

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Environment Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday 3 March 2021 virtually.

PRESENT:

Cllr Phil Awford	Cllr Stephen Hirst
Cllr Robert Bird (Chair)	Cllr Sajid Patel
Cllr Dr John Cordwell (Vice-Chair)	Cllr Suzanne Williams
Cllr Kevin Cromwell	

Officers in attendance: Cllr Nigel Moor (Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning), Cllr Vernon Smith (Cabinet Member for Highways and Flood), Kathryn Haworth, Colin Chick, Simon Excell, James Blockley, Cllr Patrick Molyneux (Cabinet Member for Economy, Education and Skills), Cllr Dave Norman (Public Protection, Parking and Libraries), Gavin Roberts and Robert Niblett

Apologies: Cllr Eva Ward and Cllr Keith Rippington

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 9 December 2020 and 13 January 2021 were approved.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Phil Awford declared an interest as GCC's representative for the Wessex/Severn Wye at the Regional Flood Defence Committee.

Cllr John Cordwell declared an interest as a pensioner of Magnox having worked at Berkeley Nuclear Laboratories and GCC's representative on the Berkeley Site Stakeholder Group, in respect of any discussion on the nuclear fusion project.

4. DECEMBER 2020 FLOODING: GLOUCESTERSHIRE LEAD LOCAL FLOOD AUTHORITY SUMMARY REPORT

4.1 The Chair invited James Blockley, Flood Risk Manager, to present this item. The report was taken as read and members noted the following points:

- The report focused on the flood incidents experienced on 23rd and 24th of December 2020, which were reported as the worst flood events for the county since 2007.
- Since the report had been published, the updated figures were 454 flood reports, 207 of which were internal flooding issues.

- The type of flood was very different to 2007 in that it resulted from surface water run off, due to intense rainfall that fell on already saturated ground.
- The report reflected the fantastic multi-agency response that was made to the event; it was quick, effective and focused, and showed very clear evidence of solid partnership working. No one body was working at cross-purposes with another.
- Whilst the Council had always been committed to providing funding for future flood resilience, and the actions taken since 2007 had clearly had a major impact on the results from December's events, there were a number of lessons learnt during the response which included but not limited to:
 - The role of district officers can sometimes be majorly overlooked in a flood response. The district response team are normally very small, and sometimes just one officer and they have multiple actions under their responsibility. We needed to make sure that this role was suitably resourced, as the lead flood authority, we rely heavily on them to discharge this role and we could not respond effectively without them.
 - The importance of the community response and support. Residents who live in areas that were vulnerable to flood events were always very realistic about where they live and were essentially the first line of defence. Their vital support helps organisations to raise warnings locally, clear routes for emergency services and offer support to their fellow residents. As a full county response, we should be doing more to support community groups and help coordinate the existing community efforts across the county.
 - There were active discussions about a Gloucestershire specific flood recovery funding pot that could be immediately released to residents for the immediate, short term recovery. During national flood events, the Government will occasionally release framework funding but this was not happening for December's events, and even if it was, it was normally received months after the event.
- The report outlined a number of actions to increase resilience of communities as well as a range of short term actions for the worst hit areas. There was an overall aim to develop a local flood risk management strategy.
- Officers intended to publish this report on the Council website so residents were able to see the benefit of the multi-agency approach.

