

**To:** Kent Flood Risk Management Committee – 23rd November 2020

**From:** Tony Hills, Chairman of the Kent Flood Risk Management Committee  
Stephanie Holt-Castle, Interim Director of Environment, Planning and Enforcement

**Subject:** Virtual Site Visit to Little Venice

**Classification:** Unrestricted

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**Summary:** To inform the Committee of the virtual site visit to Little Venice on 23 September 2020

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## **1. Background**

- 1.1 The issue of Little Venice was raised during the Kent Flood Risk Management Committee meeting on 9 March 2020. I therefore invited interested parties to participate in a site visit and discussion. At the same time, legal advice on the possibility of undertaking a compulsory purchase was sought in accordance with the Committee's wishes.
- 1.2 Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it proved impossible to hold a physical site visit. Furthermore, the use of a drone to film the site was not possible due to GDPR considerations. Nevertheless, all the attendees were very familiar with the site which ensured that a productive discussion could take place on a Virtual basis.

## **2. The Virtual Site Visit**

- 2.1 The Virtual site visit was held on 23 September 2020. The list of attendees was:

**Tony Hills** (KCC – Chairman of Kent Flood Risk Management Committee)

**Max Tant** (KCC – Flood and Water Manager)

**Tony Harwood** (KCC – Resilience and Emergency Planning Manager)

**Derek Mortimer** (Maidstone BC – Chairman of Communities, Housing and Environment Committee)

**James Bailey** (Maidstone BC – Development Manager)

**Geraldine Brown** (Yalding PC – Chairman)

**Guy Gardener** (Kent Resilience Team - Senior Resilience Officer)

**Luke Thompson** (Environment Agency – Area Incident Manager; Kent, South London and East Sussex)

**Jonathan Alawo** (Environment Agency - Team Leader Flood Resilience Team; Kent, South London & East Sussex)

**Grant Brooker** (Kent Fire and Rescue- Water Resource and Flooding).  
**Andrew Tait** (KCC Democratic Services)

- 2.2 All participants agreed that the safety of the residents was paramount. They also noted that legal advice separately obtained by both Maidstone Borough Council and Kent County Council clearly stated that the CPO option suggested at the Committee meeting was incapable of being successfully pursued. The attendees therefore discussed what measures could be undertaken to improve health and safety on the site.
- 2.3 Major flooding events are expected to occur more often as a consequence of climate change. Research has established that a 1 in 100-year flooding event occurs every three years somewhere in the UK. This does not, however mean that any one location is at a level of risk substantially greater than that.
- 2.4 Little Venice is a site which is inhabited by a significant number of elderly and vulnerable residents. It is very prone to flooding. The evacuation of vulnerable people is typically a challenge to achieve safely.
- 2.5 The Environment Agency identified a Community Flood Plan for Little Venice had been developed following the event of 2013/14. This had provision for Flood Wardens, although there is not one there at this time. The aim is to rectify this through training for flood wardens which was due to be held shortly after our Virtual meeting took place. The updates to the Flood Plan will follow the flood warden training and be written bearing in mind the debrief following the events of the winter of 2019/20.
- 2.6 The draft Medway Confluence Flood Plan covers Laddingford, Yalding and Collier Street and sets out arrangements for sandbag provision and highways management in those localities during a localised event. As stated above, there was a debrief following the events of the winter of 2019/20.
- 2.7 Little Venice was previously covered by three different warning systems that were issued at different times. This has now been reduced to a single warning that is tailored to the site without warning the rest of the Yalding community unnecessarily.
- 2.8 Gauge boards have been installed on site to enable water height to be measured at Hampstead Lock so that the anticipated extent of the flooding can be communicated to the residents. The residents typically expect the site to be flooded to some degree every winter. The Flood Warning messaging service and the gauge boards improve the ability of site residents to understand the level of severity during any flooding event that is going to happen. The 2013/14 Flood Plan and the Evacuation Plan that arose from it have worked very well since its creation and the residents on site have been able to self-evacuate quite effectively. This was also the case during the 2019/20 event where there was a *de facto* Flood Warden to assist. There were, however, significant issues for the most vulnerable residents.

