

**Report of: Environment Scrutiny Committee**

**To: Executive Board**

**Date: 5<sup>th</sup> November 2007**

**Item No:**

**Title of Report : Recommendations on Flooding**



### **Summary and Recommendations**



**Purpose of report:** To present to Executive Board the recommendations made by Environment Scrutiny Committee on the flooding in Oxford.



**decision:** No



**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor Jean Fooks, Cleaner City Portfolio Holder

**Scrutiny Responsibility:** Environment Scrutiny Committee



**Area(s) affected:** Hinksey Park, Jericho and Osney, Carfax, Wolvercote

**Report Approved by:** Sid Phelps, Chair, Environment Scrutiny Committee, Nicola Stretton, Finance and Asset Management and Jeremy Franklin, Legal and Democratic Services.



**Policy Framework:**



**Recommendation(s):** The Executive Board is asked to respond to the Scrutiny Committee's recommendations:



1. If it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations outlined.



2. If it agrees when will the recommendations be implemented and who will take the lead?



3. If it disagrees why?



4. If more information is required from other officers when that will be considered?

# 1. Minutes of the Environment Scrutiny Committee – 15<sup>th</sup> October 2007

## 42. FLOODING ISSUES

*The Chair opened the proceedings and invited members of the public to address the meeting. Jeanne Bliss, Graham Jones and Angie Goff all spoke of their experiences during the flood and made a number of points, as well as raising further questions as the meeting progressed:*

*Jeanne Bliss spoke about the need to progress the ditch clearance programme and attracting external funding through trusts and other sources;*

*Graham Jones spoke about dredging the rivers to clear silt, flood storage reservoirs, the need for earlier implementation of improvement measures, floodwater reservoirs and the unsatisfactory housing insurance situation.*

*Angie Goff also spoke about misleading information regarding house insurance making house sales difficult, the outcome of samples taken and the possible health implications, the Wolvercote Commoners Committee map of ditches and gullies to identify and publicise ownership responsibilities, flooding from land where development was not completed due to planning approvals not being followed through.*

*Picking up on the points raised, Members agreed that initiatives such as the Wolvercote map of ditches and streams was a welcome step towards improving communication and increasing the overall amount of information available. Addressing the issue of unsound flood risk insurance assessments made by house insurance agencies, Nigel Bray said that where there appeared to be an issue with the information available to the insurance companies, the Environment Agency was always willing to discuss findings with local residents to identify where adjustments to the flood risk assessment could be made. The issues around the enforcement of planning approvals were subject to Government planning guidance. Officers confirmed that the sample taken away from the Wolvercote flood site had eventually been identified as powdered mildew and there were no concerns arising from these findings.*

*Michael Lawrence took the meeting through a report on the initial assessment of the financial impact of the Councils response to the flooding, which had been to the Executive Board. The report went on to confirm that officers were drawing up a paper on lessons learned and future options, which would be reported to Executive Board in December 2007. Mr Lawrence took the meeting through some of the feedback from managers and from councillors in more detail and said that work would be ongoing with the county council and other agencies to deal with the issues raised. The key issues identified were:*

- *The supply and distribution of sandbags could be better*
- *Communication between the City Council, residents and councillors could be improved.*
- *Advice from agencies changed rapidly, which didn't help residents*
- *The City Council shouldn't forget that people live on boats. Some of them were stranded for some time.*
- *The chain of command in a flood event could be more visible*

*Members said that in terms of improving communication and the dissemination of information, such as on sandbag distribution, that local groups such as neighbourhood watch groups, could be approached through the area committees and the work of the area coordinators.*

*John Hill spoke to the meeting about the work of the Oxford Flood Group. After the flooding in 2003, the City Council, County Council, the Vale of White Horse, Environment Agency, Thames Water and Network Rail formed the Oxford Flood Group to share practical ideas and improve the response and procedures in relation to incidents of flooding and to produce the Oxford Flood Plan. The Flood Plan was being reviewed and updated in the light of new information. Although the risk of flooding could not be eliminated the goal was always to further reduce the risks involved. The next meeting of the Flood Group would be on 25 October to which all were welcome and the recent experiences and the findings from the series of public meetings could be considered further. In advance of his own presentation made later in the meeting, Nigel Bray confirmed that there was an ongoing dialogue between the City Council and the Environment Agency. Michael Lawrence said that there were many small schemes being worked on by the Council. The Environment Agency focussed more on larger schemes beyond the Councils remit and the goal was to examine the overlap and agree where work could be carried out together.*

*Steve Smith said that the series of public meetings had resulted in residents making a number of recommendations to address the flooding problems in Oxford. Officers at the City Council have started to evaluate those recommendations and have prioritised 12 to take forward, although all the recommendations would be fully evaluated. The meeting went through and considered the listing of 65 suggestions on flooding in Oxford, which had been raised at meetings held in Osney, Botley, South Oxford and Wolvercote, the details of which had been circulated with the agenda.*

