

**HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**COMMUNITY INFORMATION AND PROTECTION  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**TUESDAY 11 JUNE 2002 AT 10.30 A.M.**

**REPORT OF THE RESPONDING TO EMERGENCIES TOPIC GROUP**

Report of the Head of Safety Emergency & Risk Management

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Executive Member: Gerald Game

**1. Purpose of report**

- 1.1 To report the findings of the Responding to Emergencies Topic Group and to put forward to the Scrutiny Committee, recommendations designed to enhance response arrangements, in particular when responding to flooding incidents.

**2. Summary**

- 2.1 The terms of reference for the Topic Group were “To review the role and performance of HCC in the context of a multi-agency response to major emergencies, using recent flooding incidents as an example, and to consider response arrangements to respond to future flooding events”.
- 2.2 The Topic Group was satisfied with the multi-agency response arrangements in place to respond to flood events, the County Council’s roles and responsibilities within those arrangements and the Authority’s capability and capacity to fully play its part.
- 2.3 The Topic Group felt that additional attention should be paid to the issue of public awareness in relation to flooding. In particular, there was a need, not only to further develop arrangements for the early alerting of the public to a possible flood event but also to give those people in potentially vulnerable communities, some additional advice on a number of “self-help” initiatives. This would enable people to help mitigate the potential impact of flooding on their own properties and possessions and also “free up” the emergency services, local authorities and other responding organisations to focus on those members of the community in greatest danger or least able to help themselves.
- 2.4 The Group was of the opinion that the County Council, as the Statutory Emergency Planning Authority, should take some responsibility for raising awareness of people living in communities vulnerable to flooding and should

stimulate activity in areas identified as being at risk. The Topic Group has identified a number of initiatives which could help to meet those objectives and these are put forward as recommendations.

### **3. Conclusion**

3.1 The Scrutiny Committee is invited to:

- Endorse the Topic Group's view that, with the minor exceptions outlined in the report, the County Council's emergency response arrangements are satisfactory
- Commend to the Executive Member responsible for Emergency Planning, the proposed projects outlined in this report:
- Provision of video conferencing facilities within the County Council's Emergency Control Centre (page 4 paragraph 2.5)
- Establishment of a short term post to raise public awareness and assist in the recruitment of flood wardens (page 5 paragraph 3.4)
- Assistance with the organisation of a Flood Fair (page 5 paragraph 4.3)
- Development of closer links between the County Council's website, Customer Service Centre and digital TV service and the Environment Agency's Floodline Service (page 6 paragraph 4.4), that consideration be given to requirements and that the requisite funding be made available
- Requests the Best Value Core Group on Emergency Planning ensure that adequate attention is given to the issue of 24 hour call-out arrangements

## **Background information**

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Topic Group's terms of reference were "To review the role and performance of HCC in the context of a multi-agency response to major emergencies, using recent flooding incidents as an example, and to consider response arrangements to respond to future flooding events".
- 1.2 In the course of five meetings, the Topic Group:
- received a background briefings about the way in which inter-agency emergency planning and response arrangements are co-ordinated in Hertfordshire, the County Council's own response plans, and an additional briefing on the specific difficulties and issues related to flooding.
  - examined the County Council's own response arrangements,
  - considered how those arrangements fitted with the multi-agency framework developed within HESMIC (Hertfordshire Emergency Services Major Incident Committee)
  - met with representatives of communities who had had recent first-hand experience of severe flooding events
  - consulted with partner organisations (district councils, emergency services, the Environment Agency etc.)
  - considered what additional measures could enhance emergency response arrangements
- 1.3 In the course of its analysis the Topic Group highlighted a number of areas which warranted particular scrutiny or where additional actions may be required. These were:
- Co-ordination
  - Flood warning
  - Public awareness
  - Emergency Planning arrangements within District / Borough Councils
  - Flooding related projects currently being undertaken by the Emergency Planning Team .

Each of these areas is commented upon below

### **2. Co-ordination**

- 2.1 Any response to a Major Incident requires co-ordination both within individual responding organisations and between those organisations. However, responding to widespread flooding events makes this requirement even more important.
- 2.2 The Topic Group were satisfied that the County Council's emergency response plan ("Management Arrangements for Major Incidents") sets out clearly defined roles and responsibilities for individual services and departments and

has specific arrangements and protocols for ensuring that the HCC response is a properly co-ordinated one.

- 2.3 It was noted that the inter-agency response to the wide-spread flooding events of October 2000 had lacked some elements of co-ordination. The Topic Group were satisfied that this issue had been properly addressed and that the recommendations contained in the HEWMIC debrief report had been implemented.
- 2.4 At the Strategic inter-agency level, the Topic Group was satisfied that the County Council had robust arrangements in place to ensure that it would be properly represented. However, it noted the difficulties which the Environment Agency (EA) – a vital player in responding to flooding events – may have in resourcing this group given that the geographic area for which they are responsible covers a number of counties and London Boroughs. Topic Group has identified a possible solution to these resourcing difficulties.
- 2.5 The Topic Group is of the opinion that the installation of a video conferencing facility as part of the County Council’s Emergency Centre would significantly enhance its capacity to co-ordinate emergency response arrangements with that of the Environment Agency. As well as helping to reduce the resource demands of the Environment agency when responding to flooding emergencies, the facility could also be used to enhance liaison with other relevant organisations. The facility would be particularly beneficial in any major widespread emergency, particularly one which might extend across the region and where video conferencing could help ensure a co-ordinated regional response and decision making.
- 2.6 The benefit of having such a facility available to the rest of the organisation, outside of an emergency, has also not gone unnoticed by the Topic Group.

