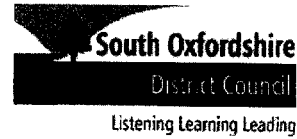




WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL



Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
DEFRA
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Please reply to Cllr Keith Mitchell

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22 October 2007

Dear Secretary of State

Re.: RECENT FLOODING IN OXFORDSHIRE

As you are aware and, indeed, saw for yourself on your visit here, there was substantial flooding of areas of Oxfordshire in July. The local authorities in Oxfordshire (Oxfordshire County Council, West Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, Oxford City, Cherwell District Council and South Oxfordshire District Council) have been working closely following the floods and this letter comes jointly from us as the relevant council leaders. We are now well into the recovery phase and would like to bring some longer-term issues to your attention, particularly in view of your Ministerial responsibilities for the Environment Agency.

1. Protecting Oxfordshire in the future

We are obviously all very concerned to ensure that suitable protection measures are put in place to prevent any serious future flooding problems in the county, particularly given the likelihood of more frequent adverse weather conditions due to climate change. Officers from all the Oxfordshire local authorities recently met with the Environment Agency to discuss possible schemes and smaller measures that could be put in place to alleviate problems in the future. While our local level relationship with the Agency is excellent, we would like to bring the following issues to your attention:

- We are pleased that the recent Comprehensive Spending Review has committed to an increase in the annual budget for flood risk management but we are very concerned by the Association of British Insurers response that "Government spending for the next three years is less than we were asking for, even before the floods. It does not begin to address the major issues, including drainage, which were highlighted this summer."



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



- It is good to learn that the Environment Agency has recently secured significant funding from the Thames region flood defence levies towards the costs of the Banbury flood defence scheme. As you know, Cherwell District Council has also committed substantial funds to the scheme. Nonetheless, there remain a number of financial, engineering and legal issues that require resolution and we would urge you to press for successful implementation of this important scheme and to end the uncertainty over whether the full financial support for it will be secured.
- While we obviously welcome their commitment to Banbury, the ability of the Environment Agency to fund major flood defence schemes is a very significant obstacle to better protection of our county. Such schemes can be extremely expensive; for example the proposal for Oxford is in the region of £150m to £200m.
- Flooding causes very real human misery. Some households in Oxford have been flooded three times in the past eight years and we have had no assurance that appropriate and significant steps are being taken by the Environment Agency to ensure that it won't happen again. Indeed we understand that the financial constraints on the Environment Agency mean that many of those schemes on the Agency's national priority list seem very unlikely to proceed, including the scheme in Oxford. We would like a commitment from you that financial issues will be addressed and the people of Oxfordshire protected.
- We recognise that it is not always cost effective to protect communities using major engineering schemes. We would urge you to consider a national scheme to support the protection of individual homes at risk, based on the pilots in Sussex and the north of England.
- The current Environment Agency monitoring system needs improving. Further investment would provide a more complete network of monitoring gauges that would improve immediate flood protection, particularly on the tributary rivers leading into the Thames. For West Oxfordshire this will include the Rivers Windrush, Evenlode and Glyme.
- We would also urge improvements to the usefulness and accuracy of the Environment Agency's early warning system which, in the case of Oxfordshire in July, was felt by many to be wholly inadequate.

2. Legislative change

We feel that responsibilities for maintaining local drainage of ditches and gullies are unclear and responsibilities too dispersed. It is worth considering whether there is need for legislative change and / or clearer local co-ordination arrangements to consolidate responsibilities and resources at a local level.

Additionally we wonder whether consideration should be given to amending the building regulations to build in new standards suitable for climate change adaptation. In particular, in relation to less obvious areas such as drainage, as well as the obvious ones relating to property.

3. Financial implications for Oxfordshire

At the time of the floods, central government appeared to make a commitment to reimburse fully local authorities for the additional costs incurred. In fact, having now had the opportunity to explore fully

the various financial aids available, it appears that the people of Oxfordshire will be left very significantly out of pocket from this natural disaster.

Our current estimate is that the net cost to the combined county and district councils will be in excess of £4.5 million, against which just over £1 million will be recoverable and the bulk of that from our Insurers. We would urge the government to consider the scope of the schemes available. In particular there is a need to simplify the complicated system of emergency relief funds, each run separately by different departments with varying threshold levels. Certainly the effect of this in Oxfordshire has been very little relief provided by government. We are also writing separately to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government regarding our financial concerns.

Of course, there will also have been a significant financial impact on many in our local business community. We are particularly concerned about the effects on our farmers, many of whom have had substantial crop losses, with hay crops particularly affected. They have been hit by the triple-whammy of flooding, restrictions due to foot and mouth and, now, the bluetongue outbreak. There is a question over whether the relief funding set aside by the Regional Development Agency will be adequate to support business recovery.

4. Local Authority responsibilities

Clearly there are also many issues where local authorities need to take the lead in preventing future serious events of this kind. We would like to assure you that we, in Oxfordshire, take these responsibilities very seriously and have a good track record in avoiding floodplain developments which we know add to the problem. All councils are working extremely closely with our partners to reduce the risk of flooding and we have agreed that a multi-agency group set up in the aftermath of July's flooding should continue to meet to take action on the longer term issues that we are able to address ourselves.

In light of the various reviews that are currently underway into this summer's flooding we felt it would be helpful to bring these issues to your attention at this time.

We seek a commitment that investment will be provided for necessary flood defence schemes to protect our county.

Cllr Keith R Mitchell, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council *Keith R Mitchell*

Cllr Wood, Leader of Cherwell District Council *[Signature]*

Cllr John Goddard, Leader of Oxford City Council *John Goddard*

Cllr Ann Ducker, Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council *Ann Ducker*

Cllr Jerry Patterson, Leader of Vale of White Horse District Council *Jerry Patterson*

Cllr Barry Norton, Leader of West Oxfordshire District Council *Barry Norton*

CC:

Rt Hon Hazel Blears MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Sir Michael Pitt, Chairman of Flooding Lessons Learned Review

Rt Hon Michael Jack MP, Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee

Tony Baldry MP

Rt Hon David Cameron MP

Dr Evan Harris MP

Ed Vaizey MP

Boris Johnson MP

Rt Hon Andrew Smith MP

Joanna Simons, Chief Executive, Oxfordshire County Council

Clive Baynes, Acting Chief Executive, Cherwell District Council

David Neudegg, Chief Executive West Oxfordshire District Council

Terry Stock, Chief Executive, Vale of White Horse District Council

Peter Sloman, Chief Executive, Oxford City

David Buckle, Chief Executive, South Oxfordshire County Council