*Councillors and members of the public asked a number of questions about the recommendations. Issues of concern included the suitability of one-way valves on drains, enforcing the clearance of streams where the Council had the power to do so and the estimations of some of the costs involved. Roger Penney from Thames Water agreed that the issue of valves was worth further consideration. The meeting agreed to recommend to the Executive Board that the initial ranking of the suggestions should be endorsed as a starting point for officers to develop the proposals with a view to reporting back on progress to the Scrutiny Committee and to the Executive Board by the end of the current year.*

*Colin Bailey gave a brief presentation on some of the latest flood-fighting technology available such as water bags, which were a possible alternative to sandbags. Further work was needed including liaising with other authorities as part of the research into best practices, which might also be suitable locally. Richard Thurston said that the National Flood Forum was a valuable source of information and the Chair said that it was this sort of information sharing which would help to improve future processes in planning and preparing for flooding. Christopher Gowers endorsed this approach and urged the development of Local Flood Plans for each community as well as Flooding Local Action Groups.*

*Members said that it was essential that the Council continue to work with all the various agencies and that it was equally important to make use of the enthusiasm of the local people willing to be involved. The meeting agreed that a recommendation to the Executive Board should be made to recruit and train Flood Wardens, from community groups or other local volunteers, to provide authoritative information on the streets in future flooding incidents. It was also suggested that consideration be given to co-opting local people onto the Flood Group.*

*Nigel Bray gave a presentation on the Environment Agency's Oxford Flood Risk Management Study, an overview of the medium to long-term flood defence plan for Oxford. The study showed that wherever key areas were identified in the Strategy, there were always technical, economic and environmental issues to consider demonstrating the on going complexity of the problem. The presentation also outlined key dates in taking forward all stages of the strategy. A further bid for funding to continue research into Oxford's situation would be made in November. This funding*

would be used to investigate short-term flood solutions. The next goal would be to justify funding for major, long-term flood defences for Oxford by 2009. Research funding for this has already been secured. By 2009, a scheme for Oxford would be in competition with other projects of national concern.

The Committee agreed that there was a need to try to work towards progressing what was feasible and economic where possible with a view to continuing to try and address some of the longer-term measures. It was noted that suggestions such as floodwater reservoirs were complicated by issues of land ownership and practical considerations regarding the building footprint and the suitability of floodwater for reservoir use.

Members agreed that the Council should endorse the work being undertaken by Mr Bray and his team and that requests should be made to the Environment Agency and other parties where possible, such as Government ministers, to support further funding to allow research and associated work towards an Oxford flood defence.

In bringing the meeting to a close, the Chair summarised some of the points made during the discussion as follows:

- Invite Thames Water and the County Council to future meetings concerning flooding;
- Ask the Environment Agency to produce another newsletter;
- Prepare a leaflet or information for residents on 'preparing for flooding, either through the Council or the Environment Agency';
- Work towards setting up local flood groups and wardens for individual streets;
- Investigate the use of portable pumps or engaging the assistance of the Fire Service to pump flood water;
- Ask Thames Water to install one-way valves wherever they would help;
- Consider storage of sand bags and other equipment on Osney Island;
- Negotiate emergency car parking as part of the Westgate development;
- Ask riparian owners to dredge ditches and streams or carry out the work and charge the owners;
- Ask the Environment Agency, should they be successful in securing funding to continue research, to carry out an evaluation within 18 months or sooner;
- Ask the Executive Board to evaluate the proposals in the suggestions document and implement action;
- Ask officers to prepare an update report to the December meeting of the Executive Board.

Environment Scrutiny Committee resolved to recommend to the Executive Board:

1. The Environment Scrutiny Committee endorses the work that has taken place to evaluate and prioritise the recommendations made by community groups since the flooding and bring back the results of the evaluation to Environment Scrutiny Committee and Executive Board in December 2007.
2. The Scrutiny Committee believes that officers shouldn't restrict themselves to working up the 12 schemes that have been prioritised, but consider the other recommendations on the list for their suitability in preventing or responding to a flooding event.
3. Environment Scrutiny Committee endorses the work that officers are doing to look at alternative flood defence products, such as water filled bags. The Committee would like to see the results of the assessments of these products as soon as possible. Assessments should focus on cost, a technical assessment of their water stopping

*capabilities and disposal issues, in comparison with traditional products.*

4. *Consideration should be given to co-opting local residents on to the Oxford Flood Group to provide an effective link with the community, improving communication between the agencies involved and local people.*

*Environment Scrutiny Committee agreed to:*

5. *Write to the Chairman, Chief Executive and Regional Director of the Environment Agency and the Secretary of State for the Environment to remind them of the impact of flooding in Oxford and to encourage them to support the bid for flood research funding that the Environment Agency board will consider on the 1<sup>st</sup> November 2007.*
6. *Ask officers to circulate the Council's response to the Environment Agency Consultation document "Managing flood risk - The Thames region catchment flood management plan".*

## **2. Introduction**

2.1 The Environment Scrutiny Committee held a special meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> October to consider the floods that hit Oxford in July 2007. The meeting focussed on three issues connected to the flooding:

- The response to the flooding event in July by the various agencies involved; what went well, what could be done better if necessary in the future and what lessons have been learned.
- Work that has been done by community groups and statutory agencies since the floods to address flood problems in Oxford.
- Medium to long-term flood defence plans for Oxford.

