

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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Agenda Item No.

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RESPONDING TO EMERGENCIES

Report of the County Secretary

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1. Purpose of report

1.1 In response to the Scrutiny Committee's request for a report on the level of preparation of Town and Parish Councils to respond to major emergencies, with particular regard to flooding, and to report on the recruitment of flood wardens in Hertfordshire.

2. Summary

2.1 Potentially, Parish and Town Councils have a limited but important role to play in responding to major emergencies. This role was exemplified by Kimpton Parish Council who played an important part in the multi-agency response to the groundwater flooding problems which threatened their community in February 2001.

2.2 Parish Councils are well placed to provide "local intelligence" to assist responding agencies. They can also make a significant contribution by providing an important link from the emergency response agencies to the affected community and provide an effective conduit to help relay information to and from the community. Some Parish Councils in the county have a limited amount of resources (plant, equipment and labour) which could also be used to assist an emergency response. Some councils have arrangements to assist in the distribution of sandbags whilst others are able to act as additional flood wardens and help raise awareness of flood risk as well as provide a source of local information to the Environment Agency

- 2.3 To assist Parish Councils in planning their own response arrangements a HESMIC¹ Town and Parish Council template Emergency Plan has been developed in consultation with the Hertfordshire Association of Town and Parish Councils (HATPC) (**Appendix 1**). The plan has now been adopted by several councils and this figure is growing as awareness of the document and its usefulness increases.
- 2.4 The Environment Agency has also approached those Town and Parish Councils situated in the indicative flood plain and offered advice on the preparation of a flood plan. The floodPACT (**Appendix 2**) is designed to assist parish and town councils, and other community groups to prepare a specific flood plan for their area and highlight key considerations. There is very little evidence to suggest that this initiative has been adopted by any councils in Hertfordshire.
- 2.5 Town and Parish Councils, through their use of local knowledge, can provide contributions to the development of integrated “water management” strategies which the Environment Agency are now developing to take a wider view of flood prevention and land drainage issues. This is a subject which the Environment Scrutiny Committee’s Flooding Topic Group has been investigating. The Topic Group will report back to its parent Committee on 23 March.
- 2.6 Flood wardens play an important role in raising awareness of flood risk and in alerting their own communities to the possibility of flooding. The total number of flood wardens in Hertfordshire has increased substantially (45%) since a series of public meetings were organised jointly by the Environment Agency and the HCC Emergency Planning team in 2002/03. Amongst the intended goals of these 20 meetings was an objective to recruit additional flood wardens in Hertfordshire. However, it would be misleading to attribute the increased numbers to this particular initiative alone as it was part of a series of initiatives designed to promote this objective.

3. Conclusions

- 3.1 The Scrutiny Committee is invited to indicate whether it wishes to undertake further scrutiny of this subject and/or make any recommendations to the Council, Cabinet or Chief Officer.

¹ Hertfordshire Emergency Services Major Incident Committee – the organisation which co-ordinates multi-agency emergency planning and response arrangements within the county.

4. Background

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 The response to major emergencies in Hertfordshire over recent years has been noteworthy for the wide variety of organisations who have participated. Not only have incidents demonstrated the professionalism and expertise of the county's emergency services, but the close working relationships between the emergency services and the local authorities – both at a County and District level. Local authorities have played an important part in supporting the emergency services in the response to a number of incidents. These include the rail crashes at Hatfield and Potters Bar, as well as flooding events such as in the autumn of 2000, the spring of 2001 and over the 2002/3 New Year period.

4.2 Role of town and parish councils in a major emergency

4.2.1 Supporting the emergency services and contributing to the local authority response is not the sole preserve of County and District Councils. Parish and Town Councils also have a potential contribution to make. Their ability to mobilise resources (be they property or people) should not be underestimated. In addition to this, their most useful "assets" are local knowledge and providing a channel of communication down to and up from the community.

