



## OFFICER REPORT TO CABINET MEMBER

### ENVIRONMENT AGENCY CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT LOWER THAMES FLOOD RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 11 November 2009

#### **KEY ISSUE/DECISION:**

To endorse the outline draft Surrey County Council response to the Environment Agency consultation on the draft Lower Thames Flood Risk Management Strategy.

#### **BUSINESS CASE:**

1. The report is an outline draft Surrey County Council (the county council) response to the Environment Agency consultation on the draft Lower Thames Flood Risk Management Strategy (the draft strategy). Flooding is an issue of national importance that has real significance to Surrey. The county council takes the issue of flooding seriously. The Lower Thames Valley has a particularly high risk of flooding and has a long history of flooding events including significant flooding in 2000 and 2003, although this was narrowly avoided in Summer 2007. The draft strategy area encompasses Staines, Chertsey, Shepperton, Sunbury and Molesey.
2. The purpose of the county council response to the Environment Agency consultation is to help ensure amendments are made to the draft strategy that will minimise the risk to Surrey communities and businesses in the event of flooding, and to ensure that amendments made, maximise the benefits for Surrey, including major investment in new infrastructure.
3. Relevant to the options in the draft strategy, the Surrey County Council Pitt Review Monitoring Task Group made recommendations in 2008 that included the county council developing a consistent approach to flood risk management across the county, and developing the reserves of trained and experienced help during flooding events.
4. The Environment Agency is the single, national body responsible for flood defence from main rivers and the sea. If implemented, the 2009 draft Flood and Water Management Bill (the draft Bill) would mean the Environment Agency having a strategic overview role of flood risk management. The draft Bill also proposes a new role of 'lead local authority' on flood and water management on upper tier local authorities (and therefore the county council). It is important that the Environment Agency seeks dialogue with the county council at a senior level to ensure a joined-up approach to flood risk management in the county.

### The Environment Agency consultation document

5. The Environment Agency is consulting on its September 2009 draft Lower Thames Flood Risk Management Strategy (the draft strategy) until 4 December 2009. This identifies priority areas for future investment that would reduce the risk of flooding. In dividing up the catchment into four reaches, different approaches are proposed for each section. Of direct interest for Surrey are the options for Reach 3 (Datchet to Walton Bridge) and Reach 4 (Walton Bridge to Teddington).
6. The draft strategy consultation document introduces the issues in the Lower Thames Valley and the study area and the Environment Agency describes how it developed its draft strategy. This proposes a recommended approach based on floodplain management, flood diversion channels and associated work before asking for views on its preferred approach.
7. The county council welcomes the opportunities the draft strategy presents for major new investment in Surrey's infrastructure.
8. However, the draft strategy does not address the problem of surface water flooding, and the way it interrelates with flooding from rivers. The issue of surface water flooding is recognised by Government and is addressed in the 2009 draft Flood and Water Management Bill and is an important issue in Surrey.
9. It is noted that whilst highlighting options for large-scale investment in Reach 3, the Environment Agency rules out large-scale investment options for Reach 4, where the floodplain is much narrower.

### Outline draft Surrey County Council response

10. The outline draft county council response is as follows:
  - Flooding is an issue of national importance that has real significance to Surrey. The county council takes the issue of flooding seriously.
  - The county council welcomes the package of measures proposed by the Environment Agency, in particular the opportunities for large-scale new infrastructure investment for Surrey in Reach 3.
  - In the Environment Agency's 2009 report '*Flooding in England: a National Assessment of Flood Risk*', Runnymede District, which is situated in Reach 3, was identified as one of the top 10 local authorities in England with the highest number of properties in areas with a significant risk of flooding. We therefore welcome the proposals for investment in flood diversion channels, which will have a positive impact on the Runnymede District.
  - Given this is a long-term strategy the county council would like to have seen more investment options for Sunbury and Molesey although it recognises the considerable constraints posed by the existing built environment and topography. An action plan for Reach 4 is a priority.
  - The county council supports a catchment area approach to flood risk management strategy. In taking this approach it would be helpful if the draft strategy included an explanation of how all the strategies relating to the River Thames are integrated, in order to reduce potential displacement of the problem of flooding. The county

council would welcome the Environment Agency working across its administrative boundaries to ensure a joined-up approach to implementation of the strategies.