2.2 Representatives from the communities affected by the floods were invited to the committee and took part in the debate, contributing to the recommendations made by the Committee. Representatives from the Environment Agency and Thames Water were also at the meeting.

## **3. Recommendations made by residents of the flooded parts of the city**

3.1 A series of public meetings have taken place since the flooding. People who live in the areas of the city that were flooded have been given the opportunity to question officers from the City and County Council, the Environment Agency and Thames Water on the response to the floods and the measures that need to be put in place to try to prevent a similar event happening in the future.

3.2 From the public meetings, over 60 recommendations have been made, which officers at the City Council have started to evaluate. The Scrutiny Committee was encouraged to hear that this was happening and

endorses this work. One of the first steps that officers have taken is to identify 12 priority schemes. Whilst ESC appreciates that there simply won't be funding in place to implement all the residents ideas (and some may also have a detrimental impact on other parts of Oxford, so wouldn't necessarily be suitable in any case) members hope that all the schemes are at least fully considered before a priority list is confirmed. The Scrutiny Committee has asked to see the results of this work by December 2007.

#### **4. Lessons learned from events in July**

- 4.1 A full report on the lessons learned from the flooding in July will be presented to Executive Board in December. ESC has also asked to see this report. One of the key points touched on at the Scrutiny Committee on 15<sup>th</sup> October was communication with local people. To that end, Environment Scrutiny Committee have recommended that the Oxford Flood Group co-opts a small number of local people to help improve communication.
- 4.2 The Scrutiny Committee believes that if local people are involved in the Oxford Flood Group, this will provide the Council and other agencies with contacts they can use to help establish flood action groups or nominate flood wardens for streets or parts of the city. It will also give local people a real opportunity to influence the flood prevention and defence policies of Oxford. Environment Scrutiny Committee hopes that Executive Board considers this request.

#### **5. New technology to prevent flooding**

- 5.1 At the Committee, members were given a presentation on the latest equipment available to tackle flooding. Water filled bags that would be used instead of sandbags were among the products shown to members. Work is being done to test their effectiveness and see whether they would be of use in the event of another flood. The members of the public at the Committee were also interested in their effectiveness, as one of their key concerns was that the supply of sandbags could have been better.
- 5.2 The Scrutiny Committee has recommended that assessments are carried out on the new products focussing on cost, a technical assessment of their water stopping capabilities and disposal issues. Comparison should be made with traditional products (such as sandbags). The results of these tests should be reported to Environment Scrutiny Committee as soon as possible.

#### **6. Comments from the Portfolio Holder (Councillor Jean Fooks)**

- 6.1 This was a very useful meeting at which the Committee were presented with very comprehensive information from many sources. Clearly it will not be possible to progress all the suggestions and it is

very important that the most promising ones are carefully evaluated, in partnership with the Environment Agency, before any funding commitments are made. The EA are meeting on November 1<sup>st</sup> to consider what short-term measures they could support and I hope that this will lead to action to reduce the risk and effects of flooding in Oxford in the very near future.

## **7. Comments from the Portfolio Holder (Councillor Caroline Van Zyl)**

7.1 None received.

## **8. Comments from the Strategic Director (Michael Lawrence)**

8.1 Officers in many departments are continuing to work well together and learn lessons from the flood emergency in July. The Special Environment Scrutiny meeting on flooding was well managed and provided a useful forum for review and discussion between members, officers and Oxford residents. The financial impact of the emergency response and spending on potential flood prevention measures will need to be considered by members in the setting of the 2008/09 budget.

8.2 In response to the specific recommendations

1. All ideas for flood prevention and improved flood response are being considered by the multi agency Oxford Flood Group. The results of this work will be reported to Environment Scrutiny and Executive Board by December 2007

2. The Flood Group holds an annual open meeting. This years meeting is on 25 October and residents affected by the flooding in July have been invited to attend. The Flood Group will continue to involve local people in future meetings to improve communication. The exact process for this will be worked out by the group.

3. Assessments of the effectiveness of new flood defence products will continue and results will be reported back to Environment Scrutiny. Where appropriate reports will also be prepared for Executive Board if members need to make budget or procurement decisions.

### **Name and contact details of author:**

Andrew Davies, Scrutiny Officer, on behalf of Environment Scrutiny Committee

Tel – 01865 252433

Email – [adavies@oxford.gov.uk](mailto:adavies@oxford.gov.uk)



**Background papers:**