- 2.9 One of the problems with the Evacuation Plan for Little Venice is that it is unclear who has the responsibility to decide who should be evacuated and who should remain on site. In March 2020, Little Venice was left with 16 very elderly and vulnerable people who the Fire Authority had to evacuate overnight by boat. It then proved problematic to move them to appropriate temporary accommodation. Maidstone BC as the evacuating authority bore the cost of doing so. This did not extend to returning those people to their homes once the Emergency was over. The aim should be to ensure that evacuation of all residents is undertaken at the same time rather than piecemeal as was the case on this occasion. Responsibility for returning people to their homes after the event needs to be clarified.
- 2.10 From an Emergency Planning perspective, it was a complex matter to resolve how to evacuate people, who were elderly and vulnerable, without inflicting harm. In March 2020, there were significant problems in persuading people to evacuate and to identify appropriate specialist accommodation. The difficulties experienced in evacuating the Little Venice site have grown between 2013 and 2020 as the residents have become older and more vulnerable.
- 2.11 There is an inherent risk to mobile homes, even though they are tethered. Furthermore, many of the residents initially reacted to the March 2020 flood event with complacency. Consideration needs to be given to how the site can be made safer in terms of layout. Some parts of the site are very vulnerable to flooding, representing a danger to life when taken in combination with the vulnerability of some of the residents. This risk is born by residents, rescue workers and volunteers, which also places pressure on Adult Social Care and Health staff, who must ensure safeguarding.
- 2.12 Mobile homes are still being advertised at Little Venice for sale at a price that is attractive for people who have retired. It is not clear whether people contemplating purchase have been informed of the risks associated with purchasing a mobile home in sites such as Little Venice. One suggested response is to warn the residents of the nature of the risks, possibly by a letter undertaken by the Parish Council.
- 2.13 The point was made that quite a few of the residents mistakenly believed that they had purchased permanent homes and had sold their former houses under this misapprehension. Furthermore, some of the more elderly and vulnerable residents have acquired the right to live there permanently over time.
- 2.14 Little Venice has an extensive planning history. An enforcement investigation was carried out by Maidstone BC some ten years ago because the lawful use was for temporary holiday homes rather than for permanent accommodation, and it was believed that a number of people had been living there permanently for a considerable period.
- 2.15 Maidstone BC informed the virtual site meeting that there are some planning restrictions, including a S106 Agreement which is effectively a tie within the main park area for a restriction of usage for that area on site. There is also a permission for the access; a 2019 Lawful Development Certificate (LDC) for the ancillary recreational use of an area in connection with Little Venice Country

Park. A new application has been received by Maidstone BC for quarter of the land covered by the LDC. If granted, this would lead to a further 40 caravans with the possibility of a further 120 if the planning process were to be repeated.

### **3. Conclusions**

- 3.1 The meeting identified a number of aspects that would benefit from further multi-agency consideration. These are:-
  - 3.1.1 exploring further were zoning the site by floodwater depth and velocity (although care would need to be taken to ensure that the residents would not be misled into believing that they would no longer be at risk if placed in a lower risk zone);
  - 3.1.2 better informing the residents of the flood risks on site
  - 3.1.3 establishing the exact level of responsibility for the duty of care at the site, including for evacuation and return of residents, and how this will be enforced if required.
- 3.2 The participants all agreed that they had become better informed of the full circumstances prevailing at the site, including options which could most productively be pursued.
- 3.3 The exercise was in my opinion an important step forward in improving health and safety at Little Venice. This meeting came about as an Initiative raised at the Committee. This reflects very well upon the manner in which it carries out its role. Whilst the site visit has not solved the problem, it has been able to facilitate work towards an improved situation.
- 3.4. I recommend that the Committee should receive an update report on progress at Little Venice within the next calendar year.

#### **Recommendations**

- 4.1 The Committee is invited to note the report and the three areas at 3.1 that will continue to be explored to a point of resolution
- 4.2 The Committee is invited to agree that an update will be presented within the next calendar year.

### **5. Report Author:**

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