

**HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**COMMUNITY INFORMATION AND PROTECTION  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**TUESDAY 11 MARCH 2003 AT 10.30 A.M.**

Agenda Item No.

**5**

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

*Report of the Head of Safety Emergency & Risk Management*

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**1. Purpose of report**

1.1 To inform Members of actions taken since the Responding to Emergencies Topic Group reported to the Scrutiny Committee in June 2002.

**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 In June 2002, following the Topic Group's report, the Scrutiny Committee reaffirmed that it 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 it's part.

2.3 The Scrutiny Committee recommended that additional attention should be paid to the issue of public awareness in relation to flooding. In particular, the 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.

2.4 Since June 2002, the Emergency Planning Team, with Executive Member approval, has undertaken a number of initiatives designed to raise public awareness of "flood-risk". These include:

- The organisation of a Flood Fair held in St Albans in October 2002,

- A series of 20 HCC / Environment Agency led public meetings in flood risk communities,
- The development of a public exhibition which gives advice about flood-risk and which will be used in libraries, Council Offices etc.
- Personal visits by an Emergency Planning Officer to every residential and nursing home within the indicative flood plain to offer practical advice about planning and preparing for flood-risk.

2.5 Since the Scrutiny Committee recommendations, Hertfordshire has not endured a repeat of the widespread flood events of October 2000. However, in the few days over the recent New Year holiday period there were a number of incidents of *localised* flooding, notably in Watford, Long Marston and Little Hadham. A HESMIC\* review of the inter-agency response to those incidents is currently underway with a report due to be tabled at various HESMIC Committees in late March and published to a wider audience in early April.

2.5 Any additional scrutiny of how the organisation responds to flood events would best be delayed until the publication of the HESMIC debrief report in April. However, the recent floods have served to re-emphasise the complex nature of flooding with incidents arising due to main rivers over-topping, land drainage difficulties, highways' surface-water "run-off" and also, on occasions, a combination of all three. Were the Scrutiny Committee minded to give further consideration to the issue of responding to flooding emergencies, it would need to bear in mind that some of these issues fall within the remit of the Environment Scrutiny Committee.

### 3. Conclusion

3.1 The Scrutiny Committee is invited to:

- Consider whether further scrutiny of how HCC responds to major emergencies is required,

and if it is...

- Agree what the terms of reference and composition of a Topic Group tasked with this scrutiny should be.

\* HESMIC: Hertfordshire Emergency Services Major Incident Committee

## **1. Background information**

- 1.1 The Scrutiny Committee, whilst satisfied with the multi-agency response arrangements in place to respond to flooding felt that additional attention should be paid to the issue of public awareness in relation to flooding. This would not only inform people of how best to mitigate the potential impact of flooding on their own properties but 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.
- 1.2 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.
- 1.3 The Scrutiny Committee commended to the Executive Member responsible for emergency planning, the following initiatives designed to meet the recommendations of the Topic Group: -
- (a) the establishment of a short-term post to raise public awareness and assist in the recruitment of flood wardens,
  - (b) assistance with the organisation of a Flood Fair,
  - (c) the development of closer links between the County Council's website, Customer Service Centre and Digital TV service and the Environment agency's Flood Line Service,
  - (d) the provision of video conferencing facilities within the County Council's Emergency Control Centre,

and also requested that the Best Value Core Group on emergency planning ensures that adequate attention is given to the issue of 24-hour call out arrangements

## **2. Flood-risk awareness initiatives**

- 2.1 The Emergency Planning Team has implemented a number of initiatives to raise public awareness of flood risk and the outcomes of those actions are summarised, in turn, below.

### *1) The organisation of a Flood Fair*

On Sunday October 20 2002, the Hertfordshire Flood Fair took place at the Alban Arena, St Albans. The aim of the event was to provide an opportunity for people living in properties at risk from flooding to learn more about how to get early warnings of a possible flood event, how to make a "flood plan" and how members of the public could help protect themselves, their homes and their families against flood risk.

As well as advice and information from both the Environment Agency and the HCC Emergency Planning Team the event benefited from being able to attract

a large number of exhibitors from the flood protection industry who demonstrated a wide range of products. 35 exhibitors took part in the Flood Fair many of whom complemented the Emergency Planning Team on the organisation of the event (“the best one this year”) and the size of the attendance which, compared with other similar events held elsewhere in the country was relatively high.

- 2.2 The Flood Fair attracted over 200 visitors. Feedback from those who attended and from the exhibitors who had travelled from across the country to attend was very positive as demonstrated by the information collated in Appendix 1.
- 2.3 Whilst the event should be regarded as successful, the officer time which went into organising the Flood Fair was significant. Feedback from the National Flood Forum makes it clear that trying to organise an event of this kind is a task that communities have struggled with elsewhere. Therefore, inevitably, “flood risk” communities across the country have tended to look to Emergency Planning Services to undertake the organisation on their behalf. Indeed it was the Parish Council at London Colney who first requested that the Topic Group support such an initiative.
- 2.4 The Scrutiny Committee may want to consider whether they wish a repeat of last year’s Flood Fair. Were this to be the case, the limited potential audience, the resource commitment required and a limited number of new products each year would suggest that an event every two years might be appropriate.

