

Environment & Transport Select Committee
27 October 2014

Report of the Flooding Task Group

Purpose of the report: Policy Development and Review

This report contains the 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 April 2014 a Flooding Task Group was set up to examine all matters surrounding the flooding experienced in many parts of Surrey between 23 December 2013 and March 2014. The Task Group was established under the auspices of Surrey County Council's Environment & Transport Select Committee, with a remit to report back by the end of 2014. Membership of the Group was as follows: David Harmer (Chairman), Mark Brett-Warburton, Stephen Cooksey, Peter Hickman, Chris Norman, Denise Saliagopoulos and Nick Skellett.
2. This report is based on witness statements, and we have relied on those. Because further information is becoming available on a regular basis, this report should be treated as a dynamic document which is likely to be further developed.

Methodology:

3. The Task Group began its investigation by meeting with Surrey County Council's (SCC) Emergency Management officers. The first meeting discussed the plans in place prior to the flooding, both for SCC and for its various emergency partners, and then the actual experience during the crisis period. A second meeting discussed the recovery phase, again

comparing plans with actual experience; since this meeting took place during the recovery phase, the experience was on a “so far” basis.

4. The Task Group then consulted the Chairmen of SCC’s eleven Local Committees, to determine which Division in each Borough and District seemed to be the worst affected. A meeting was held with the County Councillor for each of the nominated Divisions, at which the Divisional Member was invited to bring one or more outside parties, for example residents, Borough or District officers or business people, to explain their experiences of what happened on the ground. These meetings were held in the relevant Borough or District or the adjacent one, with the Divisional Member orchestrating the discussion and Task Group Members seeking clarification, in particular on the local geography.
5. At this stage the Task Group submitted an interim report and recommendations to the Environment & Transport Select Committee meeting of 13 July 2014, from where they were passed on to the Cabinet meeting of 22 July 2014. All of the recommendations were accepted (this report is available on the SCC website and/or on request).
6. Next the Task Group met with the Environment Agency, Thames Water (as the drainage authority), the Police and the Fire Service. OfWat, the water regulator, was unfortunately unable to meet with the Task Group because the timing coincided with the period in which they were considering the business plans of all the water companies for the next five years. However, OfWat provided the Task Group with written evidence.
7. Lastly, the Task Group met with Members and other representatives of further Divisions which had been significantly affected on the same basis as above. In all representatives of 16 Divisions were involved in such meetings, and additional written evidence was received from officers of affected Boroughs. A list of all these meetings and witnesses is attached at **Annexe 2**.

Overall findings:

8. There were two separate flooding crises. The first occurred just before and during the Christmas 2013 period, caused by very substantial rainfall along Surrey’s southern border, which in turn caused dramatic rises in the levels of the Wey, the Mole and their tributaries. This was exacerbated by high winds bringing down trees and power lines in some places. The second, much longer crisis occurred, with two peaks, during January and February 2014, caused by substantial rainfall along the Thames basin, well upstream from Surrey, affecting both the Thames itself and its tributaries, resulting in steadily rising river levels and volumes over a longer period.
9. In terms of properties flooded and in terms of people flooded out of their homes, Surrey was substantially the worst affected county in England. Over 1400 properties were confirmed as having been internally flooded, though there was strong evidence of under-reporting. This is believed to have been caused by concern that properties would become uninsurable and/or that their value would be reduced. Since insurance companies nowadays make their judgments essentially on a postcode basis, such

under-reporting has not been helpful. Encouragingly, The Association of British Insurers has now written to Penny Mordaunt, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Communities and Local Government, saying that “applications for the Repair and Renewal Grant will not directly lead to premiums or excesses being increased.”

10. Over 1200 of the flooded properties were flooded directly by main rivers. By this measure the worst affected areas, according to the Environment Agency, were Egham (339 properties), Staines (339), Guildford (143), Chertsey and Laleham (91), Fetcham (76), Godalming (72), Smallfield (65) and Shepperton (51). The lead agency for main river flooding is the Environment Agency, and they have plans for the protection of most of the areas affected, subject to the availability of resources.
11. Of those properties flooded other than directly by main rivers about half were flooded via fluvial gravel beds from the main rivers, these being in Egham and Staines, a third by unidentified causes and around 40 by sewage. A much greater number of properties were reported as having been seriously affected by sewage in their gardens, in their roads and lapping against house walls. The lead agency for these matters is Thames Water and indirectly the Environment Agency. It is difficult to understand what action is being taken to reduce future risk with regard to sewage, but in any case (regrettably) the County Council has no basis for intervening with resources.
12. The Environment Agency has some limited powers in cases where sewage is endangering the environment, for example where it escapes on to gardens from where there is a clear risk that it may in due course escape into the river network; or where sewage escapes on to roads from which it is likely to reach the river network via the highway drainage system. Sewage intrusion into houses is outside the remit of the Environment Agency, as is the case (which has been widely reported in Surrey) where failures of the sewage network result in residential toilets becoming unflushable. The Environment Agency has requested that all householders affected by sewage should report the matter to the EA so that they can build an accurate picture of the problems.
13. The Environment Agency does intend to propose that Thames Water should ensure that all control equipment should be located above the highest recorded flood levels.
14. The most common criticism of the authorities overall related to communication, both to and from residents and the various authorities. Many residents felt that they were not kept adequately informed of what was happening, what should be expected to happen and what action they should or should not take. At the same time they also felt that their input could have been useful to the authorities in building up a picture of the situation on the ground, if there had been a recognised channel of communication. Some authorities felt that the information flow among authorities could function much better, especially in the early part of each stage of the two crisis periods.

