

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Impacts of Storm Desmond and Eva 20 April 2016

Report of Chief Officers Regeneration and Planning/Health and Housing/Environment/Resources

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To appraise the Committee of the broad impacts of these storms on the district and the effect that engagement in the emergency and recovery operations has had on the City council so far. In addition to outline the changes which may need to be made to the districts resilience arrangements as a consequence of the experience.

This report is public

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) That the Committee notes the report.**
- (2) That the Committee asks that Cabinet review the City Council's current policy on the provision of Sand Bags in emergency flooding situations.**
- (3) That the Committee considers any other recommendations it wishes to make to Cabinet in the light of the information contained in the report.**

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Lancaster District experienced unprecedented flooding and related transport and power impacts on 5th December 2015 as a direct result of Storm Desmond. The initial District Emergency phase under the emergency planning procedures for Lancashire saw the police lead operations. The subsequent Recovery Phase was led by the County Council as the emergency affected more than one district. The continuing bad weather conditions and high levels of rainfall in December 2015 meant that underlying saturation levels on both high ground and low lying areas were unable to be relieved by natural drainage. As a result further incidents of flooding were experienced during Storm Eva on Boxing Day and Storm Frank on 30th December 2015, although these were localised to specific small clusters of properties vulnerable to water runoff from adjoining high ground. There was no repeat of power loss or major transport disruption. A summary of the main impacts is provided as Appendix A.
- 1.2 In terms of statutory responsibilities both the City Council and County Council are known as Category 1 Responders. Lancashire County Council is the Lead Flood Authority responsible for flood risk management throughout the county. Both the County Council and the City Council have a duty to provide support

within the terms of their normal capabilities and duties to assist the Emergency Services during emergency situations and into the recovery phase. In terms of non-emergency flood risk management the City Council has a duty to cooperate with the County Council in implementing management schemes within the district (subject to capacity). The Environment Agency is responsible (among other things) for protecting the environment from river and coastal flooding and is the lead organisation for reacting to major flooding emergencies.

2.0 Details

- 2.1 In recent years the district has experienced a number of localised severe weather impacts during periods of storm. On 5th December 2013, for example, coastal storms were severe but sea defences were robust and only a handful of residential properties experienced flooding and subsequently received assistance through new flood resilience measures. There have been previous incidents over recent years where inland flooding has occurred in two hot spots in the district at Slyne and Warton and remedial works through flood defence schemes have been carried out to prevent routine further occurrences. Both sets of measures were overwhelmed by Storms Desmond and Eva in common with other newly defended areas in the region.
- 2.2 Storm Desmond was significantly different from previous incidents. It created flooding impacts for Lancaster District which were broadly comparable with neighbouring districts in Cumbria, primarily due to the same conditions and the consequences of the levels of water entering the River Lune along its whole length. In addition to the direct impacts of flooding the loss of electrical power from the Caton Road substation meant that the majority of the urban areas of Lancaster, Morecambe, Carnforth and the coastal strip experienced total blackout conditions. Only small parts of Heysham retained power due to different circuit feeds within the network. The level of power loss was extensive and this also meant that a significant portion of the communications network was also lost. Mobile phone masts and publicly accessible internet provision did not function and with no power the public had no access to television news or, where wireless phones were used, normal land line coverage. In addition to all the above the flooded River Lune floated a shipping container being used as a store at Halton Camp. This was carried down the river and struck the Skerton and Greyhound bridges. This necessitated their closure until they could be examined by an engineer, further adding to the communication difficulties being experienced in the city and district.
- 2.3 The calling of a major emergency on the night did not go smoothly. Although the various agencies involved in hazard forecasting were warning of severe weather the level of alert which would have triggered an emergency operation had not been reached due to uncertainty about potential severity and location. In the event the Council activated the District Emergency Control Centre around 9.00pm on 5th December 2016 and officers were requested to attend and staff the room.
- 2.4 Although the emergency occurred at weekend the City Council operates an out of hours duty emergency officer system which provides for a District Emergency Incident Officer backed up by a Senior Emergency Officer to be available to respond to out of hours incidents within the scope of the City Council's duties as part of the Civil Contingencies Act. This would ordinarily facilitate the opening of the District Emergency Control Centre to work with the other Category 1 Responder agencies to provide the necessary assistance at

