

Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Friday, 11 September 2020, Online only - 10.00 am

Minutes

Present:

Mr A A J Adams (Chairman), Mr P Denham (Vice Chairman), Mr B Clayton, Mr M E Jenkins, Mr A D Kent, Mr J A D O'Donnell and Mrs R Vale

Also attended:

Mr A P Miller, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Environment
Dr K A Pollock, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Economy and Infrastructure
Dave Edwards, Environment Agency
Tim Smith and Jacqui Whitehead - Severn Trent Water Ltd

Paul Smith (Assistant Director for Highways & Transport Operations Director, Economy & Infrastructure Directorate), Steph Simcox (Head of Finance, Chief Executive's Unit), Emily Barker (Planning Services Manager, Economy & Infrastructure Directorate), Michael Green (Senior Flood Risk Consultant), Dave Corbett (Management Information Analyst, Cultural Services/ E & I, Commercial and Change), Samantha Morris (Scrutiny Co-ordinator) and Emma James (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

Available Papers

The members had before them:

A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);

(A copy of document A will be attached to the signed Minutes).

386 Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained the arrangements for meetings taking place online. Apologies had been received from Panel member Bob Brookes and from the Cabinet Member for Highways, Alan Amos

387 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

388 Public Participation

None.

389 Flood Risk Management Annual Report / Update on Flooding 2019-20

In attendance for this item were:

Worcestershire County Council:

Paul Smith, Assistant Director for Highways and Transport Operations
Emily Barker, Planning Services Manager
Michael Green, Senior Flood Risk Consultant
Cllr Tony Miller, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Environment

Severn Trent Water: Tim Smith and Jacqueline Whitehead, Flooding Analysts

The Environment Agency: Dave Edwards, Senior Adviser

The Panel Chairman highlighted the timeliness of the update on flood risk management, a subject which had dominated the news in Worcestershire before the COVID-19 pandemic. The Panel had been provided with a very comprehensive report and he asked those present to summarise the presentation slides included in the Agenda after which questions would be invited on the Annual Flood Risk Management Annual Report 2019-20.

The Assistant Director for Highways and Transport Operations (Assistant Director) who was newly responsible for flood risk at the Council, explained that the Council's lead officer for flood risk was unable to attend and he thanked Michael Green, Senior Flood Risk Consultant, for standing in.

The Flood Risk Consultant summarised the presentation slides.

Since the Panel's previous update 20 months ago, flooding in Worcestershire had been dominated by two serious flood periods between October 2019 to March 2020. In October/November over 70 residential properties had been flooded. In February/March 2020, around 700 residential properties and over 200 businesses had been impacted. These large events had been managed between the Council and its partners, as well as looking at future flood alleviation work and routine work, which was a broad remit to maintain alongside major events. A debriefing of the February to March 2020 flooding would take place shortly, having been delayed by COVID-19.

Understanding and prioritising flood risk was very important in determining where to deploy resources and the Local Flood Risk Management Strategy Action Plan

had been progressed over the last 20 months. Flood events helped to plan work and identify the key risks, however they also delayed progress and work on the Action Plan would continue later in the year. Nonetheless over 100 highway drainage schemes had been progressed and there had been around 1500 planning consultations. Good progress had been made with the DEFRA funded flood management programme.

In terms of reducing the likelihood and impact of flooding, a lot of work had gone into delivering flood alleviation schemes and progressing business cases for potential schemes – a process which was a very time consuming because of the evidence required to demonstrate the benefits against the costs. Partnership working was key and the point was made that the multi-agency approach of recent years had helped produce better outcomes over time by enabling a more holistic oversight and maximising use of funding.

Communications and engagement work had included encouraging community resilience and development of flood groups, and the 'virtual recovery trailer' was highlighted as being particularly innovative method of talking to people. The presentation also listed future challenges as well as plans, policies and strategies; such longer-term work may not be immediately beneficial but was hugely important.

