

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 10 JUNE 2014

REPORT BY: DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

FLOODING EVENT - WINTER 2013/14

WARD(S) AFFECTED: ALL

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**Purpose/Summary of Report**

- This report was requested by the Environment Scrutiny committee to help explain the situation surrounding the severe flood events in East Herts.

<b><u>RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></b>	
<b>that:</b>	
<b>(A)</b>	<b>The report be considered</b>
	<b>and</b>
<b>(B),</b>	<b>The committee comment on how some of the lessons learned might be addressed.</b>

1.0 Background

1.1 East Herts has had incidents of flooding “this season” since approximately November 2013. Thankfully and mostly due to the work of our drainage engineers and contractors, none were as serious as they could have been.

1.2 There was flooding in Stanstead Abbots on 1st February, but the wider area of East Herts suffered numerous significant floods from 7th February onwards.

1.3 Drainage engineers:  
East Council is only one of two district councils in Herts who have retained a dedicated drainage engineering team.

There are 1.61 FTE drainage engineers overseen by a generic manager with a drainage background. They work hard and have been proactively engaged on preventative maintenance operations right across the district to keep drainage features clear to help the network to drain effectively.

1.4 Flood prevention activity takes place all year around in the district. The officers are very successful at what they do, which is why our district with such a substantial water network, normally avoids significant flood events, unlike our district neighbours who lack such officers.

1.5 Unfortunately responsibilities for maintenance and land drainage is complicated by the complexity of recent changes to legislation, which is demonstrated in the case of Stanstead Abbots described below.

1.6 We have limited control over what other agencies or land owners do. It would also be fair to say that no agency has more resource now than a couple of years ago.

1.7 In 2008 East Herts Council took a corporate view that it was not appropriate to hold a stock of sandbags as a response to flooding.

## 2.0 Report

### 2.1 **Stanstead Abbots**

2.2 Stanstead Abbots was subject to flooding over the weekend of 1st / 2nd February.

2.3 This was reported to have originated from the fishing lakes to the north of the Council's car park where a significant amount of water quickly overwhelmed the banks.

2.4 From the banks, the drainage of the water became the responsibility of Stanstead Abbots Parish Council as it flowed across their land.

2.5 Responsibility then changed to this Council as the water then flowed over the Council's land (including the car park). The flooding compromised the car park lighting and pay and display control units and power outages were experienced. The car park is mainly drained by an open channel watercourse to the east

which is part owned by the Council and part owned by the landowner at 15 High Street who bears similar responsibility.

- 2.6 This watercourse becomes a culvert under 1 Abbott Court and 23 High street, who each have appropriate owners responsibilities, before it reaches the High Street, where it becomes a surface water sewer maintained by Thames Water.
- 2.7 This watercourse then reappears in Glenmire Terrace as a culvert where it is now owned by the owner of that land.
- 2.8 The culvert discharges into the Mill Stream and hence becomes the responsibility of the Environment Agency.
- 2.9 Responsibility for ensuring adequate drainage lies with each and every one of these agencies or owners mentioned. Any blockage or diminution of capacity to carry water along any part of the water network would cause back up and likely flooding upstream.
- 2.10 The channel and watercourse by the car park have previously been regraded by the Council to remove silt etc. and part of the channel has again been regraded in April 2014 in order to check that the outlet culvert is clear.
- 2.11 Much of the reported flooding in Stanstead Abbots appears to have been generated from a mixture of surface and river water.
- 2.12 During the period of risk, the Council's drainage engineers monitored the situation across the district and within the portion of the village along the High Street.
- 2.13 It is view of the drainage engineers that much of the flooding in this event seems to have been created by actions/ omissions of 3rd parties and could not have been reasonably anticipated.

### 3.0 **District wide flooding**

- 3.1 On Friday 7th February, approximately a week after the Stanstead Abbots event, the Council's emergency planning procedures were activated at 0600 with a call about flooding in the Little Hadham area.
- 3.2 By 07.45 am, an emergency planning volunteer attended the location and was providing liaison and situation reports.