4.2 Members and Cabinet Members thanked officers across the board for the very comprehensive report.

- 4.3 In response to suggestions of creating a Gloucestershire specific flood relief fund, a member notified the Committee that there was money leftover in the 2007 flood appeal fund, but discussions were ongoing with the charity commission to change the restrictions on the fund so it could be used for other purposes. Officers advised they were aware of this fund and initial investigations had been made. As the member was one of the fund treasurers, it was agreed to continue this conversation offline as a matter of urgency.
- 4.4 It was added that this fund should focus on resilience and resistance measures such as flood gates, moving plug sockets higher up and away from risk, it should not be there to fund immediate recovery such as replacing carpets etc. this needed to remain an issue for insurance companies.
- 4.5 A member noted the number of issues reported on page 23 of the report and questioned how these were being addressed. It was advised that these issues often require cross departmental responses and it was an ongoing, substantial effort to respond. Efforts needed to be initially concentrated on those worse hit areas but all enquires would be addressed as soon as possible.
- 4.6 It was reported by a member that after complaints that residents were not being phoned to advise they were at risk of flooding, the Environment Agency reacted by calling residents at 4am when the area was already beyond its worst point, which left residents worried that the flood was going to get worse. It was acknowledged that there was an issue with how and when the peaks and lulls of the river levels were reported to residents and this would be addressed going forward. It was added that the Cabinet Member was also considering writing to the Environment Agency in light of issues raised.
- 4.7 It was suggested that there was room for the county to be more proactive than responsive towards flood events, and that some impacts could have been reduced if we were constantly monitoring maintenance issues such as ditch fill up. In response it was advised that water course management was the responsibility of whoever owns the land.
- 4.8 The Council had a role to advise and monitor the maintenance but can only encourage owners to carry out the necessary maintenance and fulfil their obligations as land owners. Officers have produced a guide to set out these responsibilities (<https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/planning-and-environment/flood-risk-management/flood-guide/waterside-living/waterside-living-guide/#main>) which was due to be updated to advise owners on natural obstructions that could have a positive impact on water management.
- 4.9 A member added another area of alleviation was the regular maintenance of gullies, but there was an ongoing issue, especially in their area, of parked cars preventing the clean taking place. Officers were aware of this issue and

it was something that could only be addressed on a case by case basis with the team.

- 4.10 Members heard that highways had received around 200 calls by 6pm on 23 December. A review was undertaken after this event to understand what actions could be taken to improve response in the future and hence for the next flooding event proactive preparation by the department meant that they had already created a flood desk set up to triage response and action as events occurred
- 4.11 The issue of new housing developments being built on previously flooded land was discussed. It was advised that the Council provided statutory comments on district planning applications in regards to flood risk. Officers will assess whether the water run off from the site was any greater after the development. If there was a level of risk on the site, a range of conditions can be added to the application to manage this. There was unfortunately a public misconception that councils were building on flood plains regardless of risk but that was not the case. Any level of risk would be managed.
- 4.12 An update was requested on a natural flood management scheme that involved beavers being used in Lydbrook (<https://www.forestryengland.uk/beavers-greathough-brook-forest-dean>).

ACTION: James Blockley

- 4.13 A member raised concern that sometimes when councillors call in issues such as blocked drains, they sometimes did not receive a useful response. It was informed that the emergency contact sheet for reporting issues had been updated and attached to this report, following issues noticed during December's events. Officers would happily look into any specific issues offline if that would be useful for members and reassured that they absolutely rely on local information.
- 4.14 The Cabinet Member for Planning and Environment commented that this flood event really highlighted the complexity of the agencies involved in a response of this scale. They highlighted the really important role councillors play in being local advocates for their communities and to manage expectations given the scale of the response required. This was something the member was keen to support and encourage going forward, even more so given the likelihood that climate change will increase and intensify these events. The member and officers hoped to expand on these discussions and bring more information to a later meeting of the Committee.
- 4.15 The GCC representative for the Regional Flood Defence Committee (RFDC) reminded members that Gloucestershire was at the start of its 6 year flood alleviation programme of schemes and encouraged members to come forward with areas in their communities who were considered at risk. They added that they would be raising the issues shared regarding flood warnings at the next meeting of the RFDC.

- 4.16 The Cabinet Member for Public Protection, Parking and Libraries highlighted the role for GFRS during these events. Its primary role was to preserve life and protect property, and during the events in December, the Service received over 330 phone calls. There was noted frustration in the community when the fire service did not intervene in every flooding incident but it was reminded that each case needed to be weighed against the most effective response, and a small depth of water in a house did not require a full GFRS intervention.
- 4.17 A member raised the issue of new housing developments overloading the sewage systems. It was advised that the overflow of foul sewerage happened either where the network had combined sewers so foul waste and surface water entered the same system or where surface water can enter a foul sewage network. Both network set ups would experience overflows during bad weather where the surface water intake increased dramatically, and unfortunately when they flood, the overflow water would also include foul sewerage.
- 4.18 What was needed was a strategic investigation of the network to understand how to reduce the access of surface water into the foul network, either by separating the sewers or adding conditions to reduce the speed of surface water flow in bad weather.
- 4.19 The responsibility of this work would lie with the water and sewage companies who were consulting on their drainage and waste water management plans at the moment. Perhaps following this consultation, there was scope for greater interaction with regional companies and local authorities etc. It was a problem that would need collective effort to solve.
- 4.20 The Cabinet Member for Highways and Flood added that proactive work was taking place involving MPs and water companies to look at the existing combined systems in Gloucestershire. It was noted that in order for improvements of this level to take place, high level conversations would be needed and would require substantial investment.
- 4.21 The Committee gave their support and recommended that engagement with the relevant parties continued. The Cabinet Member agreed to take forward the recommendation on the Committee's behalf and continue this line of discussion and progress to the next level where appropriate.