From the perspective of the Environment Agency (EA), the Senior Advisor explained that a good proportion of time had been spent in incidence response mode. The organisation's work had involved responding to and recovering from flood events with post flood investigations and ongoing investigations in addition to routine work. The past 20 months had been a busy and strange time with new ways of working required, nonetheless a number of schemes had continued, for example flood risk management at Severn Stoke, Barbourne Brook, and property flood resilience schemes at Himbleton, Evesham, Wickhamford and Droitwich. Additional Government funds of £4.9m for Tenbury was brilliant news since as always it had been a challenge to demonstrate the costs versus the benefits; public consultation would start the following week and continue throughout the project.

From the perspective of Severn Trent, Tim Smith, Flooding Analyst updated the Panel on incident responses, schemes and more strategic work which had taken place. In terms of flooding incident response,

around 500 had been responded to, many of which were operational matters on the network, or capacity-related. More proactive work included network management. In support of the EA's work, temporary pumps had been deployed as part of incident response, which had been very busy over winter and was a bespoke arrangement in Worcestershire. Severn Trent had input to multi-agency groups and others such as Wyre Forest Scrutiny Committee, as well as contributing to the national flood forum's virtual communication with residents during national lockdown.

Examples of schemes progressed by Severn Trent included sewage schemes completed at Broad Marsten and Wythall (golf course area) which would increase network capacity. Other work included schemes with local authorities and the EA and feasibility work had taken place on schemes at Bromsgrove, a pump station at Upton Upon Severn and Broadway. It was highlighted that a major sewage scheme could take 3-4 years to develop due to the hurdles involved. Further information on schemes completed and, in the pipeline, would be circulated after the meeting; increasingly schemes were multi-agency, completed with the Council and the EA.

Severn Trent was very conscious that the sewage network could accommodate future growth and had schemes to proactively address this ahead of development and had a new bespoke team to liaise with planning authorities.

In the discussion which took place, the following main points were made:

- The Panel Chairman asked how the Council gathered local knowledge about flooding and was advised that local knowledge was very much included; development of the Surface Water Management Plan in 2011/12 had gathered information from communities and district councils which was used alongside flood maps and known data to prioritise work. The CMR confirmed that information from emergency planning meetings was also gathered.
- Cllr Clayton flagged up the need for progress with an issue in Redditch, where the road between the villages of Feckenham and Astwood Bank had been subject to flooding for over 13 years. The Flood Risk Consultant and Cabinet member with Responsibility for Environment (CMR) advised that Redditch had been identified as an area of

risk during the 2019 update of flood assessment work. Subsequently the Environment Agency had carried out work and set up a Flood Risk Management Plan for Redditch, which was very much a working document, and one which he would be happy to share and follow up with Cllr Clayton.

- Whilst acknowledging work on existing flood management plans, Cllr Kent highlighted the slow progress in resolving ongoing problems with water and sewage entering people's homes in Wythall – this was a major issue given the number of homes affected and one which he was constantly chasing. A further concern was the lack of out of hours emergency presence from Severn Trent Water during recent such events, when he and Council Officers had been on site – this was unacceptable and Cllr Kent sought reassurance that staff were available to attend flooding incidents including out of hours.
- In response, the Assistant Director undertook to look into the perceived gap in getting flood alleviation schemes off the ground; flooding was a new part of his remit, but he committed to providing more visibility of progress. Cllr Kent suggested that Gantt charts with delivery dates would be helpful and pointed out the difficulty in responding to extremely upset residents when he was unaware of schemes being developed until work began.
- The Severn Trent representative, Tim Smith thanked the Panel member for raising these issues and was aware of the pumping station problem, however was not aware of the problems of getting staff to respond. He confirmed that Severn Trent was a 24-hour organisation and would verify what had happened. The Panel Chairman requested that contact numbers for emergency 24-hour use be provided so that members could contact them in future flooding situations
- Regarding the pump station, the Severn Trent representative suggested it would be helpful to speak with the pump station manager to check mutual understanding on both sides about the issues involved.
- The CMR advised that information from the ongoing meetings of emergency and incident control was also fed into the Council's flood risk plans.
- The Vice-Chairman asked whether the ability to

predict future floods was improving and suggested that information gathering needed to be a regular exercise. The Council's Flooding Analyst pointed out that the Surface Water Management Plan was a live document and therefore constantly updated and confirmed that the next major information gathering exercise was on the 12 month work plan. At times, flooding of new places was attributed to heavy rainfall from severe storms.

