

“Be Winter-Ready” Information Campaign

Q&As for launch on 9 November 2016

#bewinterready

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1. What is the purpose of the campaign?

The purpose of the campaign is to provide advice and information to help the public be better prepared to deal with a period of severe weather. A website www.winterready.ie is available to provide practical advice and contact details of the main services that can provide help in extreme weather-related emergencies. The campaign is also to inform and reassure people that the Government has made preparations for the winter. The key message of the campaign is:

“to be prepared, stay safe and know where to get help should you need it”.

2. Who should I call if I need advice or guidance during a severe weather emergency?

The Website provides a range of numbers that you should call if you need information or advice from a range of response agencies and service providers. In the event of an acute emergency, the emergency services can be contacted by dialing 112 or 999.

3. How much has the campaign cost?

The costs of the campaign have been kept to a minimum. Departments are working together and utilizing existing budgets. The total cost this year is estimated to be approximately €45,000.

4. What about members of the public who do not have access to the internet?

A synopsis of the advice and contact information on the website is contained in a hardcopy booklet which can be obtained from from the Office of Emergency Planning at LoCall 1890-252736 or a limited quantity can be ordered by emailing oepl@defence.ie

5. What is the likelihood of another severe winter?

Comparable winters (over recent decades) to that of 2010/11 were in 2009/10, 1983/84, 1978/79, 1962/63 and 1946/47. Such winters occur roughly once every ten years, so the percentage chance of the coming winter being as severe as that of 2010/11 is approx 10%. The answer is we cannot say – but our message is ‘it is always better to be prepared’.

6. Why are Atlantic storms so destructive?

Atlantic storms that affect our country can be characterised by a combination of strong winds, heavy rain. When these are allied with extremely high tides widespread damage and disruption can be caused. The destructive power of Atlantic storms is primarily felt at the coast, where high waves can drive inland well beyond their usual limit and damage houses, roads and infrastructure.

7. What is the likelihood of a winter characterized by severe storms?

A recent study by the Irish Climate and Research Unit at NUI Maynooth, in collaboration with the Centre for Hydrological and Ecosystem Science at Loughborough University, found that the winter of 2013/2014 was the stormiest for at least 143 years when storm frequency and intensity are considered together. While every winter sees Atlantic storms and episodes of high winds, the storm that occurred 12 February 2014 was an exceptional event. Mean wind speeds above storm force (90km/h) were experienced widely in southwest and western coastal counties from Cork to Mayo. Gusts in excess of 110 km/h were prevalent across the southern half of the country; many stations experienced gusts above 130km/h, while the maximum gust of 160km/h was recorded in Shannon Airport. Storms of this ferocity are not often experienced in Ireland; the most recent comparable events were the storms of December 24 1997 and December 26 1998. Historically the so-called “Night of the Big Wind” on 6/7 January 1839 caused widespread damage

throughout Ireland and parts of Britain, and more storms through February 1903 had similar devastating effects. While there is evidence to suggest that severe storms are becoming more frequent, the storms in 2014 could be considered a one in a hundred year event.

8. What was the extent of the damage caused by severe weather in recent years?

The total estimated financial impact of the 2013/2014 severe storms in terms of damage to public infrastructure was €61.472m for the period of severe weather from 13 December 2013 to 6 January 2014.

Substantial damage was caused to the transport infrastructure of €6.95m during 2013/2014 while there was a further €1.2m damage to OPW infrastructure.

A further €18m was recouped by the DHPCLG for clean-up costs and necessary immediate repairs during the severe flooding events of 2015/2016 which lasted from early December to mid-January.

A total of €110 million was made available for repair works necessitated by severe weather in 2015/16:

- €8 million was allocated to Transport Infrastructure Ireland for works on national roads damaged as a result of the storms and flooding
- €8 million was allocated to Irish Rail for repairs to damaged rail infrastructure.
- €94 million for regional and local roads

The total of €110m was made up of €96m extra money from Government and €14m allocated from the Regional and Local road grants.

9. What was the impact of the 2015/2016 flooding?

The exceptional and in some areas record breaking rainfall that caused some of the worst flooding in Irelands history began in November 2015 and continued right up until early January 2016. This weather was punctuated by a series of Atlantic Storms including Storms Desmond, Eva and Frank. Rainfall totals over the period were 189% of normal, making it the wettest winter ever recorded.