ACTION: JAMES BLOCKLEY/CABINET MEMBER

6. RESTORING OUR RIVERS - ONE PAGE STRATEGY

- 6.1 The Chair reminded the Committee that at their meeting in January, members had agreed for a task group one page strategy to be drafted and brought back for the Committee to approve. Cllrs Paul Hodgkinson and

Bernie Fisher (the original proposer and seconder of the motion leading to this task group request) were invited to present.

- 6.2 The Committee noted the contents of the one page strategy focused on the future task group gaining an understanding of the level of pollution that existed in the county's rivers, the legal context of permissible sewage dumps and the potential road map to achieving bathing water status. Members recognised how the impacts of the previous item on flooding and river pollution were interrelated issues for the county.
- 6.3 Whilst fully supportive of the concept, members were conscious that the task group would need effective engagement from other partners in the county to make the work worthwhile. It was accepted however that if no action was taken, we would never begin the process of improving our rivers. It would be up to members of the task group to ensure partners and organisations being invited for questioning were fully informed beforehand of the group's expectations and that the members offer probing and robust questioning.
- 6.4 Noting that the list of consultees on the strategy document may not be exhaustive and may change as the group moved through their research, it was requested that the following wording be added: *"and any other relevant evidence provider"*
- 6.5 With this minor amendment, the Committee approved for the task group to go ahead and be created after the May 2021 local election.

7. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT: ECONOMY, ENVIRONMENT & INFRASTRUCTURE

- 7.1 Colin Chick, Executive Director of Economy, Environment and Infrastructure, updated the Committee on current issues. In particular, members noted that:
- Covid continued to have an impact across the services, not least on the capacity to respond. Services would begin to be brought back online in conjunction with the Government's road map.
 - The Preferred Route Announcement for M5 J10 was due around June this year.
 - All highways delivery contracts continued to move forward, despite the considerable pressure placed on the services through the winter months. The teams had effectively been in emergency response mode since before Christmas with the various snow, flood and freeze events taking place. It was estimated that the winter maintenance budget could see an estimated £300,000 overspend this financial year due to these weather events.
 - The Ash die back programme continued, for every one tree removed, the Council were committed to planting two more. It was estimated that 7000 trees would be planted by the end of the season.

- The Ashchurch Bridge over Rail programme now lay with Tewkesbury Borough Council's Planning Committee to make a decision at their March meeting.
- A lead cabinet member decision was planned for March to approve the ULEV Strategy and procurement of a provider to implement a countywide investment in EV charging points.
- Funding for the B4063 / A40 Highways England Cycling Scheme was within £3m of full funding; unfortunately the scheme had experienced an increase from its original funding forecast due to new guidance on the delivery of cycle schemes coming into force.
- The A417 Missing Link project was now progressing again following a delay experienced from last minute objections to the scheme.
- The Local Transport Plan Review was due to be considered at full Council in March.
- Household Recycling Centre booking systems would remain in place for now. Officers were looking at ways to refine and upgrade the online system in order to increase capacity and make the process more efficient. The service would also benefit from daylight saving at the end of March meaning all the sites will be open for longer.
- Some members may have attended a briefing on the Fusion Project. Gloucestershire was preparing to bid for the first fusion plant in the world and the accompanying technical centre to be based at the former nuclear plant sites at Berkeley and Oldbury. Fusion energy was clean, green and safe, and did not include any of the risks that traditional nuclear stations did such as nuclear meltdown. The process only used a very small amount of nuclear fuel to run and helium was produced as a by-product which is a sought after gas that could be captured and used efficiently. Hydrogen can also be produced in large quantities which is also a potential zero carbon energy source. The project aimed to have a plant onsite from 2030 onwards and if selected, would have a phenomenal impact on the surrounding area of the county for skills and future funding.