- The Panel Chairman asked how councillors could check information held for their own division and was advised that this was available online and a web-link would be provided. The CMR also advised that a councillor briefing on the mapping system would take place once face to face meetings were allowed.
- A concern was raised by a Panel member about the increasing number of planning applications to build homes on areas where flooding was a potential issue and highlighted the need for district councillor training to improve understanding of the implications for flood risk. He praised the report included in the Agenda from Wyre Forest District Council Scrutiny Committee and asked about comparable reports for south Worcestershire. A preventative, strategic approach to planning was so important and although Officers tried to restrict such applications there was pressure from demand for housing and from developers whose applications included flood mitigation measures.
- The Planning Services Manager explained that in South Worcestershire, Council Officers commented on planning applications regarding flood risk, as well as the EA for those near a main river. In terms of the review of the South Worcestershire Development Plan (SWDP), when plans for sites were submitted, an initial check was made to see the level of flood risk and any involving active flood plains were ruled out in accordance with the planning policy framework. Sites were then subject to strategic flood risk assessment of which there were two levels (with level 2 considering the plans against more detail of the site, flood risks, and mitigations in place). The Planning Team was working on a new policy for SWDP which would see considerably more stringent surface water requirements and to bring in Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS). In terms of demand for housing, the White Paper stated areas of flood risk and that housing shouldn't be included in zones and also sought to

strengthen enforcement where advice of the EA was ignored

- Cllr Vale referred to the very difficult floods experienced in Bewdley – she asked whether the EA representative agreed with the perception that modelling had let things down and if so, what had been done to determine what was needed? The EA representative explained that improving prediction of flooding and understanding of flood risk was a constant process, although no two events were the same. Preparation for the future may include staff training, modelling etc.
- When asked again whether Bewdley had been let down by the modelling, the EA representative explained that he did not believe this to be the case, and that the water level had risen more quickly than had been anticipated, although he appreciated that the flood barrier was not in place as quickly as the EA would have liked. A debriefing had taken place with officers who had managed the event.
- When asked for three specific steps which had been put in place for Bewdley, the EA representative referred to better knowledge of how the catchment reacted (to be able to respond better in future), improvements to the flood warning system and awareness of the rapid nature of a river such as the River Severn, which therefore brought additional risk.
- In response to a further query about whether the flood barrier used had been different from the previous one and whether this would have made a difference, Cllr Vale was advised that barriers were bespoke for each location, were stored locally and not used elsewhere.
- In response to a further question from Cllr Vale, it was confirmed that modelling for the River Severn was being done and the EA representative would be happy to keep Cllr Vale informed. He also asked Cllr Vale to contact him directly in future regarding any flood issues which were not being responded to.
- The Panel Chair suggested a taller barrier would better serve Bewdley but was advised that the current barrier was the optimum height for a temporary barrier, although the EA was in conversation with the Government regarding the possibility of future funding for a permanent scheme and he would be happy to report back about this, and acknowledged that such flooding situations were very distressing.

