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Dear Ben,

Following our exchange in the Commons on 10 December, I wanted to provide you with further detail regarding the impacts of Storm Darragh and set out some of the ways in which we are improving our resilience to future severe storms.

While severe weather events, like Storm Darragh, can cause significant disruption to all communities, remote and rural areas are often vulnerable to increased delays in having services restored. These communities rely on the resilience of telecommunications services and power supply to withstand disruption, especially to ensure there is continual access to emergency services.

In your question, you asked about the risk to telephone communications when customers lose power. First I would like to reassure you that mobile phones, when switched on, are still capable of receiving Emergency Alerts in the event of power outages in a locality. Additionally, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), with Ofcom and other key stakeholders, is examining the resilience of the mobile network to power outages to enhance the power resilience of telecommunications across the UK. DSIT is further engaging with Mobile Network Operators on the Public Emergency Call Service Code of Practice. The Code of Practice requires that any call from a mobile phone will automatically roam onto another mobile network free-of-charge to make an emergency call if they have no signal from their own provider.

On your point about areas without a mobile signal, the Shared Rural Network is reducing the number of “partial not spot” locations where there is no mobile coverage or coverage from fewer than four operators. Learning lessons from Storm Arwen, several proactive measures were implemented to enhance resilience and support. These actions included strengthening cross-sector collaboration through the Electronic Communications Resilience & Response Group providing recommendations to improve network resilience and enhancing emergency planning and customer support.



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Whilst the transition from analogue to digital landline services networks (aka the ‘PSTN migration’) is an industry-led process, Ofcom and Government are working together with communications providers to ensure consumers and sectors are protected and prepared for the upgrade process. The government secured a series of agreements with the telecoms industry in November to improve customer protection throughout the migration. These agreements will provide stronger protections for vulnerable customers and Critical National Infrastructure.

On the issues you raised about the power outages, Storm Darragh resulted in over two million customers losing their electricity supply across Great Britain. As I said in the House, I fully appreciate that this will have been a distressing time for households affected. Electricity network operators are responsible for restoring power to customers and providing welfare support to disrupted customers. However, the Government has been monitoring the situation very closely and receiving regular updates. The vast majority of those who lost power had it restored quickly. All remaining disconnected customers were reconnected by 20:00 on Friday 13 December.

This Government worked very closely with the electricity industry both before and during the Storm to ensure that the necessary arrangements were being made to repair damage to the electricity network as quickly as possible. My colleague, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, met with the Energy Networks Association throughout the incident to discuss the progress of restoration and to ensure that adequate support was being provided to vulnerable customers. I was pleased to hear that Network Operators and local emergency responders carried out door to door checks in some cases to ensure that known vulnerable customers were getting any support they needed. Support, in the form of accommodation, hot food or welfare checks, was offered by Network Operators to vulnerable customers on the Priority Services Register since outages started, and Operators then extended their offer of support to all customers that were off supply for more than 24 hours. I understand, however, that there were some unfortunate problems with the 105 number during the storm which meant customers were unable to reach their network operator. Call volumes then decreased, relieving some of the strain, and the issue continues to be investigated. We will, of course, ensure that any improvements that this investigation identifies are implemented as soon as possible.



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My officials have an excellent relationship with the Met Office and had been discussing the potential storm several days in advance. At the point at which the weather warning was increased to Amber, the COBR Unit convened a cross-Whitehall meeting to discuss the risk and the preparations being made to respond to it. The COBR Unit worked closely with their counterparts in the Devolved Governments, and Welsh Government officials joined this meeting. Offers of support were made to the Welsh Government at this meeting and during the Storm. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has also spoken to the First Minister.

Looking at longer term resilience, my colleague the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, on receipt of the Covid-19 Inquiry's Module 1 report in July, committed to undertaking a review of our long-term resilience. The importance of working with the devolved governments was identified as a central part of this review. The review is considering the established practices and policies which support UK resilience against the full spectrum of risks we face. Engagement as part of the review has included meeting with representative organisations who advocate for and support people who are likely to be disproportionately impacted during emergencies, ensuring their specific needs and experiences are considered as part of the strategic approach to resilience.

Finally, I would like to reassure you that preparing communities for severe weather events and other risks is a fundamental component of our programme of work to build resilient communities. Furthermore, my officials have already started the process to coordinate the lessons being identified from the Storm and ensure these are used to strengthen our resilience to future severe weather events.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Abena'.

Abena Oppong-Asare MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY