



Environment & Transport Select Committee  
17 July 2014

**Interim Report of the Flooding Task Group**

**Purpose of the report:** Policy Development and Review

This report contains the initial findings and recommendations of the Flooding Task Group, which was commissioned by the Environment & Transport Select Committee to investigate the impacts of the recent flood events that affected Surrey in December 2013 and early 2014.

The Select Committee is asked to endorse the recommendations of the Task Group, which seek to assist the County Council and its partners in mitigating against the impact of future flooding on residents, businesses and infrastructure.

**Introduction:**

1. In December 2013 the County of Surrey was hit by extreme weather conditions resulting in a prolonged spell of flooding affecting several Districts and Boroughs. Major incidents were declared on 24 December 2013 and 8 February 2014 to coordinate the response to flooding across the County.
2. Although it is widely recognised that the Council's Emergency Management Team and Emergency Services performed well in response to recent flooding given the severity of the event and limited resources, Members feel that it is essential to reflect on the impact of flooding and learn lessons as to how the Council can be better prepared should a similar event take place in the future.
3. In order to achieve this, formation of a Flooding Task Group was announced at Full Council in March 2014. The Group was established to investigate and gather evidence from a range of stakeholders on the strategic and local impacts of flooding on Surrey County Council, its residents and its partners. A list of the witnesses the Task Group has met with, and plans to meet with, is attached at **Annexe A**.
4. The Task Group is chaired by David Harmer and its Members are Mark Brett-Warburton, Stephen Cooksey, Peter Hickman, Chris Norman, Denise Saliagopoulos and Nick Skelllett. Representation on the Task Group was sought from within the Districts and Boroughs most significantly affected by the recent flooding, and the Select Committees whose terms of reference this issue falls in to (Environment & Transport, Communities and Council Overview & Scrutiny).
5. The aim of the Task Group is:

*'To consider the key lessons learnt from recent flood events and establish how the Council can respond as effectively as possible to future incidences of flooding, to ensure the safety of residents, businesses and infrastructure in the County'.*

6. A scoping document outlining the Group's aims and objectives in further detail is attached at **Annexe B**.
7. This interim report details the Task Group's key findings and recommendations to date. A final report will follow before the end of the year once the Group has completed its work and collected evidence from all the witnesses it wishes to speak to.

#### **Review of methodology:**

8. The Task Group is carrying out its work in a number of phases. At its first meeting County Officers from Emergency Management, Highways and the Community Partnerships Team briefed Members on key projects and activities already underway in relation to flooding. This included an overview of the County's strategic recovery plan, roles and responsibilities of public bodies/partner agencies during flood events, and the County's response to emergency incidents.
9. In order to understand as accurately as possible the impact of the recent flooding 'on the ground', the Task Group invited all Local Committee Chairmen to nominate the County Member they felt represented the division most significantly affected by the flooding in their District or Borough. The nominated Members were also asked to put forward the names of any other witnesses they felt could provide a valuable contribution to the review (for example – local residents, local Members and Borough/District officers).
10. The Group then met with the nominated Members and witnesses in their divisions to collect evidence, learn about their experiences and hear their thoughts as to what recommendations could help the County Council and its partners plan for, and respond to, future instances of flooding. This phase of the Task Group's work has been completed and its findings are detailed in paragraphs 19-31.
11. In its next phase of work the Task Group will be meeting with County Councillors from all other divisions in Surrey that were affected by the flooding (again, as nominated by the relevant Local Committee Chairman) to gather evidence. It will also be meeting with external partners including Thames Water, the Environment Agency (EA) and Ofwat in order to hear their views. Once this has been completed the Task Group will consult with County officers and review all of the evidence it has considered. A final report and recommendations will then be submitted to the Environment & Transport Select Committee and Cabinet at the end of the year.

#### **The Surrey County Council perspective:**

##### **The impact of the geography and geology of Surrey:**

12. It is important to keep in mind that flooding in Surrey is strongly affected by the County's significantly variable geography and geology between and within Boroughs and Districts, and even within divisions. This resulted in different impacts of flooding in various areas. This is because of the varying geography, volume and flow rates of the main rivers that run through the County.

Specifically, during the flooding the change of flow rate of the Thames increased in speed gradually and its water levels rose insidiously. The amount of water that flooded surrounding areas was huge and this was the cause of the most severe flooding in Surrey. Comparatively, the rivers Wey, Mole and other tributaries of the Thames experienced a much faster flow and sudden rise and fall in water levels, with some affected areas receiving as little as one hour's warning of the incoming floods.

13. These differing factors also resulted in different types of groundwater impacting on local areas. These were in the main either flooded aquifers that could not cope with the volume of water flowing through them, or water that soaked through chalk on a more gradual basis and caused flooding up to three or four weeks later. The Task Group noted these differences and will take this into account when considering its recommendations.

#### **Feedback from Surrey County Council Officers:**

14. At one of its first meetings the Task Group met with County Officers from the Highways, Emergency Management, Community Partnership Teams and Flood Recovery Programme to learn about their experiences of responding to the flooding. The key themes raised and discussed are summarised below:
15. **Flood Recovery Programme:** The Task Group was informed that a Flood Recovery Programme had been established, consisting of a number of workstreams based on multi-agency work that had taken place during the initial response to flooding. The workstreams are: Communications, Community Engagement, Environment & Infrastructure, Humanitarian, Mutual Aid and Resources. These activities are overseen by a multi-agency Recovery Co-ordination Group which is chaired by Surrey County Council's Assistant Chief Executive, Susie Kemp.
16. **Collaborative working:** It was noted that during the response and recovery phases, strong relationships were formed between the Council and external agencies involved in the flooding. This was a result of the fact that representatives of these organisations were based in the same location at Mount Browne. Initially, however, District and Borough representatives were not physically placed in the same location and a significant amount of work with these partners was carried out via teleconferences, which in the main proved to be fairly effective, though not ideal.
17. **Flood forums:** A key part of the recovery process was formation of local flood forums and use of flood surgeries. These provided residents with an opportunity to meet with representatives from partner agencies such as the Environment Agency (EA) and Thames Water, and to receive advice on applying for flood alleviation grants and funding. A significant achievement of this process was the fact that Surrey secured funding for the use of the National Flood Forum's trailer, and working in partnership with District and Borough colleagues this proved invaluable in providing knowledge and expertise to residents during the flood recovery.
18. **Administration of the repair and renew grant:** In order to assist residents in protecting their homes and businesses against future instances of flooding, the County Council administers a grant scheme providing up to £5,000 per flood-affected home or business to fund flood resilience or resistance measures. Administration of the repair and renew grant in Surrey has been very successful in light of the short amount of time officers had to establish the scheme. However, work still continues in order to increase take up of the scheme and

officers felt that more could be done to publicise it more effectively and to raise public awareness.

#### The District/Borough perspective:

19. As detailed above in paragraph 9, the Task Group invited Local Committee Chairmen to nominate the County Member they felt represented the division most significantly affected by the flooding in their District or Borough. All Districts and Boroughs contributed to the review apart from Epsom & Ewell and Surrey Heath, who were largely unaffected by the flooding.
20. The Task Group met with the nominated Members and their witnesses during May and June 2014. A summary of the key themes raised and pieces of evidence gathered is provided below:
21. **Communication:** Although strong relationships between the County Council and partner agencies were formed during the recent flood events, there were areas for improvement in relation to communication suggested by witnesses interviewed by the Task Group. In particular, it was frequently requested that there be one point of contact for both internal and public queries and for collecting very localised information for each District and Borough and the County during emergency events. This individual or team could then disseminate any requests and/or information to the relevant service, ensuring that the best and most efficient use of officer time is made and that duplication of work is avoided. Concern was also raised at the capacity for accommodating all relevant officers at the Council's Emergency Response Centre at Mount Browne – some District and Borough colleagues felt that it would have been beneficial for them to be based in the same location as County and partner authority officers.
22. **The River Thames Scheme (RTS):** A request that was frequently raised by Councillors and witnesses was that the RTS be implemented as soon as possible. There was a widespread opinion that the current, probably optimistic, completion date of 2025 was too far in the future and that the County Council should find a means of implementing the scheme as soon as possible.
23. **Clearance and maintenance of gullies and ditches:** In every division the Task Group visited the impact of poorly maintained gullies and ditches was raised. In many areas these were blocked with debris and this had a significant impact on the prevention of flooding. A particular issue was that riparian owners of ditches were either unaware of, or unwilling to carry out their maintenance responsibilities. It was suggested that the clearing of gullies and ditches become a priority for the County Council.
24. **Utility companies:** A number of concerns were raised in relation to the responsibilities and activities of utility companies during the flooding:
  - Poorly maintained drainage systems were a frequent issue, with the result being that a number of systems were unable to cope with the volume of water flowing through them which further increased the impact of floods.
  - Witnesses had experience of utilities companies having outdated maps of their networks which made it very difficult to investigate and repair damage or blockages caused by the flooding.
  - The Task Group was also informed that key pumping stations were located in areas at high risk of flooding, and it was suggested that utility companies consider re-siting them to prevent the possibility of them being non-operational as a result of future flood events.