The worst affected areas were the west, southwest and the areas along the Shannon and its tributaries and later the South East. Homes and businesses were flooded, transport links severely impacted and disruption was caused to everyday life for people in large swathes of the country. One of the most notable aspects of this severe weather emergency was its longevity, with flooding persisting in some areas into April 2016 and indeed longer in the turlough regions of South Galway.

The flooding presented an enormous challenge to the response agencies and the appropriate apparatus of state was mobilised.

The most acute and visible impacts of the flooding were to homes and businesses that were damaged by floodwaters and others that were cut off for extended periods of time. Transport infrastructure was severely disrupted and extensive damage was caused principally to the roads network. Large areas of farmland were flooded impacting on agricultural activity and raising animal welfare concerns.

A full report into the 2015/2016 flooding event will be available on the DHPCLG website shortly.

10. What was done to assist Local Authorities during the flooding?

The recouping of unbudgeted local authority expenditure associated with the response to and clean-up after significant emergencies of all kinds has been the policy since the commencement of the use of the Framework for Major Emergency Management, in which local authorities are designated as a Principal Response Agency. This approach was applied after the severe flooding of November 2009, the two severe cold periods of January and December 2010 and the winter storms of 2013/14 and again with the flooding of winter 2015/2016.

The Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government made funding of €18m available to assist Local Authorities in meeting these exceptional costs that they could not meet from within their existing resources in relation to the 2015/2016 flooding event.

A full report into the 2015/2016 flooding event will be available on the DHPCLG website shortly.

11. What lessons have been learned from recent experiences?

There was a comprehensive review carried out following severe cold weather of 2009/10. The Review Report published by the Department of Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government made a number of recommendations. Many of these have been implemented. Some are more longer term and the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning is overseeing the implementation of these recommendations. These recommendations included, inter alia, better weather warning systems, increased stocks of salt for road gritting, improved arrangements for prioritising and clearing public footpaths, better arrangements for dealing with stranded vehicles particularly at motorway junctions, new guidelines for local authorities in respect of distribution of grit for local gritting, better public information to the public and stronger linkages with business and the farming community.

The report on the 2015/2016 flooding that will be available shortly contains further recommendations to further enhance the response to severe weather and flooding.

12. What has the Government done to prepare?

The role of the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning is to ensure that there is coordination across the various departments and agencies. At this morning's meeting of the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning all of the relevant Departments and Agencies provided a briefing on what steps have been taken in order to be prepared. Each Agency is available to provide a briefing to the media.

13. Who is responsible for responding to a weather-related emergency?

The Department Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government is responsible for leading the response to weather-related emergencies. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport plays a major supporting role as transport is one of the main sectors affected by severe weather. The Office of Public Works leads in developing flood defences and infrastructure projects in flood-prone areas.

During severe weather events, the Severe Weather National Coordination Group comprising of 27 different Departments and Agencies meets when required. The Group can often convene twice a day and often during weekends. During the flooding of 2015/2016 the NCG met daily between early December and mid-January including over the Christmas and New Year holiday period.

The focus of the Group is to ensure that there is a coordinated “Whole of Government” response to weather situations; to provide high level support to front line responders; to address issues as they arise; and to ensure that timely and accurate information is provided to the general public.

The front line responders are Local Authorities, An Garda Síochána and the HSE supported by the Defence Forces, the voluntary emergency services, individuals and community groups who assist them.

14. Do Local Authorities provide warnings?

Some Local Authorities provide a pre-registered SMS text messaging service to mobile phones for their areas which you can sign-up for. Others provide details over their Web pages and on social media via Twitter and Facebook.

15. What will happen if we get another severe winter?

If we have another bout of severe weather the Severe Weather National Coordination Group will be activated in the National Emergency Coordination Centre and it will bring all of the relevant State Agencies together to develop a ‘Whole of Government’ response. This will include a comprehensive public information programme.