local level. In this instance the Senior Officer on duty was one who lives in South Lakeland District and was already experiencing localised flooding close to home. He was subject to emergency services restrictions applied to the Kendal area preventing travel. A reserve officer was found at short notice and he and several others made their way to Lancaster where the emergency centre was opened at 10.30pm, albeit initially with limited emergency lighting only from the battery back-up system and only two telephone land lines. Contact was established with the Strategic Coordinating Centre at Police Headquarters. The Council's own emergency power stand-by contract was activated and a generator was delivered from Garstang and connected around 2.30am providing limited power to the Control Centre Room and the Old Fire Station server room.

- 2.5 Notwithstanding these initial operational difficulties the City Council was able to respond to the request to open a Rest Centre at Salt Ayre Sports centre and this was operational with a local ENW generator by 1.40am. Over the period of the next several days the Rest Centre was used to various degrees of occupancy by several hundred local people whilst the incident passed and moved into the recovery phase which it did formally (for Lancaster District) at 4.30pm on Thursday 10th December 2016. The City Council had deployed resources to assist the emergency on the afternoon of Sunday 6th December and a full team facilitated the clean-up of the public realm and assisted with the removal of waste from early on Monday 7th December. Whilst ongoing reliability with electric supply gave the feel that the emergency phase was still ongoing, key aspects of the recovery phase were going well. City Council staff had most public realm areas clear and functional by Monday 7th December, and they had started making contact with affected property owners to assess and advise on how to deal with urgent items such as restoring electricity supply to flooded properties. Particular priority was given to businesses in the food and catering sector to ensure that contaminated or defrosted food, and contamination on premises did not lead to a wider public health incident locally.
- 2.6 In terms of council services more generally, Member will recall that all municipal offices and services were disrupted to varying degrees particularly during the power outages – including the closure of the Town Halls. Keeping essential services and systems running during this time required a huge effort and co-operation from staff, and this should not be overlooked.
- 2.7 As the Desmond incident moved towards the formal recovery phase the City Council was asked to take a leading role on the ground as the County Council were still dealing with an emergency phase at St Michaels on Wyre. During this period there were regular daily teleconferences between government and local authority officials and offers of assistance and guidance were widely shared. The City Council was asked to take the lead on interacting with households which had been flooded and affected by secondary impacts and businesses which had suffered the same effects. Within a week of the incident staff were visiting affected homes and categorising impacts. They had also set up an advisory Business Recovery Centre in City Lab to assist businesses with accessing financial assistance and recovery advice. During the Christmas holiday period further severe weather had been expected and arrangements were put in place to react to a further district emergency if necessary. The worst impacts of Storms Eva and Frank were felt in other parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire however, although a localised flooding impact occurred at Slyne one of the districts two flooding hot spots. This did not however require the level of emergency response experienced during Storm Desmond.

