

Report on Storm Arwen from Alwinton, Harbottle, Hepple and Netherton with Biddlestone Parish Councils covering the Upper Coquet Valley in Northumberland: November 2021

Storm Arwen hit Northumberland on Friday evening, 26th November, with sleet and winds of over 100 mph.

There was damage to buildings and all woods were affected, many devastated, losing up to 80% of trees. Large numbers of trees fell on roads resulting in the area being inaccessible by vehicles. Electricity, water supply and telephone connections, including internet and broadband, were lost throughout the area.

Diary

Day 1: Friday 26th November evening: Storm Arwen. All roads were blocked by fallen trees and branches and electricity supply disrupted totally, together with overhead telephone lines. Messages given out by Northern Powergrid in the coming days were often confusing, conflicting and highly inaccurate. There was no mobile phone signal anywhere at the height of the storm.

Day 2: Saturday 27th November evening: Water supply and telephone connection lost

Day 3: Sunday 28th November evening: Most roads opened with local teams of volunteers removing fallen trees. Mains water supply restored to Harbottle and Hepple.

Day 4: Monday 29th November: Mains water supply restored in Alwinton and Netherton. Telephone reconnected in the villages but outlying properties remained unconnected, some into January 2022. Mountain Rescue volunteers visited households in Netherton. Northern Powergrid supplied hot soup and sandwiches to Netherton.

Day 5: Tuesday 30th November: Staff from the Fire Brigade and Mountain Rescue Service visited households in Harbottle village. Police visited households in Hepple village. Burma road beyond Holystone cleared of trees by Forest England contractors. Mobile hot food van in Harbottle at 5.30 p.m. provided by Northern Powergrid. Hot food van in Alwinton. Power restored to Alwinton, Harbottle, Hepple and Netherton villages by 9.30 p.m.

Day 7: Thursday 2nd December: Electricity restored to Sharperton and Biddlestone. Police visit Holystone.

Day 8: Friday 3rd December: Electricity restored to Holystone, the Peels and Well House. Households in Holystone visited by Fire Service officers. County Council declares a State of Emergency and army brought in to help.

Day 9: Saturday 4th December evening: Electricity lost throughout the area

Day 10: Sunday 5th December midday: Electricity restored . Mobile hot food van in Harbottle.

Day 11: Power restored to the Newton

Issues

There was no overall management of the response to the emergency. A State of Emergency was not declared by the County Council until Friday 3rd December, a week later. A SoE would have enabled an appropriate Command and Control unit to be set up to co-ordinate and support the rescue and repair operations with the costs reclaimed from the Bellwin Fund.

Lack of co-ordination and communication hampered the efficient repairs to the utilities, in a large part due to there being no mobile phone signal in the area and especially given that engineers were drafted in from other parts of the country to assist with the repairs urgently required. Engineers had to drive out of the area to get a mobile signal. It is imperative that rural Northumberland be able to access the mobile phone system, particularly in view of the soon-to-be imposed digital system for landline telephones by BT. Commercial mobile phone operators must be permitted to use the emergency services masts for their equipment. As at the middle of January, there remain many households, some vulnerable medically, without a landline connection and no mobile coverage. Many of the repairs to telephone lines appear to be “temporary” and the risk remains of further disruption during stormy weather.

Too many electricity and telephone lines run through and past trees. There should be more undergrounding of cables where expedient and stricter control and management of trees encroaching on overhead lines. Consideration should be given to some re-routing of lines away from trees. Re-working of wayleave agreements to allow for a larger area free of trees adjacent to overhead lines negotiated, with appropriate payments to the landowners. Further work should be carried out so that all networks have a secondary/alternative supply route.

Households entirely dependent upon electricity suffered the most, including elderly and disabled in social housing. Elderly with personal alerters could not activate them. Residents in the villages looked after those without facilities, providing hot food and water. The only other assistance offered was a hot food centre in Rothbury (ten miles away, no public transport) and the hot food van provided by Northern Powergrid that only came for the first time four days after the storm. Social housing landlords should be required to have a “duty of care” towards vulnerable tenants in an emergency, for example, providing generators to facilitate a temporary electricity supply. Council Social Services should maintain a register of vulnerable residents so that appropriate checks and care visits can be carried out in an emergency.

Water supply was disrupted when electricity to pumping stations failed. Lack of water is a serious health hazard and residents had to resort to using water

from burns and water butts to flush lavatories. Pumping stations should have access to generators to continue to pump water in the event of an electricity supply failure.

Most of the removal of fallen trees on the highway was carried out by local people and private contractors, as quickly as possible in order to re-open the roads. However, many fallen trees remain on roadsides and potentially a danger to traffic, particularly large vehicles. County Council Highways should instigate the removal of these as soon as possible and stabilise the roadside.

Full clearing up of damaged woodland should be carried out as soon as expedient. In the meantime, many of the woods remain in a dangerous state with fallen and hanging trees and branches. Visitors should be physically prohibited from walking in these woods for their own safety. Whilst some clearing up is being done, mostly by Estates who have the manpower and machinery, there are woodland owners who lack the resources to undertake the work required. There has been no evidence of the Forestry Commission in the area since the storm despite the extensive damage to their woodland.

The effects of the storm have given rise to an opportunity to re-examine the use of the land affected. Re-planting should be carried out in appropriate areas with more suitable trees. Some areas could revert to farmland and other uses. The National Park should facilitate a wide discussion with landowners and agencies involved on the future use of the land.

Councils are required to have in place a plan for Major Emergencies. If the County Council had one it was not in evidence. The Council must work with Parish Councils to plan for future emergencies which should include identifying public buildings, such as village halls, that could be used to accommodate residents who had to evacuate their homes, together with generators, mobile phone access to emergency services masts, sand bags (in the event of flooding) supplies of heating and cooking equipment, blankets, etc.

Conclusion

This was the worst wind storm in Northumberland for at least fifty years, although the County suffers from severe snow, wind and ice storms every few years with the corresponding disruption to services. Most of the rural communities were subjected to blocked roads and days without electricity, water and telephone supply. A State of Emergency should have been declared immediately and the reasons why this was not done should be investigated. This would have given the County Council the powers and opportunity to co-ordinate the work required to restore communications and utilities and set up appropriate facilities to look after the welfare of its residents. Even now, the authorities seem oblivious to the situation our rural community found itself in and at the devastation to the woodland that will change our landscape for a generation. The Government should discourage further moves to all electric households and businesses until there is substantial improvement to the resilience of the electricity supply network.