

Hurricane Harvey 2017. Have lessons been learned?

On Friday 25th August 2017, Hurricane Harvey hit Texas, in the USA. The natural disaster has brought record levels of rainfall causing widespread flooding.

The level of disruption in Houston has hit unprecedented levels, affecting health, homelessness and economy. Hospitals have had to be evacuated, homes have become damaged and uninhabitable and businesses have been forced to close. With widespread power cuts, emergency services have been relying on backup systems to continue offering care to those most in need.

Could anything be done better at this stage of the crisis? Looking back to 2005 and Hurricane Katrina, in New Orleans; evacuation led to congestion, lack of resources resulted in poor health and social care, and widespread panic led to looting and damage to businesses. More than a decade later, New Orleans still hasn't recovered. Their population is significantly lower than pre-Katrina and their businesses still struggle to trade.

12 years on however, the military are on site to reduce disruption to people and businesses in the affected areas of Texas. Supplies and generators have been shipped in, and engineers are onsite in an effort to restore Houston's critical infrastructure whilst evacuation efforts are planned and prioritised around those most at risk. On the surface, the response effort appears more coordinated.

Whilst the efforts will continue to focus on the safety of residents, the effects on businesses will not be clear until much later. It does seem that businesses were better prepared with emergency response and business continuity plans already in place. Renovation and restoration organizations prepared for the storm by safeguarding their stocks and have put a lockdown on service inflation in the area. Farmers and traders worked tirelessly to protect their crops and although not a failsafe approach, have managed to bring at least some of their produce to safety. Local businesses have invoked their disaster recovery plans and are preparing to repair damage in disrupted areas as soon as possible, however with supply chains disrupted and entry roads blocked, this is likely to be a lengthy and difficult task.

At this early stage, it would seem that lessons were learned relating to preparedness, however whether the response has been proactive enough to ensure the regeneration and continuity of Houston and affected areas will only be seen over time.