16. How far ahead can Met Éireann warn of severe weather?

Met Éireann monitors developments in the weather up to approximately two weeks ahead. Potential severe weather will usually become apparent at about one weeks lead-time, and it then monitors it for a day or two to see that the forecasts are evolving consistently. Met Éireann normally provides a “heads-up” in the public forecasts at about 5 days lead time, but doesn’t issue formal warnings until 2 to 3 days ahead as the extent of the affected areas and the severity of the anticipated conditions are more certain at these time scales.

17. Is the climate changing?

While the global climate is undoubtedly changing, and the evidence is especially clear in areas such as the Arctic, the location of Ireland in the “mid-latitudes” has protected us from the more extreme changes evident elsewhere. Research suggests that we will see very significant changes in Ireland’s climate during the current century, but these changes will not be evident on a year-to-year basis. So, there is no reason to suppose that the severe weather of recent winters (floods, severe cold, extreme winds and then floods again) can tell us anything useful regarding the coming winter, given the great variability of the weather from year to year at our latitudes.

18. Did we not have a lot of storms last winter?

The winter of 2015/16 was the first occasion during which Met Éireann, in conjunction with the UK Met Office, named winter storms above a certain level of severity. A total of 11 storms were named during the period from October to April, but not all of these affected Ireland – some only affected parts of the UK. However those storms in December – Desmond, Eva and Frank – brought especially heavy rain which led to flooding

problems across both islands. The winter of 2015/16 was not nearly as bad for strong winds as the winter of 2013/14, but it was worse for flooding.

19. Will we be naming storms this winter?

Yes, the joint storm-naming scheme will be used again this winter. The names for this coming season are on the Met Éireann website. It is important to note that storm-naming is an attempt to raise the awareness among the public of an impending severe weather event, so that they can take steps to avoid putting themselves in danger.

20. Is flooding likely to be a problem again this winter?

Flooding is a regular winter hazard and there is rarely a winter passes without some flooding problems, although usually they are confined to relatively small regions. The flooding we experiences in late 2015, as with the flooding in 2009, were both very severe events and were typically augmented by accumulations of rain over many weeks followed by one or more heavy rain events. As of today we have no particular to expect a repeat of last winter.

21. How can we get information on power supply interruptions?

Interruptions to power supplies are rare, but when they do occur customers need to find out quickly and easily when their power will be restored. ESB Network's "PowerCheck" provides an easy way for customers to access this information. PowerCheck is an App from ESB Networks which provides updates for customers regarding planned and unplanned power supply interruptions. This free App is accessible for iPhones and Android smartphones and online at: www.esbpowercheck.ie

22. Will transport services be disrupted by severe weather?

Transport services are always susceptible to severe weather events such as heavy snow, severe ice, flooding and high winds. However, our transport operators and agencies have response plans in place in the event of severe weather. These plans are to keep our national road network, rail and airport runways open as far as possible, and to keep the public informed of developments throughout any severe weather period.

23. Where can I get Contact Details for Transport Operators?

Contact details for the transport operators are provided on the www.winterready.ie and www.dttas.ie websites and in the "Be Winter-Ready" booklet which is available on-line at both websites. www.dttas.ie also has a quick and customer-friendly portal to all the above Public Transport operator/Agency sites and to other information sites such as those of Met Éireann, the Local Authorities, AA Roadwatch and Local Radio Stations. This information will be uploaded during severe weather events. Details can be found on the 'Transport Information Guide during Severe Weather 2016 – 2017' on the homepage.

24. How do I check whether my Bus/Train/Luas is running?

You have a number of options. Firstly listen to the national and local radio stations who keep their listeners updated during severe weather events. You can access www.dttas.ie on the web and this site will take you to which ever public transport operator you wish to check. www.transportforireland.ie provides real time information for transport in the Dublin area. You can also access the operators directly on their websites and keep up to date on their Social Media.

For the public without web access you should check the phone book for customer service telephone numbers for the transport operators for your area. Efforts are made to extend the opening hours of these services during severe weather.

25. How can I get information on road conditions?

In the event of severe weather, details of road conditions can be found on the websites of the Transport Infrastructure Ireland www.tii.ie, www.tiitraffic.ie and local authorities through the websites www.dttas.ie and www.winterready.ie. Details will also be available from national and local radio and media.

26. What steps can I take to prepare for the coming winter?

The Winter Ready booklet and website has many helpful tips on how to prepare for the coming winter. www.winterready.ie You should consider developing a personal, family and/or business plan as a preparation for this winter and for severe weather events.

