**Dealing with floods management toolkit** 

**If your business has been impacted by floods, find information and advice to help you get back on your feet, including dealing with cancellations and communicating with customers.**

## Assessing the flood situation

**Are you affected?**

**a) Directly**– my business is not operational due to flood/weather damage

Your first priority is to contact any customers that have booked, advise them of your situation and offer them alternatives or refunds.

Your second priority is to assess your business (both in terms of damage and cash flow/future financial planning).  Immediate issues around repairs and maintenance are critical, as is ensuring that your business can communicate with the outside world.

**b) Indirectly**

Some of the following factors may indirectly impact on your business:

* Can customers get to you (are they stranded in flooded areas, or do they have to travel through flooded areas to reach you)?
* Are public transport facilities fully operational?
* (Don’t assume that visitors know the geography of your destination – media reporting is often very broad – ‘floods in the South West’ implies most of the region is affected rather than specific locations).
* Are attractions and other local facilities that your customers are likely to use still open?
* Are your suppliers still able to provide you with the products and services you need?
* Are your staff affected and are they able to get to work?
* If destinations near to you are affected by the extreme weather, how is this being reported - are people being advised to stay away?

Knowing how you could be affected will help you to identify how you need to respond to the situation.

Note that sometimes the situation may not seem serious – in some instances a regular assessment of a developing situation is required.  It is important that you keep up-to-date with the news, both locally and nationally and through any social media routes which you can access.

**Sources of information**

To answer some of these questions you will need to establish the situation and know what you (and your immediate location) are facing.  This will help you when you are communicating the urgency of the situation both to customers and to those who you are contacting in respect of repairs and maintenance.

If you have a local business organisation, destination management organisation (DMO), business improvement district or chamber of commerce, they may have made an assessment of the local situation from a business/tourism perspective and may have plans in place.

Monitor the Environment Agency updates, local weather reports and keep an eye on travel information through the following sites:

* [Environment Agency](https://www.gov.uk/browse/environment-countryside/flooding-extreme-weather%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)
* [Met Office](https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/warnings-and-advice/uk-warningshttp%3A/www.metoffice.gov.uk/public/weather/warnings/%22%20%5Cl%20%22?tab=map" \t "_blank)
* [Highways Agency](http://www.highways.gov.uk/traffic-information/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)
* [National Rail](https://www.nationalrail.co.uk/service_disruptions/today.aspxhttp%3A/www.nationalrail.co.uk/service_disruptions/today.aspx%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

## Working with others during a flood event

Once you have assessed your own situation it is useful to know what others are doing locally.

The chances are you will not be the only business affected by the severe weather and flooding (or the perception of it). You should do as much as you can to develop or support a coordinated response to the situation – this is a more effective way of getting your message across than working on your own.

Your first port of call should be your local tourism/trade organisation, as they are best placed to co-ordinate a response to the situation and will be in contact with local authorities and agencies. They will be able to produce a thought-out response (supported by facts and figures collated from across the destination) and develop simple messages that are practical and realistic, which you may also want to use with your own customers. Providing a consistent response across a wide number of businesses is going to be far more reassuring to visitors than mixed and conflicting messages.

Working with, and supporting, a lead organisation means that you will find it easier to find out how the situation is progressing and any measures that are being taken to sort out the problem – if they are producing regular briefings, make sure you keep up to date with these. They are also a central source of information and should be able to tell you which facilities are affected, which are still operating and help identify alternative activities for visitors coming to the area.

You should find out:

* What information do they have about the impact of severe weather on facilities in your area?
* What are their plans?
* What messages have they developed?
* Can they help with your communications?
* Can they give you contacts for support (grants, suppliers etc.)?
* Where are they posting information and what are they saying to the outside world? Follow their lead and, in turn, provide them with good, consistent and factual information to make their job easier.

## Communicating with your customers during a flood event

Once you have assessed your situation and contacted your local tourism organisation to find out what information they have and what communications they are developing, you can set about developing your own communications programme.

If you are unable to access your website, or have no internet connection, speak to your IT suppliers and where possible to your local [Destination Management Organisation](https://www.visitbritain.org/business-advice/find-local-support), who will help you to find a way to communicate.

In putting together a communications programme you will need to consider and address the following issues.

**What are your customers thinking?**

News travels fast – and it isn’t always accurate.  Again, the widespread media coverage of the weather can have a significant effect on how customers and potential visitors perceive a destination or feel about making a visit. Even if you, or your area, have not been affected, always assume that major storm or flood events will trigger significant concerns with customers that you need to address.