- 2.8 As part of the City Council's role in running the recovery process locally and engaging in high profile teleconferences throughout the emergency and recovery phases your officers were able to continuously feed information into the coordinating centres and to Ministers about impacts and needs for specialised assistance. This meant that the emergency services and organisations such as Electricity North West and the Environment Agency could react quickly where necessary. It also meant that impacts which would need medium to long term attention, such as flooded areas, could be identified and recorded during the incident so that they could be targeted for repair and investment once the incident had subsided. Because the City Council maintained an operational District Emergency Centre for several days it could also monitor a report ongoing impacts such as the early dispersal of students from the two universities and Lancaster and Morecambe College, and the gradual normalisation of infrastructure across the district.
- 2.9 It has to be said that the ability to operate and maintain the District Emergency Control Centre for such a period was only achieved because of the arrangements this district has in place for preparation and training of staff in civil contingencies. Because of this it has staff experienced in mock exercises and team working on emergency scenarios. The City Council is a much smaller organisation than it once was however and had it been required to run the District Emergency Centre on a 24hr basis rather than a 6am to 6pm operation it would not have been able to cope effectively due to a lack of alternative shifts to staff the operation. If such a response had been required the ability of the council to resume normal business operations alongside managing the local recovery process would have been significantly prejudiced.
- 2.10 A formal internal City Council debrief of the flooding response was held on 24th January. Once the conclusions of the debrief have been formalised and agreed between the various agencies, the Council's Management Team will consider whether there is a need to review the district's emergency plans to account for the experience now accrued from this increased level of impact from severe weather incidents.
- 2.11 Now in the spring of 2016 the "recovery phase" is still in operation and there remain 139 households and 53 businesses who cannot reoccupy their property (a further 66 businesses are partially operational). The majority of homes and businesses which were eligible for initial financial assistance in terms of flood impact payments, Council Tax and Business Rates relief have received it. Arrangements are also in place to assist households and businesses claim further assistance for Flood Resilience measures such as waterproof plaster, raised electrics etc, which if implemented during repairs can make properties flooded in future incidents recover quicker. Applications for take up are rather slow and officers have engaged with the Business Emergency Resilience Group (Funded by the Princes Trust and also operating in Cumbria) to assist the council in promoting and delivering the grants.
- 2.12 High levels of pressure are also now being applied by Ministers and the Department for Communities and Local Government to complete weekly statistical returns seeking to identifying final totals for the numbers of properties flooded and affected and measuring how many in various categories are now being reoccupied. Ministers seem to think that the population of their database is a much simpler task than it is and fail to appreciate that there are still new properties being brought to the council's attention months later and requiring

visits and categorisation. Officers have had to redeploy a number of staff from other duties to verifying data sets and correcting figures obtained during the high pressure environment during the emergency phase and often based on scant information and best estimates. It is also clear that initial Ministerial pressure to allocate relief funding hastily is now beset with the predictable problems associated with changing eligibility criteria and audit after the event. The potential for the administrative impacts of Storm Desmond to be an ongoing burden for the local authorities for some time was reported to Cabinet in the briefing note attached as Appendix B.

3.0 Requirements for increased resilience

- 3.1 Storm Desmond clearly demonstrated that Lancashire will become more likely to experience the impacts of severe weather incidents in the future. Whilst disruptive impacts in recent years have been more common in Cumbria, the events of December 2015 demonstrated new areas of vulnerability which we in Lancaster District need to prepare for. The highest levels of impact were experienced by those households and businesses which were flooded. Nationally the government expects the Environment Agency and lead Flood Authorities to address flood defences, but at an individual property ownership level monies are being made available through “flood resilience funds” to enable repairs to be undertaken which incorporate flood resilience measures for better protection/recovery in the future.
- 3.2 The next greatest impacts affecting the community were of course the direct flooding incidents of households and businesses. Whilst there is scope for increased flood protection along parts of the river in future, affecting repairs with the aid of new flood resilience measures should be a priority for property owners. Take up so far has been very slow hence the decision to involve the Business Emergency resilience Group in the promotion of grants. There were also a significant number of homes which were affected by indirect impacts such as power and services loss due to flooding of basements. Although the homes themselves remain intact, works to restore power and services will be needed before reoccupation takes place.
- 3.3 The next level of impact, and perhaps the greatest numerically, related to power loss and the closure of the Lune bridges. The first, ironically, had been predicted by the Environment Agency and they will continue to work with your officers to design a new flood protection scheme along the river in the Caton Road area. Ministers indicate that this will be given high profile consideration. Such a scheme should help to protect power supplies from future flooding incidents and assist in preventing homes and properties around the city centre being flooded. Secondly had the Lune bridges been damaged or destroyed Lancaster might have found itself in a similar position to Workington some years ago. The near completion of the Heysham/M6 link means however that there will be an alternative means of crossing the river in the future should Greyhound or Skerton Bridge or both be damaged or lost.
- 3.4 The closure of the bridges meant that access to the rest centre at Salt Ayre was precluded for those seeking shelter from the south of the River. This tells us that the ability to provide another rest centre, in the city but to the south of the river, in such circumstances is desirable. The widespread loss of digital communications alongside the scale of the emergency was deeply traumatic for the whole community and the sterling work by Bay Radio provided at least