- 3.3 Working closely with Police and County Council colleagues, a refuge was set up at St Andrew's School.
- 3.4 As people awoke, reports about further flooding across the district arrived in quick succession. The Council responded by having officers set up another refuge in Puckeridge and Standon community hall.
- 3.5 About that time a fully equipped reception centre was set up at the Charis Centre, Bishop's Stortford, staffed by emergency planning volunteers and police staff.
- 3.6 An emergency planning volunteer was dispatched to Puckeridge to assess the situation where there were reports of elderly vulnerable people trapped in their home. The officer was able to provide assistance to the couple.
- 3.7 By 10.30 am at Wallfields, in accordance with our emergency plan, the Incident Manager (Head of Service Community Safety and Health Services) had formed and held the first meeting of the Incident Management Team. This consisted of the Chief Executive and senior staff from relevant departments. Tasks were delegated and the Leader and key Members were provided with updates via the Chief Executive's office.
- 3.8 Further reports of flooding arrived during the day and included Hertfordingbury, Hertford, Hunsdon, Buntingford Sawbridgeworth, Datchworth, Bishop's Stortford, Wadesmill, Walkern, Standon, Bennington, the Hadhams, Letty Green, Luffinhall, Albury and Brickendon.
- 3.9 From around 11.00 am and throughout the entire weekend several times every day, the Council's Emergency Planning staff maintained communications, feeding information and receiving updates through conference calls with the multi-agency 'Gold Group' chaired by the Assistant Chief Constable. This looked at the strategic management of the flooding across the entire county and included representatives from Hertfordshire districts as well as the Department of Local Government, the NHS, the Environment agency and many departments from each of the response services.
- 3.10 The Council's Incident Management Team met frequently, every 2 – 3 hours, to collate information, monitor the event and respond to the developing situation.

- 3.11 There was very close and regular contact between the Council and Police, Highways, the Environment Agency, Fire and Rescue and the Herts County Council Resilience team throughout the entire event.
- 3.12 Based upon incoming reports about the numbers residents that were affected and the likely numbers to be expected (estimated by police to be in the hundreds at one point) the Incident Management Team decided to plan for a long haul and open a reception centre in Wodson Park, Ware.
- 3.13 This location is one of a number of pre-designated and equipped reception centres. There are 5 in all; the others being the Charis Centre, Hertford Theatre, Seth Ward hall in Buntingford and Sawbridgeworth Memorial hall.
- 3.14 Wodson Park sports centre was chosen because it could take many more residents than the others as it was much larger. It would also be capable of staying open throughout the event unlike the Charis Centre which was unavailable due to a large international event taking place there on Saturday.
- 3.15 Additionally, Herts Resilience had agreed to provide transport to Wodson Park where it was needed, residents not wishing to leave could attend the local refuges that we had set up.
- 3.16 Wodson park also had the advantage that the roads around it were relatively unaffected by the floods, so it was accessible by road.
- 3.18 The Council was able to staff the reception centre throughout the weekend 24/7 with a group of 29 volunteers, including two Councillors who instantly responded to a call put out by the Chief Executive on Friday afternoon. A number of Councillors also visited the centre.
- 3.19 By the end of the immediate risk, Sunday afternoon, Wodson Park had received only 13 residents seeking help from the reception centre. This was very different from the initial warning of hundreds suggested by police. It transpired that most people had decided not to leave their homes, preferring to remain and clear up.

3.20 Social Services attended Wodson Park and together with volunteers from an organisation called Rapid Relief, looked after a small group of vulnerable residents from a care home. They were able to place these residents in other suitable, emergency sheltered accommodation.

3.21 The Council arranged for accommodation for the remaining five very vulnerable residents in a local hotel at a cost of approximately £350.

#### 4.0 **Post event**

##### 4.1 **Grants**

4.2 On Thursday 20 February 2014 the Prime Minister announced details of four financial flood support packages, each to be administered by local councils.

4.3 The guidance for these schemes took a long time to emerge and was then subject to significant change over several weeks as the policy developed. Officers were able to provide a detailed briefing paper about these schemes to Members on 14 March 2014 (**Essential Reference Paper B** attached).

4.4 East Herts Drainage Engineers set up two of these schemes whilst Revenue and Benefits set up the other two. The Council was approached by some neighbouring councils asking if we would allow them to copy our documents and processes.

4.5 At the time of writing, 12 May 2014, the progress of each scheme is as follows;

- Council tax exemption for flooded properties  
43 Council Tax exemptions
- Business Rate Relief Scheme  
11 Businesses have received rate relief.
- Repair and Renewal grants for homes and businesses  
95 grant applications have been received and are being processed
- Business Support Scheme  
13 applications have been received and £4,000 allocated.

#### 4.6 **Post event activity**

4.7 Our drainage engineers have recorded all flood incidents reported to the Council. We are in the process of carrying out investigations at each of these flood sites.

4.8 Many incidents in the district have been due to river flooding. The Environment Agency has operational responsibility for managing the risk of flooding from main rivers but we have offered support and advice to affected residents. The officers have personally met and helped residents that need to deal with the agencies involved, i.e. East Herts, HCC, Herts Highways, Thames Water and the EA.

4.9 Our close relationships with these agencies proved beneficial as we were able to liaise on a personal level with each other to help residents get a quick and useful response. This is something that other authorities, without drainage engineers, have found more difficult. In many cases due to all working together we were able to reduce and in some cases prevent flooding altogether.

