

KENT FLOOD RISK MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Kent Flood Risk Management Committee held in the Romney Marsh Internal Drainage Board, New Hall, New Hall Close, Dymchurch, Kent TN29 0LF on Monday, 23 July 2012.

PRESENT: Mr R E King (Chairman), Mr A H T Bowles, Mr D L Brazier, Mr M J Harrison, Mr C Hibberd and Mr M J Vye

OTHER AUTHORITIES: Mrs J Blanford (Ashford BC), Mr H Rogers (Tonbridge and Malling BC), Mr J Scholey (Sevenoaks DC) and Mr M Tapp (River Stour IDB)

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr T Harwood (Senior Emergency Planning Officer), Miss N Gibbs (Emergency Planning Assistant), Mr R Knight (Environment Agency), Mr D Oliver (Romney Marsh IDB), Mr N Botting (Romney Marsh IDB) (Assistant Engineer) and Mr A Tait (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

7. Minutes of the meeting on 16 March 2012

(Item 3)

(1) With reference to Minute 2 (6), the Committee accepted Mr Harwood's offer to contact the Environment Agency in order to provide an indicative priority ranking for Flood Defence Grants.

(2) RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 16 March 2012 are correctly recorded and that they be signed by the Chairman.

8. Local Flood Risk Management Strategy

(Item 4)

(1) Mr Harwood introduced the report. He said that work on the production of the draft Local Flood Risk Management Strategy was well underway, having been discussed in detail at the last meeting of the Kent Flood Partnership.

(2) Mr Harwood continued by saying that the Strategy would be an overarching, holistic document. The aim of those preparing the document was that it should be as pragmatic as possible whilst ensuring that all the various agencies worked effectively together.

(3) Mr Vye asked to what extent the Committee could be held to account if the aims of the Strategy were not achieved. Mr Harwood replied that the responsibilities of the Lead Flood Authority were set out in the Flood and Water Management Act 2010. In terms of liability, the legal test would be "reasonableness", as it was for all local government functions.

(4) Mr Hibberd agreed that it would be wise not to proceed with a very detailed draft. He believed that the review period should be two years rather than the three envisaged. He also asked for the inclusion of the total number of organisations affected by Water Legislation. Mr Harwood replied that the Kent Flood Partnership had discussed similar concerns. He suggested that a “light touch” bi-annual review would be appropriate and agreed that the roles and responsibilities of key partners would be factored in to the Strategy.

(5) The Committee agreed that it would have sight of the Strategy before publication. It was agreed that the most appropriate approach would be for its Members to be sent an electronic version beforehand so that they could comment. In the event that Members had more fundamental concerns, there might need to be a special meeting of the Committee to consider the matter.

(6) The Chairman asked that any Member who, on receipt of the pre-publication draft, wished for a special meeting of the Committee to contact him at the earliest opportunity.

(7) RESOLVED that:-

(a) the report be noted; and

(b) a pre-publication draft of the Draft Local Flood Risk Management Strategy be circulated electronically at the earliest opportunity to all Members of the Committee in order to enable them to comment upon it and, if necessary, for a special meeting to be arranged before publication.

9. Presentation from the Environment Agency

(Item 5)

(1) Members of the Committee had visited the flood defences at Robertsbridge before the meeting (including an exercise with the flood alleviation scheme in partial operation). This had been followed by a visit to the Woodside Pumping Station, which was in the process of being repaired.

(2) The Chairman thanked the Environment Agency for the interesting and informative tour during the morning. He asked on behalf of the Committee whether there could be a second visit to the Woodside Pumping Station once the work had been completed.

(3) Mr Richard Knight from the Environment Agency began his presentation by explaining the very unusual weather patterns which had occurred over the previous months. The jet stream was further south than was normal, leading to low pressure systems moving north east across southern parts of England. Meanwhile, the surface temperatures in the North Atlantic had been higher than usual. It was possible (but not proven) that the shrinking polar ice cap was responsible for these conditions. In any case, these factors had brought about unusually high levels of rain in April and May.

(4) Mr Knight then said that the previous five summers had all been wetter than average and that there had been very unusual weather patterns in the whole of the Northern Hemisphere. In the UK, the effects had been similar to those of 2007. There had been floods in Wales, Cumbria, Hampshire, Dorset and East Anglia.

(5) Mr Knight went on to say that the Environment Agency's regional Instant response staff covered Kent, South East London, parts of Surrey and East Sussex. Their task had traditionally been to respond to severe weather which built up in a slow moving system over a long period. It was now increasingly the case that they had to respond to much more sudden rainstorms. Examples of these had occurred at Bearstowe in Surrey in June when 45 millimetres had fallen in 5 hours. In July, a storm had stopped above Edenbridge in Kent, depositing 40 millimetres.

(6) Mr Knight concluded his presentation by saying that the Incident Room in Addington had been opened on six occasions in June and July 2012 (the first time this had ever happened during these months).

(7) Mr Knight responded to Members' questions by saying that most scientists had concluded that extreme weather patterns would become more common as a result of global warming and melting ice caps. Ocean cooling did not necessarily result from melting ice caps. Scientists were well aware of the La Nina and El Nino effects in the Pacific Ocean area (where high or low sea temperatures could translate into their opposites in landed areas. It was quite possible that an effect along these lines could occur in the Atlantic area. It was, though definitely the case that the glaciers were retreating on an annual basis even though they did make up some of that loss during the winter months.

(8) Mr Knight responded to further questions by saying that DEFRA assumed an average increase in sea level of 6 centimetres per year. This was especially significant for Kent which had more people at risk of coastal flooding than any other authority in the UK. He was able to confirm that the multi-agency flood plans contained a comprehensive list of resources and equipment for flood prevention/mitigation.

