

EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO FLOODING – Christmas 2013

Multi-agency meeting with residents of Danvers Road, and surrounding area, affected by flooding

Wednesday 5 February 2014 at the Angel Centre, Tonbridge

Present: Representatives from the Environment Agency; Southern Water Services; Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council (Leader – Councillor N Helsop and Chief Executive – J Beilby); Kent County Council Highways and Transportation; Kent County Council Emergency Planning and Kent Police (Chief Inspector J Kirby).

Together with Sir John Stanley MP and residents of Danvers Road, Barden Road and other surrounding areas affected by flooding.

INTRODUCTION

The Leader (Councillor N Heslop) of Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council welcomed everyone to the meeting and was pleased to announce that multi-agency attendance had been secured to listen to the views of those residents affected by the recent flooding in and around Danvers Road, Tonbridge. It was hoped that open discussion would help identify where improvements could be made and how these could be delivered.

All thoughts, ideas and actions put forward from this meeting would be captured and reported into the relevant committees at both Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and the other agencies. Councillor Heslop advised of his commitment and intention to progress and monitor all outcomes. In addition, the next meeting of the Tonbridge Forum, arranged for Monday 17 February 2014, would also focus on the emergency response to flooding and enable agencies to report back progress made on issues and concerns raised.

A range of questions had been received in advance of the meeting, co-ordinated by the community Facebook page '*Help and support for Tonbridge and surrounding areas affected by the floods*'. Councillor Heslop commented that this demonstrated strong community values and a real example of people working together to support each other.

Following a presentation from the Environment Agency, residents would have the opportunity to raise concerns and ask questions from any of the agencies attending.

Sir John Stanley MP was also in attendance and he would speak later in the proceedings.

ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

Reference was made to a 'flooding questionnaire' circulated before the meeting, which residents were invited to complete. Responses would help the Environment Agency (EA) better understand the full picture of the flooding event in the area and the impact

on individuals and their community. The information collected would help to improve the EA's response to flooding and their work with partner agencies. It would also be used to develop and improve flood warning services in the area, so that more detail could be given in messages to make them as accurate and timely as possible. Residents were advised that the EA wanted to work with local communities and other authorities to improve collectively on preparation and response to future flooding events and identify where, working together, the impact could be reduced.

The presentation of the EA centred on many of the questions submitted in advance of the meeting. These questions would also be answered formally on the community Facebook action page.

Severe weather between 17 December 2013 and 17 January 2014 meant that the ground was saturated and rivers high when approximately 65-70 mm of rain fell during 23 and 24 December. This led to flooding in many areas, particularly Danvers Road, Barden Road, Avebury Avenue and surrounding properties. However, there appeared to be three contributing factors to the flooding:

- (1) Intense rainfall causing surface water
- (2) Overflowing drains
- (3) River Medway bursting it's banks

Residents were told that the EA provided flood warning for rivers and did not take account of surface water and/or overflowing drains. However, the Agency was interested to hear from residents how and when they were flooded as this could help identify contributing factors, which in turn could identify possible prevention options.

The EA also aimed to deliver flood warnings 2 hours in advance, although in Tonbridge on the morning of Christmas Eve they managed to give 3.5 hours notice. The EA understand that the flooding initially started from the foul and surface water sewers rather than from the river.

In response to questions regarding the operation of the Leigh Flood Storage Area and control of the flood water levels, the EA remained confident that the management of the barrier had been appropriate. The operation of the barrier had accorded with legislation (River Medway Flood Relief Act 1976), fully trained staff had been in place and the site was independently audited every six months. Appropriate evidence was available to support the actions taken and this could be provided at a later date.

Finally, the EA highlighted issues already identified for action:

- § The need for capital investment
- § Improvements to flood warnings, communications and information
- § Reduce risk of surface flooding
- § Community action and how the Agency could work with communities to address concerns

RESIDENTS MAIN ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Residents voiced severe concern and frustration at the lack of communication, not only

between agencies but with communities, particularly the lack of sufficient warning given prior to evacuation and the inaccurate/conflicting information provided from EA staff in the area. In addition, residents were angry and disappointed at the lack of support, assistance and guidance offered and complained that not enough help had been received during and after the flooding. There was also a feeling that agencies had not accepted responsibility following the event.

Questions were asked about:

- (1) Surface water drainage and if an improved cleaning regime, at a different time of year, would be introduced; blocked drains and did these contribute to significant flooding in some areas; query over whether a pump on the drain system operated by Southern Water Services was working.

Kent County Council Highways and Transportation advised that currently drains were scheduled for cleansing every 12 months. A reactive cleanse as part of the flood cleanup operation would be undertaken.

Southern Water Services resolved to investigate all issues fully and apologised if they had got things wrong. Residents were advised that the pump, based in Sovereign Way, had been repaired several months ago. However, it was possible that it had not been switched back on, although as it was part of a two pump system Southern Water Services were confident this had not impacted sufficiently on the surface water problem.

Action: In response to further queries, Southern Water Services agreed to check what areas were covered by the pump, if and how long the pump was out of operation and report back to residents.

Action: Kent County Councillor R Long would pass concerns regarding surface water drainage and the cleansing regime to the relevant Cabinet Member at County.

- (2) The impact of planning decisions leaving some areas exposed to flooding and would future planning decisions take into account the effect of building on the flood plain. Some residents felt that existing development was far less resilient to flooding and created an impact for existing properties.

