

STORM ARWEN: LEARNING LESSONS

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Storm Arwen: Learning Lessons 2021 – 2022



Fallen trees at Kielder (Source: BBC)



Damaged power lines (Source: Sky News)

Introduction

Storm Arwen heavily affected my constituency of Hexham. The constituency covers much of South and West Northumberland. We had thousands without power for a long period of time. On any interpretation this storm was the worst storm to affect electricity and energy provision that our community had seen for at least 40 years. Our region lost hundreds of thousands of trees, and huge amounts of our energy network.

The outages affected many communities, but it quickly became apparent that communities in my area were particularly badly hit: Ponteland and the surrounding areas, the North Tyne, Hexhamshire, Slaley, and the Allen Valleys, and West Northumberland. Other areas were affected both in my constituency and across the North East, but these were our main areas. This report focuses on these communities and the specific problems they faced, but its application is generic.

Key Recommendations of the report

I have met with the Energy Minister repeatedly, the Northumberland County Council as well as Openreach; I also have upcoming appointments with Ofgem. These are the 10 core recommendations:

1. Regional resilience: the energy companies work on a “Just in Time” basis with insufficient readiness for big weather events. Put simply, Northern Powergrid (NPG) must have a bigger and better storage of generators and poles. They presently have minimal numbers. There should be local storage facilities in every county. They were patently not ready for this storm, and slow to react, not least because they did not have the poles and energy replacement that they needed to address the storms impact.

2. Communications: this remains poor as we saw once again during Storm Malik and it was still a struggle in Storms Dudley and Eunice. NPG simply do not have the people answering the phones and providing responses. This encompasses more people, a transferable phone system to allow for staff not being able to get to the core hub, and better organisation. Their website was poor. Finally, the actual communication to constituents was woeful – hundreds were being told that they would be connected in 24 hours or the next day and of course they were not. A better communication strategy of reconnection must be improved.

3. Local resilience: We need local hubs funded by energy companies in designated village halls and community centres, which can provide local support when we have a significant power cut. These hubs need emergency power capacity, and the existence of the hubs needs to be then publicised. We have done this in Northumberland with our flood groups and the flood forums that work very well together.

4. 105 number: the government and regulators need to investigate if the 105 number needs to be activated as an emergency number like 999 in specific circumstances, as clearly 105 did not work when certain people lost mobile network coverage.

5. ‘Digital voice’ landlines are a real problem: this must be looked at as there must be residual resilience on phone lines, which is presently not happening if plans continue to phase out

6. Data sharing: the Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) don’t work very well. They also don’t have sufficient data to address constituents who are not on the vulnerable social services list. The obvious

example is GP data on post operative recovery patients and those with electric stairlifts. A better local plan for data sharing is needed.

7. Energy company data cleansing: this storm has shown that NPG, and their sub-contractors, don't know the name and address of at least 5% and maybe 10% of their customers, as they could not pay around this amount, hence some of the delays in compensation. They need to spend money on their data updating and cleansing.

8. Interim energy provision: I personally arranged over fifty generators for constituents as neither NPG nor the Local Resiliency Forum saw it as their responsibility to provide interim energy whilst we waited 12 days to get the power back on. This is simply unacceptable. There must be a policy and a plan for interim energy provision. My view is that NPG and other companies need to have a supply of such interim generators for vulnerable customers in such difficult times. There was a massive dearth of generators locally.

9. Communication of Local Resilience Forum plan: This does not take place as well as it should; and what does exist is not fully communicated to parish councils, MPs or community leaders. This needs to change.

10. Other companies' energy resilience: it is clear that the Northumbria Water, the Forestry Commission and other organisations suffered from prolonged energy outages and were similarly unprepared. All these companies – public and private – are looking at their resilience but government and the regulators [e.g. Ofwat re water providers] and the LRF need to be more aware of the need to sort these matters. There is also a need to address the impact of power outages on farming – in several areas, notably the Allen Valleys water provision for stock was dependent on energy.

