Coping with the weather

by Simon Belt

The ***Beast from the East*** has wreaked havoc on poor benign Britain, not used to the funny ways and disregard for our quiet lifestyles. The news has had stories of NHS staff walking miles to get to work, sleeping at the hospitals even, whilst many schools closed for much of last week and transport services severely affected. Many supermarkets saw unusually high purchases of milk and bread, alongside farms not being able to get tankers in to collect the milk. The M62 was closed as it goes over the pennines and drivers left stranded. As if cold winds and snow wasn't enough, we now face a double whammy with flooding dues to melting snow, high tides and burst pipes. Was the weather this last week really so bad and unusual that it should have such an impact?

I know I sound a bit glib, and many of an older generation come across as nostalgic for a time gone by when people just knuckled down and struggled through periods of bad weather, something akin to a blitz spirit. The attempts of the press to hunt down stories of chipper spirit do seem a tad desperate and forced, even though the stories of people getting on with things are genuine and thankfully that's what most people do. There is something of a problem though - under reporting of the scale which many organisations seem to retreat from the weather, and a lack of seriousness about sorting out our infrastructure to ensure it is more robust and resilient.

So what do I mean about organisations retreating from the weather too easily? For example, many schools seem to close at the drop of a hat these days, which certainly didn't happen a few decades ago, leaving many parents in a difficult situation of potentially not being able to go into work, and keep things moving for others. Discussion on Facebook is illuminating how people track the headteachers from schools that stay open come what may, and see how they do the same when at another school, whilst their previous school now closes. There's heightened sense of risk aversion these days, from schools, to bus companies, train operators etc that has a wider impact on the rest of society bunkering down at the first sign of bad weather. The London Evening Standard had a headline on Monday afternoon encouraging people to get home by 6pm that evening and stay indoors.

The retreat from the weather rather than working out how best to reduce its impact, has a consequence for those who really do need things to be as normal as possible. We begin to experience problems due to adverse weather as though we bring the problems on ourselves, or that we shouldn't want a solution to them. So for example, the old person at home scenario when the boiler fails, is left not wanting to be a burden on anyone by asking for help in difficult conditions, because we're all told not to go out unless essential, and so wanting people to come out and help is opposing such advice.

The news this week as the thaw exposes problems with infrastructure, is that tens of thousands

of people are left without water and many more being told not to use it unless essential. The cold weather has cracked many water pipes, not just in individual homes but also across the infrastructure of distribution. Much of our infrastructure in Victorian and its replacement has been very slow and patchy. Yes, the privatisation of the utilities doesn't help as it accentuates the short term over the long term. More importantly though is probably the way responsibility for infrastructure is dispersed to a series of smaller organisations responsible for managing the existing infrastructure rather than investing in new technology more able to withstand variations in the weather. Centralised infrastructure like ultilities and transport would certainly be better served by a centralised administration, but the problem is surely one of ambition for the future rather than effectively managing the past.

For me then, the problem with the weather is not really the weather but the tendency today to be meek in the face of it. We really need to have more ambition to conquer the impact that nature has on society rather than encourage us to retreat home before the snow even arrives.