

Response by Cabinet Member with Responsibility for the Environment to the Report of the Worcestershire Joint County and District Council's Scrutiny of the Summer Floods 2007.

May I begin my response by thanking the members of the Joint County and District scrutiny task group for their work and the production of very comprehensive report following the devastating floods of summer 2007. The task group has given a great deal of thought and time to the subject finding some areas of weakness and yet also identifying some strengths. Much of their analysis rightly focuses on the multi agency partnership response to the flooding, however, I will concentrate my response on the recommendations that have a clear County Council dimension.

Before I begin with my response I would also like to clarify that this Scrutiny report and its recommendations have an impact on each Directorate of the County Council and not just simply Environmental Services. However, since the majority of the recommendations fall within the remit of environmental services I have agreed to present this corporate summary response to you.

Turning to the recommendations made in the report, I will deal with each in turn where they relate directly to the County Council.

4.25 The Group also recommend that a system is developed, whereby each Category 1 Responder organisation can post relevant public information on (or linked to) a designated space on the same web-site, so that details of road closures, the location of rest centres, evacuations, public transport (for example) can be more easily checked by the public and other organisations.

As an integral part of its Communications Strategy, The West Mercia Local Resilience Forum intends to develop a one stop information website shared by all Category 1 partners. However, the County Council already posts information on road closures and public transport on its website and shares this information with Local Media. We will work with partner Category 1 responder organisations to seek to achieve the ambition of this recommendation.

4.32 The Group recommend that during a flooding emergency a single point of contact should be available to parishes to enable them to report local conditions (such as road conditions). Further, the LRF should consider the benefits and practicality of communicating with parish councils and how this might be included in the LRF Communications Plan.

Whilst our Highways staff did work with many Parishes and their Lengthsmen during the floods, we would welcome the opportunity to work closely with the LRF to support a more coordinated approach to communications in any future major severe weather events.

4.42 The Group recommend that the Highways Agency review its emergency procedures to ensure communication with a County Council Highway Authority officer, who should liaise with named officers in districts to alert them to the possible need for rest centres. The decision to (eg) open a rest centre or not should still however rest with the district council.

We agree with this recommendation and the Highways Agency have now put in place emergency arrangements for diversion routes and other associated matters, with clear lines of communication established with our Highways teams. The County Council's Highways Officers also have arrangements in place to liaise with named officers within the District Councils with regard to rest centre issues.

5.36 The Group therefore recommend that alternative transport arrangements for areas known to flood are contained within the county's emergency plans; and that a training exercise takes place to test out the effectiveness of the plans and that bus operators involved are fully aware.

Our Transport team already have alternative 'flood' bus timetables in place for key critical areas known to flood. In addition, an Emergency Transport Functional Plan is in the final stages of development, which will further ensure that all elements of this recommendation are addressed, this will include the testing of this plan in an exercise involving key parties.

5.7 The Group recommend that the further development of this approach (including their staffing and location) should form a key part of the County Council's response to any future emergency. To maximise their effectiveness 'hublets' would need to be established and fully operational as quickly as possible as an emergency develops.

The "hublet" (or mini hub) concept of local information centres set up by the Worcestershire Hub in the worst flood hit areas to provide residents with up to date information and advice, were particularly well received by local communities. As part of any future emergency response the Worcestershire Hub will co ordinate any future "hublet" response on behalf of partner agencies. Arrangements to set up these up quickly and effectively during future flooding events are in place. However, I am anxious that the Hublets should be staffed with personnel drawn from all partner agencies not just the County Council.

5.9 The Group support **Pitt's Recommendation 68**: that Council Leaders and Chief Executives should play a prominent role in public reassurance and advice through the local media during a flooding emergency, as part of a co-ordinated effort overseen by Gold Commanders. The Group believe that the development of a linked website (as recommended in paragraph 4.25) would provide a valuable tool for Council Leaders and councillors to enable them to play a more prominent role in public reassurance and advice.

I agree with this recommendation and I am supportive of initiatives that support and promote the role of councillors as Community Leaders. The West Mercia Local Resilience Forum (of which the County Council is a key member) recently published a Communications Plan designed to coordinate media and communications during an emergency. This Plan provides for a single point of contact for the public to find information relating to emergencies. However, during an emergency relevant council service information (including highways and public transport) will continue to be posted on the County Council website.