(9) RESOLVED that Mr Knight be thanked for his informative and thought-provoking presentation.

10. Presentation on the work of the Internal Drainage Board

(Item 6)

(1) The Chairman thanked Romney Marshes Area IDB on behalf of the Committee for providing such a splendid venue for the meeting.

(2) Mr Nick Botting from Romney Marshes Area IDB gave a presentation which had originally been prepared by Mr David Oliver (who had been obliged to present his apologies at this point in the meeting).

(3) Mr Botting said that the Romney Marshes Area IDB had been formed in April 2001 as an amalgamation of the Denge and Southbrooks, Pett, Romney Marsh Levels, Rother and Walland Marsh IDBs. These had been formed in the 1930s by the

Land Drainage Act 1930. This Act had created an integrated drainage system in the lowland areas of Kent to be under the control of Catchment Boards (now the Environment Agency) who were responsible for the larger watercourses (Main River) and the sea defences. Land within an Internal Drainage District fell under the control of the IDBs, who were made responsible for managing effective drainage.

(4) Mr Botting went on to define an Internal Drainage District as a low lying area of land which was prone to flooding and where, consequently, works had to be undertaken to protect land and property. The current Romney Marshes Area IDB functioned under the Land Drainage Act 1991 and the Flood and Water Management Act 2010.

(5) Mr Botting next described the IDB's administrative area. It covered over 33,000 hectares (82,000 acres). Its catchment area (land draining into the district) was 94,000 hectares (232,000 acres). Much of the marsh land was Grade 1 arable land, but the IDB's area also covered the river valleys of the Rother, Brede, Tillingham and other tributaries.

(6) Most of the marsh was below mean tide level, which meant that it would be under water most of the time if it was not protected by the sea wall. Land levels in Romney Marsh were about 2 to 3 metres above Ordnance Datum Newlyn (AOD) (the main sea level to which all levels in the UK were related). In Walland Marsh, the levels varied between 5 metres AOD at Lydd and Midley to about 1 metre AOD at Fairfield. The soil on the marsh was quite varied. It was mainly alluvium, but also ranged from light sandy soil (which drained freely but did not hold water) to clay in the river valleys (which could cause flooding problems through rapid run-off). In many areas, the underlying stratum of peat from the ancient forests was quite close to the surface, leading to possible settlement problems when the land was drained.

(7) Mr Botting then said that the Romney Marshes Area IDB was one of about 150 boards in low-lying areas of the country. It was a self-funding public body, comprising 21 members elected by agricultural ratepayers and 22 members nominated by those Councils which paid levies to the Board. The Board employed a Clerk/Engineer, an Assistant Clerk/Engineer, a Water Bailiff and a part time Rating Officer. Contractors were employed to undertake maintenance work.

(8) Rates were collected by setting an agricultural rate paid by the occupiers of agricultural land and a special levy on the District Councils. These rates were used to pay for the maintenance or improvement of watercourses and structures. The IDB also paid a precept to the Environment Agency for the maintenance of their watercourses and sea defences as well as for administration of functions such as the Flood Warning Service. The Environment Agency in turn made a contribution to the IDB for accepting water from the catchment into the lowland area.

(9) The IDB maintained some 350 km of watercourses (petty sewers) and also owned and maintained 5 pumping stations. All of these watercourses discharged into main rivers maintained by the Environment Agency. The IDB owned none of these watercourses and its powers were permissive. This meant that it did not have to maintain them. The ultimate responsibility for maintenance lay with the riparian owner. The basic law of land drainage was that a person had to accept the natural flow of water from upstream and could not obstruct it. Under Section 23 of the Land

Drainage Act 1991, it was an offence to cause an obstruction or alter the flow of any watercourse without the written consent of the IDB.

(10) Mr Botting next said that maintenance of watercourses was done by “brushing” to clear the channel of weed growth. This took place annually in the late summer and autumn in order to remove vegetation, allow free drainage of the winter rains, minimise re-growth and to allow nesting birds to rear their young successfully. Brushing was carried out by excavators fitted with mechanical weed-cutting baskets. Since this mechanised system had been developed in the 1960s, dredging of the watercourses to remove the build up of silt needed to be undertaken less than once a decade.

(11) Stop boards were placed in structures across the watercourses during spring time to hold the water at a higher level in the summer. This water was used as wet fencing for livestock and for irrigation. Some of the stop boards had been in existence for hundreds of years. Since the Second World War, there had been an increase in arable farming over grazing. Because graziers generally required higher water levels than arable farmers, this meant that compromise and diplomacy was at a premium.

(12) Irrigation could place demands on water levels. Most farmers now had storage ponds for their irrigation needs; however some still had licences of right which permitted them to draw water direct from watercourses without compensation from their own reserves. During the summer months, evaporation could reduce water levels by as much as 9mm each day, and the Environment Agency provided summer feeding of water to the marsh in order to combat this effect. Water could be moved from the Rother, which usually had a steady flow of water from the upper reaches all year round. By pumping and opening sluices, it was possible to feed water from the Rother into the Royal Military Canal and then onto the marsh, thereby supplying water which would otherwise simply flow into the sea.

(13) Mr Botting concluded the presentation by saying that conservation played an important part in the IDB’s work. The Land Drainage Act specified that due consideration had to be given to enhancing conservation wherever possible. There were several SSSIs within the district requiring special consideration before a licence could be granted for the IDB to undertake its work.

(14) RESOLVED that Mr David Oliver be thanked for preparing a very informative presentation on the work of the Romney Marshes Area IDB.

11. Date of next meeting
(Item 7)

The Committee noted that its next meeting would be held at 2.00 pm on Monday, 19 November 2012 at County Hall, Maidstone.