4.2.2 The response to the ground-water flooding incident in the North Herts Village of Kimpton in February 2001 provided a powerful example of how much value a town or parish council can add to the multi-agency response. The parish council mobilised pumps, distributed sandbags and played a very important role in advising the emergency services on community issues. They also provided a channel of communication through which the local community could be kept informed of decisions made and future actions. This was achieved by a number of mechanisms: the organisation of public meetings, production of a daily newsletter circulated to individual householders and by word of mouth.

4.2.3 It is important to recognise however, that parish and town councils should not be viewed as a homogeneous group. There are some very significant differences between them, not least their variation in size, and their differing levels of experience and resources.

4.3 HESMIC Parish Council Major Incident Emergency Plan

4.31 In Hertfordshire, HESMIC (the Hertfordshire Emergency Services Major Incident Committee) is the organisation which co-ordinates multi-agency emergency planning and response arrangements in the county. It has been in existence for over 25 years and is made up of organisations likely to have some role to play in responding to major emergencies. In recent years HESMIC has recognised the increasing

importance of this particular tier of local government and includes a representative from the Hertfordshire Association of Town and Parish Councils (HAPTC) on the HESMIC Local Authority Planning Group.

4.3.2 Within HESMIC, the County Council's Emergency Planning team has worked with HAPTC to produce a generic template Town / Parish Council emergency plan which individual councils can adapt to their own particular needs or circumstances. (see appendix 1). This plan sets out:

- the roles and responsibilities of the various agencies likely to be involved in an emergency response,
- how a major incident will be managed (i.e. "Command and Control" issues)
- a frameworks for each Council to set out its own response arrangements, emergency contact / call-out details, details about resources, key holders etc.

4.3.3 All town and parish councils which are members of HAPTC have been sent a hard copy of the template and given details on how to access it electronically. The template plan can also be downloaded from Herts direct. (www.hertsdirect.org/hcc/corpservices/sermu/epplan/pcplan)

4.3.4 Adoption of the template to date has been relatively slow but is now starting to take place. In conjunction with some of the District/Borough councils, awareness sessions have been held for Town and Parish councils (PCs) in North Herts and most recently in Dacorum BC. They have resulted in a number of councils going on to develop their own plans, Berkhamstead Town Council being a good example of this.

4.4 Responding to flooding emergencies

4.4.1 The Environment Agency has produced a useful summary of roles and responsibilities during a flood event (**Appendix 3**). The resources which town and parish councils have at their disposal to respond to flooding events are, on the whole, very limited. Some councils have arrangements with their District Councils for the location and distribution of sandbags (which in a significant flood event might be of limited value) but some may lack the resources to physically fill or distribute those sandbags. East Herts DC has written to all Parish Councils in their area offering to set up such distribution schemes but very few of those councils contacted have been able to assist with these arrangements.

4.4.2 The Environment Agency (EA) has responsibility to warn the public of a flood event and some parish councils take a proactive role in helping to cascade this information down to the public, effectively playing the role of a "supplementary flood warden". Both London Colney and Little Hadham Parish Councils receive the EA's automated voice messaging system (AVM) which gives telephone warnings of a likely flood event. However, the ability to pass this message on to an "at-risk" community

may be quite limited, particularly if the recipient of such messages works elsewhere at certain times of the day or has other commitments.