27. Are sufficient supplies of salt in the country to keep our roads open?

Yes. At the start of this winter 240,000 tonnes of salt will be available and strategically located across the country. By comparison, 96,000 tonnes of salt was used over last winter and some 130,000 tonnes was used during the very severe winter of 2010/2011. However, supplies of salt during the winter of 2010/2011 were severely constrained. Provision is also in place to acquire additional stocks over the winter in the unlikely scenario that more stocks would be needed. Local Authorities have Winter Maintenance Plans in place for the coming winter, aimed at keeping our national and strategic routes open should severe weather occur.

28. How many snow ploughs and salt spreaders do we have in the country?

There are 335 Snow Ploughs and 347 Salt Spreaders located throughout the country.

29. How do I check if my road route has been salted?

In advance of this severe weather event your local council will have published on their websites the priority routes being treated during severe weather. In total, normal winter maintenance covers approximately 18,000 km of our 96,000 km road system. It is not possible to treat the entire roads network. National/Local Radio and AA Roadwatch also provide updated information. If you are using the motorway system you can access live pictures of conditions on your route by checking the TII website. Links to all the local authority websites are available on the www.dttas.ie website.

30. Where can I get more information on airports?

All our airports operate arrival/departure information on their websites. There are links to these websites on www.dttas.ie. When a severe weather event occurs make sure to check with your airline company for any changes. Additionally, the national/local radio stations are very useful in providing updated information.

31. Should I clear my footpath if it snows?

Yes, all householders and businesses are being encouraged to clear snow and ice from in front of their premises. This will help everyone in the community to get around more safely. The Website provides advice on how best to carry out this task and, of course, only clear snow if you are confident to do so and you don't have any underlying medical complaints.

32. Can I be sued if I clear my footpath and somebody subsequently falls?

No, you will not be liable; the clear advice from the Attorney General is that no liability

arises where footpaths are cleared in a safe manner. The same advice applies in the case of the spreading of grit by volunteers on local roads – i.e. that the issue of liability does not arise where the material is delivered, stored and used in a safe manner and does not cause a hazard.

33. What is Government Policy on Flood Risk Management?

The Office of Public Works (OPW) is co-ordinating Ireland's whole of Government approach to flood risk management across three strategic and policy:

- Prevention by avoiding construction in flood-prone areas.
- Protection by taking feasible measures, both structural and non-structural, to reduce the likelihood and impact of floods.
- Preparedness by informing the public about dealing with flood risk and a flood.

Irish Flood Risk Management complies with international best practice and is well on track according to the renowned Dutch Risk Reduction Team that completed a Peer Review of Ireland's approach to flood risk management. The Dutch benchmark of Ireland's policy against international best practice reported our critical achievements to date include:

- that we have profiled the main flood risk areas, through the CFRAM programme.
- significant Government investment of almost €400m since 1995 to reduce flood damage,
- the introduction in 2009 of planning guidelines so that we no longer build on flood plains, and
- our progress in responding to flooding events.

34. Who is responsible for flood protection works?

Historically, flood risk management focused on land drainage for the benefit of agricultural improvement. Under the Arterial Drainage Act, 1945 the OPW completed 34 arterial drainage schemes and 5 estuarine embankment schemes between 1945 and 1995. The OPW continues to maintain in excess of 11,500 km of channel, 730 km of embankments, 18,500 bridges and 750 ancillary structures such as sluice gates, pumping stations and tidal barrages, providing protection to approximately 650,000 acres (265,400 hectares) of benefitting land. Local Authorities are responsible for drainage schemes constructed prior to 1945.

With increasing urbanisation, the Arterial Drainage Act, 1945, was amended in 1995 to permit the OPW to implement localised flood relief schemes to provide flood protection for cities, towns and villages. Since 1996, 37 major flood defence schemes have already been constructed throughout the country. By the end of 2016, 12 new schemes will be under construction and a further 25 schemes will be at design and planning stage and will all be advanced to construction over the next 3-4 years. The largest scheme ever to be undertaken in the country will start construction next year in Cork City.