- Acknowledging the work involved in progressing schemes, several Panel members highlighted their importance and the need for members to have more detail about project plan and status updates to local councillors so that they could respond to the public. The Assistant Director's offer of regular updates was welcomed and the Chairman requested more detail of the schemes in paragraph 3.1 of the Annual Report.
- The Chairman asked about staff capacity to clean rivers and brooks to ensure they were not blocked and was advised by the EA representative about the programme of checks which factored in the level of risk and particular attention was given to pinch points – he was unaware of any staff reductions but would check numbers.
- The Panel was interested to hear that as part of information gathering, the EA used drones to survey flood impact, as well as positioning liaison officers at flood sites to talk to the local community.
- The Panel agreed that the Annual Report was very informative.
- The Panel Chairman reported that feedback about the scheme at Broad Marsten was good, but had a query about a stone driveway put in by the contractor that was causing some flooding issues, and the Severn Trent representative would contact him after the meeting.
- A Panel member expressed frustration about the time taken to respond to burst water mains which affected water pressure and also wasted water, and the Severn Trent representative explained that there were standard response times, however these may not be met during times of extreme demand. Calls were prioritised, and he believed the response time for issues affecting a property was 2-4 hours but that whereas blockages could be cleared, problems with water capacity from heavy rainfall may be a matter of waiting for levels to fall.
- When asked about responsibility for maintaining SuDS for new housing developments, Severn Trent advised that Ofwat had approved in April 2020 that the water companies could work with developers to adopt and maintain SuDS. Approaches from developers so far had been few but it was hoped this was a transition stage and although there was no new legislation, the shift represented an improvement.
- Cllr Vale placed on record her praise for the

Council officers on site during the flooding at Bewdley.

- When asked, the Council's Flood Risk Consultant explained how the Property Flood Resilience grant scheme worked - the scheme was delivered by the district councils and in reality the most practical way of working had been found to be for residents to put in effective solutions and find suitable contractors, which the district councils would then check before awarding funding.
- A Panel member asked about promotion of natural schemes in upriver flood prevention work which were often more cost-effective and the Council's Officers explained that in future, natural schemes would be more likely to gain funding due to a shift in the rules from the EA for the next 6 year flood alleviation programme. Natural schemes may have less instant impact but brought gradual improvement working alongside engineered schemes and this was a prime example of active workstreams being addressed by working together through the River Severn Partnership.
- Following a question about paying farmers to allow some of their land to flood upstream of settlements to help prevent flooding, the Panel was advised that schemes were in place but were complicated; there was the potential for improved working and this was something the Council with partners had fed back to the National Farmers Union and into national policy.
- Cllr Kent sought reassurance that the Council and partners would collaborate on analysing the cost benefits of schemes to prevent flooding of homes and businesses and referred to a couple of areas in Wythall which he believed could be used as 'holding ponds'.
- The Chairman highlighted the need for the GIS map of gullies on the Council website so that the public could report blockages and check the cleaning schedule, something which he had suggested during previous updates.

In summing up, the Panel Chairman thanked everyone present and asked what could be done to speed up development of flood alleviation schemes?

The following information requests from the discussion were noted:

- Flood Risk Management Plan for Redditch to be shared with Cllr Clayton in order to follow up the

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issue of flooding between Feckenham and Astwood Bank

- The Assistant Director undertook to provide more regular updates on the delivery of flood alleviation schemes to members with time frames (ideally with Gantt charts)
- Web-link to the Surface Water Management Plan
- Web-link to Surface Water Flooding Preliminary Assessment
- Consideration of flood awareness training for councillors on planning committees
- Detail of the schemes listed on para 3.1 of the Flood Risk Management Annual Report.

Environment Agency

- Contact telephone numbers for 24 hour emergency use
- Cllr Vale to be kept updated of modelling work for Bewdley and the possibility of future funding for a more permanent flooding scheme on Beales corner.
- Confirmation of the number of staff responsible for cleaning rivers and brooks.

Severn Trent

- Confirmation of emergency call-out provision and contact telephone numbers for 24 hour emergency response
- Information on schemes delivered in the last 12-24 months, and those in the pipeline
- In liaison with Cllr Kent, discussion with pump station manager at Wythall to be arranged to check mutual understanding of flooding issues.
- To liaise with the Chairman about the issue with the Broad Marsten scheme that was causing local flooding.

In attendance for this item were:

Paul Smith, Assistant Director for Highways and Transport Operations
Steph Simcox, Head of Finance
Dave Corbett, Management Information Analyst

Performance Monitoring – Quarter 1 (April to June 2020)

The Chairman referred to a number of outstanding queries from the report for the previous meeting concerning Quarter 4 (the recording of the percentage of potholes fixed on time, and secondly, confirmation of

steps being taken to improve the performance of days taken to approve Development Control technical submissions) and was advised that the information had been compiled and would be finalised following this meeting.