The Storm's Impact

It is imperative that, even locally, Storm Arwen is not viewed as having caused a 'power cut across North East England'. The reality is that even within my own constituency the experiences different villages and communities faced, as well as the response to those problems, varied a lot.

Lessons need to be learned. We need to focus on building a more resilient network so that going forward, fewer, and less severe power outages will be experienced.

The rurality of my constituency means that many communities are isolated, even when the power is on. But when you depend on electricity for contact because your house is remote and your next-door neighbour lives half a mile away, dependence upon power becomes even more apparent.

The storm did not impact only rural communities, where houses are few and far between. Less than a mile away from Newcastle International Airport lies Ponteland, a small town in the east of my constituency. Here, large numbers of houses were impacted by what a power company would call a 'nested low voltage fault'. This essentially means that the power distributor, in this case Northern Powergrid (NPG), recognised that there was a fault with the high voltage (pylon) system, but they were unable to see the issue on the low voltage (wooden poles and substations) system. Pont View was a street that was particularly impacted by this. Residents I spoke to grew increasingly frustrated that having waited hours to speak to NPG on the phone, they were told that there was no fault as far as NPG could see. It took local action by residents and my team, days after the street first lost power, until NPG finally registered a problem.

NPG's response to these communities was frustrating. Ponteland is relatively well-served by a strong offering of local takeaways and, being close to Newcastle, it has access to a range of food delivery options. Despite this, NPG sent a mobile food van to Ponteland, which while welcome, could perhaps

have been better directed to areas such as the Allen Valleys or Kielder, where there is less local provision, and no food delivery options. Residents in the Allen Valleys and Kielder were apparently told to take advantage of takeaway options, which simply wasn't available, as it was to residents in Ponteland. This shows that NPG just don't know and understand the community they serve.

For my part, I tried to help bridge the gap in communication. My team was able to put NPG in touch with a local Hexham business, Forest & Garden, that was able to source, deliver, and install generators for the most vulnerable. Constituents who could not get through to the NPG response team would often turn to my constituency office for assistance rather than the LRF. Throughout the two weeks of Storm Arwen, all my constituency team and I did was casework relating to it, and I spent the whole of the second week solely in the constituency. In the end, many constituents found it easier reaching out to me and my office, rather than the professionals who are trained to offer targeted welfare assistance to the most vulnerable people. This has to change.

Throughout Storm Arwen, and since then, we responded to literally thousands of queries from constituents about structural damage, interim power generation, housing, communications, compensation, or places to go for welfare provision. It should not take the involvement of a local MP for customers to be taken seriously, and their legitimate questions and complaints to be treated with respect.

Localised, on the ground knowledge is critical in a crisis of serious magnitude, as Storm Arwen was. We pointed out that some responses – such as the food van – might be more beneficial to some communities than others. This only came after the food van was sent to areas where it was not best suited, and residents in rural areas where no deliveries are made were told to get take outs delivered. Rural Northumberland does not enjoy pizza or Just Eat deliveries. There should have been a conversation with residents, local councillors, and community groups before a decision was taken. In short, a pre-Storm Arwen resilience plan should have been in place. This is one of our key recommendations.

I organised a series of public meetings in the wake of Storm Arwen. Residents had the opportunity to hear from representatives from NPG, Northumbrian Water, Northumberland County Council, Forestry England, and other relevant organisations. Crucially, these meetings took place in the most impacted areas, and as the communities were still recovering, as many are still to this day.

These meetings were set up to get my constituents the compensation that they deserve, answers as to what happened and a community effort to get lessons learnt. Residents had the opportunity to question NPG, and other providers, about their individual experiences and to provide suggestions and thoughts on how the response can be improved and how the network can be made more resilient, in preparation for the next severe weather event.

The Public Meetings

- Ponteland: 13th January 2022
- Bellingham: 14th January 2022
- Hexham: 27th January 2022
- Allendale: 28th January 2022

Each meeting lasted at least 2 hours and were well attended by around 80-100 every time, plus many more online. The videos of the meetings have also been viewed a lot on YouTube . Although the four areas I held meetings in are each different from each other, the issues raised were remarkably similar. Three dominating themes prevailed: communication, resilience, and compensation.