- The installation of non-return valves was raised by a number of witnesses. It was felt that their use should be far more widespread in order to prevent water and sewage overflowing from drainage systems in the event of flooding (the Task Group intends to discuss this issue in further depth when it meets with Thames Water at a later date).
25. **Sandbags:** The Task Group was informed that District and Borough Councils received a significant number of requests from residents for sandbags to protect their homes during flood events. These were allocated on the basis of most need but the view was widely expressed that they were not the most effective means of flood defence and that, in some key locations, there were not enough sandbags for the purpose. As such, it was suggested that the Council investigate alternatives to sandbags in order to maximise the ability of residents to protect their properties.
26. **Traffic management:** A number of Boroughs and Districts experienced significant problems in relation to traffic management during the flooding. The closure of roads was raised as a specific concern, as in some cases the Police and SCC Highways team did not have the capacity to effectively close all roads affected by flooding. The result of this was that residents and local volunteers often tried to manage traffic themselves, with road users ignoring their warnings. The ensuing wash caused by vehicles travelling along roads inundated with water caused substantial, unnecessary and easily preventable damage to infrastructure and property.
27. **Joint agency working:** An issue that was raised on a number of occasions by witnesses was that information sharing between the Council and partner agencies could be improved. Specifically, Districts and Boroughs and the agencies they worked with during the flooding often held their own databases with information relating to road closures or vulnerable people, for example. Officers in particular felt that it would be beneficial for there to be one central list for areas such as these that all organisations could refer to.
28. **Staffing issues:** With the first major flooding incident taking place on Christmas Eve, both the Council and partner agencies were short staffed as a result of leave taken over the holiday period. It was suggested that additional allowances be made to ensure that a sufficient level of support staff is available during emergency events at times of year such as this. Moreover, it was felt that a clear system whereby officers could deputise for others in their absence be devised, in order for expertise to be available at all times.
29. **Secondary emergencies:** It was very clear that flooding in Surrey was exacerbated by a number of secondary emergencies, in particular high winds blowing down trees, thereby blocking access to roads and pulling down power lines, resulting in power cuts. The view was expressed that it would therefore be essential for emergency response and recovery plans to have sufficient provision for dealing with more than one type of emergency during a crisis event such as flooding.
30. **Gatwick Airport:** Witnesses from affected areas close to Gatwick Airport expressed the view that BAA may have not constructed sufficient flood defences in the past and that this exacerbated the flooding. There were also concerns that chemicals in the water coming out of Gatwick may have blocked drains and impacted on their ability to deal with high volumes of water. There are plans in place to construct a reservoir at Gatwick to assist in water management and flood prevention, but this will only take place if a second runway is constructed at the airport. Should there be a Plan B?

9

31. **Planning policy on floodplains:** A significant cause of concern for a number of witnesses interviewed by the Task Group was the fact that planning permission was frequently being granted by the relevant authorities in areas of high flood risk and floodplains. In some cases the local District or Borough Council had refused to give planning permission on these grounds, only for it to be overturned on appeal. To prevent these issues in future it was suggested that the EA keeps flood plains on their maps and informs planning inspectorates of where flooding has recently taken place. A further concern raised in relation to planning was that large houses were often given permission to extend with little consideration for the impact this has on the effectiveness and/or closure of nearby culverts and ditches.

#### **Future evidence gathering with external partners:**

32. As detailed in paragraph 11, the Task Group is planning to meet with key external agencies that were involved in the flooding in order to hear their views and learn from their experiences. The Group has a meeting scheduled with the Environment Agency on 9 July 2014, and is also planning to meet with Thames Water in late July 2014. Ofwat were invited to attend a meeting but declined owing to resource issues. They have however agreed to provide a written submission to the Task Group and this will be taken into consideration for the final report and recommendations.

#### **Recommendations:**

That the Select Committee endorses the following actions:

- a) That a review of the communications arrangements between the County Council, Districts and Boroughs and relevant partner organisations be carried out, with a view to avoiding duplication of effort and to improve communication as perceived by residents.
- b) That the County Council determines how the River Thames Scheme can be implemented as soon as possible.
- c) That, in order to reduce the quantity of water entering the fluvial system, priority be given to the clearance of all ditches and soakaways in the County, and, where appropriate, the reinstatement or creation of ponds.
- d) That utilities companies be encouraged to keep up to date plans of their networks.
- e) That the County Council explores alternatives to the use of sandbags in flood defences.

#### **Next steps:**

The Task Group will continue to gather evidence from the witnesses detailed in this report. It will then submit its final recommendations to the Environment & Transport Select Committee and Cabinet in late 2014.

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**Sources/background papers:** None.

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