

RAF helicopters in major flood rescue effort

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RAF Search and Rescue helicopters joined the emergency services in helping to rescue more than 100 people after flash floods cut off a large area of Sheffield on Monday 25 June 2007.



RAF Sea King helicopters plucked many people to safety [Picture: RAF]

A call from the Brightside area of the city, where 20 people were trapped on the roof of a factory which was in danger of collapsing, was the first sign that a major incident was in progress. Once the water began to rise, it spread very quickly and affected a considerable area of Sheffield, including homes, offices and the transport system.

In what was a police-led operation, four RAF Sea King helicopters -two from E Flight, 202 Squadron, at Leconfield, one from A Flight, 202 Squadron, at RAF Boulmer and one from B Flight, 22 Squadron, at RAF Wattisham - took turns throughout the evening to rescue a number of people believed to be in immediate danger.

A further three helicopters at the training school in Cornwall were on standby to assist, but with a concentration of flights in a relatively small area the decision was made not to use them.

Sergeant Jonathan Carrington, aged 37, from 202 Squadron explained how he and his colleagues were tasked with several jobs in relation to the flooding, firstly around the Hull area and then subsequently in Sheffield:

"We winched a disabled man from a ground floor flat in Analby, along with his social worker, and took him to a nursing home in North Ferriby," Sgt Carrington explained. "The helicopter had to land in a school and they transported him to the nursing home in the back of a transit van."

This initial incident was followed by the rescue of a man stuck up a tree in Chesterfield:

"There was torrential water around the base of the tree," Sgt Carrington continued. "The Fire Service, Police and Ambulance were in attendance and a fireman had chucked him a rope, which he'd used to tie himself to the tree, but they couldn't get to him."

Sgt Carrington was winched down through the branches and cut him free, then the man was winched to safety. The crew left him with the emergency services and medics.

Meanwhile in Sheffield, where most of the evacuations took place, there was chaos with people wading through water waist deep. Sgt Carrington explained:

"People stuck in offices were waving out the windows trying to get our attention. We prioritised jobs for those who looked most in danger."

"The majority of people were calm, some were scared to be winched, but they were grateful we could get them out of there to somewhere safe, with food and dry clothes."

Sergeant Jonathan Carrington

People were winched out of windows and off roofs and the Fire Service and Police took them to shelters:

"The majority of people were calm, some were scared to be winched, but they were grateful we could get them out of there to somewhere safe, with food and dry clothes."

"The water was waist deep and in one place we tried the window, but around the other side we could get the door open and we got the people to wade through the waist deep cold water, so we could get them out."

"The locals were gobsmacked. They've never seen anything like it in Sheffield before. They've never seen flooding to that extent."

RAF involvement lasted around seven-and-a-half hours, the aircraft being stood down just before midnight, though the Sea King from RAF Boulmer remained overnight on standby at Sheffield City Airport.

The Air Rescue Coordination Centre (ARCC) at Kinloss coordinated the military effort and the Police led the major incident, which quickly escalated through the bronze, silver and gold levels.

Regular training exercises are held with the emergency services and this major incident was well coordinated following many years experience and training in order to achieve better coordination.