

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

THURSDAY, 22ND OCTOBER, 2020

A MEETING of the COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL was held by MICROSOFT TEAMS MEETING on THURSDAY, 22ND OCTOBER, 2020, at 2.00 pm.

PRESENT:

Chair - Councillor Mark Houlbrook

Vice-Chair - Councillor Nigel Cannings

Councillors Martin Greenhalgh, David Hughes, Tosh McDonald, Ian Pearson and Sue Wilkinson

Other Councillors

- Councillor Jane Kidd – Chair of OSMC
- Councillor Chris McGuinness - Cabinet Member Communities, Voluntary Sector and the Environment.

Other

DMBC

- Phil Holmes - Director of Adults Health and Wellbeing
- Paul Evans - Drainage & Street Works Manager
- Caroline Martin - Senior Governance Officer

External

- Robert Brown - Technical Engineering Manager - Doncaster East IDB
- Gary Collins - Flood and Coastal Risk Engagement Engineer - Yorkshire Water
- Helen Batt - South Yorkshire Flood Risk Manager - Environment Agency
- Ruth Willis - Chief Executive - South Yorkshire Communities Foundation
- Andrew McGill - Chief Executive - Doncaster East IDB and Water Management Consortium
- Duncan Chamber - Researcher - Sheffield University

1 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies made.

2 To consider the extent, if any, to which the public and press are to be excluded from the meeting.

None

3 Declarations of Interest, if any

Declarations of interest were made by Cllr Sue Wilkinson and Cllr Chris McGuinness in virtue that they were both members of the Doncaster East Internal Drainage Board.

4 Minutes of the Communities and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 20th January, 2020

The minutes of the meeting held on the 20th January, 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

5 Public Statements

There were no public statements made.

6 Flood Recovery in Doncaster – Partnership Update

The Panel received a report and considered updated information regarding recovery activity across the Borough of Doncaster following the November 2019 floods. The information included actions that had been undertaken and were planned by the Council, the Environment Agency, Independent Drainage Boards and water companies to safeguard the residents and businesses of the Borough over the short, medium and longer term.

Following an overview from the Director of Adult and Social Care, the Panel discussed the following areas;

Long Term Funding and Investment - It was explained that ongoing close work and frequent meetings were taking place to consider future investment, accelerating plans for future projects, recovery works, repairs and works that will reduce future flood risks going forward. It was outlined that funding was currently being taken through a process and there was further partner funding that could be matched against that.

It was recognised that there were potential benefits of the schemes to the wider economy, the environment and climate resilience, which were also of interest to investors. It was explained that by working together to better understand the scope, benefits and costs, the Environment Agency was in a much stronger position to work with Doncaster to secure investment and schemes right across the Borough. Reference was made to the benefits of the work undertaken by the Climate Commission for Doncaster that had a current focus on “shovel ready” projects. It was explained that the Government was particularly interested in projects that will assist with an economic recovery and therefore to look at those with investment appeal. It was noted that steps would be undertaken to consider further economic and environment benefits and work was being undertaken with Sheffield City Region to secure match funding against the allocated Government funding.

It was clarified that £11 million had been allocated through the Environment Agency project to repair damage caused by the floods and to improve standards of protection. It was viewed that this was something that had worked successfully in Doncaster.

Impact of Climate Commission and the Council's Environmental Strategy on Flood Management in Doncaster - It was explained that there was a range of hard and soft solutions available and natural flood management should not be focused on alone.

Members were assured that the flood agenda was part of the Climate Commission Report and the Environmental Strategy, which were currently in the process of being developed. It was acknowledged that climate change would continue to be a risk in terms of flooding.

Members were informed that the Environment Agency was now leading on the total catchment plan for the River Don. It was further explained that the catchment plan would not only bring the water together but also enable better partnership working to understand what was being done and to provide transparency to communities and potential investors as part of a living process. It was felt that as well as the need to keep driving forward with traditional hard engineering approaches, there was a need to work better as partners.

It was added that Doncaster needed to be more sustainable, that investment in maintenance was vital as well as the need for capital investment. Reference was made to ageing assets owned by different companies that needed further consideration as to how they were going to be maintained.

Impact of New Developments on Flooding - Concern was raised regarding the impact on new developments in the Town Centre and the wider borough on flooding and how effective working was being undertaken with developers.

Members were informed that these issues were addressed as part of the planning application process and consultation would take place with the Internal Drainage Board and Environment Agency where building was taking place close to the river. It was felt important to ensure that private developers included what was best for Doncaster.

It was noted that the most significant issue on Humberhead Levels was the displacement of tidal flows as the landscape was so flat.