In respond it was explained that the Local Planning Authority (Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council) had to comply with legislation set out and were bound by certain rules within the National Policy Planning framework. However, the Environment Agency was a statutory consultee on new developments and the advice received had to be seriously considered before reaching a decision.

The Chief Executive of the Borough Council (J Beilby) advised that Tonbridge and Malling worked closed with the EA and continued to have discussions at a local level to understand where flooding pressures and tensions existed. The importance of working together to make improvements was recognised.

- (3) Communication between staff and agencies. Concern was raised about the

warning system and the automated text alerts not being sent early enough. No central communication point in Tonbridge to provide accurate messages. Conflicting messages received from EA staff in the area (flood ambassadors). Inaccurate information received over the telephone from EA staff.

The EA advised that a Severe Weather Advisory Group had met on 22 December to advise and co-ordinate a multi agency response. All of the agencies had met at regular intervals over the Christmas period and during the flood event.

It was acknowledged that the flood ambassadors did not necessarily have local knowledge and, therefore, the EA apologised for the quality of information given.

Action: A potential solution to the warning system would be to appoint flood wardens who would inform neighbours of any flood risk. This system had worked successfully in other parts of the county. (Environment Agency)

Action: Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council advised that the offices at Tonbridge Castle would be set up as a central communication and liaison point in any future event.

Chief Inspector Kirby briefly outlined the role of Kent Police and advised that a number of addresses had been attended by officers once the evacuation stage had been reached. Mobile police stations and Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) had been out and about to provide a point of contact during the event. Recent events provided an opportunity to look at what worked well and more importantly what could be learnt and improved for the future.

Sir John expressed serious concern about flood alerts and the amount of time given especially as the warning system was based solely on the River Medway flooding, which was only part of the risk. He asked whether the flood warning/alert should be adapted to cover both the River Medway and surface water flooding.

The EA representative answered honestly that it was doubtful that surface water would be monitored in the same way as a river due to complexity and costs.

Residents not signed up to the flood alert system were encouraged to speak to the EA direct to discuss if alternatives were available.

It was recognised that early warning of flooding was important but it was equally important to have improved prevention measures in place.

(4) The provision and distribution of sandbags would be better before/during flooding and not after the event.

Julie Beilby, Chief Executive, acknowledged that the Borough Council had not had sufficient number of sandbags available at the beginning of the floods as they were not stored on-site. 2,000 had been distributed prior to the event and another 4,000 during and after. Stocks had now been increased and the Borough Council were better prepared for any future event.

Action: Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council resolved to identify local pick up and storage points for communities so that some sandbags were readily available.

(5) Insurance premiums

Residents were advised that if they felt they had a claim against the EA they should contact the Environment Agency claims department with evidence.

Residents of Gladstone Road asked if a letter of acknowledgement regarding the incident could be provided by the EA to demonstrate evidence to the insurers.

Action: Letters and the flooding questionnaire to be delivered to Gladstone Road and Barden Road. (Environment Agency)

The National Flood Forum could provide advice and assistance to residents in looking for the best insurance.

Telephone: 01299 403 055

Website: www.nationalfloodforum.org.uk

Many of the points raised were noted by the relevant agencies for further consideration on how to introduce improvements. Residents were also encouraged to contact relevant agencies to raise any issues.

COMMENTS OF SIR JOHN STANLEY MP

Sir John Stanley MP was invited to speak and he thanked everyone for their frank and open comments, especially as it was important to get firsthand experience from those affected.

He promised to put pressure on central Government for increased investment into flood protection measures for Tonbridge, East Peckham, Hildenborough and Watlington.

Clarity would also be sought on how different agencies accessed funding for additional flood protection and this information would be shared with local authorities and other responsible agencies. In addition, to strengthen the success of future bids county, district/borough and parish councils together with flood action groups would be asked to identify top priorities for additional funding in their areas.

Sir John also talked about the following priority actions for Tonbridge:

- (1) Flood wardens for Tonbridge: As the town was non parished it would be suggested that the Borough Council establish an appropriate flood warden system.
- (2) Existing barrier: It would be suggested that the height of the flood defence wall be increased.
- (3) Length of wall: It would be suggested that serious consideration be given to

lengthening the flood defence wall.

- (4) Adequacy of Leigh Flood Storage Area: The EA would be pressed as to whether the existing controls were sophisticated enough to ensure water was let out sufficiently early. In addition, should consideration be given to increasing the capacity of the storage area?

Sir John concluded by reassuring residents that he would actively and strongly seek increased funding and approval for additional flood protection measures.

CONCLUSION AND ACTION POINTS

In summary, residents wanted:

- § Better communication and accountability between/of agencies
- § Better warning notification
- § Better assistance during and following event
- § Prevention i.e. improved and better drainage/gully clearing and planning considerations

Other actions identified for the Environment Agency:

- § Deal with the River Medway (longer term measure)
- § Address surface water issues (longer term measure)
- § Address drainage water
- § Improve communication of flood warning
- § Temporary barrier at Town Wall, between TA Centre and Barden Road
- § Establishment of incident room at Tonbridge Castle, in liaison with Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council
- § Training of own officers
- § Creation of Flood Wardens

In conclusion, it was accepted that communication between agencies needed to be improved and it was hoped that the public meeting had proved beneficial in enabling concerns and issues to be aired and addressed.

The meeting ended at 2300 hours
After commencing at 1930 hours