The OPW works in partnership with Local Authorities to deliver major urban flood defence schemes and also supports the delivery of certain local flood relief projects where a solution can be readily identified and achieved in a short time frame, under the Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme.

35. What is the Minor Flood Mitigation Works & Coastal Protection Scheme?

Local flooding issues are a matter, in the first instance, for each Local Authority to investigate and address. The Local Authority may carry out flood mitigation and coastal protection works using its own resources. Local Authorities may also apply to the OPW for funding under Minor Flood Mitigation Works & Coastal Protection Scheme. This scheme provides funding to Local Authorities to undertake minor flood mitigation works or studies, costing less than €0.5m each, to address localised flooding and coastal protection problems within their administrative areas. All applications are assessed under the eligibility criteria of the Scheme, which include a requirement that any measures are cost beneficial, and having regard to the OPW's overall availability of funding. Since this scheme was established in 2009, OPW has approved funding of €35m for over 550 projects.

36. What is the Government doing to lessen the effects of flooding?

The principal response mechanisms to flood emergencies are set out in the Major Emergency Management Framework, see www.mem.ie. The Winter Ready booklet also details such measures. Preparatory measures which can be undertaken by the householder to better protect their dwellings against flooding inundation are also detailed at the website www.flooding.ie

The Office of Public Works (OPW) is the lead agency in relation to flood risk management. An increased allocation for flood relief activities has been agreed by Government totalling €430m in the period 2016-2021 with the annual budget allocation rising from €45m to €100m by 2021. The flood protection capital programme 2016 – 2021 will build on the very significant investment of €460m that has already been undertaken in flood relief works throughout the country over the last 20 years and it will provide the means to provide feasible protection to homes and businesses in major urban areas together with investment in many minor works projects to address more localised flooding problems.

The OPW has an on-going engagement with the Principal Response Agencies to ensure adequate information sharing on flood risk data and this will become more focused with the detailed level of information which will emerge from the CFRAM Programme. An implementation plan for the first stage of the National Flood Forecasting and Warning Service has been agreed following the Government's decision of 5th January 2016 to establish the Flood Forecasting Service over the coming 4 to 5 years within Met Éireann. Existing flood forecasting and warning systems and arrangements including the European Flood Awareness System will continue to be utilised until the new Service is fully established.

37. What is the Catchment Flood Risk Assessment & Management (CFRAM) programme?

The CFRAM Programme is an initiative that came from the National Review of Flood Policy (2004) that will also deliver on the requirements of the EU 'Floods' Directive (2007). The CFRAM Programme is focused on 300 areas of potentially significant risk, referred to as Areas for Further Assessment (AFAs). The AFAs were identified through a national screening exercise, the National Preliminary Flood Risk Assessment (PFRA), for

such areas where there may be a significant risk to communities associated with flooding. The PFRA was completed in Ireland in 2011 following public consultation.

The flood maps produced through the CFRAM Studies will complement the existing flood mapping produced by the OPW (www.floodmaps.ie) and the national indicative fluvial, coastal, pluvial and groundwater flood maps that have previously been provided to the local authorities around the country. Flood maps produced under the CFRAM Programme will be a valuable resource for flood event emergency planning and response.

In total, 29 draft Flood Risk Management Plans have now been prepared containing preferred feasible measures that can address the significant flood risks identified in a comprehensive and sustainable way. These specific measures will be prioritised to determine the long-term investment programme for flood risk management in Ireland. The draft Flood Risk Management Plans have been issued for public consultation on a rolling basis since July and is a significant milestone as part of the CFRAM Programme. It is very important, therefore, that as many people as possible – local communities, businesses and environmental groups engage in this consultation process to inform the final plans.

These Plans are the outputs of the largest flood-related study of its kind undertaken in this country, incorporating decades of rainfall and water-level data, thousands of kilometres of river and flood plain surveys and significant analysis and modelling by OPW Engineers.

OPW will finalise the Plans, taking account of submissions received during this consultation phase and the final plans will then need to be approved by Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform before being adopted by the Local Authorities. A priority list of schemes will be put in place to be advanced to detailed design and construction over the next few years.

38. Will Ireland have a Flood Forecasting Service?

Following a Government Decision in January 2016, a national Flood Forecasting Service is being established as a new operational unit within Met Éireann with guidance for standards and performance overseen by the OPW. When fully operational, this service will be of significant benefit to communities and individuals to prepare for and lessen the impact of flooding.

