

Speech by Mr. Simon Coveney , T.D.,

Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government

Launch of the Be Winter-Ready Campaign

- I am delighted to be here today with my colleagues, Mr. Shane Ross, Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Mr. Sean Canney, Minister of State for the Office of Public Works and Flood Relief and Mr. Paul Kehoe, Minister of State at the Department of Defence and to be associated with the Be Winter Ready campaign, now in its sixth year.
- I have been involved with this campaign for 5 years now in my previous role as Minister for Defence and I am delighted to see how the campaign has developed and grown over the years.
- The campaign aims to provide advice to individuals, communities, and businesses to enable them to prepare for the coming winter.
- While I am sure we all still remember the two episodes of severe cold in 2010, more recent severe weather emergencies have been characterised by wind and rain, and in late 2013/early 2014 by a series of severe Atlantic storms that persisted for over 2 months.
- Last winter it was the turn of incessant rain, punctuated by more Atlantic storms that produced the worst flooding in generations.

- Rainfall over this period was nearly double the norm, making it the wettest winter ever recorded.
- November 2015 was in itself an exceptionally wet month and the start of December saw the impact of Storm Desmond affecting primarily the midlands and west of the country.
- When Storm Frank arrived in late December it was the turn of the South East to be inundated.
- The most visible, severe and devastating impact of the flooding was on householders, businesses and farms that had their homes and properties affected by floodwater.
- In many cases the flooding caused enormous hardship with families being forced to evacuate their homes and in some cases they were unable to return for months.
- The impact was especially severe as the flooding occurred over Christmas when rather than settling down to enjoy the holiday period, families and business owners found themselves in a desperate battle to save their homes and businesses from rising floodwaters.
- The worst affected counties were Cork, Kerry, Mayo, Galway and Roscommon.

- In addition to those homes and businesses directly impacted by floodwaters, a great many more found themselves marooned and cut off by flooded roads.
- This caused enormous disruption to scores of householders in getting to schools and workplaces.
- In many locations, elderly and vulnerable people faced particular difficulties in accessing essential services.
- Drawing on the experience of previous years and lessons learned, both central and local government are prepared and ready to respond to severe weather events and to work quickly to restore society's normal functioning.
- My Department is assigned the Lead Government Department role for the response to severe weather events and takes on the task of convening and leading the National Emergency Coordination Group, which brings together the entire panoply of Government, when severe weather, flooding or other such events occur.
- Last winter, my Department convened a National Emergency Coordination Group for Severe Weather in anticipation of the arrival of storm Desmond on 3 December.
- The Group met daily until the floodwaters began to recede in mid-January 2016, bringing a "whole of Government" response to bear in dealing with this crisis.

- At the local level, arrangements for the response to emergency events have developed greatly in the last decade in Ireland, learning from each previous event.
- The 2006 document, A Framework for Major Emergency Management, sets out arrangements whereby the three Principal Response Agencies, An Garda Síochána, the HSE and local authorities, work together and with the Defence Forces and the Voluntary and Community sectors in responding to emergencies.
- The Framework provides that Local Authorities are the lead agency for co-ordinating the response to severe weather events and requires all Local Authorities to include provisions for severe weather in their Major Emergency Plans.
- During recent severe weather incidents, including last winter's flooding, the co-ordination structures and procedures in these plans were used extensively and included activation of both Local Co-ordination Groups and internal Crisis Management Teams.
- Early activation of the Local Co-ordination Groups enables decisions to be made quickly at the onset of severe weather.
- During those recent severe weather events, many Local Co-ordination Groups were in a position to anticipate problems and take appropriate action at a very early stage.

- While the response is coordinated and managed at a local level in the first instance, as was the case last winter, my Department can convene at short notice, a National Emergency Co-ordination Group for Severe Weather in support of this local response, should it be required.
- Yesterday, my Department brought to Government a major Review Report on the response to last winter's flooding.
- This Report describes the meteorological and hydrological characteristics of the period and reviews the impact of the storms on the communities involved.
- It describes the preparedness and the response of the State Agencies to the severe weather events while also detailing the recovery measures that were put in place by Government to deal with the aftermath of the flooding.
- In examining the response, the report concludes that the Lead Government Department model worked effectively for the management of this emergency at national level.
- The severe weather protocols in place in all the Principal Response Agencies, and underpinned by the Framework for Major Emergency Management, are also considered to have worked effectively at a local level.

- Notwithstanding the effectiveness of the response, the Report recommends that the Framework, now in its tenth year, be reviewed to further enhance inter-agency co-operation in emergency response related activities.
- As part of this review, the role of the community and voluntary sector in building resilience to major emergencies will be given special consideration.
- We have learned that central to an effective response to any weather related emergency is the level of preparedness and resilience of ordinary people.
- During the flooding, communities and individuals worked together with the Principal Response Agencies, demonstrating remarkable resilience and resourcefulness to further bolster the response effort.
- These combined efforts were a contributory factor in ensuring that fewer properties were flooded last winter than during the previous severe flooding event of 2009, despite the floodwaters being higher in many areas.
- The Be Winter-Ready Campaign is a key support to this community resilience.
- In addition, there are a range of community and voluntary groups that are of huge support to the Principal Response Agencies as well as those in need.

- I wish to acknowledge the work of both the Principal Response Agencies for their commitment in maintaining essential services during recent severe weather incidents and the volunteers and community groups who assisted them.
- The importance of this cooperation cannot be over-emphasised and helps to ensure that everybody, especially older and more vulnerable people are supported.

Conclusion:

- We have just concluded a meeting of the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning which dealt with winter-preparedness and where a comprehensive briefing was provided from across the range of Government Departments and Agencies.
- We are jointly launching this campaign to emphasise the 'whole of Government' approach that is in place.
- The 'Be Winter-Ready' Booklet, leaflets and website gives information to householders on being prepared and provides practical advice for coping during episodes of severe weather.
- The main message is simple; be prepared, stay safe and know where to find help if you need it.

Thank you.