- The county council would also welcome the Environment Agency's assurance that delivery of this draft strategy is a real possibility. The county council notes the high cost of implementing improvements in Reach 3, and the long timescales anticipated for implementation.
- The county council seeks clarity on what the Environment Agency would do should Government not provide the required levels of investment for its recommended approach; and asks what is its alternative strategy for Surrey and the wider catchment? In addition the county council would welcome bringing forward implementation timescales for some parts of the strategy. There are smaller improvements that could be achieved in partnership.
- Whilst the county council recognises the impact of river flooding on the county and beyond, it is surprising to see no explicit mention of surface water flooding in the draft strategy. We would like to see mention of the issue and the interplay between river and surface water flooding. We note Government's intention to join up flood and water management, reflected in its 2004 strategy '*Making Space for Water*', which identified a compelling need to have a holistic, joined-up, and integrated approach for dealing with all types of flooding.
- The county council is a key stakeholder in development and implementation of this strategy. Indeed it is implied in the draft strategy that partnership working with local authorities is needed to deliver aspects of it. The draft strategy needs to reflect the responsibilities proposed in the 2009 draft Flood and Water Management Bill, as these are likely to impact on it.
- As a key stakeholder, the county council wants to ensure that all available additional funding is brought into the county to reduce flood risk, beyond that which Government will commit to itself. This may include European funding programmes.
- The county council recognises the constraints set within the draft strategy. Whilst it understands the scale of a discounted option on flood storage, in principle, using the floodplain to store water would help ensure the problem is not simply displaced downriver. This is especially pertinent given the growing pressures on the Thames Barrier from tidal flooding, further complicated by climate change. The county council is nevertheless interested in examining opportunities to store water in the floodplain, for example through restoration of mineral workings. The county council has experience of working with the mineral industry and with Surrey Wildlife Trust on this, for example at Moor Park Nature Reserve, which reduces flood risk in Redhill town centre; and at Church Lammas, which provides flood relief on the Wraysbury River and avoids property flooding in Staines.
- It is imperative that a multi-agency approach to flood risk management is pursued, led by the Environment Agency, to ensure that residents and businesses in Reach 4, and indeed everyone in the catchment, are made fully aware of the risks and measures they need to take to protect themselves from flood risk. The county council is able to support this work, for example working with the Surrey Chambers of Commerce in developing business continuity plans and in establishing an emergency response volunteer scheme.

- The county council is keen to enable residents to have greater involvement and control of these risks. From experience, we know the existing Environment Agency Floodline Warnings Direct service precludes joining of individuals outside immediately affected areas. We therefore ask the Environment Agency to extend the scheme to interested parties across the catchment, so that, for example, county councillors may play a role in helping communities prepare for flood events.

#### Equalities implications

11. Between the recommended approaches for Reach 3 and Reach 4 it would appear there may be inequalities in the recommended approach for people in Reach 4. Vulnerable people are at particular risk from flooding.

#### Risk management implications

12. If implemented in its current form, the strategy would serve to manage flood risk better across the whole catchment. It is important that catchment flood risk management strategies join up along the River Thames down to the Thames Estuary. The county council would support a balance between retaining water in the floodplain and keeping it moving down to the sea, given the risk of the Thames Barrier being increasingly called upon to prevent tidal flooding. From previous discussion with the Environment Agency, we understand this is beyond possibility of Government funding. However, we note this is a long-term strategy and that all positive interventions would reduce overall flood risk in Surrey.

#### Implications for the Council's priorities or Community Strategy/ Local Area Agreement targets

13. If the draft strategy is implemented in its current form, it is likely to have overall positive impacts on following priorities and targets, with greater benefits for Reach 3:
  - The delivery of SCS Priority I: Improve public confidence in the ability of public services to keep Surrey safe, prepare for emergencies and reduce crime and anti-social behaviour
  - Other national indicators that Surrey County Council is measured on. These include NI 188 Adapting to climate change and NI 189 Flood and coastal erosion risk management.

#### 14. Other implications

None.

#### 15. Section 151 Officer commentary

The Section 151 officer confirms that all material, financial and business issues and risks have been considered in this report. While the strategy may have future financial implications, which would need to be reported at the time, there are no direct implications as a result of this report.

#### 16. Legislative implications

There is no proposed new legislation.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- (1) That the Cabinet Member for Environment endorses the outline draft Surrey County Council response to the Environment Agency consultation on the draft Lower Thames Flood Risk Management Strategy. The full response will also cover the technical/ practical detail.
- (2) That the Cabinet Member delegates final approval of the Surrey County Council response to the Lead Manager for Environment and Economy in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Environment.
- (3) That the Strategic Director for Environment & Infrastructure begins dialogue with the Environment Agency over long-term funding issues regarding implementation of the strategy for Reach 3 and Reach 4; and on interim and smaller scale measures that could potentially be delivered in partnership.
- (4) That Surrey County Council continues to apply pressure to central Government to accept the urgency of the issue, particularly given that Runnymede District is identified by the Environment Agency as one of the top 10 local authorities in England with the highest number of properties in areas with a significant risk of flooding.

## **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Principally, these are to:

- Ensure that Surrey County Council's views are made known to the Environment Agency
- Ensure that the Lower Thames Flood Risk Management Strategy maximises benefits to people in Surrey.

## **WHAT HAPPENS NEXT:**

The following will take place prior to submission of the full Surrey County Council consultation response on 4 December 2009:

- Liaison with relevant county, borough and district councils
- Consultation with Cabinet Member for Community Safety on 29 October 2009
- Consultation with the Cabinet Member for Environment on 30 October 2009
- Spelthorne Local Committee Informal Member Briefing on 2 November 2009
- Elmbridge Local Committee Informal Member Briefing on 6 November 2009
- Cabinet Member considers draft Surrey County Council response on 11 November 2009
- The Environment Agency expects to publish its final strategy for Government approval in 2010. It will publish all responses after the consultation has closed (unless confidentiality has been requested).

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**Consulted:**

Consultation with the Environment and Economy Select Committee 19 October 2009

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**Sources/ background papers:**

Surrey County Council, A Surrey County Council response to the Defra consultation on  
the draft Flood and Water Management Bill, July 2009

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Draft Flood and Water Management  
Bill, April 2009

Surrey County Council, Progress of the Pitt Review Monitoring Task Group, April 2009.

Sir Michael Pitt, *Learning lessons from the 2007 floods*, June 2008.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, *Making Space for Water: Taking  
forward a new Government strategy for flood and coastal erosion risk management in  
England*, March 2005.

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