5.10 The Group recommend that it should be made clear to Councillors how they will be briefed on a developing emergency and how Councillors can find out what is happening.

The special role that councillors perform as community leaders is recognized and the Community Leadership Unit of which Emergency Planning is a part has reviewed its procedures to ensure that where appropriate, relevant information about emerging or actual emergency situations is made available to local members as soon as practicably possible. However, the nature of emergency situations means that the initial immediate response takes precedent and that prompt communication may not always be possible. Members should also bear in mind that where appropriate, and without putting themselves at risk, they can perform a key role in the collection and communication of local information into the Council during an emergency incident.

5.11 With this in mind, the Group also recommend that all Councils review and update their emergency contact lists and that they be shared widely in a co-ordinated way. Furthermore, agreed arrangements should be put in place to ensure that such lists are regularly and routinely updated.

The County Council has procedures and arrangements in place to update and share appropriate emergency contact information with partner agencies. Members should be aware that such contact information is sensitive and time limited. Safeguards are in place to limit circulation to appropriate officers only.

5.15 Taking on board the spirit of the Pitt recommendation 66, the Group recommend that the County Council investigates the feasibility of introducing a system to enable customer contact centres to redirect callers where appropriate (such as to the Environment Agency for advice on what to do in a flood).

I am informed that it would be very expensive for the Worcestershire Hub to provide such a “switchboard” service and redirect callers to partner agencies. However, I can assure you that the Worcestershire Hub provides callers and web site users with appropriate and up to date information and contacts.

5.16 The Group recommend that structures for the provision of relevant information to the contact centers are drawn up and put in place as soon as possible.

The County Council has recently adopted a new Emergency Response Framework (ERF) that will manage the council’s response to emergency incidents. An integral part of these new arrangements is a Response Centre that will coordinate and manage an emergency response. An important element of the Response Centre role will be to ensure that the Worcestershire Hub receives up to date and relevant information that can be used to inform the public.

5.19 As previously mentioned (paragraph 4.25) creating a dedicated space on the same website with lists of contacts for each partner organisations such as for example, trading standards, the highways agency and the Chamber of Commerce, would be a useful start. The Group recommend that ways of achieving this be explored further with members of the Local Resilience Forum, led by the County Council’s Emergency Planning and Communications Units.

The County Council plays a prominent role in the Local Resilient Forum and supports the work of its Communications working group. This group will explore the provision of relevant partner agency contact information on the LRF and partner websites.

5.29 The Group therefore recommend that (a “door knocking”) system should be explored further and incorporated into parish emergency plans where appropriate.

A pre flood warning system delivered to “at risk” local communities by local parish council volunteers would appear to be logical. However, caution needs to be exercised in respect of asking people to access potentially risky areas and situations. Therefore, I believe that alternative methods of raising community awareness such as the Environment Agency Floodline service and local policing should be considered in the first instance.

5.33 The Group recommend that the County Council’s Emergency Planning Team assists with the development of a blue print or toolkit, providing more than just a skeleton, for other parishes’ emergency plans, with the aim of encouraging parishes to create their own emergency plans for use in appropriate circumstances.

Wychavon and Wyre Forest District Councils have developed proposals for the development of local community parish level emergency plans. A pilot scheme run and funded by Wyre Forest District Council began recently and Wychavon DC has funded the development of local plans in some of the worst flood hit parishes. The Emergency Planning Unit will monitor the development of these plans and if they prove successful will work with other District authorities to establish similar arrangements.

7.15 The Group recommend that the Land Drainage Partnership consider this and other relevant research (as highlighted in the Pitt Review (Chapter 4) to find a practical cost effective way to model and map areas at risk from flash flooding.

I have been informed that the Worcestershire Land Drainage Partnership have already met with the Lecturer from the University of Worcester and are liaising closely with the Environment Agency who are members of the partnership on flood research mapping and modelling issues.

7.16 The Group recommend that the flood risk map should be produced by the District Councils and held by the County Council for every parish and urban area affected by floods, showing which properties and roads had flooded and the extent and direction of flow of flood waters. The District Council should carry out the mapping, with assistance from parishes. Information needs to be fed in to the County Council, and shared with members of the Land Drainage Partnership.

The County Council is working with the District Councils and other parties through the Worcestershire Land Drainage Partnership (which includes the Environment Agency) in developing an effective approach to flood risk mapping, which can then be used by a variety of key organisations.

