
Flooding – Advice for unions
Health and safety in the aftermath
February 2014

Health and safety in the aftermath of flooding

Advice for union health and safety representatives

The recent floods have not only cost the economy billions of pounds, they are also having a major and devastating impact on the lives, and the work, of hundreds of thousands of people. Many employees will be affected, either in the workplace or in their homes.

Employers have a legal duty to ensure that the health and safety of all employees is protected. It is not in anyone's interests to ask workers to risk their lives or health either during the floods themselves, or in the aftermath.

This guidance is intended to assist union representatives in ensuring that the health and safety of employees is not put at risk during or after the current crisis. It is not intended to deal with the wider societal issues, although unions are already heavily involved in supporting members in those areas of the country where the flooding is most widespread.

Anyone in affected areas will by now have got used to checking local flood warnings, news bulletins and weather reports. The better prepared individuals and their employers are, the more likely they are to cope with the effects of the floods. Also, every employer should have a 'disaster recovery plan' in place, agreed with the union, which should be regularly reviewed.

In areas where flooding still persists

Under no circumstances should an employer ask anyone to travel in a flooded area unless they are part of the emergency services, have been trained in how to deal with such situations, and have full support and back-up.

People should not drive in flooded areas unless they have to and should never try to drive through floodwater. Not only is there the possibility that a vehicle may be swept away, but floodwater is also likely to be contaminated with sewage.

Nor should people attempt to walk or wade through floodwater. It is very easy to be swept away by currents or come into contact with contaminated water. Even in very shallow water there can still be many hazards underneath the surface, such as uncovered holes. The force of water often removes manhole covers for example.

If a building is surrounded by, or threatened by, floodwater and there is any possibility that water has got into the premises, including basement areas, the gas and electricity should be turned off.

In some parts of the country, a large number of premises remain without water supply or electricity, even beyond the area immediately flooded. Employees should not be expected to work without an adequate supply of fresh water and sanitary facilities. This is contrary to Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations. Workers in affected premises should normally be sent home where it is safe to do so. In certain emergency situations, or where workers have no water or toilet facilities at home, union safety representatives should discuss alternative arrangements with employers. No-one should be expected to work in buildings that are flooded.

After the flooding subsides

Following the flooding, union safety representatives should meet with employers to make sure workplaces are safe to be re-occupied. Death and injury is a serious risk in the aftermath of any flood and there are a number of precautions that should be taken. While unions will want to make sure that everyone “pulls together”, staff should not be put at any further un-necessary risk and no building should be re-occupied until it has been properly inspected and a risk assessment undertaken. In extreme cases the structure of the building will need to be checked before anyone is allowed in.

If any staff are involved in the clean up there should be a risk assessment and staff should be provided with proper personal protective equipment.

Buildings will not only need to be dried out, they will also have to be cleaned and disinfected. Floodwater contains not only silt but also sewage. All surfaces that have been contaminated need to be properly cleaned and disinfected as well as dried.

Dampness can promote the growth of fungus and mould which can cause allergies and breathing problems if inhaled.

Where employers use temporary portable gas or oil heaters to dry premises, it is important to ensure they have sufficient ventilation and are kept away from any flammable materials. Under no circumstances should petrol or diesel generators be used indoors due to the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Any electrical equipment that may have been affected by floodwater must not be used until it has been checked and verified as being safe by a competent person. The electricity and gas supply should also not be switched on unless it has been similarly checked.

If any materials, such as chemicals, are stored on the premises they may also have been affected by water. In some cases the composition of the material may have changed or hazardous materials may have spilled out. Safety representatives should ensure that employers have verified that any material that could become dangerous as a result of water damage has been checked and, if necessary, disposed of safely.

External doors, in particular fire exits, should be checked to ensure that they are usable before the building is re-occupied and fire alarms and emergency lighting systems

looked at by a competent person before the premises are used.

After flooding, rats and other vermin can often be displaced from flooded buildings and will move to other premises in the vicinity. Employers in areas that are in, or close to, flooded areas should be particularly vigilant in checking for infestations.

Support for staff

In flooded parts of the country there will be many workplaces which have not been directly affected but where employees' homes will have been partially underwater or they will have had no water or electricity supply. Safety and other union representatives should work with employers to make sure that such employees are given as much support as possible. This could include access to showers and washing facilities at work, time off, or other support as required.

Anyone with any queries relating to any safety matters should seek advice from their union.

Links

[Basic advice on flooding](#)

[Environment Agency advice on flooding](#)

[Public health England advice on flooding](#)