



Flooding Task Group

Draft Report

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Overview & Scrutiny Committee
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Introduction

A number of significant flooding events have occurred in Wyre over recent years and all the indications are that such events will become more frequent and more serious in years to come.

Elected members have been involved in all recent flooding events to a greater or lesser extent. One theme that has been consistent has been that the roles and responsibilities of councillors are not clear and not always fully understood, either by councillors themselves or by members of the public.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee commissioned a task group to review the ways in which councillors have been involved in recent flooding events and to make recommendations about how their roles and responsibilities could be more clearly defined.

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Aims of review

The aims of the review, as specified in the scoping document (see Appendix 1), were as follows:

- To clarify the role of ward councillors before, during and after flooding events
- To understand the respective roles of the organisations and individuals involved in planning for, dealing with and the recovery after flooding events in the borough
- To understand the range of issues and challenges faced by residents during and after a flooding event
- To review ward councillors' experiences in terms of the questions asked and demands placed on them in relation to flooding events

The review process

The task group held its first meeting with the Neighbourhood Services and Community Safety Portfolio Holder and the Head of Engineering Services. The group subsequently interviewed the Emergency Planning Officer and the Housing Options Team Leader.

The ten Flood Action Groups (FLAGs) were invited to submit comments and observations about the way in which councillors have been involved with flooding events.

All councillors were invited to complete a questionnaire about their understanding of the roles and responsibilities of elected members in flooding.

Task group members were made aware of a scrutiny review report (dated January 2018) carried out by Knowsley Council which covered many similar issues.

Summary of evidence provided by Councillor Roger Berry (Neighbourhood Services and Community Safety Portfolio Holder) and Carl Green (Head of Engineering Services)

Cllr Berry addressed the roles and responsibilities of councillors under three headings:

- (i) Day-to-day, on-going work
- (ii) During a flooding event
- (iii) Recovery stage

Much of the day-to-day work is coordinated through the Wyre Flood Forum, which provides for direct engagement between residents, councillors and a range of other agencies and organisations. Actions are agreed and followed up at subsequent meetings.

A number of Flood Action Groups (FLAGS) have been set up, or are in the process of being set up. These are made up of residents who are taking on a localised role of liaison and coordination. They are also responsible for encouraging people to take appropriate resilience action for their own properties. Councillors play a key part in motivating residents to set up and run FLAGS, which is consistent with their role as community leaders.

During an event weather reports and flood warnings are very important, but not infallible. It is very difficult to predict the precise location where flooding might occur as a result of rainfall; predicting flooding from rivers is easier, by comparison. There is a limit to the number of sand bags that the council can provide, despite residents' expectations, which is consistent with the similar approach being promoted by the FLAGS.

There is a limit to what should be expected of councillors during a flooding event, as the key responsible agencies (police, fire and rescue, Environment Agency, LCC) all have clearly defined and understood roles. It is important that councillors act as a hub for local communication and as a support to residents. The comment was made that local ward councillors should carry out an audit of their own wards in order to know where the older and more infirm residents lived and those with mobility difficulties.

It is the recovery phase where councillors can be of most help. They can offer assistance, support and leadership, clearly communicating the needs of residents. Councillors should be available and visible and act as a source of information, advice and reassurance. They should also offer basic advice to encourage residents to make insurance claims, where appropriate.

The Head of Engineering Services, Carl Green, made a presentation, focusing on the roles of key partner organisations during a flooding event. He reaffirmed the point that councillors should leave things to the key services during a flooding event - but they do have a key role afterwards.

The Civic Contingencies Act 2004 sets out a single framework for civil protection in the UK. It creates two categories of responders and sets out clear expectations and

responsibilities for frontline responders during an emergency. Category Two responders include utility companies, transport companies and other organisations such as the Health and Safety Executive and Clinical Commissioning Groups, who have a duty to cooperate and to share relevant information with Category One responders.

A series of multi-agency emergency plans and information are in place, including:

- Generic Emergency Response Plan;
- Multi Agency Flood Plan Part 1;
- Wyre Flood Plan Part 2;
- Rest Centre Plan;
- A number of others (e.g. Merlin, COMAH, CAMI, MACPOL)
- Up to date contacts.