Their concerns can be both immediate and longer term:

* Is your business still open?
* Can they access your business?
* Is it safe to visit?
* Are there still things to do when they visit?
* Will the quality and enjoyment of their visit be negatively affected?

Having identified what issues are likely to concern your visitors, the rest of this section will cover how you can communicate with them to help address these concerns.

**What should you say?**

Base your messages and responses around those of the local DMO or trade association, but tailor them to your business and customers.

If your business is closed, develop a factual statement about the situation. In addition to a brief explanation of what has happened and what it means for visitors, this could include:

* How long you might be closed (if you know)
* Alternative options (can you recommend an alternative business or activity to your customers?)
* Your cancellation policy
* Opportunities to postpone visits and rearrange at a future time.

If your business is open but the wider area is affected by weather, develop a factual statement reassuring visitors/potential visitors that you are open for business and include details such as:

* Any travel/transport issues
* Attractions, facilities and activities that are available – focus on the positive elements, but be realistic about any restrictions if they are significant.

If you are providing transport advice or updates on your website, keep them in the same place and make them easy to find.  Make sure the links are simple (and that they work) and keep the information up to date.

It is probably better to provide your customers with too much, rather than too little, information - but make sure that you are getting your own information from a reliable source.

Using a ‘Question and Answer’ format is an easy way to order the information that you are providing to customers. Just make sure you keep it positive and stay on message.

**How should you say it?**

**Be honest and transparent:** Customers expect an honest appraisal of the situation. Know the facts – be aware of the latest information and never attempt to bluff – you will be found out.

If you don’t know what the current situation is, let your customers know this and get back to them with the facts from a reliable source.

**Be clear:** Use everyday language and be clear and concise.  Don’t assume that other people have the same level of knowledge about your business or destination that you have. They probably don’t know alternative routes to reach you - something that you may take for granted.

**Be positive:** You may feel angry about the situation, let down and unhappy about how it is being handled, but your priority now is to communicate a clear and positive message externally.  Sharing your frustrations with your customers is not going to reassure them that they will have a positive experience when they visit you.

In all your communications it is important to stay on message, stay focused and stay authentic.

**Contact your customers**

The majority of customers/potential customers will be both sympathetic and understanding of your situation, as long as you maintain a dialogue. Inform them immediately of any issues, closures or restrictions and also as soon as roads re-open or other services resume.  Handled sensitively, this is an opportunity to develop goodwill for your business and enhance your relationship with customers. This is where a personal approach can make all the difference.

Contact any customers (whether individuals or group operators) who have made a booking with you to let them know the facts; follow this up with a phone call if possible.

If you are closed, try to provide alternative arrangements or new dates. A hotel may be able to offer rooms in a different hotel; an attraction could offer a different venue for a function.

It is important to ensure that you offer a good alternative to the customer so that they feel that they are getting good service and not being ‘shunted around’.

If you are open, assure them that there is still plenty to see and do and provide details of alternative activities, but be honest about any restrictions or facilities and activities that may be closed. If travel is a potential issue, make sure you have the latest information to hand.

It is important that the person making the call is well informed about what is open/closed and is comfortable in handling potentially tricky conversations. If your customers wish to re-book for later in the season, be as accommodating as possible and make sure you can make that decision and booking there and then.

Keep customers updated on a regular basis, helping to reassure them that they will still be able to have an enjoyable experience.

Focus on your immediate bookings in the first instance but don’t forget to keep other customers informed about the situation – they may not be immediately affected, but they could still be concerned about a future visit.

**Contact your potential customers**

Contact with pre-booked customers is relatively easy to undertake, but you also need to think about future customers – people who may have been considering a visit but are being swayed by media coverage and are looking for reassurance.

Your website, social media channels and media activity should all feature in your communications plan. (See our [Digital Marketing Toolkit](https://www.visitbritain.org/business-advice/market-your-business/digital-marketing-toolkit)for help with using social media). This is your opportunity to showcase your business, so no matter how you respond or how you interact, imagine how this will look to your customers. Remember, word of mouth is now ‘social word of mouth’ – ask your customers to post on Facebook or tweet about their excellent stay with you or the fact that they are coming to visit.

Update your website/social media regularly. The situation can change quickly, so you must make sure that all information you provide is regularly updated to ensure it is accurate and timely.  This will build confidence in your potential customers that you are in control of the situation.