*2) Public meetings to enhance public awareness of flood risk*

- 2.5 Since last November, a total of 15 public meetings have been organised jointly by the Emergency Planning Team and the Environment Agency. The aims of these meetings were:
  1. To inform the public on the roles and responsibilities of the Environment Agency and HCC during major incidents with particular emphasis on flooding.
  2. To inform the public on measures they can take before during and after flooding.
  3. To attract new registrations for Flood Wardens in the County.
  4. To reach those people in communities who were unable to attend the flood fair.
  5. To ask people if they would be willing to partake in further research organised by the EA.
- 2.6 Venues were chosen to try and target those communities who had either suffered in the past from flooding or who were regarded as being in “flood-risk” areas.

Publicity was raised via a number of articles in local newspapers, a poster campaign (Appendix 2) using local notice-boards, post offices, shops and libraries as well as on Herts Direct. The Environment Agency wrote to every household within the indicative flood plain drawing attention to the Flood Fair

and also that public meetings would be taking place in their area, in the near future, with details appearing on the HCC website.

- 2.7 Attendance at the meetings was very mixed. Not surprisingly perhaps, the largest audiences tended to be in locations which had suffered from flooding in the recent past. However, even at some of those events, numbers were somewhat disappointing. At London Colney, which had suffered significantly in the autumn 2000 floods and where the Parish Clerk had personally leafleted all properties at risk from flooding, only 27 people attended. This experience mirrors that of the Environment Agency's previous efforts and those of emergency planning services elsewhere in the country to engage with flood risk communities at public meetings.
- 2.8 Nevertheless, the public meetings should be seen in a positive light as an effort to raise flood awareness. For those that attended the feedback received was generally very positive as evidenced by the "feedback" forms which attendees were asked to complete. A list of the 15 venues, the attendance at each meeting and an analysis of the event evaluation forms appears in Appendix 3.
- 2.9 Were there to be occasions in the future when flooding occurs and members of the public argue that they should have been better informed about what to do and how to mitigate flood damage, the County Council is now in a significantly stronger position to respond.
- 2.10 The Environment Agency has reported that the public meetings did generate a number of requests from residents in flood-risk properties to sign up to the Automatic Voice Messaging system (AVM). This is a system, which delivers early warning of flooding via the phone line and is regarded as a very effective method of disseminating flood warning information. However, the EA has yet to have had any additional volunteers come forward to become Flood Wardens.
- 3) *An Exhibition about flood risk to be displayed in public buildings across the county.*
- 2.11 Funding has been made available to purchase display boards and exhibition equipment is currently on order. It had been hoped that a number of libraries would be able to host the exhibition but the limited amount of exhibition space in these buildings and the size of what existing exhibition boards the Emergency Planning Team currently uses has precluded use of such facilities to date. It is expected that the new, smaller display boards will be more suitable for this purpose.
- 2.12 It is the Emergency Planning Team's intention to make the flood-risk exhibition the focus for next autumn's flood awareness promotion.

4) *Development of the NTL Digital TV service*

- 2.13 The emergency planning team has addressed the possibility of using the NTL digital TV service to promote awareness of flood risk. The limitations of the system preclude any detail “real-time” information about flood warnings being transmitted via the service but information about the Environment Agency’s Floodline service can be accessed and this is now available to users of the NTL digital TV service.

*5) Visits to EPHs*

- 2.14 An Emergency Planning Officer has personally visited all the elderly people’s homes and nursing homes which lie within the indicative flood plain to offer practical advice about flood-risk and how to be better prepared for the possibility of flooding.  
These visits have been extremely well received by care home managers each of whom has now undertaken to develop a “flood plan” for their own location.
- 2.16 Prior to the visit of the Emergency Planning Officer only one of the eight care homes visited was aware of, and had signed up to, the Environment Agency’s Automatic Voice Messaging system (AVM). Following the EPO visits all of the elderly people’s homes and nursing homes which lie within the indicative flood plain have now signed up to this system.
- 2.17 The above actions have resulted in a significant improvement in the state of preparedness within these establishments.

**3. Other Scrutiny Committee recommendations.**

*1) Installation of Video conferencing facilities*

- 3.1 An order has been placed for this equipment which is expected to be installed in the County Council’s Emergency Control Centre within the next month.

*2) Provision of 24-hour emergency cover.*

- 3.2 A duty rota of Emergency Planning officers to provide enhanced 24 hour cover has been developed. Arrangements are being finalised and it is planned to introduce the scheme from the 1 April 2003.