Rotary and the floods in Cumbria

The floods of 19th November in Cumbria have been well documented and shown on TV so that most people will be aware of the devastation in Cockermouth and Workington. However, what the reports do not convey is the silence, smell of damp wood and plaster and leaking sewage and chilliness of the abandoned homes and businesses. Phase One of the relief operations in Cockermouth was to rescue people and animals from the 2 metres of water rushing through the town. When the waters subsided, Phase Two was the removal of the damaged commercial and private goods and chattels from the damaged shops and homes. The town depending on tourism and surrounding rural areas, Phase Three was on getting the predominant in the main areas running.

Thus, in Phase Four, Rotary District offered its services and was asked to provide a team of two from each of ten clubs to assist the Red Cross as appropriate. Having now made 76 attendances at the Silloth-on-Solway Club I am pretty well accepted as ‘belonging’ and often help out with their events. Thus it was that David English and I from Silloth reported to the Red Cross in the Flood Support Centre in Christ’s Church, Cockermouth on the first day of Phase Four. We were allocated Zone Six (around Jennings Brewery!!) in the eastern part of the town and instructed to locate all residential properties in the zone. We had then to determine which had been abandoned and were still empty, those which were currently unoccupied (i.e. for sale, under renovation or holiday cottages) and those where the occupants had remained during the flooding or had now returned following their evacuation. The empty properties were left a notice giving information on the help available and whom to contact. The main effort, however, was talking to the traumatised returnees now faced with ground floors devoid of furnishings, soaking wet and supplied with electricity from temporary cables. We offered comfort where needed, though most people were stoic and busily throwing themselves into the clean-up task. I suspect that many of these were high on adrenaline and the full impact and consequences has not yet registered. They are going to need support for many weeks to come. It was quite difficult finding many of these centuries’ old properties hidden down small snicketts, in converted outhouses or as flats above shops. However, the job was accomplished just before nightfall and the data fed back into the District Council database. This is now being used to co-ordinate the residential recovery operation and determine those in most need, such as the man we found in a one-up and one down cottage where there was only room for his bed on the first floor and everything he owned, including clothes, had been on the ground floor and which he found, on his return, had been swept away.

This was the first time that I had been at the sharp end of Rotary help in a disaster area. If anyone has any doubts about the value and effectiveness of Rotary they would have been
quickly dispelled by spending a little time in Cumbria this November; and one has to remember that this is an effort promulgated nearly every day somewhere in the World.

To end on a philosophical note; why is it that in everyday life; progress and development is bogged down, delayed and made more expensive, through ‘red tape’ and protesters when in an emergency like this everyone has worked together and ‘moved mountains’ ….. an emergency railway station erected at Workington in four days, a temporary footbridge over the river Derwent in ten days!!!!

Some more background and facts about the Cumbria floods

The Rotary Club of Silloth-on-Solway invited the neighbouring clubs of Wigton and Maryport together with partners to a joint meeting to listen to Jill Stannard, the CEO of Cumbria County Council, give an impressive account of how the flood emergency was dealt with. She took up her post on 19th November, the day of the floods!!!

Much of value had been learned from the 2005 floods at Carlisle. Carlisle’s new flood defences held and there was no problem.

Every bridge in the County was checked on the Wednesday before as a result of the severe weather warning.

Only Barrow escaped flooding out of the six Districts.

314 mm (12.37 inches) of rain, a UK record, fell at Seathwaite in one day.

1000 hours. Keswick evacuated

1100 hours. Rest centre established at Cockermouth

1200 hours. Police force takes control and establishes ‘Gold Command’

1300 hours. Ambulances parked, and surgeries established at each end of key bridges

1600 hours. Darkness falls

2200 hours. 200 people rescued from Cockermouth by RAF and Mountain Rescue teams.

*Gold Command* makes strategic decisions, *Silver Command* does the organising and *Delivery Teams* carry out each of the following activities: -

- Rescuing people
- Identifying missing people (This was the area in which Rotary became involved)
- Establish rest and advise centres (Advice and support centres still operating)
- Welfare issues, including medications, clothing, counselling.

2239 properties were flooded, the whole of Cockermouth Main Street flooded to about 8 feet, thousands of homes without electric power, 20 bridges temporarily closed, 6 road bridges
lost, Port of Workington unusable due to silt accumulation. (Cost £6.7m to make usable again)

On Monday 23rd, emergency situation declared to be over and control passed to the County Council to initiate the *Recovery* phase which encompassed four areas:

- **Welfare**: Many people still require psychological support.
- **Businesses**: Temporary shops constructed in storage area of a local auctioneer. 275 businesses applied for grant aid and received £860k.
- **Infrastructure**: Re-building bridges at an estimated cost of £29M, the new Workington road bridge was opened on 14th April (Arguably the shortest time ever for a road bridge to be built)
- **Environment**: Removal of rubbish, damaged goods etc and clearance of hundreds of tons of debris silt and rocks from 84 farms at a cost of £338k. In addition to having to deal with snow buried roads and icy conditions over the remainder of the winter using an average of 300 tons of salt/grit per night, with one memorable night requiring 800 tons.

Inger and I came away very impressed with the cooperation between local Government, commerce, emergency services and the voluntary sector, including Rotary.

Finally, I report visiting the Main Street in Cockermouth on 15th April, five months to the day since the floods, to find that only 22 shops, out of 101, in the main Street are back in business and very few ground floor homes between Main Street and the Rivers are yet occupied.

**Up-date on the Cumbria Floods**

The Flood Relief Fund having reached £m2.2 has been closed for donations as the organisers now say that they have sufficient money to deal with the problems. £800k has been distributed to applicants, of which 700 have been individual cases.

Originally 20 bridge crossings were closed because of their condition; this has been reduced to 11. Whilst the Workington road bridges are closed a free train service is being run every half hour over the intact rail bridge to link the two sides of the river.

However, for those travelling by road have to make a long detour inland to cross the River Derwent in order to continue their journeys up and down the coast. The Government is responsible for the road bridges and the County Council for footbridges. Cumbria CC voted on 19th May to divert £250k from ‘an on-street park and pay’ proposed development to re-building these footbridges. You will recall the police officer who lost his life when the bridge collapsed; his body was found by one of the Silloth-on-Solway Rotarians some seven miles away along the Solway Firth coast.

Many families remain in temporary accommodation. Cockermouth Main Street still has many premises boarded up as the drying out and re-fitting continues. Some will never open as the owners have gone out of business. It is estimated that the area will need assistance for a further two years before becoming self-sustaining and life returns to normal.