Pictures from the Bellingham, Allendale, and Hexham public meetings

Communication & Resilience

The lack of communication and inaccuracy of correspondence were significant. Residents were consistently told that the power would be restored imminently, or within 24 hours, because the systems used by NPG were, according to them, “optimistic”. This may be an effective system in normal times, but it should have been immediately apparent that Storm Arwen was not a normal event, and the resulting power cut was not a standard power cut. The inaccurate message that power would soon be restored had the effect of making families choose to stay in homes that dropped below freezing; some stayed for as many as eleven days. One resident told me that their children had to go to bed in multiple layers of clothing and wearing coats to have any semblance of a good night’s sleep.

Residents in the rural parts of my constituency were left with no way of contacting NPG. The lack of electricity meant they had no home internet. In the areas which do have good phone signal, the storm had either damaged phone masts, or power had been cut. Exacerbating the problem, Openreach’s upgrade of copper phone line to fibre optic ‘digital landlines’ meant that many home phones were unable to make calls once the phone cabinet’s batteries depleted, which they did after a relatively short time.

My office had to ask for emergency contact details from Northern Powergrid, as we were struggling to get through just as constituents were, and it was not until 20:00 on day three of Storm Arwen that I was provided with those details. Shortly after I was able to talk and meet with NPG’s representatives. I mention this because myself and so many other organisations – be it the council, or water companies, or the telecommunication companies - were relying on information from Northern Powergrid and basing our responses on it. Many constituents have asked why the military was not called in at an

earlier stage. The answer is both frustrating and straightforward: the council were also told that power would be restored quickly and thus that there was no need to do so. The inaccuracy of reporting prevented a coherent response across multiple agencies.

One resident of Bellingham, who works for a telecommunications company, pointed out that calls to 999 are routed through any available mobile network a mobile phone can reach. It has been suggested that calls to 105 (the phone number that connects a caller to their local electricity distribution network operator) should also have this ability, so residents can keep informed.

However, even residents who were able to make phone calls had issues. One resident said “we couldn’t get through to the grid and if any of the residents did get through, they were told that they did have power. We did not have any power for six days... up until day five [NPG] said there was no power cut”. Residents were sitting in their homes without power desperately trying to get through to NPG, only to be incorrectly told that they did in fact have power.

The poor communication was felt at every level. In Bellingham, a local County Councillor pointed out that the powerful sense of community spirit really helped residents. A resident noted that she, being able bodied and willing, would have been happy to volunteer to help but simply did not know how to. This was echoed by a resident from Allendale, who said “the community responded as best as knew how to, but that is not an integrated system”.

Ultimately, it is local people who know local issues best. Northern Powergrid and the Local Resilience Forum did not have a detailed plan in place to include localised expertise in resilience hubs and then actions and decision making. There is a reason why – namely that the LRF focuses on the vulnerable according to strict criteria, primarily based on social security and care records. But this needs reviewing when we are dealing with outages of such a period of time. Many representatives from North Tyne Parish Councils attended the Bellingham meeting. All said that they struggled to get information. We believe that the LRF and NPG should create a framework or blueprint for parish councils to follow in the event of future such emergencies, so that they know exactly what to do and to minimise any potential miscommunications or duplications of efforts.

Much was made of the idea of having a larger generator, or alternative power source like batteries, available in designated community centres and village halls, which could then act as emergency centres run by the Parish or Town Council or relevant community body. There, residents would be able to find out information, access communication, recharge phones etc, and at a basic level have some warmth and food. A particular frustration that arose at the Allendale meeting was a lack of clarity between the various agencies – all trying to help – as to where the best or designated emergency shelter and support hub was. This created an element of confusion and frustration that should be avoided in the future. Better resilience planning, through a local resilience plan, properly communicated, will fix this.

