

Scrutiny Committee

Report of Head of HR, IT & Technical Services

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Review of flooding in January and February 2014

Recommendation

(a) The scrutiny committee is asked to note the overall positive outcomes following the flood events in 2014 and to pass any comments to the cabinet member to consider.

Introduction

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the county-wide response plans that are in place and how effective they were during the flood event of January and February 2014 and in particular the role played by Vale of White Horse District Council. The report will also cover lessons learnt.

Strategic Objectives

2. Providing resources in the event of a severe flood event impacts positively on two of the Vale of White Horse District Council's strategic objectives: support for communities and effective management of resources. Officers acting as part of a joint agency approach help to support communities who have houses and areas flooded, may be cut off by flood waters and/or have residents who have been displaced from their houses. Using our contractors to help make and deliver sandbags impacts on the delivery of their own service but it is an effective use of resources in times of emergencies.

Background

3. In 2011, a Joint Severe Weather Plan, attached as appendix A, was adopted by Oxfordshire County Council, the District and City Councils that outlines a common approach to adverse weather events. The plan is maintained by the emergency planning leads collectively of these authorities with the support of key partner agencies such as police, fire, ambulance and the Environment Agency.
4. The aim of the plan is to outline the joint emergency response arrangements across Oxfordshire councils in response to severe weather. The plan meets the statutory requirements of the council as a 'category one' responder in times of flooding and in its duties under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The plan includes a framework for the responsibilities of both County Council and District Councils in terms of activation, allocation and deployment of resources.
5. The plan deals with a number of severe weather scenarios; gales/storms, winter weather such as snow/ice/fog, heavy rain/flooding, and drought.
6. The following sections outline the activation processes and key structures relating to flooding.

Activation criteria

7. As with all plans, the Severe Weather Plan includes activation criteria and in the case of flooding, these are generally:
 - amber or red severe weather warning – Met Office National Severe Weather Warning Service;
 - amber or red risk – Flood Guidance Statement
 - flood warning or severe weather warning – EA Flood Warning
 - notification from partner agency or internal service
 - visual observations from the public received and verified
8. Once the activation criteria have been reached, a multi-agency teleconference is organised to assess the potential likelihood and impact upon the county and consider appropriate action to take. The initial teleconference will include all of the local authorities as well as specialist teams from within OCC and external advisers such as the Met Office.
9. In anticipation of severe wet weather in January and February 2014, officers from the Vale of White Horse District Council took part in initial teleconferences and sent a representative from the council (the emergency planning officer) to the EOC (emergency operation centre) at Woodeaton, Oxford to facilitate communications between multi-agency partners there and officers at Abbey House.

Coordination

10. Within Vale of White Horse District Council, an activation of the severe weather plan also triggers generic actions outlined in the council's joint operational flood plan as attached in appendix B. The principal actions of the Vale Council are:

- co-ordinating role for the Vale and South Oxfordshire district areas
- activating the councils' emergency plan/severe weather plan as required
- emergency assistance – provide sandbags subject to available resources and circumstances (and in line with sandbag policy), provide temporary accommodation
- clear blocked watercourses etc. (enforcement powers under Land Drainage Act 1991)
- investigate environmental health issues - pollution
- clear blocked road channels – street cleaning
- co-ordinate emergency planning support groups
- clear trash screens on non main river culverts that are under council ownership as riparian owner.

Flood defence emergency procedures

11. Other than the normal response to flooding incidents as above, the Vale Council has specific flood defence emergency procedures for South Hinksey Village; St Helens Mill, Abingdon; Old Botley and Kennington Road, Kennington.
12. These emergency procedures are implemented on a flood warning or a severe flood warning being issued for the nearby watercourses and where critical water levels have or are predicated to be reached.
13. In 2014, the decision to put up the flood barriers at Kennington and St Helen's Mill for example came following joint agency agreement on trigger levels to allow for road closures and communications with residents and the local parish council.

Community resilience

14. The local response to flooding is based upon a tiered approach starting with personal and community resilience through to emergency response by the traditional emergency responding organisations.
15. Over the past number of years, district council officers have worked with the OCC emergency planning unit, the Environment Agency and OCC services to promote community resilience to individuals and communities. We have promoted the development of multi-use community emergency plans to Parish and Town Councils in order to create a database of locations that can be used by the community in the case of evacuation. During the floods of 2014, the database was successfully used to identify appropriate locations for rest centres in Abingdon and Henley.

What happened in 2014?

16. Over the Christmas period in 2013 officers were closely monitoring river levels and weather forecasts and had already taken some initial actions. When flood guidance statements reached 'amber' levels in early January 2014, officers took part in multi-agency teleconferences. High river levels continued in January and although river levels started to recede later in the month, further severe weather warnings at the beginning of February led to more teleconferences in preparation for flooding that took place on 7 February.
17. For both events in January and February, OCC established an emergency operations centre (EOC) where officers from the Vale Council attended and which provided coordination of response with external partners both within Oxfordshire and the rest of Thames Valley.

Actions by officers during flooding events

18. Officers took the following actions during both flood events in January and February 2014:
 - took part in initial tele-conferences to establish first actions
 - provided officer support to co-ordinate actions via EOC
 - kept members of the public, senior management team, councillors and staff informed of what is going on and what key messages need to be made
 - implemented flood defence emergency procedures, for example in St. Helen's Mill, Abingdon and Kennington
 - maintained action and financial records
 - investigated flooding and recorded information including flood levels
 - carried out inspections of key watercourses causing flooding
 - kept records of properties flooded, the extent of flooding and provide details to the EOC
 - organise 'sandbag dumps'
 - organise specific deliveries of sandbags to 'at risk' groups
19. The council was able to draw on resources from the refuse and street cleaning contractor (Biffa) to both take supplies of sand and sandbags in Culham, fill the bags and distribute them, on almost a 24/7 basis. From experience from previous events and going on requests direct from the public, officers identified locations for 'sandbag dumps' where anyone could collect and use sandbags to protect their own property. The sandbag dumps were at Abbey House and later by Old Abbey House with help and support from Abingdon Town Council, B and Q, Abingdon, Chaunterell Way, Abingdon, Steventon, South Hinksey, Grove, West Hanney and East Hendred.
20. The use of multi-agency teleconferences and good communication streams between EOCs and emergency responders meant that at-risk areas were identified and appropriate action agreed between partners. Officers were able

to obtain lists of those vulnerable people most at risk of flooding and make specific deliveries where appropriate. In addition members of the facilities team were able to feed back information on water levels on the ground. The council's principal engineer, the technical and facilities manager and other members of the facilities team were heavily involved in speaking to the public, identifying high risk areas and feeding information into the EOC. At the same time, the EOC was collating information from various sources and then feeding that back to council officers to action or inspect on the ground.

21. Several flood groups or committees have been formed within the Vale since 2007 and some key people, experienced from previous flood events, were able to give vital information to officers to feed into the EOC and also help to understand the situation that was changing daily on the ground. In particular this was the case in South Hinksey where properties regularly flood and local residents established a flood group.
22. In late February 2014, officers were asked by the EOC to identify areas where the army could be of assistance. This led to an EOC led, co-ordinated military intervention, for example with the building of a large concrete bund in South Hinksey as well as helping to deliver sandbags to Steventon.

How effective are our resources?

23. The Vale Council responds to flood events as part of a joint agency approach. Every flooding event provides responders with more information about at-risk locations which is useful in profiling the resources and actions required to respond. Along with the other agencies, during and after the event, the Vale Council collates data on river levels, flood locations and root causes of flooding. Each event provides new challenges but sources of information and actions that were particularly effective for the Vale Council in 2014 were:

- widespread use of the EA flood warning codes to publicise flood risk – introduced in 2011, the three stages of warnings are becoming familiar, as are the recommended actions to be taken.
- web-based river levels and live flood warning maps (on the EA website) provided officers a clear picture of how watercourses were responding to weather events and when flooding to properties was expected
- the use of (up to) twice daily teleconferences to share information and update partner agencies on actions
- the role of Biffa in providing staff and vehicles over an extended period of time to both fill sandbags and deliver them
- effective sandbag dumps at strategic locations often in collaboration with local flood groups and town and parish councils
- the use of social media to provide information on sandbag dumps as well as disruption (such as road closures due to flood barriers)
- good communication and hard work of all staff

What have we learnt from the 2014 flood events?

