

EIR Request (received 08 November 2023) - Reference: DFI/2023-0419

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, I wish to request the following information from Roads Service:

1. Why this area of the St Patricks Square has flooded, when it has never happened before in our 17 years trading at this location.
2. Why when I requested sandbags from your department I was told that there were none. We were left to try and secure our premises amid rising flood waters containing raw sewage.
3. When the gullies in the town centre were last jetted and cleaned?
4. Why there was no assistance from road service on the ground to help manage the situation?
5. What flood measures your department has in place? and why they failed?
6. What planning is in place to ensure there is no repeat of this situation?
7. Why there seemed to be no coordinated multi agency response in Downpatrick?

Response (issued 07 December 2023)

I refer to your email of 8th November 2023 requesting under the Freedom of Information Act information in relation to the recent flooding in Downpatrick. Please consider this a combined response on behalf of DfI Roads & Rivers.

In considering your request on behalf of the Department, I have determined that the information requested falls under the aegis of the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR), as opposed to Freedom of Information Act 2000. Your request is for information that relates to activities, policies or plans that affect the environment. Section 39 of the Freedom of Information Act specifically excludes from consideration under that Act requests for what is deemed to be environmental information.

A guide explaining the Environmental Information Regulations can be found at:

<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/foi-eir-and-access-to-information/guide-to-the-environmental-information-regulations/>.

The Environmental Information Regulations established general public rights of access to environmental information held by public authorities, similar to the general rights established under FOI. There is no provision for privileged access to information, it may either be

released to the World at large, or it must be withheld. Any information provided in response to an information request (either FOI or EIR) is considered to have been placed in the public domain.

I will respond to each of the issues in the order you raised them.

1. *Why this area of the St Patricks Square has flooded, when it has never happened before in our 17 years trading at this location.*

While the recent flooding appears to have been the worst in living memory, there was significant flooding on Market Street, Downpatrick in April 2013 with a number of properties flooded.

The recent unprecedented rainfall throughout the wettest October in over 153 years of records, resulted in many watercourses in the South and East of Northern Ireland rising to record levels resulting in widespread flooding across this region.

2. *Why when I requested sandbags from your Department, I was told that there were none. We were left to try and secure our premises amid rising flood waters containing raw sewage.*

The Department, as part of a multi-agency response, provided Newry, Mourne and Down District Council with over 1,000 sandbags for distribution in Downpatrick Town Centre. I understand that you received a number of these sandbags from the Council.

3. *When the gullies in the town centre were last jetted and cleaned?*

The road gullies in Downpatrick Town Centre were cleaned on 7th November 2023. Prior to the flooding incident the road gullies in Downpatrick Town Centre were cleaned between 31st May 2023 and 16th June 2023. It must be emphasised that the flooding was not caused by, or contributed to, by any failure in the roads drainage system. From observation, as the flood water receded, the road drainage system appeared to be operational.

4. *Why there was no assistance from road service on the ground to help manage the situation?*

DfI Roads were very active in the Downpatrick area in assisting with flood relief effort. Over 1,000 sandbags were delivered to the town centre for distribution by the Council to affected properties. DfI Roads also assisted the NI Fire and Rescue Service in their pumping operation by planning and securing a route for the discharge pipes from the pumps on Market Street to the Quoile River at the Belfast Road.

5. *What flood measures your department has in place? and why they failed?*

The 'New' Quoile Barrier which uses a series of 14 self-actuating gravity gates and 2 automated electronic fish passage gates were operating to their full design capacity throughout the flooding event with all gates venting flow at the available window within the tidal cycle. The operation of the barrier was monitored both remotely through telemetry/CCTV and by operatives on the ground. The outlet of the tidal barrier will always be limited by the tidal range at this location. The tidal barrier not only blocks incoming seawater during high tides but also serves as a gate for controlling the release of river and surface water that enters the drainage system.

Record high rainfall falling on heavily saturated ground meant that catchment rainfall gathered quickly from runoff within the Downpatrick urban environments and because of its sheer volume and limiting release through the barrier (high tide was over 1m higher than the Quoile river system for a considerable period) the excess water made its way to the lowest areas of Downpatrick given the town's topography, causing the flooding in Market Street area and surrounds.

6. *What planning is in place to ensure there is no repeat of this situation?*

The Department is the Lead Government Department for the strategic co-ordination of the emergency response to significant flooding and emergency plans and processes have been developed in conjunction with our multi-agency partners including the Met Office, PSNI and Local Government.

These plans are tested as necessary to ensure they are not only effective but also communicated to key staff. For a significant flooding event such as we had recently, the Department, along with our multi-agency partners, will reflect on the effectiveness of these plans and will incorporate any key learning within future plans to mitigate as far as possible against future flooding events. It should be noted however that the intensity of some rainfall events has the capacity to overwhelm flood defence infrastructure.

7. *Why there seemed to be no coordinated multi agency response in Downpatrick?*

Preparations for this flooding emergency began at the earliest opportunity with multi-agency co-ordination taking place throughout the previous weekend in response to ongoing rainfall warnings well in advance of the storm arriving on Monday 30 October 2023 and prior to the Yellow and Amber severe weather warnings coming into effect. The Department's Operational teams were proactively on the ground maintaining flood risk management infrastructure before the flooding had commenced. In addition, the Department in conjunction with the PSNI and multi-agency partners held a series of coordination meetings to plan and to deploy resources effectively.

Additional Departmental staff and contractors, along with assistance from multi agency colleagues, were called in to provide assistance during the response to enable a large-scale response to the flooding which occurred in a number of areas across the Southeast including Downpatrick. Heavy rain in preceding days falling on already saturated land caused many issues for watercourses and roads and operational teams worked hard to reduce the impacts of flooding where possible. However, it would not have been possible for the Department to predict within any reasonable timeframe the location and extent of any flooding which ultimately occurred. In response to the flooding in Downpatrick a coordinated multi-agency effort, including NIFRS, PSNI, DfI, and Local Government, was initiated to allow for a complex pumping operation to help remove flood waters from Downpatrick commencing on the 3 November 2023.

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