It was noted that further consideration was needed about communication with Doncaster residents to make them feel reassured that steps taken in other parts of the Borough had not resulted in the flooding they had experienced.

It was recognised that it was important to work with developers prior to developments going forward.

Lessons Learnt for Winter Preparation and Flooding – The following areas were outlined;

- Resources and staffing levels (2007) – It was acknowledged that staffing had been previously under resourced to react to the scale of the situation.
- Winter readiness preparation – examples provided included gullet cleansing, desilting work, watercourses, stabilisation in areas and length of time under water, which lent to slippages.

- Members were informed that the sandbag policy would change to enable a quicker response. It was also commented that there would be increased sandbag stocks provided in local areas.
- Reference was made to steps taken with Mary's Bridge and Conisborough Brook and Millpond.
- PFR schemes – that there was £75K towards certain community schemes to improve resilience.
- Improved planning to ensure that schemes were ready for when funding became available as well having the ability to secure investment.
- Ensuring more effective partnership working and communication.
- Sharing experiencing in delivering successful schemes and sharing knowledge.

Specialised Vehicles and Equipment for Flood Operations - A Member spoke about their own experiences around springs in their ward area and asked whether operatives involved in flooding situations were resourced appropriately and had received the appropriate training.

In relation to springs, it was explained that there was confidence in diagnostic levels predicting understanding water levels and being able to respond accordingly. It was continued that steps were being taken to look at the bigger picture and see what can be done to address the problem.

Regarding the use and operation of specialised vehicles, it was explained that Council operatives were not trained to be technical drivers and therefore not specialised in that particular field. It was acknowledged that contingencies should be in place and reference was made to Conisborough and Fishlake as examples where a more preventative approach had been applied. Members were advised that it was less traumatic to ensure that the correct response was there in the first place.

It was commented how local knowledge and history was very important and should be taken into consideration.

The Chair commented that he was confident that lessons had been learnt and that search and rescue and other specialist teams could be relied upon.

Timeline - It was explained that the Section 19 report had been produced at a time when the first wave of the Covid pandemic had begun and therefore had placed considerable demands on the Council.

Members were informed that Rab Consultants had been appointed to undertake a Section 19 Flood Investigation, which followed the Environment Agency framework. It was noted that there was significant amount of data to process and the report had now been taken through consultation.

It was explained that there needed to be a balance between doing something quickly as well as sufficiently and with clarity to enable the Council and its partners to look at the future and prioritise accordingly. It was acknowledged that following the 2007 floods, colleagues wanted to have strong basis to learn for investment and therefore ensured that there was far more rigour in place.

It was recognised by partners that Doncaster was a step ahead with outlined options and proposals that also mitigated risk and this was viewed as commendable and ambitious.

Recovery initiatives – It was explained that some of the recovery initiatives in place included the humanitarian aspect. The Chief Executive of the South Yorkshire Communities Foundation outline areas that had been carried out by their organisation;

- Approximately £1.2 million into Doncaster to address issues around Health and well-being, stress and trauma.
- A focus on long-term projects (of around 3 years) for example, St. Peters in Bentley with a £100K project for debt counselling and four Citizen Advise Bureaus (towards welfare advice and insurance affordability).
- Supporting credit unions and community centres affected by flooding. It was added that there was approximately £10k remained to fund community grants and the Foundation was liaising with DMBC officers to encourage community groups to come forward.
- £360,000 in pro bono support through the house restoration project (in addition to other gifts and services that have come in).

It was stressed how important it was to continue to resolve some of the long-term issues faced. Reference was made to potential projects at Fishlake and Bentley such as local wardens, sandbag schemes for future and buildings/storage facilities. Reference was made to funding available for Phase 3.

A Member requested that funding details to apply for local projects be circulated.

Members were told that there were a number of contingencies in place for the prevention of flooding, examples of these included;

- That defences were “winter ready” through a programme of permanent or temporary repair completed by the end of October 2020 (with permanent repairs undertaken by March 2021 or otherwise with a contingency in place).
- An incidence room that could work remotely and issue warnings with staff working from home. It was added that contingencies in place where warnings could also be issued from national incidence room.
- A South Yorkshire Local Resilience Forum that had organised a recent exercise operation testing processes in time of lockdown and emergency unfolding during that time.
- Additional pumps and equipment that had been invested in and made available locally.
- Explained that as the Environment Agency were dependent on mutual aid during an incident (which was currently compromised due to the current pandemic), further training of the supply chain as well as the military had been undertaken to ensure they were prepared.
- Strengthened community resilience supported by new Flood Wardens and volunteers.
- Ongoing work being undertaken with the Fishlake community to update their flood plan and also working with Doncaster Neighbourhood Community to engage with the community at Bentley.

It was viewed that closer working needed to take place with other groups to engage with hard to reach and more vulnerable groups.

It was commented by the Director of Adults Health and Wellbeing that a great deal of physical work (as outlined in the report's appendices) had been undertaken widely across the Borough by partners. It was explained how some very pragmatic and sensible evidence based work on existing defences across partners had been undertaken with greater confidence going into winter and effective response.

Community Flood Plans - Members were informed that work had been undertaken with the Council's Emergency Planning team to role floods plans out (one of the tasks of the newly formed team) and fed into technical parts. It was continued that the Emergency Planning team had links with Flood Wardens, the Environment Agency as well as other partners.

It was acknowledged that it was always helpful to link into the local knowledge and connections of Members.

Impact of New Developments across Borders and Potential Flooding - Concern was raised around the lack of communications and connectivity across neighbouring Local Authorities (as part of the planning process), in light of new major development applications that crossed borders and potential flood issues that may occur as a result. It was felt that there needed to be greater collaboration with neighbouring authorities as part of procedural practice and was a fundamental issue in light of the importance and emergency declared around environmental and climate issues. This was further evidenced by an example relayed by one of the Panel Members concerning a new major development by a neighbouring authority that crossed over borders into Doncaster.

Reference was made to the current consultation to the Planning White Paper and concern was raised about the impacts of what that would mean with such developments in respect of flooding.

Insurance Premiums - Concern was raised as to why residents had been declined or were being charged high premiums by certain insurance companies for home insurance. It was viewed that this was a difficult question to respond to and an issue that had had been put forward previously through public engagement and as part of the South Yorkshire summit. It was acknowledged that more clarity was needed on how Central Government was held to account on it or how Doncaster voices could be heard.

The Chief Executive of the South Yorkshire Communities Foundation outlined examples of cases where insurance premiums and excess amounts were excessive and unaffordable. Members were informed how the Foundation were able to advise on those companies that have taken a hard line and support residents back to normality and in some cases by addressing areas not covered by the insurance company.

Members were made aware of the Flood Reinsurance Scheme, which was a Government sponsored scheme operated as an independent company. It was explained that this worked by offering the flood insurance element to the insurance companies that offered the product directly to customers and that the scheme underwrites the flood element.

The Cabinet Member for Communities, Voluntary Sector and the Environment added that a review of the Flood Reinsurance Scheme (and flooding and insurance issues in general) was currently underway and that such concerns had been fed into that review.

Other - There was a brief conversation about the Cheswold and what monitoring of it was taking place. Reassurance was provided that it was not causing a problem at present and was running to a certain level of capacity.

Concern was raised about lack of cooperation with the railway companies in anti-flooding operations.

A Member enquired about what maintenance work had been undertaken on the Ebeck since last year. It was explained that the Council was going to undertake walking inspections on a yearly basis to gauge issues with either with riparian owners or partners to address maintenance.

The representative from the Internal Drainage Board explained that they had undertaken management of that area and recognised how there will be a lot of work to carry out. It was continued that this would be achieved through a detailed serviceability plan over the next few years to reach a standard of good condition with the support of the Council and communities.

Clean Water - A Member raised concern about future water shortages considering the current rate of water used. It was explained that residents were encouraged to have water butts in their gardens. It was also recognised that droughts were worst in the South-East than in Yorkshire. Members heard that Yorkshire had a clean water grid that enabled water to be moved across the region and therefore could be rezoned.

RESOLVED that the Panel note the report and the Flood Recovery actions that had been undertaken to date and those planned for the next period. In addition to this, the Panel also recommended the following;

1. To acknowledge and recognise the exceptional work of partners and Doncaster Council officers as well as all others who have been involved.
2. That an update be provided to the Panel on the following issues:
 - On the longer term flood preparations discussed at the meeting and next stage of the Section 19 report (to be considered as part of the 2021/2022 workplan.
 - On this year's winter preparations (to be considered by the Panel February/March 2021 through a briefing meeting).
3. That the Executive and Officers continue to lobby Central Government for additional funding for flood mitigation.
4. That feedback on the "Impact of New Developments across Borders and Potential Flooding" from the meeting be forwarded to Officers for inclusion in the Planning White Paper Consultation.

7 Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan and the Council's Forward Plan of Key Decisions.

The Senior Governance Officer presented the 2020/21 Scrutiny Work Plan for consideration and reminded Members of the current Forward Plan of key decisions. There was a brief discussion around future items for the Overview and Scrutiny future workplan following the meeting's discussions.

RESOLVED the Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan 2020/21 and Forward Plan of key decisions be noted.

CHAIR:_____

DATE:_____