

Floods and SEPA

Regional Flood Alerts and Local Flood Warnings

In Ballater, we know one thing: a flood will happen. It has happened in the past, and will happen in the future. When and how much, we don't know, and not knowing is very stressful. However, there are things that we can do to get ready as much as possible. We can get equipped with flood protection (PLP: property level protection, such as FloodGate), we can get to know the local hydrology (have a look at <https://www.ballaterandcrathiecommunitycouncil.com/river-dee-data-how-to-read-it> and the affiliated pages) to better understand how the River Dee reacts to rainfall and snow, and we can consult the forecast that is provided by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA). This article outlines the 3 main ways that SEPA communicates the flood risks, and how to use them.

Flood forecasting and warning is done by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), in collaboration with the MetOffice. Every day of the year, around 10:30AM (and around 3:30PM if the risk has significantly escalated since the morning), two forecasts are issued: one is sent to "category 1 and 2 responders" which includes the emergency services, the national transport companies, SEPA itself, energy suppliers, NHS. This is a 3 to 5 days outlook, which includes details of the flood forecast that category 1 and 2 responders are specifically trained to understand and interpret.

The second forecast is the Scottish Flood Forecast (SFF). It is aimed at a wider audience, and includes a 3 days outlook of the flood forecast in Scotland comprising a colour-coded map of Scotland outlining the flood risks. It is the earliest indication possible of when and where flooding is expected, and whether the source is from rivers, surface water, or the sea. You can access the SFF at <https://www.sepa.org.uk/scottishfloodforecast>.

Regional Flood Alerts

are sent to anyone who has subscribed to them via the SEPA's Floodline service (<https://www.sepa.org.uk/environment/water/flooding/floodline/https://myfloodline.sepa.scot/register>).

They warn that flooding is **possible** in a wider geographic area from rivers, the sea and/or surface water and are typically issued 24 hours in advance of anticipated impacts (although they can be issued anywhere from 2 – 48 hours in advance). There are 19 Flood Alert areas across Scotland; They are typically shorter notice than the SFF that there is a flooding risk in one of the 19 alert areas in Scotland; as a resident of Deeside, you will receive the Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire regional Flood Alert if you sign up either via text, automated phone call or email, depending on your preference. The text or call received is a prompt to check the specific message detailing the source of flooding (coastal, surface water, rivers) and provides advance notice to prepare for the possible impacts. You can also check for live flooding updates and message content at <https://floodline.sepa.org.uk/floodupdates/>.

Local Flood Warnings

are sent to anyone who has subscribed to them via SEPA's Floodline service (<https://www.sepa.org.uk/environment/water/flooding/floodline/> <https://myfloodline.sepa.scot/register>) entering their postcode.

They warn that flooding is **expected** in that specific area from rivers and/or the sea (the risk of surface water flooding is highlighted only in the regional Flood Alert) and are typically issued 3-6 hours in advance of expected impacts; this is not always possible in locations that are susceptible to snowmelt, such as Ballater, where river levels can rise unexpectedly during a snowmelt event. Not every community at risk of flooding has a local Flood Warning as these are only available where SEPA is able to monitor river and coastal flooding. Ballater is one of the 326 local Flood Warning areas provided as part of SEPA's flood forecasting and warning service across Scotland and will be issued when flooding is expected from the River Dee. Flood Warnings are describing a heightened risk of flooding in one of the 326 Flood Warning Areas in Scotland. The entire country is not covered by a Flood Warning. Only those 326 areas are, because of their specific risks of flooding. Flood Warning Areas have a specific forecast in place (either a specific detailed flood forecast computer model or a series of river gauges). Ballater flood warning area is covered by a detailed flood forecast computer model. However, such models are complex but not perfect: snowmelt poses a particular challenge in flood forecasting. When snow melts in the upper Dee catchment, forecasting floods for Ballater becomes very difficult, and Flood Warnings may be sent with a much shorter lead time than usual. As with regional Flood Alerts, you can sign up to receive local Flood Warnings via text, automated phone call or by email. On receipt of the local Flood Warning, you should read the text or call received prompts to check the specific message detailing as much as possible what is expected in terms of flooding in the area and take any necessary action to protect yourself and property. You can also find this message at <https://floodline.sepa.org.uk/floodupdates/> alongside other live flooding updates.

Local Flood Warnings can be escalated to Severe Flood Warnings which are flood warnings sent in exceptional circumstances when widespread dangerous flooding and risk to life is expected in one of the 326 flood warning areas.

Practically, here is what we can do when we are concerned about flooding in Ballater (so pretty much any time in autumn, winter, and early spring...). First of all, as a resident of Ballater, it's a good idea to sign up to the Floodline <https://www.sepa.org.uk/environment/water/flooding/floodline/>. You will be able to see whether you live in the Flood warning area for Ballater (if you don't, it does not mean you are not at risk of flooding!). Then:

1. Know the weather forecast. MetOffice provides that, and heavy rain or warnings for rain, are all good hints to look more closely at flood risks.
2. If you receive an Alert from SEPA via text or phone call, check the content of the message at <https://floodline.sepa.org.uk/floodupdates/>. Sometimes, the alert will be for the coasts (the text will say it clearly), so it won't be of concern for Ballater. However, be aware that some roads in Aberdeenshire may be at risk of flooding.
3. Check the SFF at <https://www.sepa.org.uk/scottishfloodforecast>. If Ballater is in or near a yellow / orange (called Amber) / red area, it means that a flooding risk is forecast for the area. Read the content of the text, which describes the risks.

4. If you receive a Flood Warning for Ballater, check the content of the message at <https://www.floodline.sepa.org.uk/floodupdates/>, and immediately get ready by putting up flood protection at your property, especially if you live in the Flood Warning Area.
5. If you receive a Severe Flood Warning (the text or phone you would receive will be clear that it is a Severe Flood Warning for Ballater), imminent danger to life is being forecast for the area. Find a safe shelter right away, do not attempt to drive or walk in the water unless it is vital, and evacuate if you are told to do so.

Remember that SEPA and MetOffice are providing a forecast: although it has proved very reliable in the last decade for Ballater, it is not an exact science, so don't hesitate to use your judgement, your understanding and knowledge of the area, and to reach out to other people in the village.

Lucile Verrot

9th July 2025