6 million received to date and committing to an ongoing annual investment of £0.3 million that will enable NFM to become available to the 3671 farms across Herefordshire?

Investment in Flood Defences

In Herefordshire there is huge scope for extending flood defences along both the main rivers and into the many tributaries that feed them. It is the time to seriously look at the funding criteria for flood defences to enable fair investment in the defence our rural communities, market towns and Hereford itself. In Hereford, our market towns and in many rural communities, the benefit cost ratios naturally work out to be less and as such it becomes impossible to progress flood defence schemes for these deserving communities under the present rules. Now is the time to revisit the scheme, increase investment and ensure fairness in its distribution between urban and rural communities.

Insurance

Some households and businesses that have experienced flooding now struggle to insure their properties. Many have found that FloodRe will not insure them against flood, and there is no market alternative. Others, that FloodRe will do so but only at entirely unaffordable costs of insurance. We believe that the number of properties in Herefordshire in this position will be in the range of 300 – 500 properties. Many of those properties will be unsellable without the possibility of flood insurance. It would seem highly inequitable that those owners are literally stranded without flood insurance of any kind. Many purchased those properties when there was no identifiable risk of flood. The floods experienced in the last two weeks in Herefordshire have after all, been unprecedented.

Could Government assist in reviewing FloodRe to ensure that insurance is made available to all properties liable to flood, and that there is an affordable cap on this related to the value of the property?

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Working to Support Our Communities

Herefordshire would welcome the opportunity to work with Government to enable early assurances and announcements to those residents recently affected by Storm Dennis.

We hope you will agree to meet us along with local MPs, at your earliest convenience, so that together we can deliver the support that our community deserves, both in recovery from this storm and in our progress towards a more resilient future.

Yours sincerely

COUNCILLOR DAVID HITCHINER
LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

ALISTAIR NEILL
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

COUNCILLOR JOHN HARRINGTON
CABINET MEMBER - INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRANSPORT

cc Jesse Norman MP Hereford and South Hereford
Bill Wiggin MP North Herefordshire