7.2 There was a discussion regarding the high waiting times at Pike Quarry HRC. Officers advised that this particular HRC for some reason experienced a high number of no shows which therefore impacted availability of slots for residents to book. It was hoped that by enhancing the booking system (work which was now resourced) and allowing residents to change their appointments, this should have a positive impact on waiting times.

7.3 It was reiterated that officers did not acknowledge the link between an increase in fly tipping incidents with longer waiting times for HRCs. It was added that as a district responsibility, district councils would be the first to notice any extreme increases in fly tipping and there had been no reports of this to date from district colleagues.

- 7.4 It was added that a suggestion of trialling having one day per week that operated a non-appointment system at sites would not be advisable at the moment due to Covid restrictions and safety for staff and visitors.
- 7.5 Noting that commercial vehicles were unable to take their commercial waste to HRCs, a member highlighted the ongoing issue of residents being unable to use their commercial vehicles to take regular household waste. It was advised that this was another improvement that should come with the new booking system as for the first time, vehicles can be tracked on how many times they visit the sites, and drivers would be contacted if they were visiting an unusually high number of times. It was accepted that if a commercial vehicles was being used for personal waste, it was unlikely it would need to visit a HRC every week; this would therefore indicate commercial use.
- 7.6 A member raised an ongoing issue of the need to look at alternative scheme options that would be achievable at a lesser cost than the existing options, to address the increasing flooding of the A417 Maisemore section of highway.

5. RAIL DEVELOPMENTS

- 5.1 The Chair invited Rob Niblett, Senior Planning Officer, to present this item. The report was taken as read and members noted the following points:
- The impact of Covid on passenger numbers had been catastrophic; they had reduced in proportion to the level of restrictions in place.
 - As a result, the Government put all franchises into emergency measure agreements where they take the risk on revenue and the train operating companies were paying just to run the services.
 - Cancellations and reductions in services have had a major impact on school pupils travelling to and from school in the county, which continued for forest residents returning from schools in Cheltenham and Gloucester.
 - The long term impact of the pandemic on rail passengers and services was very difficult to foresee. It was very unlikely that commuter levels would return to pre-Covid levels due to the increase of working from home, and the morning/afternoon peaks we used to see were likely to be more spread throughout the day, if experienced at all.
 - There was likely to be some form of bounce back in leisure travel, which we experienced to some extent last summer when restrictions were eased.
 - The industry was in a state of flux, similar to many others.
 - It was highlighted that rail played a significant role in tackling climate change/reducing carbon and congestion on our roads and as such Network Rail were continuing their long term planning for demand post-Covid and GCC have been heavily involved in this.

- The Council were very keen to remain engaged in future planning as any prediction on future demand could have an impact on critical routes for the county.
- The recent Network Rail traction strategy document highlighted all the rail lines in the county for future electrification but no dates/timescales were given for this work and it was clearly going to be a very expensive exercise.
- GCC was also a member of the North Cotswold Line task force which dealt with services from Worcester through to Oxford that residents in the Cotswolds relied on.
- In terms of new stations, in line with the LTP, officers were committed to working with rail industry to explore any possibilities.
- Unfortunately officers had recently been advised that the improved half hourly service from Gloucester to Bristol that was due to be implemented in December 2021 had now been delayed until May 2022, as well as the hourly service to Worcester (which was currently only every 2 hours) being delayed until 2022. Operators had advised this was due to one of the unseen impacts of the pandemic, train driver training.

6.2 A member welcomed information on the possibility of a new station south of Gloucestershire but noted that it relied heavily on the rail companies agreeing to use it and there was a significant lead time between this being agreed/built and making its way onto the timetables. It was also questioned whether existing lines could have their capacity increased to allow more services to use them.

6.3 Officers agreed that it was a difficult process opening new stations and clearly one of the top priorities was to improve capacity on the lines which could be done through increasing speed and improving signalling. This was one of the main attractions for electrification of the network. It was also agreed that some operators were resistant to accepting new stations on their routes as every additional stop increased the overall transfer time.

8. WORK PLAN

No additional items for the future work plan were suggested.

Members took this opportunity to share thanks for the Committee's work and achievements over the last 4 years.

CHAIR

Meeting concluded at 12:40.

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting