

Cabinet Report



Report of Acting Deputy Chief Executive – Partnership and Planning

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To: CABINET

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Funding agreement re flood risk in Abingdon

Recommendations

- (a) To make a payment of £68,075 and provide limited assistance in kind to the Environment Agency (EA) as a contribution towards the cost of appraisal and outline design work for the flood storage area and natural flood management (NFM) opportunities in the catchment of the River Ock.
- (b) To authorise the Head of Legal and Democratic in consultation with the Deputy Chief Executive - Partnership and Planning to finalise the terms of and enter into an agreement with the EA as to the terms on which the contribution is to be made; the assistance in kind given, and the terms on which EA is to provide reports to the Council following completion of the work.

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide Cabinet with a summary of the background and work to date on the flood management schemes of Abingdon, to inform a decision about future Vale of White Horse contributions to the project and to agree a delegation of authority to the Head of Legal and Democratic Services to enter into an agreement with the EA that determines the agreed level of contribution to the project and the conditions surrounding our involvement.
2. The EA also provided a briefing for councillors on Monday 15 July 2019.

Corporate Objectives

3. The Vale of White Horse Corporate Plan 2016-2020 sets out the strategic objectives “Providing funding towards works on temporary flood barriers in South Hinksey and for the investigations of options to manage flood risks at sites in Abingdon, including Hillview Road on the River Stert; St Helen’s Mill on the River Ock, and a more comprehensive scheme for the River Ock, as well as the major Oxford and Abingdon Flood Alleviation Scheme.”
4. Additionally, the Vale has a corporate priority and commitment to “working with infrastructure partners to find solutions to flooding problems across the district.”

Background

5. Abingdon lies to the west of the River Thames, at the confluence of the Rivers Ock and Stert.
6. In 2007, extensive flooding (a 1 in 200-year event) from the Ock led to 433 residential properties and 21 commercial properties flooding.
7. Following further widespread flooding in 2013-14 (a 1 in 20-year event), proposals to reduce flood risk in Abingdon and Oxford were reviewed.
8. Vale of White Horse District Council made an early commitment of up to £2.5 million to reduce flood risk in Abingdon by means of a number of potential schemes, one of which was the creation of a flood storage area upstream of the A34. The initial draw down of this contribution was used to re-establish the Abingdon River Ock scheme in 2014 to investigate a flood storage area on the River Ock upstream of the A34 at Abingdon, alongside a package of other measures, jointly known as the ‘Abingdon Flood Schemes’.
9. In October 2016, a Memorandum of Understanding in respects of the Oxford and Abingdon Flood Alleviation Schemes was signed between:
 - The Environment Agency
 - Oxfordshire County Council
 - Oxford City Council
 - Vale of White Horse District Council
 - Thames Regional Flood and Coastal Committee
 - Thames Water Utilities Ltd
 - Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership
 - Oxford Flood Alliance.
10. While this Memorandum primarily focusses upon the much larger Oxford Flood Alleviation Project, it does mention that the Environment Agency is looking at solutions in Abingdon for the River Ock. It states that these proposals could be delivered within the next few years following additional feasibility work and subject to the necessary funding being in place.
11. A collaborative agreement between Vale of White Horse and The Environment Agency concerning appraisal work, modelling and investigative works relating to the River Ock commenced in April 2017. The objectives of the project were to:

- carry out an appraisal and investigative modelling and outline design works for a flood storage area in Abingdon
 - undertake developmental work for Natural Flood Management (NFM) opportunities in the Ock catchment.
12. An initial estimated cost of the flood storage area scheme, which would have involved the creation of a 1.5 km flood embankment, was £4.7 million, with the Vale contributing £2.1 million.
13. After more detailed design work, the estimated cost of the project increased to £9.77 million. Some of the reasons behind the doubling of the initially estimated costs include:
- the need to excavate down and build foundations for the embankment – it was initially thought that the embankment could be built on existing ground
 - a substantial increase in the amount of clay material that will be needed to construct the embankment
 - ensuring that the embankment met the requirements of the Reservoir Act 1975.
14. The increase in the overall cost has major implications for the viability of the project with the incremental Benefit Cost Ratio (comparing the option to the next best option of do minimum) being evaluated at 0.19. As this figure is less than one, it does not qualify for DEFRA funding.
15. (The estimated benefits of progressing the flood storage area is £40.29 million compared to £38.34 million for doing nothing. The difference between doing the minimum and doing something is, therefore, only £2 million, at a cost of nearly £10 million – the project, therefore, does not provide value for money).
16. Other potential options around the River Stert and Swift Ditch (a backwater of the Thames) were also explored, but none of these delivered sufficient benefit or reduction in flood risk.
17. While £4 million has been committed to the proposed flood storage area by Vale of White Horse and the Thames Regional Flood and Coastal Committee, without support from DEFRA the project still needs just under £6 million in external funding. The Steering Group considered that securing this was not currently feasible and, consequently, the EA decided on 4 December 2018 to halt work on the flood storage area.
18. Focus has now shifted to NFM developmental work. This work is currently being led by a dedicated Environment Agency Project Manager. Examples of NFM work include changing the way land is managed so soil and trees can absorb more water – the project manager is meeting landowners in potential areas of interest along the River Ock to ascertain what may be possible.
19. It must be noted that the Environment Agency has delivered two flood risk reduction schemes in Abingdon – a flood wall along St Helen's Mill and a plan for temporary flood barrier deployment.

COSTS OF THE WORK UNDERTAKEN

Output	Completion date	Total cost	The council contribution
Final outline designs for the Flood Storage Area - Jacobs	November 2018 Completed	£212,000	£38,075
Final Abingdon flood storage area viability report - Jacobs	December 2018 Completed		
Natural Flood Management EA Project Manager in post	1 April 2018 to 31 March 2020	£36,000	£10,000
Phase 1 Natural Flood Management initial modelling and assessment report - Jacobs and JBA	1 January 2019 to July 2019	£50,000	£20,000
TOTAL			£68,075

20. The contribution will be made in one payment following receipt of the report from the EA following the completion of the appraisal and design work. The agreement contemplates that the EA may call upon council officers to provide information and expertise.
21. A legal agreement between the EA and Vale will set out payment details and the objectives.
22. The EA will be financing the remaining expenditure outlined in the table.

Options

23. Do nothing - the Vale is not obliged to provide any funding and the EA could seek alternative contributions or grants.
24. Contribute a lesser amount.
25. Either of these options would be at odds with the partnership agreement and the Vale's historic allocation of funding for flood schemes in Abingdon. They would reduce the amount of NFM that the EA is able to provide and therefore Abingdon would continue to be at the same level of risk of flooding.

Financial Implications

26. This payment is from the Capital budget YA37 (Abingdon flood relief) carried forward from 2018/19 to 2019/20.

Legal Implications

27. Officers has already agreed a draft document with the EA which sets out the terms and conditions on which the Vale would enter into an agreement with the EA for the contribution of funding and technical support. The final agreement would be signed by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services if Cabinet chooses to delegate authority.

Risks

28. If we contribute a lesser amount or choose to take no further action with the EA Abingdon would continue to be at the same level of risk of flooding.

Other implications

29. None

Conclusion

30. The contribution outlined towards the cost of NFM opportunities in Abingdon and the agreement between the Vale of White Horse and the EA that would outline the contribution and any conditions attached represent the most appropriate and cost-effective way forward to mitigate the flood risk of Abingdon. Additionally, it demonstrates our commitment to working and engaging with partners to find solutions and represents a significant contribution towards this important local issue.

Background Papers

None