### **3. Flood Warnings**

- 3.1 The Topic Group was of the firm opinion that early warning of a flood event was vital in enabling those potentially vulnerable communities to take steps to mitigate the effect of the flooding. It noted the significant steps which had been taken by the Environment Agency over recent years to improve their ability to warn people of flooding but the Topic Group still believes that more could be done to enhance flood warning arrangements.
- 3.2 This opinion was reinforced by the Group’s visited two communities (London Colney and Little Hadham) who had been badly affected by recent, significant flood events. The Topic Group has concerns about the relatively low percentage of people, living within the indicative flood plain who were signed up to the Environment Agency’s automated telephone warning scheme ( 40-45% on average). The system allows subscribers to receive flood warning via an automated messaging system. In addition, the difficulties the EA had in recruiting Flood Wardens to help disseminate flood warnings amongst vulnerable communities, exacerbated these problems.

- 3.3 The Topic Group felt that there was a potential role for the County Council to assist the EA in promoting awareness of the automated telephone-warning scheme and also the recruitment of additional Flood Wardens, in partnership with the Environment Agency.
- 3.4 The Topic Group is in favour of the Emergency Planning Team establishing a short-term post who would, along side other relevant tasks, raise public awareness through presentations and public meetings and promote the automated telephone-warning scheme as well as assist in the recruitment of additional Flood Wardens.
- 3.5 Early warning was also essential to enable a comprehensive emergency response from the relevant responding agencies and organisations. The Topic Group was satisfied with the arrangements in place within the County Council to provide warnings of flooding and severe weather to HCC services and departments as well as other agencies. It was also satisfied that the ability of the County Council to provide those warnings was monitored, through records made by those who received the warnings, and departmental 'health checks'.
- 3.6 The Topic Group has some concerns, however, about the existing call-out arrangements within the Emergency Planning Team, in particular the onerous responsibilities currently being borne solely by the principal emergency Planning Officer. It notes that this issue will be incorporated into a forthcoming Best Value Review and urges that a revised system be implemented as soon as is practicable.

#### **4. An Informed Public**

- 4.1 It is recognised that early warning of a flood event is essential in alerting the public to a potential flood event. However, there is also a need for clear guidance and an understanding on the part of members of the public, of what actions they themselves can undertake, to help mitigate the potential impact of flooding on their own properties and possessions.
- 4.2 One such initiative is the holding of a Flood Fair. Flood fairs are exhibition-type events at which manufacturers of flood prevention products can demonstrate those products to an interested audience. Other relevant exhibitors like the Environment Agency, the British Association of Insurers would also attend to help raise public awareness of flood related issues. During their visit to London Colney the Parish Council asked the Topic Group for assistance in organising such an event, feeling that their community and others like them would derive significant benefit from such an awareness raising event.
- 4.3 The request for assistance has been picked up by the Emergency Planning Team and considerable progress has been made in organising such an event. Hertfordshire Flood Fair will take place on Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> October at Francis bacon School, St Albans. The event has already elicited the support of the County Council, St Albans City & District Council, the Hertfordshire

Association of Local Councils (HALC), London Colney Parish Council and the Environment Agency. The timing of the event is designed to benefit from the raised profile and increased public awareness of flooding engendered by the Environment Agency's National Flood Week campaign which takes place in the previous week.

- 4.4 The Topic Group has also identified additional actions which could be undertaken to increase public awareness of flooding and self-help initiatives. These actions include:
- A series of display boards and exhibition material which could be put on display at local libraries and in District Council offices to promote flood awareness.
  - A short-term post who would, along side other relevant tasks, raise public awareness through presentations and public meetings and give practical advice on self-help initiatives.
  - Closer links between the Environment Agency's Floodline Service with the County Council's website, customer service centre and Digital TV service with the goal of establishing Floodline as the "first stop shop" for all flood-related advice and information and ensure consistent and reliable information is available via a variety of media .

## **5. Emergency Planning arrangements within District / Borough Councils**

- 5.1 The Topic Group considered a report detailing the variety of emergency planning activity which was being undertaken in each of the District / Borough Councils. It noted that with 10 Councils, each with their own cultures, operational priorities and different organisational structures the approach to emergency response arrangements varies across the county. However, the essentials of having an Emergency Plan in place, of that plan being up to date and relevant, staff having an understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the event of a major emergency and the organisation having a regular opportunity to exercise those arrangements remain universal.
- 5.2 The Topic Group was broadly satisfied with the state of emergency preparedness across the districts and noted several examples of good practice. It also noted the work that had been undertaken to ensure healthy "cross-border" relations existed (e.g. joint exercise with Essex for Stanstead Airport and a similar event with Bedfordshire for Luton Airport).
- 5.3 In each District / Borough area, a Local Emergency Planning Forum (LEPF), determined emergency planning priorities and the workload undertaken by an Emergency Planning Officer (30% of whose time was given to supporting the LEPF). The Topic Group was satisfied with this arrangement.

## **6. Emergency Planning "flood-related" projects**

- 6.1 The Topic group noted the flooding related projects currently being undertaken by the Emergency Planning Team. These included:

- Support for the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the Unicorn Project – a joint HCC / Environment Agency initiative to assess the impact of the county on a 1 in 100-150 year flooding event- designed to highlight particularly vulnerable communities or client groups.
- Support given to Elderly peoples homes lying within the flood plain
- Development of the Environment Agency “Floodline” project, designed to promote a “first stop shop” facility for all flooding enquiries
- Assistance in the organisation of the Hertfordshire Flood fair

6.2 The Topic Group was satisfied that sufficient attention was being paid to flood related issues within the Emergency Planning Team.