7.8 The Group recommend that the County and each District Council ensure that suitably qualified officers in each district can take the lead responsibility for checking the condition of drainage assets (watercourse and ditches), feeding information to the drainage condition and assets map and sharing information with the Land Drainage Partnership.

The County Council took the lead in bringing together the Worcestershire Land Drainage Partnership to help provide for a more coordinated approach to managing drainage issues across the County. We have also put in place a Special Projects team of very experienced officers, largely dedicated to dealing with drainage and flooding issues who work closely with our District Councils partners and other key organisations. The County Council has already completed over 190 drainage projects which will help alleviate and address flooding and drainage issues, and has dedicated an additional £5 million pounds over two years to deal with these issues.

7.20 The Group recommend that records of drainage maintenance carried out are also kept and routinely maintained and that, again, overall responsibility should rest with the County Council.

We support this recommendation directly in relation to the Highways asset and working with our District Council partners to take a lead in coordinating broader drainage records management. The use of GIS in this for both the District and County Council's is vitally important.

7.27 The Group recommend that the County Council, in collaboration with the District Councils, should consider maintaining an inventory of local equipment held by local farmers which could be used in alleviating flooding and drainage problems either during a flooding event or as part of recovery.

We support the spirit of this recommendation and my officers are already working through the Worcestershire Land Drainage Partnership (whose membership includes the National Farmers Union and other farming interests), to develop a Flooding and Drainage 'Resource' inventory, which will include local resources and equipment. Caution needs to be exercised however, as this recommendation should only relate to physical resources and not to people in view of potential liability issues.

7.42 The Group recommend that consideration be given to a greater utilisation of the local knowledge on road drainage and watercourses of Parish Lengthsman. Parish Lengthsman should be contacted wherever possible to advise the County Council drain clearance teams of main flooding problem areas.

The County Council already works closely with many Parishes and their Lengthsman over drainage matters. We are keen to ensure that the Parish Lengthsman do become even more involved in helping identify and manage drainage issues where appropriate.

7.43 The Group recommend that the County and District Councils consider ways to improve advising both rural and urban householders of their drainage responsibilities, including details on the availability of grants as well as the consequences of non compliance.

The County Council recently published a major article on Flooding and Drainage issues in the 'WOW' magazine, a copy of which is circulated to the large majority of households in the County. Details of responsibilities for land drainage issues were included in this article, with contact details for obtaining the 'user friendly' Environment Agency leaflet 'Living on the Edge', which provides more detail on responsibilities for landowners and householders. We will also continue to work with

the Worcestershire Land Drainage Partnership on more ways to improve the advice we and others provide on these issues and the availability of any grants.

8.24 The Group conclude that the County Council should await the outcome of **Pitt's recommendation 60** – “that the Government should implement a public information campaign which draws on a single definitive set of flood prevention and mitigation advice for householders and businesses, and which can be used by media and the authorities locally and nationally.” **The Group recommend that when such advice is produced, the County Council's emergency planning officer should discuss with the Chamber of Commerce how to then promote improved business continuity planning in the county. [paragraph 8.24]**

The County Council as a Category 1 Responder under the Civil Contingencies Act has a statutory duty to promote the concept of business continuity within the local community. During the past year the Emergency Planning Unit sponsored a week of business continuity awareness activities in association with partner agencies. The opportunity to work in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce is welcomed.

8.35 The Group recommend that the County and District Councils develop protocols for sharing appropriate staff resources during recovery work after emergencies where appropriate.

The current Emergency Planning Memorandum of Agreement between the County Council and each District Council creates the setting for mutual aid arrangements when necessary. The County Council worked closely with our District Council Partners during the major floods in many ways to good effect. Specifically in relation to Drainage matters the County Council through the Worcestershire Land Drainage Partnership has enabled more effective joint working.

Concluding remarks

In July 2008 Sir Michael Pitt published his report into the summer floods of 2007. His report highlights the need for local authorities nationally to be better prepared for future flooding events due to the impacts of climate change. The official government response to the Pitt Report and its recommendations is expected in December 2008 and it is my understanding that there will be significant expectations placed on local authorities.

I am therefore particularly grateful to the Scrutiny task group for raising some of these key issues in advance of the Government response and in doing so helping to ensure that Worcestershire is better prepared to respond to any future flooding emergencies.

Derek Prodger MBE
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