The service will deal with flood forecasting from fluvial (river) and coastal sources and when established it will involve the issuing of flood forecasts and general alerts at both national and catchment scales.

A Steering Group has been established to steer, support and oversee the establishment of the new service and an implementation plan has now been agreed. Implementation will comprise a number of phases, including an initial set-up phase (scheduled for completion by Q3 2018) and a development and trial phase (scheduled for completion by Q1 2020). Given the complexities involved in establishing, designing, developing and testing this new service, it is anticipated that it will take 4-5 years before it is fully operational.

In recognition of the timescale required to develop the full operational capacity of the service, and mindful of the pressing national requirement for such a service, the Steering Group is examining options for prompt capacity development through collaboration with other national meteorological or related service providers who have experience in operational flood forecasting.

In the interim period, existing flood forecasting and warning systems and arrangements will continue to be maintained.

39. What is the role of the Interdepartmental Flood Policy Co-ordination Group?

The role of the Group is to take a whole of Government approach to the issue of Flood Policy. The Group is chaired by the Minister of State for the Office of Public Works and Flood Relief and consists of representatives of 7 Government departments with sectoral responsibility.

In addition to the 10 year programme of flood defence schemes to be prioritised by the OPW through CFRAM, the Group is considering a range of non-structural measures and other policies including insurance, community resilience, individual property protection and voluntary home relocation. Information on the Group is available on the OPW website (www.opw.ie).

The initial outcome from the two Individual Property Protection projects announced by Government in January 2016, in Kilkenny and Crossmolina, are due later this year. These will inform any Government schemes to support IPP and in turn any voluntary home/farmyard relocation as part of an overall planned prioritised investment to managing national flood risk.

40. What is Government Strategy in relation to flood insurance?

The Department of Finance is responsible for insurance policy and its role on the Interdepartmental Group has been to examine the issue of flood insurance availability, to assess options around this issue and to provide a comprehensive analysis of each option with a view to providing a recommendation to Government.

OPW and insurance company representatives, Insurance Ireland, have an agreed system of information sharing in relation to completed flood alleviation schemes. The outcome of this arrangement is that the insurance industry has a much greater level of information and understanding of the extent of the protection provided by completed OPW flood defence works and is in a position to reflect this in assessing the provision of flood insurance to householders in areas where works have been completed.

This facilitates, to the greatest extent possible, the availability to the public of insurance against the risk of flooding.

41. Is insurance against flood risk readily available throughout the country?

The provision of insurance cover, and the level of premiums charged and the policy terms applied are a matter for individual insurers. Insurance companies make commercial decisions on the provision of insurance cover based on their assessment of the risks they would be accepting on a case by case basis.

Under the Memorandum of Understanding between the Office of Public Works and Insurance Ireland, OPW is providing Insurance Ireland with detailed background and technical information on all completed OPW flood defence schemes in an agreed format. Insurance Ireland members have committed to take into account all information provided

by OPW when assessing exposure to flood risk within these areas. Data on OPW completed schemes has been provided to Insurance Ireland.

The Department of Finance and OPW meet insurance company representatives on a quarterly basis to discuss a broad range of shared issues between the State and the insurance industry including the availability of flood insurance cover.

42. What is the role of the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group?

In January, the Government took decisive action to support the existing plans in place to address flooding on the Shannon by establishing the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group to enhance on-going co-operation across all of the State agencies involved with the River Shannon, including ESB, Waterways Ireland, Bord na Móna, Inland Fisheries Ireland, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, OPW and the relevant local authorities.

Its extensive Work Programme, published on the OPW website highlights the current proactive and co-ordinated approach by all state agencies to flood risk management on the Shannon catchment. The Working Group is:

- building on the existing work and commitment of all the State Agencies involved in flood risk
- focussed on ensuring the best possible level of co-ordination between all statutory bodies involved in flood management on the Shannon
- solutions focussed, designed to deliver the highest level of efficiencies to add value to the Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme.

The Group held three Open Days on its work programme to discuss the role and work of the Group with the public, and met with the Irish Farmers Association to discuss and explore the approach being adopted to address their issues of concern.

There have been five meetings of the Group to date, chaired by the Chairman of the OPW. At the meeting held on 18th October, the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group discussed the benefits of possible measures to managing flood risk for Winter 2016/2017 and decided to trial and carefully monitor the lowering of the lake levels in Lough Allen in specific circumstances to help to mitigate in a small way potential flood risk for this Winter. While the impact of this initiative may be quite small, this demonstrates the continued commitment of the agencies to work in a coordinated way to explore all measures that may benefit the communities along the River Shannon.

The Group also agreed to evaluate the benefits from any short and medium term programme of localised dredging and any future piloting to remove some pinch points along the Shannon. The Group will discuss both this evaluation and progression with the lake levels trial throughout this Winter.

43. How are water levels on the Shannon managed?

The river level is primarily the result of the amount of rain that falls on the river catchment area. The water levels on the 3 lakes (Lough Allen, Lough Ree and Lough Derg) are

controlled and managed by the ESB for the purpose of electricity generation while the levels in between the lakes are managed by Waterways Ireland for navigation purposes.

There is daily communication and a co-ordinated approach to management of the levels between Waterways Ireland and the ESB with the ESB managing levels for electricity production and Waterways Ireland managing the levels for navigation in the boating season.

At the meeting held on 18th October, the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group decided to trial the lowering of the lake levels in Lough Allen to help mitigate potential flood risk for this Winter.

From the analysis completed, this may have a small positive impact on the extent of certain flood events that might occur during a Winter. This is to be achieved through protocols to be agreed between the OPW, the ESB and Waterways Ireland with input from the relevant Local Authorities. The modelling and analysis completed shows that this action can only be done in specified conditions to avoid causing or exacerbating flooding downstream and this trial will need to be carefully monitored.

44. Severe weather can impact on the farming community – where can we get advice?

The farming community has proved to be very resilient in times of severe weather. Nonetheless, Teagasc provide specific advice based on best practice for the various sectors of agriculture in time of need and this is published on the Teagasc and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine websites and www.winterready.ie

The Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine together with Teagasc and the Office of Emergency Planning has prepared advice for farm families both in terms of planning for the impact of severe weather on livestock and farming activity in general. This advice is contained in the Winter Ready Booklet produced by the Office of Emergency Planning. Copies of the booklet are available on request from the OEP or on www.winterready.ie

The Department also operates an Animal Welfare Helpline (1850 211 990) which farmers can contact in the event of fodder shortages or other animal welfare related matters. Farmers should plan well in advance in order to minimise the effects of severe weather on their farming activity. Farmers should listen to news bulletins and weather forecasts and remember that farming is always a dangerous occupation but all the more so in difficult weather conditions.

45. What is the Government's role in assisting businesses?

The www.winterready.ie website provides specific advice for businesses. During last year's severe weather the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation consulted with a number of business representative bodies and fed back information on any significant incidents to the National Coordination Committee or to local frontline agencies (e.g. local authorities). A detailed checklist for businesses has been prepared outlining key measures to be taken. The checklist is available to download from www.forfas.ie and www.djei.ie

46. What about school closures?

The decision to close a school rests with the school management authority taking into consideration the full guidance and direction available from the principal response agencies, especially An Garda Síochána. Any decision to close is taken in the interest of child safety, having assessed the local risks and having consulted, as appropriate, with

school transport operators.

Some of the issues that schools take into account include:

- conditions in the school itself
- the capacity of the school to ensure the health and safety of students whilst in school
- the ability of parents, students, staff and school transport services to safely negotiate local road conditions to reach the school
- guidance and direction from the principal response agencies
- Guidance on time lost due to unforeseen closures as a result of severe weather is set out in circular 34/2011 which is available on the Department's website: www.education.ie

47. What is Bus Éireann's new policy in relation to School Transport Services in the event Met Éireann issues a Red Weather warning?

All services provided by Bus Éireann (by Bus Éireann school buses and contractors) under the Department of Education and Skills School Transport Scheme will be cancelled in the affected area if a Status Red weather warning is announced for all or part of a given day. Services will be cancelled on a per school basis – either all or no services to a given school will operate. The decision will be an operational matter at the sole discretion of Bus Éireann.