4.10 Close co-operation with other agencies and our officer's local knowledge has also assisted the investigations and expedited necessary works, from clear up to preventative and resilience works.

4.11 Due to the volume of residents affected, many investigations are still on-going. In some cases where enforcement is required, we are working with Herts County Council who are the lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) to achieve the best outcome and where possible avoid reoccurrence of such an event in the future.

#### 4.12 **Drop in 'flood' surgeries**

4.13 Officers have attended drop in surgeries in Little Hadham, Puckeridge and Hertford. These were organised by the Environment Agency who invited partners to attend and provided an opportunity for residents and businesses to discuss concerns with relevant agencies. These surgeries have been vital in reassuring and talking people through the grant application processes and allowing officers to assist applicants to complete the paperwork.

#### 5.0 **General information**

## 5.1 **Flood data**

5.2 Gathering data from flooding incidents is important to help alleviate flooding in the future. For example it is used by the team to assess where drainage networks may require maintenance or upgrading by land owners or other Authorities.

The information is also used to update the Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) document and assist in our assessment of planning applications in relation to flood risk.

## 5.3 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA)

This document (a version with maps is available on the web) was originally drafted on 2008 by officers in conjunction with the Environment Agency and is intended to be used to guide developers to avoid constructing in flood risk areas. In addition, the SFRA contains information about how new commercial and residential developments can be constructed using sustainable principles that not only reduce flood risk but will also promote biodiversity, water quality improvements and health / wellbeing benefits to communities by the creation of new green infrastructure.

5.4 Many developments constructed before the SFRA rely on conventional below ground drainage systems that are difficult and expensive to maintain and become neglected as the years progress due to asset owners forgetting that they are there and that they need constant maintenance.

5.5 When they inevitably stop working they do so without much warning – more of a catastrophic failure is experienced and the severity of a flood event associated with it is more extreme. When they do require work it can only be achieved by specialist plant and equipment such as CCTV cameras and jetting machines.

5.6 The Council's data indicates that all the reported flooding associated with the winter 2013/14 event are from conventional below ground drainage systems.

5.7 In contrast the green infrastructure tends not to fail catastrophically and its performance and ability to drain down can be noted by residents and passers- by. If it is in need of maintenance it can be easily observed and crucially it is easier to arrange as the activities associated with maintenance can be

accomplished by non-specialist /grounds maintenance contractors.

## 5.8 **Planning Applications**

5.9 The Drainage engineering officers review and assess all minor & major development applications in the district (over 10 residential units and commercial of over 1,000sq M). The assessment will include an appraisal of the site and where it lies in relation to river and surface water flooding zones. Additional information used includes the extent and severity of individual /historic flooding events.

5.10 An assessment is also made of the proposed developments 'sustainable construction' plans and in particular the developer's proposed Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) for the site.

5.11 SuDS can consist of green roofs, swales, bio retention areas, ditches and ponds etc. most of which are very simple, can be used as dual usage areas that can "make space for water" and will usually be able to be used as play and recreation spaces for residents and workers

5.12 The team may make additional suggestions if more or better SuDS could be utilised. An assessment would normally either confirm that the development can be considered as "sustainable construction" or advice given stating how it could be achieved.

## 5.13 **Lessons learned**

5.14 There was an excellent response from our volunteer staff. However had this event required a sustained and prolonged staff presence at the reception centre, i.e. exceeding three days, then the Council would have great difficulty finding the resource.

5.15 The Council has a limited number of staff who work away from council offices. The Council generally rely upon contractors as a annual workforce and their work is very prescriptive. The Council does not have the capacity to send out teams of officers to provide general assistance e. g. warning and informing the public.

5.16 The landscape around flood related issues is incredibly complex, particularly in respect of ownership and responsibilities. The public have little idea of their responsibilities.

- 5.17 Even when informed, residents have taken little action to prepare for flooding.
- 5.18 It is inevitable that flood plains will flood at some point, and that flooding will become more regular.
- 5.19 The Council should revisit whether the Council should acquire and retain a stock of flood barrier type equipment.
- 5.20 It is appropriate to consider resurfacing appropriate car parks with permeable paving to allow water to soak through the surface. Stanstead Abbott car park would be a good example.
- 5.21 It is important to consider providing water proof protection to the electricity supply cabinets/ Pay and Display machines in appropriate car parks, in particular Stanstead Abbott car park
- 5.22 Sustainable drainage systems (SuDS)  
Much of what engineers call green infrastructure consists of SuDS. These should be encouraged in new developments.
- 5.23 The Council should also consider increasing preventative and programmed maintenance works across district to reduce the impact at critical sites

## 6.0 Implications/Consultations

- 6.1 Information on any corporate issues and consultation associated with this report can be found within **Essential Reference Paper 'A'**.

## Background Papers

ERP B Flood support schemes – information sheet

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