Even with detailed plans in place the most important element remains effective communication at all levels, and this is something in which councillors should be centrally involved as far as links with residents are concerned.

Mr Green emphasized the following points:

- Phone operators have scripts for use during flooding events
- Chairs of FLAGs have scripts
- Flooding events happen most years (2013 was an exception)
- There are likely to be more flooding events, with more and heavier rain
- Each FLAG should have its own local community plan
- Councillors do not need a list of all the relevant service phone numbers – there are already a number of plans and procedures in place. Excessive calls to those phone numbers would be detrimental and block the system
- A number of effective emergency plans, at various levels, are in place for which all the contact details are kept up to date
- The council's website provides information in great practical detail (preparation, FLAGs, rest centres, etc.) and should be the main point of reference
- Individuals have great responsibility for themselves (resilience) and for knowing who their vulnerable neighbours are
- Communication is the key role for councillors

Summary of evidence provided by John Blundell, Emergency Planning Officer

One of the biggest challenges is dealing with the expectations of local communities as the council simply does not have the resources to deal with everything in the way that they would like. The provision of sandbags is a good example, the council only providing them, at present, to vulnerable people and only then, as and when they are available. The council's limited resources should be allocated very carefully in times of crisis. As far as the Emergency Planning Officer is aware, Wyre Council is the only District Council in Lancashire that still provides any sandbags to its residents. Communities and individuals are increasingly encouraged to become more resilient by making their own provision, the Churchtown Flood Action Group being an excellent example of how that can be done.

After every major flooding incident a de-briefing session is held, which leads to action plans being agreed for future improvements. Mr Blundell indicated that he would like to see councillors involved in the de-briefing process, which they are not at present.

Mr Blundell referred to the role of councillors before, during and after flooding events.

1 Before a flooding event

Elected members are the public face of the council and as such have a role to play in both ensuring community resilience is in place for responding to and recovering from emergencies. Resilience can be summarised in this way:

- Supporting your local community
- Taking the opportunity to make the best use of local resources and knowledge
- Encouraging residents to help themselves during an emergency in a way that complements the local response
- Helping to protect and support those who are unable to do that for themselves

Mr Blundell identified the following questions as examples of the sort that might be asked of residents to promote resilience and to assess how prepared the community is:

- I. Are you aware of the risks you and your community might face?
- II. How can you help yourself and those around you prior to, during, and after an emergency?
- III. What can you do to get involved in your community?
- IV. Do you know where to get the information you may need?

It is also important to promote resilience in planning and preparation:

- Promote and encourage the preparation of community emergency plans, not just for flooding

- Ensure the community is aware of partners' websites, Environment Agency, Met Office, etc.
- Use local knowledge to identify local groups/partners who could play a role in preparedness, response, and recovery
- Self-resilience within the community and managing residents' expectations
- Actively support communities involved in community resilience work

Political leadership is important and includes:

- I. Representation to central Government for additional resources or financial assistance
- II. Promoting joint working with Community Groups, Parish, Town, District, Upper Tier, and Unitary Authorities
- III. Liaising with other elected representatives (MPs, MEPs, etc.)
- IV. Representing your communities on the Recovery Group
- V. Minimising reputational risk to the authority and defending decisions
- VI. Being aware of the decisions made by the Strategic Coordinating Group and the implications for your communities
- VII. Ensuring identified lessons are addressed and plans improved

2 During a flooding event

During a flooding event councillors whose wards have been impacted by the emergency have a key role to play in:

- a) Providing community leadership in their own wards
- b) Identifying the needs of individuals and the wider community and feeding them into the appropriate part of the response plan
- c) Signposting members of the public towards the right agency to get the support they need
- d) Communicating consistent information to the community
- e) Supporting and assisting those affected in how they engage with the media

3 After a flooding event

As community representatives and figureheads in the local community, councillors have an important role to play in the recovery phase, once the incident has passed and emergency services have left the scene. The councillors' role during the recovery phase is vital in rebuilding, restoring, rehabilitating and reassuring the communities affected, and making representations on their behalf. Councillors can assist by using local knowledge, listening to the community and providing support. Local community groups can be an important source of help and specialist advice.

