

From: **Mike Harrison, Chairman of the Kent Flood Risk Management Committee**

To: **Scrutiny Committee – 12 June 2014**

Subject: **The work of the Kent Flood Risk Management Committee**

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Summary: This report provides the Scrutiny Committee with an overview of the work of the Kent Flood Risk Management for the period May 2013 to March 2014. .

Recommendation(s): The Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the contents of the report.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Kent Flood Risk Management Committee's first meeting following the Local Government Elections took place on 22 July 2013. This meeting elected me as the Chairman.
- 1.2 The Committee's Terms of Reference are set out at **Appendix 1** to this report. The membership of the Committee consists of 8 Members of the County Council. There is also a standing invitation to each of the District Councils and the Internal Drainage Boards in Kent to send representatives to the meetings. I have followed the practice of my predecessor, Richard King in treating these representatives as though they are full Members except for the formal items of business.
- 1.2 The Minutes of the Committee's three meetings are set out at **Appendix 2**. These are very detailed. I summarise the main areas of activity from each of the Committee's events.

3. Committee meeting of 22 July 2014.

- 3.1 The Committee received reports accompanied by presentations on Local Flood Risk Management and the Local Flood Risk Management Strategy; an overview of flood risk in Kent; and Environment Agency Flood Alerts and Warnings. The main purpose of these reports was to enable the new Members of the Committee to familiarise themselves with the areas of work that the Committee was required to undertake. The presentation on Flood Alerts and Warnings was particularly significant, given the events that were to come. The Committee was impressed by the awareness shown by all the agencies at both a strategic and local level of both the risk of flooding and the potential consequences which would need to be grappled with.
- 3.2 The Committee also received an excellent presentation from Christine Wissink and Carolyn McKenzie on the Coastal Communities Project, which reinforced the Committee's understanding of current medium and long term tidal flood risks for Kent, including detailed planning that is very closely linked to our Committee's remit.
- 3.3 The meeting also agreed a series of topics for further consideration at future meetings.

4. Committee meeting on 18 November 2013

- 4.1 This meeting occurred a month before the major storm and flood events struck. The first report considered was an East Kent Flooding Update, prepared by the Cabinet Member

for Community Services and the Emergency Planning Team. This report detailed the national threat and Kent's preparedness to deal with it (both in terms of dealing with an emergency itself and of increasing general levels of awareness). The Committee endorsed the KCC and wider-partnership approach and agreed on the need for "sustained vigilance in the light of recent rainfall and forecast unsettled weather conditions."

- 4.2 The Committee also considered the standing item on Environment Agency Flood Alerts and Warnings as well as a report on the County Council's new responsibilities for sustainable drainage which were expected to commence in the near future.

5. Informal Meeting on 15 January 2014

- 5.1 I invited the Committee Members, our District and IDB colleagues to attend an Informal meeting in order to give an opportunity to discuss the response to the major flooding events that were still ongoing at this time. Many of the officers reporting to the Committee were still in "response mode." The meeting was well attended. It heard contributions from two Cabinet Members (Mr Brazier and Mr Sweetland), the Head of Community Safety and Emergency Planning; the Head of Planning Applications Group; and Kent Highways Services. We were extremely grateful that representatives from Kent Police and Kent Fire and Rescue found the time to attend. Likewise, we were delighted that the Chairman of Yalding Parish Council was able to join us and speak movingly of her community's experiences.
- 5.2 I had made it clear at the outset of the meeting that it would not be appropriate to consider the minutiae of the flooding response. Nevertheless, if there had been areas of broad dissatisfaction, they would have received a thorough airing. What emerged instead was that everyone who spoke expressed deep gratitude and satisfaction for the work of all the partner agencies and all the local volunteers who had responded with commitment and efficiency to the prolonged and serious events during the winter.

6. Site Tour on 11 March 2014.

- 6.1 The Committee Members were very keen to undertake visits which would enable them to gain a better picture of flood attenuation schemes to support their work. On this occasion, we visited three sites in the Ashford area. The first visit was to Hothfield flood storage area, which had made a major contribution to protecting many thousands of homes downstream in Ashford during the period of abnormally high seasonal flows in the River Stour. The Committee Members were able to compare the current water levels with those of a mere two weeks earlier, when the entire area on which they were walking had been completely under water. We noted that the water was automatically released into the River Stour at a rate that did not threaten the town of Ashford downstream.
- 6.2 The Committee then inspected the river restoration work at Goddington Manor. This work had been carried out by the Environment Agency. By profiling the channel and providing obstacles to flow at strategic locations, the EA had managed to get the river to flow at the optimum speed to prevent siltation and provide a better habitat for fish and other aquatic wildlife, which it will be able to maintain in perpetuity.
- 6.3 Lastly, we went to a sustainable drainage system (SUDS) scheme at Singleton Hill, Ashford. We walked the entire route from top to bottom, observing how the different features of the system provided attenuation to prevent flooding, habitat for wildlife and amenity for the development. Many Members considered this visit to be particularly valuable.

7. Committee meeting on 11 March 2014.

- 7.1 The Committee received an oral presentation from Ian Dunn from the Environment Agency, which went into detail about the entire flood response since Christmas 2013. Whilst all Members of the Committee reiterated their appreciation for the work that had been done, a number of issues of concern were also raised. These included the need for the EA and Water Companies to work closely together to ensure that flooded communities did not simultaneously experience such an event as the sewage deluges experienced in Hildenborough and Yalding over the winter; the inconsistencies in the flood warning systems (either in terms of consistency of alert levels or in their frequency); and the complexity of the bidding process for minor flood defence improvements.
- 7.2 The Committee was also very pleased to receive a report from Martin Twyman from the Little Stour and Nailbourne River Management Group. This presentation is detailed in the Minutes at **Appendix 2**. The Committee Members were particularly receptive to the view that the Environment Agency ensure that management of waterways benefitted both flood protection and biodiversity. They were also concerned to hear about the local water quality problems caused by over-pumping of the sewer by the water company.

8. Future events.

- 8.1 The Committee is due to meet three times over the next year. The next meeting is in July 2014 when a representative from Southern Water will be invited to give a presentation, including on the issues described above.
- 8.2 The meeting will be preceded by a visit to the Leigh Barrier.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1 The Committee has carried out its scrutiny function with diligence and enthusiasm. Its Members have participated fully, and their views as set out in the Minutes are conveyed to the relevant agencies for their information.

10. Recommendation

10.1 The Committee is invited to note the content of this report

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