

Disasters: prevention and management

Report of Conservation Forum 2011, November 22, Southwark Cathedral.

The Cathedral and Church Buildings Division's Conservation Forum 2011 considered disaster planning and recovery and was chaired by Anne Sloman, Chair of the Church Buildings Council.

Lord Smith of Finsbury, Chairman of the Environment Agency, gave the keynote address. His talk revealed considerable understanding of the concerns of the sector over disasters, and included a personal memory of attending York Minster soon after the devastating fire and seeing the rose window undergoing conservation in temporary accommodation in the minster grounds. The impact of climate change on the weather, and therefore on church buildings, was addressed. Although there are many examples of churches built on high ground and not considered at risk from rising flood waters, some are at risk from sea floods, river floods and coastal erosion. Churches at risk can plan to lessen the damage, maybe by siting valuable furnishings higher in the building or installing a gallery for the organ. Flood water has enormous power and will bear away all that is in its wake. The time taken to recover from severe flooding is measured in years.

Dr Joseph Elders, Major Projects Officer of the Church Buildings Council, introduced the Church Buildings Council guidance on disaster management plans. This guidance is intended for parish churches, but could be applicable to any place of worship. The guidance has been tested on the two churches (Jarrow St Paul, Monkwearmouth St Peter, Diocese of Durham) forming the UK's nomination for UNESCO World Heritage status for 2012, and will be available on the Churchcare web site when it is finalised. [The presentation can be downloaded here.](#)

David Bonner, Flood Incident Manager, Technical Specialist, of the Environment Agency, began the first of his two presentations by giving an account of the Lewes (East Sussex) flood of 2000, when the town experienced the worst rainfall it has suffered in 200 years. The impact of the floods on people and property was enormous, with many dwellings uninhabitable for 18 months to 2 years after the floods and some residents suffering flood-related problems 10 years later. As a result of the flood Lewes now has more robust flood defences and a siren to give warning of floods. The siren is tested annually, giving an opportunity for annual testing of flood plans. This was one of many reminders during the day that emergency plans need testing regularly and keeping up to date.

Flood warnings are available from the Environment Agency, <http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/homeandleisure/floods/31618.aspx>, and through its careful monitoring of rivers warnings can sometimes be up to two days in advance, giving time to prepare. [The slides of the presentation are available here.](#)

Steve Emery, Fire Safety Advisor, English Heritage, explained the legal and operational frameworks that the fire service operates under, and from this showed how to work effectively with the fire service before there is an emergency and what to expect on site should they attend a fire at your property.

The fire service is trained in salvage, which it will undertake if it can be done without loss of life, but to do this successfully needs to know from the owners of cathedrals and churches what objects are of such importance to attempt to salvage them in an emergency, and how to handle them to avoid causing damage to them. This requires the custodians of the church or cathedral to alert the first service to their historic and

valuable contents and their locations in the building. This information is retained with the fire crews. It may also be helpful to offer you building to the fire service for training, which will assist crews should they have to attend in an emergency.

During an incident the Fire Incident Commander will be in control of the site, and will take responsibility for it and all those within it. If it is necessary to cordon off a wider area to assist in fire fighting the police will be responsible for it. Following the fire access to the building may be subject to restriction and control for a variety of reasons that may include fire investigation, criminal investigation the local authority or the Health and Safety Executive. [These matters are explained in greater detail in the presentation which can be downloaded here](#). There is a draft emergency plan for fire available from English Heritage, ask at iep@english-heritage.org.uk.

In response to questions from the floor Mr Emery explained that fears about fire fighting in buildings with PV Cells were found to be unfounded, and fire fighters will fight fires where solar panels are fitted. When a major project is taking place it is good to inform your local fire station and invite the officers on site to inspect and familiarise themselves with any changes to access and ensure that temporary structures won't prevent fire engines attending, for example.

In his second presentation **David Bonner** showed the evidence for climate change and the changing weather patterns we are likely to experience – dryer and hotter summers and wetter warmer winters. The need for building preparedness for extremes of weather will become more acute – especially to withstand intense rain and winds. For example, the need to keep drains a culverts clear will be more pressing and ways of providing hard surfaces, such as a car park, in a porous material to control run off. Vigilance with existing buildings will be increasingly important as the potential for immediate damage from blocked gutters will be considerably greater. The Meteorological Office can give warnings of intense rainfall events, although these are very difficult to predict as they are often localised over a small area. [The presentation is available online here](#).

Simon Langdon, Director of *Cedarthree*, in a joint presentation with **Charles Curnock**, administrator of Bath Abbey, explained the principles of crisis management. The nature of a crisis means that it is not predictable and could arise from any number of events, not all of them related to traditional disasters. A well made plan will enable a church or cathedral to respond appropriately, with the right people informed at the right times and the crisis team assembled to manage the response, including responding to the media, which should be managed by one person, usually the most senior cleric. The Bath Abbey crisis management plan has been used twice in five years. It was not used for a third crisis during that period (a case of financial fraud) and the response was less good as a result.

A crisis management plan will help identify what has happened, the impact of the crisis, the priorities for the church or cathedral and the actions to take. Thought needs to be given to have the right people on the crisis team and a log must be made of all actions taken during the crisis. Essential to the proper operation is an up to date plan, ideally summarised on a sheet of paper that all the crisis team carry with them, with up to date contact details of the team and those who will be needed immediately in a crisis. The formation and operation of a crisis team is set out in detail in the presentation - [Click here to download it](#).

Andrew Brown, Technical Claims Manager, Ecclesiastical, explained the role of the insurer in a disaster, emphasising the need to be in touch as soon as possible, whatever

the time, and the range of matters that the insurers would assist with. These start straight after the incident with matters such as site security, temporary fences, access control and making safe a damaged building. When a disaster seems inevitable the insurers can also help before it strikes to limit the damage – for example while the flood waters are rising towards your church or cathedral.

Good records of a building will greatly assist the recovery process. An up to date inventory, with clear photographs showing objects and their location in the building is invaluable and architectural drawings and measurements, including details recorded during a Quinquennial Inspection can be invaluable. [The presentation is available for download here.](#)

Robert Kilgur, Derby Cathedral Architect, spoke about his experience following a fire at Derby Cathedral. Derby Cathedral had a Disaster Recovery Plan in place at the time of the incident but as it was not tested regularly there was a low level of knowledge of the plan and its implementation among some staff. The need to test the plan and ensure all new staff have a proper understanding of it was emphasised, a plea that had already been heard several times during the day.

There is an overlap between crisis management and recovery, and a recovery plan should allow for the routine running of the church or cathedral. Statements of Significance can be invaluable in forming the disaster management plan since they will help give an understanding of what is important in a building. The disaster plan should take account of volunteers as well as paid staff, and all need to be trained. [The presentation is available here.](#)

In questions to the speaker the point was made that help is available to parishes from Diocesan Communications Officers in managing their media response to a disaster.