Be proactive on social media.   It’s an opportunity to share updates widely and posting images can help to counteract any extreme images that may be shown by the media – helping to reassure potential visitors that while the situation is serious, it is not as widespread as people imagine.

You can also use social media to push out the messages relevant to your situation (for example, by highlighting activities and events still taking place or promoting any offers) and you may want to add links to local weather or travel sites. It is also a good way to develop conversations with supporters and potential customers and respond to any immediate concerns. Visitors can tweet that they have booked, that they will be booking, that they are in a specific area and that they are having a great time, despite the weather!

If you have a local Destination Management Organisation or trade association find out what #hashtag they are using for a specific event or incident and tag your tweets, so that you are very much a part of the conversation. Keep your updates light and informative; do not get into long conversations with people about the rights or wrongs of a situation.  Think about what you want to say and even have some messages prepared for both Facebook and twitter – use it to talk not only about your business, but also businesses in your area, to show potential visitors that there is an active community and a community worth visiting.

**Working with the press**

The media is a good way for sharing messages and information with visitors, potential visitors and the wider community. It isn’t a substitute for communicating directly with customers, but it can certainly add value.

A press release provides the opportunity to present your messages about the situation and key information in a clear and considered way.  When speaking to the press directly, make sure you have your key messages prepared so that you are comfortable with what is reported.

The content of media releases will vary depending on your situation, but they should:

* Be factual – don’t speculate
* Provide a contact name and number for further enquiries
* Be calm, reassuring and positive (avoid terms such as “crisis” and “emergency”)
* Acknowledge responsibility to visitors and the community
* Indicate that further information will be released as soon as it becomes available.

You may also consider:

* Providing practical advice on travel/accommodation
* Emphasising areas that are unaffected
* Including expected recovery time
* Promoting activities not impacted.

The media will inevitably be more interested in the bigger, more dramatic stories, but will cover other more positive stories if they are newsworthy – angles could include:

* Bucking the trend
* Human interest stories, such as the community working together
* Adapting your offer to the situation (one hotel offers ‘storm watching’ breaks to drive business in the winter)
* What your current position is in terms of bookings and what you expect in the future.  If you have plenty of forward bookings that have been unaffected by this crisis, make sure you tell the media and your local Destination Management Organisation- it all helps in maintaining a positive outlook.

You may find that your local media would be only too happy to get behind some positive messages or campaigns, as it is in their interest to be supporting the local community.

Avoid writing any releases which look like you are taking advantage of problems in other parts of the country.

## Cancellations and refunds due to flooding

**If you cancel a booking**

A booking is a contract between you and your customer.

Normally, if you cancel a booking you are in breach of contract and your guest is entitled to claim damages from you to compensate them for any loss. This might include the cost of taxi fares to find alternative accommodation or coach transfer to another venue. However, if your business has been flooded and you are unable to open, then this should be treated as a case of force majeure, whereby an “act of God” has prevented you from fulfilling the terms of the contract and compensation is not due.

Most customers will, of course, be sympathetic to your situation, as long as you have informed them immediately of any problems and, where possible, helped identify alternative options.

**If your customer cancels a booking**

Similar to the situation where you have to cancel a booking due to being flooded, your customer may be able to claim a case of force majeure if they are not able to get to your property due to the flooding or they themselves have been flooded.

However, if your customer simply cancels the booking because of more general concerns such as the weather or whether surrounding attractions will be open, then force majeure does not apply.

In this type of circumstance, you should consider the reason why the customer is cancelling the booking and make a commercial judgment in terms of retaining deposits or imposing cancellation charges. In making a decision you will need to weigh-up the goodwill generated through not imposing cancellation charges against the loss in cash flow to the business.

Remember social media and review sites are new routes for customers to let others know how you have reacted to the situation (positively or negatively) and while they should not hold you to ransom, you need to at least consider them in your decision making.

If you are concerned, speak to other businesses and your [Destination Management Organisation](https://www.visitbritain.org/business-advice/find-local-support)to find out how others are handling cancellations and look at Pink Book Online for guidance on legislation in this area.

Where you have to make refunds to customers, review the conditions of your business insurance policy to see if there is any relief under the business interruption and consequential loss sections. If your insurance includes cancellations, check the conditions of this in respect of the current issue – it is also important to speak to your customers and ask them to check any insurance policies they may have.

**New bookings**

Before taking any new bookings, check your standard terms and conditions and cancellation policy and update them if necessary, to ensure that they are clear in case of future weather-related impacts. When new customers book, let them know your cancellation policy if floods occur and confirm that they have accepted it.