- 4.4.3 The Environment Agency has recently produced an information pack for parish and town councils including advice about preparing a Flood Plan (see Appendix 2). The information pack includes posters, CD Rom a VHS video and a number of advice leaflets on preparing for flooding and its consequences. A copy of the full pack will be available for members to examine at the Community Services Scrutiny Committee meeting of 24 March. The EA has distributed these packs to all Hertfordshire town or parish councils located in the flood plain. It is not clear how many parish or town councils have adapted the document to their own circumstances but, to date the Environment Agency have received no calls or enquiries from any council to discuss the pack's content.
- 4.4.4 When considering the particular ability of any town or parish council to respond to flooding emergencies it is important to recognise a number of additional constraints. The topography of Hertfordshire is such that the lead time between large amounts of rain falling in a river catchment area and subsequently that river flooding can, for some parts of the county, be relatively short. Despite additional investment by the Environment Agency to improve their flood warning systems, communities along rivers such as the Rib, Ash and Upper Colne may get very little notice of a flood event occurring. The time period therefore between a warning and implementing any short term flood defence systems (i.e sandbags) and that river flooding may well be a short one.
- 4.4.5 Prior to a flooding incident, Parish and Town Councils have a useful role to play in monitoring the state of local flood defence arrangements and reporting the need for any remedial attention. In the past, councils have made representation about the need to dredge particular stretches of river and clear gullies or ditches and where resources have been available for this to take place, the flood risk has diminished considerably.
- 4.4.6 It could be argued that one of the most significant roles parish or town councils can play in the context of major flood events is in supporting the need for proper longer term land drainage and flood prevention measures and participating in the development of those measures.
- 4.4.7 The Environment Agency is now starting to implement a strategy for "Integrated Water Management" at the local level and this requires the Environment Agency to speak to all Local Authorities about flood risk issues. This has promoted considerable dialogue between the various agencies and the Environment Agency which will continue in the future. The process has also involved contact with parish councils and is designed to draw on their local knowledge and expertise about where flooding occurs and its impact on local communities.

4.4.8 The subject of integrated water management has been looked at recently as part of a programme of scrutiny conducted by the Environment Scrutiny Committee.

4.5 Environment Scrutiny Committee

4.5.1 At its meeting on 17 June 2003 the Environment Scrutiny Committee established the Flooding Topic Group with a remit:

“To examine the effectiveness of current land drainage and flood defence arrangements and to address the issues of long-term, cross-boundary, integrated flood prevention and relief planning.”

4.5.2 The Group questioned a number of the primary bodies involved in flood management [known as Operating Authorities] about their responsibilities, functions, roles and levels of integration. The Group’s report to the Environment Scrutiny Committee (23 March 04) is expected to conclude that the operating authorities:

- are effective in their own sphere;
- integrate at the higher policy level;
- make pragmatic links, as required, at the operational level.

4.5.3 The Topic Group felt that whilst there is a great deal of positive work going on, the degree of wider integration appears to be variable. The Topic Group’s report is expected to suggest that the Environment Agency:

- is supported in its recently confirmed role as lead body with responsibility for implementing the European Union Water Framework Directive; and
- is encouraged to further the co-ordination of all relevant parties involved in flood risk management through the newly introduced mechanism of River Basin District management plans.

4.6. Recruitment of Flood Wardens

4.6.1 Following the “Responding to Emergencies” Topic Group report to the Scrutiny Committee in March 2002, the Emergency Planning Team, in partnership with the Environment Agency, undertook to conduct a series of public meetings in “flood-risk” communities. In total 20 meetings took place across the county. The two major objectives for these events 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.

- 4.6.2 A secondary objective of the sessions was to assist the Environment Agency in the new registrations for Flood Wardens in the County. The Flood Wardens serve their communities by:
- Providing the most accurate and earliest possible warning of flooding tailored to the needs of local communities;
 - Using their in-depth local knowledge to identify any specific local problems that can then be addressed before the onset of flooding;
 - Helping to co-ordinate the efforts of all the Authorities in flood risk management on issues such as sandbag distribution and road closures.
- 4.6.3 It is difficult to determine the success of the third objective since there was never any expectation that volunteers would be recruited on the day but instead would contact the EA at a later date were individuals to be interested. Moreover, a “mail-shot” campaign designed to meet the goals listed above was also undertaken towards the end of the programme of meetings.
- 4.6.4 It is possible to state however, that since the meetings held in 2002/03, the numbers of flood wardens has increased by 45% to a total of 51 flood wardens. Whilst this increase is to be welcomed there remain a number of parts of the county where the recruitment of additional flood wardens would be beneficial.

Background Papers

Environment Agency Flood PACT: Parishes and Communities Together

The HESMIC Parish Council Major Incident Emergency Plan Template

Report of the Environment Scrutiny Committee’s Flooding Topic Group