Listening to the community entails:

- I. Being the eyes and ears 'on the ground' by providing a focus for and listening to community concerns

- II. Gathering the views and concerns of the community and feed them into the recovery process through the Recovery Coordinating Group
- III. Providing support and reassurance to the local community, by listening or visiting those affected and acting as a community champion and supporter

Providing support in the recovery phase entails:

- ✓ Providing encouragement and support to recovery teams working within the community.
- ✓ Disseminating key messages, advice and information to the community, ensuring there is a consistent message.
- ✓ Potentially assisting debrief sessions with the community.
- ✓ Managing community expectations.
- ✓ Actively engaging with community members involved in recovery efforts.
- ✓ Collating joint recommendations from Town, Parish, District, Local Councillors, as well as Village Halls etc.
- ✓ Supporting community, volunteers and vulnerable people.
- ✓ Supporting the community with technical expertise.
- ✓ Supporting the community with documentation, the management of donations, grant applications, insurance claims, financial matters etc.
- ✓ Supporting the community with loss of life, anniversaries of events etc.

Summary of evidence provided by Pamela Holroyd, Housing Options Team Leader

The Housing Options Team has been involved in assisting with several flooding incidents. Ms Holroyd used these as practical examples to describe the team's work.

The most recent incident was in November 2017 when the team received a phone call from the Duty Officer informing them of flooding. The Thornton YMCA was opened as a rest centre in case it was needed, in line with the Wyre Multi-Agency Flood Plan (updated on 18 May 2018). There was only one family, comprising three adults and two large dogs that needed to be accommodated. It was the council's duty to find accommodation, which was eventually secured in Blackpool, there having been some difficulty in finding accommodation that would accept dogs. In this case the family was only accommodated for one night as water levels reduced and they could return home.

The flooding in Garstang, Bilsborrow and St Michaels in December 2015 was potentially a huge task. The YMCA at Garstang was opened as a rest centre (in accordance with the Flood Plan) and although there were a number of people and dogs that were affected they were all able to be accommodated by family and friends.

In response to questions and comments from task group members, Ms Holroyd made the following additional points:

- Councillors play a valuable role in supporting and reassuring residents during flooding events.
- It is important that councillors are clear about the limits of their role and responsibility in order to enable others to carry out theirs effectively.
- There have been occasions when recognised rest centres have not been used for various reasons. For example, the Crofters Hotel was used on one occasion.
- The council's responsibility continues for as long as it is required to in order to discharge its responsibilities under the Homelessness Act 2002.
- As soon as someone confirms that they are covered by insurance the duty under the Homelessness Act 2002 is relinquished.
- Consideration is always given to looking after the public purse.

Ms Holroyd concurred with task group members on the following points:

- Councillors should have a good knowledge of local resources to refer residents appropriately.
- There should be consistency across the borough, particularly when identifying potentially vulnerable individuals.
- There is the potential for some smaller, more local facilities (churches or village halls, for example) to be considered as potential emergency rest centres, which could reduce the number of people who have to travel away from their own locality.
- There needs to be a mechanism by which councillors are reliably informed about imminent flooding events, perhaps via text message.

Written evidence submitted by local Flood Action Groups

There are Flood Action Groups (FLAGS) in the following areas of the borough:

Churchtown
Cleveleys
Garstang
Great Eccleston
Hambleton
Preesall
St Michael's
Stalmine
Thornton

The following four questions were emailed to each of the FLAGS asking for their opinions and experience of the involvement of Wyre councillors before, during and after flooding events, and the responses received made the following points:.

- 1 Generally speaking, what has been your experience of the way in which Wyre councillors have assisted residents before, during and after flooding events?**
 - (i) Using local knowledge
 - (ii) Councillors' involvement is more of a reaction than a solution
 - (iii) They are not very good at publicising or explaining to voters what they are doing to help
 - (iv) I have not been aware of Wyre councillors playing a major role in helping us with flooding issues
 - (v) As far as we can see they haven't! They come to the meetings we have attended but I'm not sure what they do.
 - (vi) Some are very actively involved and provide a link between the residents and the council; others are not
 - (vii) The local councillors have not been very visible at these times.