48. What about schools in the event of Bus Eireann's withdrawing of school buses following a red alert?

It remains the independent decision of each school whether to close in a red alert; some schools do not have a high proportion of children who use the school transport scheme. This Bus Éireann School Transport policy for red weather alerts has been communicated to school management bodies, who make independent decisions on school closures, to schools served, and to parents of children who avail of these school transport services. The decision to close a school always rests with the school management authority, (in such cases, the Principal, acting on behalf of the Board of Management), taking into consideration the full guidance and direction available from the principal response agencies, - especially An Garda Síochána, - as well as any other contingencies, for example a decision by Bus Eireann to withdraw school bus services. In these circumstances, Bus Éireann will keep schools and media informed of school transport developments.

Any decision to close a school, - or otherwise, - is taken in the interest of child safety, having assessed the local risks and having consulted, - as appropriate, - with school transport operators, including Bus Eireann.

Some of the issues that schools would in such circumstances consider include;

- The proportion of the school population depending on Bus Eireann for transport to and from school.
- The ability, generally, of students and staff, parents and other visitors, - and other school transport services, - to safely negotiate local road conditions.
- The capacity of the school to ensure the health and safety of students in the absence of transport home from school.
- Guidance and direction, as always, from the principal response agencies, especially An Garda Síochána.

49. Why did Bus Eireann implement this policy when they did?

Status Red Weather Warnings are a relatively new development and the advice on what to do on these occasions continues to be refined. Bus Éireann decided on this policy based on key principle of safety on our School Transport services– it was announced now as we head towards the winter season and poorer weather conditions.

50. What actions were taken previously to School Transport Services when bad weather occurred? (Will School Transport Services be cancelled in the event of other weather warnings- or adverse weather conditions?)

In line with previous procedure, Bus Éireann will assess particular routes/areas on the given day and a decision will be made locally by the Regional School Transport Office on whether to operate a service or not. Individual services may be cancelled without notice due to adverse weather conditions on safety grounds and nothing in this new policy changes this approach.

51. Was there consultation with the Department of Education on the policy?

Yes, there was extensive consultation with the Department of Education and Skills- on whose behalf Bus Éireann operate the School Transport Scheme.

In addition, account was taken of the ‘Be Winter Ready’ booklet produced by the Office of Emergency Planning and developed in association with other organisations including the Department of Education and Skills, the RSA, An Garda Síochána, the Health and Safety Authority, and Met Éireann.

52. How is this policy being communicated?

This policy has been communicated to the school management bodies, schools served, and parents. Bus Éireann issued some 64,000 emails to parents/guardians who are registered for School Transport online and sent 1,200 letters to parents/guardians who do not access information online. In addition the Press Office issued information to local and national media, and the policy is available in the School Transport section on our website- www.buseireann.

53. What about the voluntary sector?

The voluntary sector can play an important role in assisting the response. For example, over three and a half thousand Civil Defence volunteers are available to assist local authorities in dealing with severe weather in every part of the country. Last winter Civil Defence volunteers were heavily involved in assisting the principal response agencies in dealing with the severe flooding which affected much of the country. The activities performed by Civil Defence volunteers including pumping water, sand bagging and evacuating people from their homes. Civil Defence also assisted HSE staff in reaching people living in isolated areas which could not be accessed readily due to water levels.

54. What is the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning?

The Government Task Force is a group set up to improve the coordination of emergency planning across Government and help share information and keep emergency planning high on the agenda of Government Departments and Agencies.

55. What is the purpose of the National Emergency Coordination Centre?

The National Emergency Coordination Center is a dedicated location for coordinating the response to emergencies that require a national-level response. It is also used for facilitating training and exercises and for hosting meetings of the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning.

56. What other arrangements are there in place for providing information to the public?

The website www.winterready.ie is a portal with links to all the websites that have up-to-date information on areas such as the HSE, transport and travel, weather forecasts, local authorities etc.

In addition, all of the relevant Departments, Agencies and Service Providers will provide information on their websites. For those without access to a computer, limited copies of the booklet 'Be Winter-Ready ' can be sourced through public libraries or by phoning the Office of Emergency Planning at 1890 252 736. TV and radio will also provide up-to-date advice and information.
