

NEU Guidance for Members, Reps and Local Officers

The regularity of severe flooding in recent years means that unfortunately this is one of the contingencies for which schools need to plan. Schools/colleges may be affected but also members' homes and the journey between home and work. This briefing sets out advice on steps to take when floods are threatened, when the worst happens, and also on dealing with the aftermath. Employers have a legal duty to protect the health and safety of staff and pupils and no-one should risk their health, or their life, during a flood or during the clean-up process.

How should schools respond to flood alerts?

The NEU would expect that where a flood warning has been issued in respect of the local area, school management prepares for the eventuality as thoroughly as possible, including by:

1. listening out for local news reports, updates and warnings on radio and on television.
2. following advice from the Environment Agency, local authority and emergency services, as appropriate. (This is important even for those in places apparently unaffected by flooding, as there may be advice regarding travel to work in the wider geographical area.)
3. calling the Environment Agency's Floodline on 0345 988 1188 for more information.
4. monitoring the Environment Agency's "Flooding Updates" at <http://apps.environment-agency.gov.uk/flood/31618.aspx>
5. Scrutinising the employer's "Major Incident Plan" and ensuring it is both adequate and that safety representatives have been properly consulted.
6. Liaising with Emergency Services if there is any likelihood that the premises might be evacuated in the event of a flood.
7. Using the usual method for informing parents about possible evacuations and closures.

What practical measures should be taken in response to the threat of flooding?

1. Electrical items should be unplugged and, where possible, removed to a place of safety such as an upper storey or a high shelf.
2. If there is a suspected gas leak, the head teacher, or designated member of staff, should ring the 24 hour gas emergency service on 0800 111 999, and follow the official advice given. If possible, the mains gas supply for the school should be turned off by a competent person such as the site manager. Electrical switches and mobile telephones should not be operated. No one should smoke or strike matches. Wherever possible, doors and windows should be opened.
3. Under no circumstances should the safety of staff or pupils be jeopardised. It is important that anyone affected by a flood or a potential flood is aware of basic safety rules, for example:
 - Do not attempt to walk, wade, drive, or even swim, through floodwater. Head teachers must never ask staff to do this. It is very easy to be swept away by currents and even in shallow water there may still be hazards hidden beneath the water, for example uncovered holes
 - Avoid all contact with floodwater – it may be contaminated by sewage
 - If you are trapped by flooding, stay by a window and try to attract attention
4. The school's asbestos management plan must be consulted, to establish which areas in the school that could be damaged by water ingress contain asbestos or are suspected to contain asbestos.

In the unfortunate event that a school is flooded, how should the aftermath be handled, once the water has subsided?

1. A risk assessment must be carried out prior to re-occupation of the school and head teachers must seek employer advice before the school re-opens. The asbestos survey must be consulted in order to establish whether areas damaged by flooding contain asbestos or are suspected to contain asbestos. Water ingress caused by flooding can cause asbestos fibres to be released and areas to become contaminated.
2. Where flooded parts of the school contain asbestos, access to these areas should be restricted. The school must employ a licenced contractor to undertake any remedial works on asbestos containing materials (ACMs), including removal of ACMs. Air testing must also be carried out by an appropriately qualified contractor prior to reoccupation.

3. No-one should be expected to work in a flooded building or without an adequate supply of fresh water, without sanitary facilities, and where heating systems aren't working properly. This would be contrary to the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992. In such circumstances schools must remain closed to pupils and staff. There must be no expectation that members assist in the clean-up. Where members do wish to volunteer in this respect, this should only happen following the undertaking of the risk assessment described above, which would specifically need to take account of their role. Staff who do volunteer in this respect must be provided with proper personal protective equipment and in no circumstances should staff clean up areas where asbestos is present or could be present.
4. The affected areas must be dried out and thoroughly cleaned and disinfected. Flood water may contain not only silt but sewage. Dampness can promote the growth of fungus and mould which can cause allergies and breathing problems if inhaled. See end of document for a link to the NEU guidance on mould.
5. The following must be checked by a competent person and verified safe prior to resumption of use:
 - Electrical and gas connections
 - Electrical equipment and plant, if affected
 - Heating systems, if affected
 - Fire safety systems, including alarms but also fire exits and escape routes. In the event of fire safety concerns, the fire authority should be contacted.
6. It is important to try to dry out the affected area as quickly as possible to prevent mould growth. Good ventilation and keeping the heating on, where it has been checked out, is a good idea. A temperature of between 20 – 22 centigrade is recommended for steady drying. Dehumidifiers can also help. They need to be of the correct size for the area concerned as too small a unit will not remove enough moisture. If portable heaters are to be used to heat and dry out the premises, they must be positioned in well-ventilated areas away from combustible materials, so as not to endanger staff or pupils. Under no circumstances should petrol or diesel generators be used indoors due to the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning.
7. Any hazardous materials or substances which have been affected by floodwater should be quarantined and specialist advice obtained prior to their disposal. If chemicals are stored on the premises, they may have leaked out.
8. After flooding, rats and other vermin can often be displaced from flooded buildings and will move to other premises in the vicinity so employers must be vigilant in checking for

infestations.

9. Checks should be made to ensure school security has not been compromised.
10. Any damaged items and equipment should be removed and either stored securely away from any building, or safely disposed of.
11. Where there is potentially hazardous structural damage resulting from the flood, the employer should be contacted before re-occupation.
12. Where other health and safety concerns remain unresolved, schools and/or the employer should approach the HSE for specialist advice.

What support should NEU members expect if their own home is flooded?

It is impossible to list every way in which members could be affected. Apart from needing time off to deal with the practicalities of clearing up after a flood, and meeting with loss adjusters and trades people, they may be unable to attend work because of public transport problems, or damage to their own vehicle, or because their own children's school is closed. They may need access to school washing and shower facilities, and clothes washing facilities. The NEU would expect head teachers to show compassion and concern for staff in these circumstances and to agree reasonable requests for support.

Note that there is a statutory right to reasonable unpaid time off for urgent domestic reasons to deal with an emergency involving a dependant.

In addition, any NEU member who experiences severe financial hardship as a result of flood damage to their home and property may be eligible for financial assistance from the NEU's benevolent fund (NEUBF).

Further Guidance

TUC advice on Health and Safety in Flooded areas is available at <https://www.tuc.org.uk/workplace-issues/health-and-safety/health-and-safety-flooded-areas>.

NEU Guidance on Mould in Schools, available at <https://neu.org.uk/>.

Cabinet Office guidance 'Preparing and Planning for Emergencies' is available at <https://www.gov.uk/preparation-and-planning-for-emergencies-responsibilities-of-responder-agencies-and-others>.