- 2 What valuable contribution have Wyre councillors made before, during and after flooding events?**
 - (i) Councillors suggest that that it is solely in the hands of the residents to protect their properties
 - (ii) Councillors should be knocking on doors during and for the weeks following a flood, but it is usually the emergency services who actually do this
 - (iii) Remaining in touch with affected residents for longer than just the short-term
 - (iv) Some individual councillors have been very supportive, including writing about flood issues in local publications

- 3 What could Wyre councillors do better to support residents and local communities, in relation to flooding events?**

- (i) Some contact at the time of flooding would be beneficial in giving moral support, even if the councillors did not physically help
- (ii) Help provide sand bags
- (iii) Knowing where vulnerable residents live
- (iv) Attend FLAG meetings
- (v) They should provide support and advice when needed, helping to 'open doors' with other agencies and organisations
- (vi) Councillors should not just appear at the time of events but follow through with the residents over the following months/years to ensure that protection is improved
- (vii) Help residents not to feel abandoned
- (viii) Councillors should be visiting properties which suffered flooding lending support and giving out any relevant information
- (ix) Show more interest

4 Do you have any additional comments about the role of Wyre councillors in flooding events, which has not already been covered?

- (i) Councillors should attend Flood Forum meetings
- (ii) Councillors should communicate better with local communities
- (iii) Residents do not feel supported or respected
- (iv) They need to demonstrate that they are working to provide funding to create the best defences possible for us all
- (v) Let people know that they are aware that we have a real problem and that tackling it is a priority, not just something they respond to only when a disaster occurs
- (vi) There is no defined role which councillors have to adhere to in situations such as flooding

Councillors' questionnaire responses

A questionnaire was sent to all councillors to try to assess their understanding of their role and responsibilities before, during and after flooding events. Thirty questionnaires (60%) were returned. A summary of the responses to the specific questions posed is attached at Appendix 2.

The responses show that in relation to some aspects of flooding councillors have differing views about what they should and should not be doing and for what they are and are not responsible.

A number of key points were made by members of the task group, in the light of the questionnaire responses received.

These points included:

- All councillors should be notified about an imminent flooding event in their ward by text message, or an alternative method.
- There are mixed views about whether the provision of sandbags should remain the council's responsibility, and if so, what the role of the councillor is in relation to their distribution.
- Residents, as well as councillors, need clarity about what the role of councillors is and is not; a major public information campaign should be considered.
- Residents should be encouraged to take resilience measures whenever possible, although it should be remembered that some people simply cannot afford to do so.
- Despite having the best intentions, councillors should never put themselves in danger and should constantly be assessing risk.

Conclusions and recommendations

It is the task group's view that more should be done to clarify and define the roles and responsibilities of councillors before, during and after flooding events. There is evidence of significant misunderstanding by councillors and local communities about roles and responsibilities, as well as often unrealistic expectations on the part of residents, often fuelled by the general lack of clarity.

1 Before a flooding event

It is important that residents increasingly take on responsibility for aspects of their own safety and flood protection. Ward councillors can and should continue to play a role in this by helping to keep residents informed and encouraging them to become more active in this respect.

The task group is very impressed with the work that has already been done by Flood Action Groups (FLAGS) across the borough, and would like to see them set up more widely still. The role that FLAGS play in engaging the public, involving them in decisions and taking personal responsibility cannot be replicated as effectively by the council.

There was evidence throughout the inquiry that the role of councillors is unclear – indeed, this is what precipitated the review in the first place. Local communities in particular need to understand what the role of a ward councillor is, and they have mixed messages which often fuel unrealistic expectations.

RECOMMENDATION ONE

That ward councillors actively support the excellent work already being undertaken by FLAGS and provide a lead in exploring options with local residents for setting up FLAGS in other parts of Wyre.

RECOMMENDATION TWO

That ward councillors advise, support and encourage residents to take whatever actions are necessary to make their own properties more resilient against the threat of flooding, perhaps to include the installation of flood gates/doors or the development of a Household Emergency Plan, for example. Actions should also include taking steps to improve resilience when household improvements are being made, such as new kitchens avoiding the use of chipboard or the installation of a flood-resistant front door.