Cancellation provisions within a contract can only be applied when these terms were made clear at the time of booking. This will be important should your customers subsequently decide to cancel their visit.

## Addressing the future impact of flooding on your business

Consider the following steps to take to help minimise the impact of extreme weather on your tourism business.

**Review marketing activity** - can you move it/do you need to move it?

It is worthwhile looking at what you planned to spend on advertising and promotion. You also need to think quickly about the next few weeks and check whether any booked advertising is appropriate.

You may decide to cancel some advertising, either because it will not generate business at this time (or the money saved could be used more effectively at a later date), or because the message is wrong in the circumstances.

**Review your offer**

Think about your pricing during difficult periods. There is no need to offer huge discounts, but remember there are costs associated with empty capacity. Added value offers (3 for 2 for example) can be better ways to entice in new business, are easy to introduce and are less likely to devalue your product. Work with your local tourism and trade association, [Destination Management Organisation](https://www.visitbritain.org/business-advice/find-local-support) and other businesses to assess the best way forward, both in terms of generating bookings and presenting a positive picture of your destination – not one in crisis.

Is there anything you can do to make your product more attractive? Activities or offers will reassure existing customers and encourage new visits. These could include:

* Offering added value  - 3 for 2 offers, for example
* Alternative options and itineraries - could you change tours to avoid flooded/sensitive areas?
* Emphasising relevant facilities - for example, do you have a drying room or could you offer a clothes drying service?
* Tweaking your welcome – perhaps offer hot drinks or soup to arriving guests?

**Look at your costs**

Have a good look at your incomings and outgoings.

* Review your costs
* Slow down your payments
* Delay (or cancel) spending that was planned.

In doing this, remember that your business is built on your staff and customers. While you are looking at cutting costs, you will need to strike a balance and ensure that you can still operate to the appropriate standard that your customers expect and can afford to promote your business to customers.

Have a good look at your business and divide your costs into fixed (things that don’t depend on the number of customers you have), variable (things which depend on customers) and one-off costs.

Fixed costs tend to be agreed regular payments, such as mortgages and rates. For most fixed costs you will have entered into a contract to pay and non-payment may mean that you lose your business.
Variable costs include staff, utilities and supplies. Review these and see if you can reduce them. Can you slow down any spending? Can you renegotiate terms with suppliers?

See if there are any buying groups which could make savings for you and ask your suppliers if they can deliver smaller quantities; check your energy and insurance costs. Can you reduce these – are you on the best energy tariffs and have you introduced energy saving measures?

Discuss different payment terms with your suppliers. A switch to 60 or 90 days payment from 30 days could help your cash position significantly.

Are there any non-essential/one-off items of expenditure which could be reduced, put on hold or cut?

For example:

* Is any planned capital expenditure needed? Can it be postponed? If you are looking at damage repairs, make sure you get a series of competitive quotes in advance. Is the local authority or any local business offering support to those who have been affected? It is inevitable in this situation that lots of people will be looking for tradespeople to undertake repairs – resources will be limited and prices potentially higher, so consider what is essential and what can wait.
* Review all other areas of maintenance – can you do it yourself, or do you need to contract a professional? Review any non-essential professional services or work with other businesses to share costs.
* Speak to your bank – are they giving you the best deal? Do you have the best offer for your overdraft/term loan, interest rates, bank charges and credit card commissions?
* Review your gross margins on food and drink – are they sensible and can you achieve them?
* Keep your personal drawings as low as possible and only for your immediate needs.

If you have to reduce your staff numbers/times, be open and clear with your team so that they understand the rationale.  You must understand current legislation if you are making any staff members redundant or changing their contracts.  It is always useful to seek professional advice, or to view websites such as [ACAS](https://www.acas.org.uk/). Ask for advice from your trade association, Destination Management Organisation and from other businesses, as they may have the information you seek.

Make sure you have professional advice from a reliable source at all times – if you do not follow 'the letter of law', you could face more serious issues in the future.

Considering all of these elements will help you to focus on the future and what expenditure you will be facing.

**Assess your future finances**

What do you think the demand on your finances will be over the next 6-12 months? Be realistic, it will help you when you are preparing your profit and loss projections.