- It was clarified that some PIs such as ‘condition of highways’ were updated annually, hence the reason for some unevenness between the graphs; this PI was due to be updated between now and the autumn
- Another Panel member who was a frequent cyclist, highlighted the exceptional quality of Worcestershire’s roads and the positive feedback he had received about the speed of action to repair potholes.
- An update was requested on what was being done to respond to issues affecting countryside access, in view of the increased number of calls and whether more use could be made of volunteers? The Panel was advised that a post was being recruited to. The increase in calls could be attributed to people getting out more during COVID-19 and the Assistant Director undertook to consider how to respond to this growing need, including the scope of the volunteer scheme which was acknowledged as very helpful and enjoyed by those who participated.
- Referring to the enquiries from public (PEMs), a panel member pointed out that around 45% were related to roads/footpaths/cycle paths and suggested a more detailed breakdown would help to identify the issues involved? The Management Information Analyst explained that this was not possible with the current PEMs categories, but he would check if it was possible to drill down.
- The Directorate was congratulated on reducing the number of outstanding public enquiries (PEMs)
- A number of services were praised for their continued work during the current pandemic, including maintenance of drains and ditches, prompt attention to fallen trees during recent storms, highway maintenance (Ringway) and the Highways Liaison Engineers.
- A member asked what was being done to decrease household waste overall, for example encouraging more recycling, since although the decreasing level of waste to landfill was pleasing, waste sent to Worcestershire’s incinerator generated emissions. The Assistant Director was

aware of initiatives to reduce food waste but undertook to provide a comprehensive answer for the Panel.

- The new legislation to collect household food waste was discussed and the concerns about collection costs and escalating food waste from panic buying during the pandemic. A Panel member recalled that collection costs in Wychavon had exceeded £600,000 a year, with less than 25% of the public using the service. The Panel encouraged greater promotion of composting and educating the public to avoid food waste.
- The Panel was advised that the considerable increase in highways and utilities permits granted for June was attributed to being input to a new management information system, therefore levels should decrease for July.
- The Assistant Director would follow up a question from the previous meeting about the kilowatt-hour (kwh) cost of electricity compared to the market rate.

Budget Monitoring – Quarter 1 (April to June 2020/21)

The Head of Finance summarised the slides contained in the Agenda.

The Economy and Infrastructure (E&I) Directorate was forecasting an underspend of £84k up to the end of period 3, with a couple of areas showing a slight overspend. All COVID-19 related expenditure and loss of income was being accounted for with other sources of funding; so far this had been fully funded by Government grants but monitoring would continue.

- The Chairman praised the budget performance and asked about savings from services which had paused during COVID-19 which were likely to be significant, however, was advised that although there were small savings from staff mileage, a number of transport providers such as school bus operators were still being paid in order to potentially avoid losing providers, in a similar approach to adult social care. The Government had provided grants for the Council to deal with additional costs associated with social distancing.
- It was confirmed that no staff had been furloughed, apart from a small number involved in afterschool care.
- In view of the considerable costs from COVID-19,

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the Chairman asked whether there had been sufficient funding to address expenditure so far, and this was confirmed to be the case, but there may be a gap between the funding allocated and the spend by the end of the year, which would be reviewed on a monthly basis.

- In relation to monitoring the impact of COVID-19 on budgets, the Panel learned the approach was to take a long-term view and try to kickstart activity and schemes.
- Regarding confusion about use of the Severn Card (student bus pass), the Panel was advised that initially Officers were concerned about the number of students to be conveyed whilst adhering to social distancing requirements, however students should now be able to use the Seven Card, or to seek a reimbursement if no longer required.
- The Assistant Director would liaise with Cllr O'Donnell regarding concerns raised with him about the impact of funding cuts for community transport, which appeared to contradict the Here2help scheme.

The Chairman reminded Panel members that a briefing on the Ringway contract had been arranged for 28 September, which would then be followed up by a visit to the Highways Control Centre.

The meeting ended at 12.50 pm

Chairman