RECOMMENDATION THREE

That a campaign is undertaken by the Communications Team to ensure that the community is fully informed about the role of councillors before during and after flooding events. This should include clarity about what is included and what is not included within elected members' roles and responsibilities in relation to flooding.

2 During a flooding event

There are clear expectations and responsibilities for frontline responders during an emergency, and also a series of detailed emergency plans which provide the blueprint for dealing with a flooding event. Councillors should be aware of those but should not get involved in their implementation, leaving it to those agencies responsible. Ward councillors play a valuable role as a hub of information but such a role depends on them being kept informed or having access to the most up to date information. The review exposed some gaps in the provision of information to councillors, which must be resolved if they are to carry out their role to its full potential.

Evidence shows that the public's perceived reliance upon and expectations of the availability of sandbags during a flood are high and unrealistic. Sandbags are only ever in short supply, they are difficult to move, labour-intensive to fill and transport, they are rarely available in the right place and even when used only provide short term respite from serious flooding. It was noted that the majority of other councils in Lancashire do not use sandbags at all; they represent a distraction to residents as well as discouraging residents, to some extent, from taking their own resilience measures.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR

That a system be put in place to ensure that ward councillors are provided with all essential information about flooding events, in a timely fashion, including the decisions made by the Strategic Coordinating Group and the implications for local communities.

RECOMMENDATION FIVE

That the role of the ward councillors as an 'information hub' for residents be reinforced at every opportunity, so that it is fully understood by councillors and members of the public.

RECOMMENDATION SIX

That the council stops routinely providing sandbags with immediate effect, in recognition of the facts that their effectiveness is limited, they are labour-intensive to fill and distribute and that members of the public should be increasingly encouraged to take responsibility for making their own properties safe from floods.

Consideration should be given to continuing to provide a limited number of sandbags to protect critical assets and to support FLAGS for distribution to their vulnerable residents, whom they had previously identified.

3 After a flooding event

The long-term impact of flooding is well-recognised, residents often being unable to return to their flooded homes for many months. After such a traumatic event many residents require on-going support and advice (e.g. in relation to how to make an insurance claim) and ward councillors can play a very significant role in this regard.

There is a wealth of information that councillors will have gleaned from a variety of sources at all stages of a flooding event. In their role as 'information hub' it is important that there is a clearly understood path by which the information they have gathered can be fed back to other relevant individuals and organisations as part of the multi-agency emergency plans.

Councillors need to be kept fully up to date about flooding issues and to have the opportunity to clarify aspects of their role, in the light of recent developments, on a regular basis. Work on flood prevention is always changing and any alterations to policy and practice need to be fully understood by councillors so that they can support communities in line with the other recommendations in this report, specifically their role as an 'information hub'.

RECOMMENDATION SEVEN

That ward councillors be facilitated to contribute to the de-briefing session following a flooding event.

RECOMMENDATION EIGHT

That the importance of ward councillors being involved in the medium- and long-term support of people whose properties have been flooded be encouraged by

- (i) Advising residents that this is part of the agreed role of a ward councillor, and**
- (ii) Ensuring that ward councillors have the requisite skills and knowledge to carry out such a role effectively**

RECOMMENDATION NINE

That flooding event training be made available to councillors at least annually, perhaps by way of presentation at a pre-Council briefing or by other agreed methods.

RECOMMENDATION TEN

That a list of Dos and Don'ts for councillors be adopted and distributed to all members, in line with the training to be provided under recommendation nine (see Appendix 3).

Councillors' attendances

There were five meetings of the task group.

Name	Meetings attended (maximum 5)*
Councillor Lady Atkins	2
Councillor Ballard	4
Councillor Cartridge	3
Councillor Catterall	4
Councillor Ellison	4
Councillor Lees	3
Councillor Orme	4
Councillor Robinson	3
Councillor Walmsley	4

List of Appendices

Appendix 1	Flooding Task Group – Scoping Document – FINAL
Appendix 2	Councillors' questionnaire
Appendix 3	Flooding events - Dos and Don'ts for ward councillors

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4 October 2018