If you see any cash flow shortfall in the immediate future, you will need to plan how to deal with this (for example through savings, the sale of surplus assets or an increase in bank support). Talk to your bank and remember, your bank will want to know:

* Your progress in managing your loan to date.
* What action you have already taken in terms of expenditure and reduction of costs and what plans you have for the future to continue this.  What will that mean in terms of savings?
* What your plans are and how confident you are in achieving your assumptions.
* What contingency plans you have in place.

You may need to ask for an additional overdraft facility, or for your current repayments to be suspended for a given period. You should take this time to talk to your bank about rescheduling once the season starts or bookings return; but remember you will have to pay your loan back at some point, so make sure you are not overstretching yourself.

Clearly you need to survive in the short term, but you need to plan for the future, making sure that your business can be re-built and is sustainable and successful. Any time you spend on business planning now will pay dividends and will ensure you recover as quickly as possible – think about your robust financial projections over the short, medium and longer term.

**Create a flood risk management plan**

You can find [guidance on completing a flood risk management plan](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/flood-risk-management-plans-frmps) on the Gov.uk website.

**Sign up for flood warnings**

[Register for Government flood warnings](https://www.gov.uk/sign-up-for-flood-warnings) via the Gov.uk website.

**Who else should you talk to?**

Make sure you speak to your suppliers, particularly if you need extended credit. They are likely to be sympathetic and understanding during difficult times. Don’t ignore suppliers seeking payments - it is important to maintain goodwill at all times.

Keep an eye on your debtors too, although you may feel you should show the same understanding that you are seeking from others.

If you find yourself in a situation where you cannot cover your debts, seek professional advice as a matter of urgency. [Citizens Advice](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/) is another good source of advice.

## Returning to normal after flooding

There is still work to do when things return to normal. Remember that your customers will not necessarily know that things have changed.

The first thing to do is update your website.  Make sure you remove any messages about the situation – you don’t want to keep reminding potential visitors of the issue.

Contact your customers – thank them for their patience (and support) and welcome them back.

Review your marketing activity and consider supporting any activity that aims to support the recovery of the local area’s recovery campaigns.

Other options to consider could be:

* Themed activity – such as a focus on local produce and customs
* A residents’ campaign – to thank the local community for their support
* Visiting friends and relatives – harnessing local support from residents and the media to encourage friends and family visits

A number of other options are available, depending on your budget and resources. These include:

* Providing regular media updates
* Promoting newsworthy stories
* Distributing fact sheets
* Highlighting recovery milestones
* Encouraging high-profile visitors.

## Summary of actions to take when dealing with flooding

The following provides timescale guidelines for actions to take following a flooding crisis:

**Basics**

* Assess your position
* Establish the facts
* Identify likely customer concerns
* Develop Personal Flood Resilience Plan

**Immediate**

* Liaise with your DMO/tourism associations
* Work with your DMO to identify and support their plans and messages
* Identify useful partners
* Develop your own messages
* Share messages with staff, supporters and local businesses
* Contact your customers directly
* Update your website, share messages through social media and undertake press activity

**Next steps**

* Review marketing activity
* Review your offer
* Continue communicating with customers
* Seek endorsements

**Your business position**

* Review your costs/expenses
* Seek financial support and advice
* Consider your current position and plan for the future

**Post crisis**

* Update your website
* Thank customers for their support
* Review your marketing activity

## Further support for dealing with flooding

Further information and support is available through national agencies and charities:

[The National Flood Forum](https://nationalfloodforum.org.uk/)– a charity dedicated to supporting people affected by flooding.

[Citizens Advice](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/)–a useful source of advice on a range of topics, including basic legal guidance.

[Local support finder](https://www.visitbritain.org/business-advice/find-local-support) – enter your county into VisitEngland’s quick tool to find advice and support specific to your local area.

[ACAS](https://www.acas.org.uk/) – guidance on dealing with staff.

[Pink Book of legislation](https://www.visitbritain.org/business-advice/know-your-legal-obligations) – your legal obligations, including those around cancellations and refunds.

[The Environment Agency](https://www.gov.uk/browse/environment-countryside/flooding-extreme-weather)– the latest flood warnings and information.

[Met Office weather warnings](https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/warnings-and-advice/uk-warningshttp%3A/www.metoffice.gov.uk/public/weather/warnings/)– the latest weather warnings from the UK Met Office.

[Highways Agency](https://highwaysengland.co.uk/traffic-search) –the latest information on traffic conditions and closures.

[National Rail](https://www.nationalrail.co.uk/service_disruptions/today.aspxhttp%3A/www.nationalrail.co.uk/service_disruptions/today.aspx)–the latest information on rail travel disruption.