

ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

13 December 2000

FLOODING – STRATEGIC COUNTERMEASURES

Purpose of Report

1. To respond to the following Notice of Motion to the County Council by Mr J.N.B. Irving:

“In view of the recent serious flooding in Wiltshire, that Council be informed of what strategic measures are planned to alleviate any future such crises.”

Background

2. This report will advise the Committee on strategic plans, both national and local, to alleviate any future flooding crisis.
3. Environment Agency. In response to the devastating Easter floods of 1998, the Government tasked the Environment Agency (EA) to improve public warning of flooding from the main rivers, to provide home owners that live within main river flood plains with basic information on the “Dos” and Don’ts” when preparing for and dealing with a flooding situation, and to undertake closer liaison with local authorities in preparing contingency plans to deal with areas most vulnerable from rivers flooding.
4. County Emergency Planning Officers have regular quarterly meetings with senior EA Officers and as a result have produced a comprehensive Countywide flood plan which has been integrated into the County Major Incident Response procedures. In addition, the six areas within Wiltshire which have been identified as having a higher than average risk of flooding have more detailed contingency plans. These flood plans are exercised annually with full representation from all involved agencies. The last two of these exercises were held on 6 October 1999 and 5 October 2000. The first exercise tested the Salisbury District area plan and the more recent validation tested the response to flooding in the North Wiltshire District area.
5. Flood Warning Pack. After consultation with local authorities, the Environment Agency issued a flood warning pack to all homeowners living in river flood plains in England and Wales. The information covered:
 - The new flood warning codes and alerting procedures.
 - The actions to be taken when hearing a flood warning.
 - The actions to take when flooding starts.
 - Advice on how to cope after a flood.
 - Advice on how to prepare a simple family flood plan.

Regrettably of the 1.3 million properties at risk from flooding in England and Wales, research has shown that less than 5% of those at risk take the threat of flooding seriously enough to make any preparations.

Local Strategy

6. As part of the Government's review on the country's state of preparedness for extreme weather conditions, Wiltshire County Council is working closely with the LGA, which has been tasked, to co-ordinate the local authority response to flood defence plans.
7. The liaison, coordination and cooperation with and between the various agencies involved in tackling the problem of extreme weather is very good in Wiltshire and certainly proved to be workable and effective in the recent flooding.
8. The County Emergency Planning Officer chairs a quarterly meeting with all agencies and local authority departments that could possibly be involved in dealing with severe weather related incidents. Protocols have been agreed with regard to alerting, planning and resources at the strategic, tactical and operational levels.
9. The recent flooding clearly showed pre-warning of bad weather by the Weather Bureau and predicted flooding of rivers by the EA to be effective and timely; emergency planning officers were in the main advised of changes to the weather and flood alert state within minutes of the warnings being issued and the areas involved were then warned through the appropriate District officers.
10. The flood alerting role is clearly defined and involves the EA and Weather Bureau as taking the lead. However, the same clarity is not apparent for many of the other responsibilities and functions undertaken in a weather related emergency.
11. There is much confusion, even among the experts, as to which organisation is responsible for some of the tasks and therefore, there is doubt as to which agency has the lead. As far as the public is concerned, once they and their property are subjected to flooding, they wish to have a single point of contact that they can call for advice. No one authority is responsible for watercourses, which are treated in different ways by various authorities. There is a mish-mash of roles and responsibilities that need to be pulled together. For example, different agencies have varying responsibilities for the following:
 - Main River
 - Non Main Rivers
 - The Highways Act
 - Riparian owners
 - The Planning Process
 - Flood Warning (mainly confined to Main Rivers)

Therefore, through the LGA, the County is requesting that Government clarify the situation with regard to ownership of various tasks and functions.

12. In the short-term the County Council is engaging in closer ties with Districts, EA, Utilities and Emergency Services in order to agree protocols and procedures regarding responsibilities and allocation of resources; it is believed more can be done with greater cooperation and partnership. It is intended to launch a new public awareness campaign in order to advise those most at risk on what pre-planning to undertake and how to obtain assistance and advice in the event that they are flooded.
13. However, much more agreement and guidance is being asked of Central Government with regard to long-term issues, including climatic change; changes in agricultural practices; planning issues; and funding arrangements. All these factors have a profound effect on how effective authorities are at tackling long-term flooding.

National Strategy

14. Powers. Under the Highways Act and a number of water related Regulations, authorities currently enjoy some powers with regard to flooding and planning. However, new powers will be needed if the Government decide to ban all development within flood plains or, if some development is to be allowed in those high risk areas, then new powers will be required to ensure that builders take on the responsibility for flood defences and safety of those developments.
15. Other questions that need to be addressed concern the properties that are now deemed to be uninsurable and which may lose all value. It is likely that many people will now suffer negative equity as a direct result of the recent floods; a number of insurance companies consider that the recent happenings are likely to be more frequent due to climatic changes and consequently are revisiting their policy with regard to flood insurance.
16. Resources. There are a number of issues that need to be discussed at Government level with regard to resources. Already some Counties, like Wiltshire, undertake duties above those stipulated in the Highways Act. Such duties include County Council officers acting as coordinators when flooding occurs for evacuation and safety of the public. Moreover, significant monies and extra work are allocated to cleaning up after flooding.
17. With the advent of long-term climatic changes likely to significantly affect UK weather patterns, Government capital spending needs to be planned over a 10-year programme. MAFF grants and grant rates need to be examined and projects of various sizes need to be carefully costed. Currently, there are no specific flood defence levy grants or a mechanism for levy funding; much could be done by Central Government to free council hands on flood defence spending.
18. It is ironical that emergency planning grant aid and the Highways SSA which covers activities such as routine highways drainage maintenance for Wiltshire, is being significantly reduced at a time when the County is undertaking more in-depth long-term flood/climate planning to meet the recognised increased risk to weather related incidents.

19. Finally, in the long-term Central Government will need to examine the drainage systems and flood defences of the Country on a national scale. Replacement of very dated drainage systems would be costly and would take time. However, in many areas the drains are archaic and rather Victorian; they were not designed to cope with today's water/waste problems.

Conclusion

20. The County has a sound short-term to mid-term strategy regarding extreme weather emergencies. However, clear guidance is required from Government with regard to a long-term strategy and new tasking will need to be properly resourced and the appropriate powers granted.

Recommendation

21. To recommend County Council to note the strategic measures being taken at a local and national level as set out in the report in response to Mr Irving's Notice of Motion.

David Head

County Emergency Planning Officer

The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report:

None

Environmental impact of Recommendations contained in this Report:

None