Compensation

Another key issue was around welfare payments and compensation. It is to be welcomed that Ofgem, in partnership with NPG, acted quickly to remove the £700 cap so that affected people and families could claim for the whole period they were without power. To their credit, NPG also met with me immediately post - Storm Arwen and agreed with my suggestion for a very early payment. They acted decisively after power was restored to ensure that the regulator-mandated compensation was paid to almost all families before Christmas, which I know will have been a particular blessing to those on lower incomes at a time of high spending.

However, despite a volume of compensation being given out, multiple constituents still hadn't received their compensation by 22nd February. Others have ongoing disputes with Northern Powergrid over the name and amount on compensation cheques.

Northern Powergrid also created a discretionary 'welfare payment' plan. It reimbursed impacted families for additional costs incurred, such as solid fuel, hotel stays, and hot food. This was an innovative and reactive idea, and one that should be repeated in any future similar event.

Key issues around welfare provision remain. The key one, which came up repeatedly at the public meetings, was that with no internet or phone signal, residents were entirely unaware of this scheme's existence because it was created in response to Storm Arwen, rather than as an already existing scheme.

Secondly, in most cases, NPG would not pay for costs up front. In the most distressing of cases, residents told me that this meant that they would struggle to eat, as they had already spent their food shopping budget. Nor could they afford the more expensive takeaway option that was suggested by officials from NPG.

Thirdly, NPG insisted that receipts would be needed to claim for reimbursements. But as one resident pointed out in a public meeting, the last thing on people's minds was keeping paperwork when the priority was trying desperately to ensure their children were being fed. Many elderly residents paid for food and other items in cash, with no trace of transaction.

Conclusions

This is the second 'once-in-a-lifetime' weather event I have experienced since I was elected as the Member of Parliament for Hexham in 2010.

Storm Desmond in 2015, resulted in a series of catastrophic flooding events in my constituency across Tynedale and Ponteland.

The aftermath of Desmond was crucial for learning lessons and improving community resilience and infrastructure for future storm events.

With climate change threatening further storms going forward, we need to look at how we have a much better response to similar events in the future.

I am fully aware of the operational challenges that were faced by key stakeholders during the Storm Arwen crisis. Each and every constituent I have spoken to has applauded the fantastic work of the linesmen and engineers who returned supply as quickly as they could.

Holding a series of public meetings has ensured that voices from across all parts of my constituency have been heard.

Communications are the single greatest improvement that need to be considered. The fact that hundreds of my constituents were without power for more than eleven days is completely unacceptable. But it was unforgivable that day-by-day, these same constituents were being promised through 105 and the Northern Powergrid website that their power would be restored. Transparent and up-to-date information must be central to Northern Powergrid's resilience planning going forward.

Community resilience in emergency situations like this is vital. Northumberland County Council and Northern Powergrid already have the details of their most vulnerable customers. However, smaller, and more remote communities in my constituency were isolated and left behind during the Storm Arwen crisis. Greater capacity for interim power generation and designated community centres will ensure that local people are aware of where they can go in the event of a future severe storm like Storm Arwen. Specifically, an emergency point of contact through each Parish Council would ensure that communities have a person who can direct them to their nearest hub. This will mean communities can charge their phone, cook a warm meal, and get out of the freezing weather.

The poor response to the crisis was widespread in communities of different shapes and sizes in my constituency. From Ponteland, which is suburban and near to Newcastle, to Kielder in the North Tyne, my constituents struggled. That is why there needs to be a serious focus on building resilience in local communities themselves, so they are not so reliant on the provision of welfare and support from the power distributor: their fundamental role should be getting the lights back on.

In my view, implementing these recommendations will be key to our communities faring better in the event of a future storm. The magnitude of Storm Arwen was unprecedented, but the response was mixed. I will leave no stone unturned until our communities in Northumberland are match fit for the future.

This report is sent to the independent energy regulator Ofgem, The Department for Business and Energy, the Northumberland County Council, the head of the Local Resilience Forum for Northumberland and Ofcom.

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