

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a remote meeting of the Scrutiny Committee of South Norfolk District Council, held on Wednesday 27 January 2021 at 9.30am.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: G Minshull, V Clifford-Jackson, B Bernard, B Duffin, J Hornby, J Rowe, R Savage and J Wilby

Cabinet Member Present: Councillor: J Fuller

Other Members in Attendance: Councillors: D Bills, M Dewsbury, J Easter, M Edney, G Francis, J Halls, K Kiddie, N Legg, L Neal, J Overton and V Thomson

Officers in Attendance: The Assistant Director of Regulatory (N Howard), the Assistant Director of Planning (H Mellors), the Assistant Director of Individuals and Families (M Pursehouse), the PR Manager (J Pyle), the Emergency Planning Officers (J Bloomfield & S Faraday-Drake) and the Senior Governance Officer (E Goddard)

Also in Attendance: Mr N De Spon (from Ashwellthorpe Parish Council)

1278 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Regarding the Briefing Report on the recent flooding (minute 1280), Cllrs V Clifford-Jackson, B Duffin, J Halls, J Hornby and G Minshull declared that they had been lobbied by residents.

Cllr V Thomson declared an “other” interest as the Chairman of the Development Management Committee.

Cllr J Fuller declared an “other” interest as the Leader of the Council and a Cabinet Member.

1279 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 21 December 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

1280 BRIEFING REPORT ON RECENT FLOODING IN SOUTH NORFOLK

The Chairman advised the Committee that it was required to consider the Council's response to the recent flooding and its responsibilities going forward. He explained that a separate Scrutiny Committee meeting would be held to consider the planning considerations regarding flooding prevention.

Members noted that Norfolk County Council, as the Lead Local Flood Authority, was convening a series of meetings with strategic partners across Norfolk, to conduct a wider investigation into the recent flooding.

The Portfolio Holder, Cllr J Fuller, introduced the report which provided background and briefing information to assist the Committee with its initial considerations. He relayed a number of residents' experiences of the recent flooding, and he stressed the importance of determining what the Council could have done better. He thanked members and officers for their quick and effective response to the recent emergency situation.

The Assistant Director of Regulatory and the Assistant Director of Individuals and Families presented a verbal briefing to the Committee, which included:

- Definitions of the three types of flooding
 - Coastal/tide flooding
 - River flooding
 - Surface water flooding
- An outline of the different authorities and agencies (including South Norfolk Council) involved in the prevention of, and response to flooding
- An outline of the flooding incidents seen across South Norfolk between 23 December 2020 to January 2021
- Figures on:
 - Fire and rescue service calls per hour between 23-24 December 2020
 - The number and types of flooding incidents attended between 23-26 December 2020
 - Parishes within the South Norfolk District with 5 or more properties flooded
- Estimates on the number of properties impacted by flooding in the South Norfolk District
- South Norfolk Council's emergency incident response, including suggestions on improvements that could be made going forward
- Summary of the sandbag situation at South Norfolk Council
- Summary of the help and support provided by South Norfolk Council

Mr De Spon, on behalf of Ashwellthorpe Parish Council, outlined some of the flooding issues, experienced by some of the residents of Ashwellthorpe, which highlighted ongoing issues with insufficient culverts, ditches not being maintained and an inadequate pumping station.

The Chairman thanked Mr De Spon for his contributions and suggested that he email him with further details of the issues raised, so that he could forward them on to Norfolk County Council.

During a discussion on the causes of the recent flooding, members felt strongly that the lack of maintenance of ditches and culverts by landowners and / or the County Council / Environment Agency, significantly increased the risk of flood, and that the maintenance of these areas would have resolved some, if not all of the flooding risks.

Members noted that councils and the Environment Agency had provided flood warnings and had requested that maintenance work be carried out. Officers explained that the Council did not have any legislative powers to force landowners to carry out riparian work or maintain/clear ditches and culverts, and that they could only contact landowners to make them aware of their responsibilities. Members noted that the Council had previously carried out some maintenance works on areas most at risk of flooding at its own cost, but officers stressed that the Council had no powers to fine people, re-charge for work or carry out work without a landowner's permission.

Members put forward the suggestion for the appointment of an Environmental Protection Officer who would investigate maintenance issues, such as blocked ditches and culverts and contact landowners as part of their role. It was noted that Broadland District Council had an out-of-hours environmental health scheme in place for receiving calls or reports of incidents which could be investigated further, however the Assistant Director of Regulatory stressed that this was a very different role to the one being proposed.

In response to a query, the Emergency Planning Officer advised members that South Norfolk Council worked with neighboring authorities, as part of the Multi-agency Co-ordination group response to incidents, such as the recent flooding. Members noted that there had been no requirement for the Managing Director to convene the Council's Emergency Committee, as the flooding was handled by the local coordination group of agencies.

Members commented on the importance of officers providing members with live updates as incidents progressed, which would enable them to give relevant advice to local residents.

Some members stressed that extremes of weather were becoming more common and whilst work on the prevention of flooding was vitally important, there was also a need to address climate change.

The Chairman referred to previous workshops provided by the Council to support town and parish councils to devise or update their local emergency response plans and resilience response groups. It was proposed that these workshops be repeated, and this suggestion was supported by the members of the Committee.

In response to a query, the Assistant Director of Regulatory advised the Committee that there was a Tactical Flooding Response Plan in place across the county, and that no shortfall had been found in the current Plan. He informed members that an item had been added into the Council's 2021/22 Delivery Plan, to promote and seek the expansion of current emergency plans.

One member raised concerns that the public were not aware of key flood related information, and the Committee agreed that officers should produce an article for the Council's Link Magazine, providing a range of key information and advice regarding flooding.

Discussion turned to sandbags, and it was noted that these were often thought as, as the main prevention tool for flooding. Members were advised that sandbags were only useful to divert running water away from properties or to slow down the flow of water, and it was explained that that sandbags had been in some cases a misleading solution to flooding. It was also noted that sandbags deteriorated under UV light and could not be easily stored long term. Members were advised that not all councils provided sandbags to residents; some chose instead to encourage residents to obtain sandbags themselves.

After further discussion, the Committee agreed that sandbags should be provided to residents when needed, but that the Council should be able to control distribution. It was suggested that the Council's sandbag policy be reviewed and that alternative methods of flood defenses be researched.

The Committee expressed its gratitude to the officers, emergency services and volunteers involved in the response to the recent flooding and it was,

RESOLVED

1. To note the contents of the report;
2. To request that officers prepare a report focussing on the planning considerations regarding flood prevention in respect of the consideration of planning applications, to be presented to the Committee on 31 March 2021; and
3. To recommend that:
 - a. Officers prepare an article for the Link Magazine providing the public with information on flooding support and Floodline.
 - b. Officers consider the appointment of Environmental Protection Officer(s) and/or Emergency Incident Officer(s) to provide a response on-site in the event of an emergency situation (including flooding) or an out of hours community protection complaint (eg, noise). Consideration also to be given whether

these officers could assist with ensuring that work to ditches etc is completed by landowners with riparian rights.

- c. The Council provides training workshops to Town and Parish Councils to support them to devise or update their local emergency response plans and resilience response groups.
- d. Officers review the Council's policy regarding the provision of sandbags across the District and research alternative methods of flood defense.

1281 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND CABINET CORE AGENDA

The Committee noted the Work Programme and Cabinet Core Agenda.

The Chairman confirmed to Members that a report focussing on the planning considerations regarding flood prevention would be brought to the Committee at its meeting on 31 March 2021.

(The meeting concluded at 11.28 am)

Chairman