24. The promotion of community emergency plans is an ongoing project and work continues this autumn. In addition the councils are working on personal resilience and people taking proactive responsibility of protecting their own property. In times of flood a lot of resource is used up in providing sandbags which are not always used effectively. In addition, in one case in Abingdon over 100 bags were taken by one sole vehicle which officers suspect were sold. Traditional sandbags are able to divert the water but are heavy and difficult to store. Alternative 'eco/floodsax' are now available and although more expensive, can be stored and placed more easily. An Oxfordshire wide 'flood protection fair' is planned on 31 October to help promote products and actions that individuals or groups should take to make property more resilient and example of efficient ways to protect property. Officers would like to see more community managed sandbag stores run by parishes or local flood groups in order to ensure that the right people get sandbags at the right time.
25. The work undertaken by the emergency planning teams within local authorities is undertaken in consultation with OCC Highways and Drainage teams to encourage the adoption of community emergency plans where flood alleviation and management activities are discussed.
26. Plans are reviewed in response to post-incident debriefs and lessons identified. The Joint Severe Weather Plan is reviewed annually prior to the onset of winter and lessons from the flooding of 2014 will be incorporated in the next review (currently under way).
27. Following feedback from agencies on flood alerts for the River Ock, Abingdon the EA has reviewed and improved the areas receiving flood alerts for this area
28. As part of the larger Oxford and Abingdon flood alleviation schemes, the EA is currently reviewing options for the three different issues in Abingdon as below:
 - The Ock catchment – proposed storage area upstream of A34
 - The Stert catchment – culvert replacement and possible storage area
 - St Helen's Wharf – local issue at the Ock / Thames confluence
29. Since the flooding, central government has made grants available for flooded houses as well as business rate relief and council tax flooding relief. In particular, officers are considering applications for the 'repair and renewal' grant where residents whose houses have been flooded, can claim up to £5,000 to make their home more resilient to flooding. Claims must be submitted to the Vale Council by 30 December 2014. The current take up is quite low (only three to date) so county and districts are working to promote a county wide flood fair on 31 October to help promote this grant.
30. The Vale Council carries out investigations of all flooding events as part of the agreement with OCC (as they are the 'lead local flood authority'). Following reports from parishes, officers are aware of 38 incidents of flooding which are/have been investigated. The principal engineer has been the key resource investigating each report of flooding, prioritising locations either where

properties have been flooded internally or where there has been flooding of main roads which led to severe traffic disruption. Officers report that the majority of flood issues relate to unmaintained land drainage and blocked roadside ditches where there is a general misunderstanding as to who is the 'riparian' (adjacent) landowner and what their responsibilities are for maintaining the water flow, bed and banks of the ditch.

31. The table below summarises the investigations which shows that about a quarter of the investigations have been completed and the rest are on-going. Subject to no further flooding, officers hope to complete the investigations by the beginning of 2015.

Table 1 Flood summary locations 2014 – investigations complete and on-going

Flood summary locations Vale Council (blue complete, yellow on-going, white not started)		
No.	Location	Parish/village
1	Ladygrove Paddock	Abingdon
2	Marcham Road	Abingdon
3	Virginia Way	Abingdon
4	Appleton Village	Appleton with Eaton
5	Baulking Lane, A417 at Challow and Stanford road	Challow
6	Longworth Road	Charney Bassett
7	West Street	Childey
8	Childrey Lane	East Challow
9	Cornhill Lane	East Challow
10	Memorial Hall	East Hanney
11	Lower Mill	East Hanney
12	Coxwell Road (1)	Great Coxwell
13	Coxwell Road (2) Entrance to village	Great Coxwell
14	Grove Road	Harwell
15	Kennington road	Kennington
16	Mill House area	Letcombe Regis
17	Mill Street	Marcham
18	Pembroke Lane and High Street	Milton
19	High Street	Milton
20	Moor ditch, Pembroke Lane.	Milton
21	Causeway to Lower Radley	Radley
22	Bayworth Road	Radley
23	Manor Close	Shrivenham
24	Manor Road, John Piers Lane, Barleycott Lane and St Lawrence Road	South Hinksey
25	Vicarage Road	Steventon
26	School Close	Steventon
27	Mill Street & Causeway	Steventon
28	Church Lane	Steventon
29	Boars Hill towards Bayworth and Sunningwell	Sunningwell
30	Churchmere Road	Sutton Courtenay
31	Upper Common Lane	Uffington
32	Watchfield Village	Watchfield
33	Mill Street	Wantage
34	A417	West and East Challow
35	Botney Bridge	West Hanney
36	The Greenway road (junction with The Millham)	West Hendred
37	Woolstone Road (where road meets Claypit Lane)	Woolstone

Conclusion

32. The severe weather events of 2014 demonstrated how well the joint agency approach has been developed in recent years to cope with and organise resources. The tele-conferences that take place in preparation of potential severe events are very useful in getting the various bodies on standby, gathering information and then the EOC bring people together to co-ordinate work.
33. There is now an expectation that the council will provide sandbags and this can be done relatively cheaply from existing resources. However, residents should not rely on the council to deliver sandbags 24/7 and more work needs to be done to encourage community and individual resilience and responsibility.
34. Officers continue to investigate all flooding events from January and February 2014. We are working with other agencies on helping to promote awareness to landowners of their rights and responsibilities as riparian landowners to maintain watercourses that flow adjacent or through their property and often are the source of flooding problems.