some means of local residents being able to access information. There are two future issues for resilience here. The first is for public bodies to consider. How could we use traditional non digital methods of communications to feed information into the community if total power loss occurred again? The second concerns resilience advice to the community. The benefits of owning a plug in land line for emergency use, the merits of keeping battery or wind up torches and radios are now evident. The modern digital world is a great asset for society but it has its drawbacks if relied on solely for communications outside major conurbations where power supplies and other means of connectivity rely on overhead lines and infrastructure susceptible to damage from storms. Specific resilience advice on how to deal with domestic equipment during power outputs, something widely publicised in rural areas for example, could helpfully add to resilience advice in the future.

- 3.5 For local communities susceptible to localised flooding such as the two hot spots in Lancaster District the opportunity has existed for some time to engage with the City Council's Civil Contingencies Officer to prepare a community resilience plan. Whilst little interest has been shown in this offer of help in the past, the impact of Storm Desmond has seen a rise in the number of rural communities and parish councils making contact with the Civil Contingencies Officer to open discussions about plan making. It will be harder to identify community groups in the affected urban area but no less important to try to prepare local plans. The Environment Agency are particularly keen to assist in this area of preparation planning as it enables early warning actions to take place to try and mitigate some flooding impacts within communities.
- 3.6 One of the usual pressures associated with flooding incidents which the City Council usually experiences is the expectation that it will provide sand bags for individual property owners to take emergency defence measures. The City Council's current policy which was reviewed around 2-3 years ago is that it only maintains a supply for use on its own installations and that through the Council website it provides information to householders on how they can plan ahead in the event of flooding. Widespread experience during the floods demonstrated the very limited value of sand bags in most circumstances and the logistical problems that would occur in trying to distribute them in a period of emergency. They also cause many subsequent problems after water has subsided as they are contaminated and heavy and may split open thereby sometimes blocking drains and exacerbating the impact of further rainfall. Properties susceptible to flood risk are far better taking advantage of flood resilience measures such as closable barriers and pumps than sand bags. Because they deteriorate rapidly it simply isn't practical for the City Council to create and maintain a large supply of sand bags routinely. However, information during the floods from the Government and other Agencies did give the public the impression that Councils were responsible for the provision of free sandbags, and that local people should expect nothing less from their Council. Understandably there were several occasions where local media sources put out messages like this, which although they were corrected by the Council, became a source of frustration. For these reasons a review of the council's policy on providing sandbags is recommended in the light of the experiences associated with the flooding from these storms.
- 3.7 The loss of digital communications during the emergency was traumatic for the local community especially where families and friends were unable to check upon each other for assurances about safety. Resumption of services, whilst entirely welcome, did however bring it them a raft of demands from the

community for actions which in an emergency situation were disproportionate and out of context with the wider emergency being handled. Demands to remove or reposition some of the mobile food trailers which Electricity North West provided took no account of the fact that some residents could not cook or had lost food supplies. Demands to turn off low voltage LED Christmas lights took no account of the difficulty in contacting contractors at short notice or gaining access to switching points. Both could have diverted officers managing the District Emergency Control Centre from the role undertaken as part of the resilience forum had a firm line on priorities not been taken.