15. However, Borough and District Councils' support for residents was generally very helpful. Some communities and individuals made extraordinary efforts to help vulnerable residents. And the decision process led by SCC's Chief Executive which resulted in the early declaration of an Emergency was a key factor in preventing much greater potential problems.
16. Among other concerns reported by residents were the protection of closed roads, wash entering gardens and homes from cars driving too fast along flooded and even closed roads, and problems of cars blocking roads where emergency services needed vehicular access. Residents believe that the authorities ought to take strong action about these issues during flood emergencies, while the authorities, Police and Councils, point to the level of resource that would be required to enforce the requisite controls.

Options for reducing future risk through capital investment:

17. Potential risk reduction through new capital investment falls into three categories. Firstly, a range of protection measures could be implemented along the main rivers. This would fall under the aegis of the Environment Agency, but would require substantial investment, ranging between 50% and 80% of the overall cost, on the part of Local Authorities. The percentage to be locally funded is derived from a Central Government formula based on the cost/benefit in economic terms. These measures range from quite modest schemes costing less than £1 million to the River Thames Scheme for which the Surrey element would cost £240 million at 2015 prices.
18. Secondly, there are a range of measures which could be implemented to reduce the amount and the rate of water getting into the main rivers in the first place. This could range from the reinstatement of former ditches, soakaways and ponds to the creation of new lakes and floodplains. Many of these would also have the effect of reducing floodspots on the highway, thereby improving safety. Most of these measures are likely to require close to 100% funding by the County Council, although some contribution may be sought from riparian owners and/or Boroughs and Districts.
19. Thirdly, there is a clear need for the drainage authority, Thames Water, to make a whole range of improvements to its drainage systems. These measures include the renewal of pipework to prevent surface water getting into the drainage system where it is at risk of creating unsustainable levels of water pressure downstream. They would also include renewal of pipework to prevent foul water and sewage from escaping into the general environment, as well as improvements to a number of control systems which failed under the pressure of the winter's flooding. Since Thames Water is a private company, public money cannot be contributed to the costs of these improvements, and it is not entirely clear what authority is responsible for ensuring that these improvements are made.

Non capital investment:

20. At every meeting with Divisional Members and residents, it was stressed that the greatest concern was communications. Residents felt that they had very limited information as to what was happening and what they should expect to happen. Flood alerts proliferate to such an extent that they have become less helpful. Both alerts and flood warnings are expressed in such a broad geographical way as to be of limited help in each specific area. Residents and Councillors believe that they could be very helpful to all the authorities by giving them locality-specific information if there was a clear channel of communication. This would enable the authorities to harness their resources more accurately, as well as enabling them to pass on more accurate information to other residents in nearby locations.
21. Flood fora would assist in providing a clear channel at the resident end, and SCC are keen to encourage their development. However, there is concern that such fora may be difficult to sustain after a few years (hopefully) without serious flooding.
22. The Environment Agency has argued that dredging the Thames would be counter-productive as it is a self-cleaning river, and this is becoming generally accepted. However, there are a number of areas on the Thames where residents have clear evidence of a build-up of silt and/or other material, particularly downstream of bends in the river and upstream of constructions within the river confines. Cumulatively these areas would appear to amount to a potential loss of river capacity. Dredging these areas on a trial basis could be considered.
23. Following the 2013/14 floods a large number of obstructions, including many substantial trees, were left blocking the free flow of water in the main rivers. The Environment Agency has received additional income from Central Government specifically to address this issue, and work is under way to that effect.

Risks and costs:

24. The risks may be categorised as follows:
 - a) A similar scenario might occur, repeating the 2013/14 experience, with similar results;
 - b) An 1894 level flood might occur, short but much more severe, resulting in tens of billion pounds' worth of damage and subsequent economic loss;
 - c) A storm of a different pattern, but of similar severity, might result in a quite different pattern of damage.
25. Common sense surely dictates that it would be desirable to set out to protect Surrey from a known pattern of damage, recognising alternative risk scenarios.

26. The capital costs of the work that should be done can be estimated (at 2014 prices). These are outlined below and are broken down in to further detail and specific schemes in **Annexe 1**.

Scheme:	Cost:
The River Thames Scheme (Surrey section)	£240m, of which £120m from SCC
Costed schemes to 2021 on other main rivers	£30m, of which £23m from SCC
Prepared schemes beyond 2021 (excl. RTS)	£29m, all from SCC
Other schemes not yet prepared	£25m, all from SCC
Surface water capture (ditches, ponds etc.)	£25m, mostly from SCC

(Note that Borough and District Councils may contribute to the SCC element).

27. Current plans are scheduled for around 75% of this work, to be largely completed by 2025. History tells us that the completion date will slip, and in any case 2025 is too long a delay in providing the protection. A better plan must be found.

Recommendations:

The Select Committee is asked to endorse the following recommendations:

- a) Surrey County Council should lobby Central Government to change the powers of the Water Company regulators, such that proper investment in the drainage networks of the water companies can be directed, until such time as the Secretary of State is satisfied that those drainage networks fully comply with current standards.
- b) The Environment Agency should be pressed to give strong consideration to a programme of selective, tactical dredging of specified areas of the Thames.
- c) Surrey County Council should work with partner organisations to make significant improvements to the arrangements for communications in emergencies, and in particular to provide for communication structures between residents and the relevant authorities. Particular attention should be made for special arrangements in holiday periods.
- d) Surrey County Council should work with all the Boroughs and Districts and with residents in the relevant areas to establish flood fora.

Next steps:

The Task Group's report and recommendations will be submitted to the Cabinet meeting on 25 November.

The Task Group will continue in a monitoring role as and when required.

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