4.0 Conclusion

- 4.1 The Impact of Storm Desmond on Lancaster District was both significant and game changing. Dealing with the emergency and recovery phases has been a steep learning curve for the City Council but built onto the existing foundation of civil contingency planning already adopted by the City Council will make handling future events easier. The key and important role to be played by the City Council in both emergency and recovery phases is evident even though the County Council remains the Lead Flood Authority. Perhaps the greatest revelation arising from the Storm Desmond incident is that neither the government nor the County Council have the ability to intervene to assist the community into recovery without the resources, knowledge and skills of the City Council. In short notwithstanding what has been said about the value of local government in recent years it has proved itself invaluable on this occasion.
- 4.2 Thankfully, as a result of the high profile impacts of the storm, key infrastructure to improve protection for the future is likely to be authorised and funded. Disappointingly, the support and reassurance from government to distribute funds and help quickly and without dogma has descended into retrospective drives for bureaucratic accounting and accuracies which were incapable of being delivered in the heat of the moment and require mitigating verifications which are now consuming resources which need to be deployed back into normal business. It is also clear that Ministers do not have a realistic understanding of the challenges households and businesses face in securing re-occupancy of flooded premises including securing contractors and completing recovery works. This is not the urbanised south east with access to greater capacity in the construction industry, so it is inevitable that the significant rise in demand for building and repair work will overwhelm local contractors and those in reasonable proximity to deliver services.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(including Health & Safety, Equality & Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

This storm event had high level impacts in terms of community safety, public health, and sustainability. The impacts were felt in both urban and rural areas though to different degrees.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The City Council has legal duties as a responder in civil contingencies so it is important that it assesses the effectiveness of its response to district emergencies and undertakes any adjustments to its preparations accordingly.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Government support has been made available to Lancaster City Council to support both households and businesses affected by Storms Desmond and Eva under the following schemes. All figures quoted are based on information as at 11 April and they will continue to change:

- Communities and Business Recovery Scheme, including:
 - Community Recovery Scheme (Section 31 Grant via Lancashire County Council - £500 per household) - 302 households have received the grant, giving a total value of £151,000.
 - Business Support Scheme (Section 31 Grant administered by Lancashire County Council - £2,500 per business) - 51 businesses have received support totalling £191,000.
 - Property Level Resilience Scheme (Section 31 Grant administered by Lancaster City Council – £5,000 per property) - only 2 applications have been approved, with payments totalling £7,000. A further 17 applications are currently being processed.
- Council Tax Discount Scheme – 297 households have been awarded discounts totalling £117,000.
- Business Rate Relief Scheme – 79 businesses have been awarded relief totalling £393,000.

The total value of support provided to date amounts to around £859,000.

In addition, the Government has also extended its Bellwin emergency scheme to cover the eligible costs for councils affected by Storms Desmond and Eva in dealing with flooding, in that any costs over and above the threshold of £35K is to be funded by Government with the initial £35K expenditure being funded by the City Council. This has already been budgeted for in 2015/16. At this stage, it is thought that the value of the City Council's claim may not exceed the £35K threshold, but this is an indication only as the actual claim has not been made yet – the deadline is 06 June.

Separately, the Council has made a number of insurance claims with an estimated value of £270,000.

There has been, and continues to be, significant work involved in administering the various financial arrangements. The cost of this work has not been fully measured or estimated (that in itself creates more work) but it is safe to say that it is considerable.

OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

In very simple terms:

Human Resources: The emergency has consumed considerable resources both during the emergency phase and the recovery phase.

Information Services: The emergency raised huge challenges for the council in terms of maintaining systems and communications during power outages and finding ways to communicate with the community in such circumstances.

Property: The emergency directly affected many council property assets, either through the power outages or more directly through the flooding mainly around Cable Street and the

Quay, or through the need to set up emergency support facilities at Salt Ayre and the District Emergency Control Centre.

Open Spaces: The emergency required the deployment of considerable assets to effect the clean up of the public realm.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The s151 Officer has contributed to this report (which is in her name in part, as Chief Officer (Resources)).

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

District Emergency Planning procedures

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