

## **Sandbag provision**

**Cabinet Member** Cllr Ray Radford  
**Responsible Officer** Head of Environmental Services

**Reason for Report:** For PDG to critically examine the arrangements for providing sandbags as explained in the report.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

That PDG recommends to Council that:

- 1) the provision of sandbags, except to our own housing stock, cease;
- 2) the Council assists Parish and Town Councils to make provision locally and takes opportunities to remind individuals of their responsibility; and
- 3) the Council supports the Pathfinder bid with Devon County for resources to highlight individual responsibility.

### **Relationship to Corporate Plan:**

The Council's emergency plan is in conjunction with the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) and it operates through a Combined Agency Emergency Response protocol (CAERP) to deal with emergency situations as they arise. Flooding will be a situation which would require action under emergency plan – in the response phase and more importantly in the recovery phase. It is one of the Council's frontline services.

### **Financial Implications:**

There will be nominal savings from materials costs and some saving will be in overtime payments to staff generally. There is no budget specifically allocated to materials in the emergency plan budget and previously a small sum has been removed from the land drainage budget to cover the provision of materials.

### **Legal Implications:**

As a Category 1 responder under the Civil Contingency Act, the Council has a duty

- to assess local risks to inform emergency planning
- to put emergency plans into place
- to provide information on civil protection; and
- to maintain arrangements to warn, inform and advise the public as well as other business continuity planning and advice.

There is no explicit requirement to provide physical resources.

### **Risk Assessment:**

The Council has traditionally provided assistance with providing sandbags; it has no policy on who receives them, when, where or how they will be delivered or how many it will provide. The 'call' for sandbags has regularly outstripped the ability to provide them.

Whilst callers have been asked to collect sandbags, the Council has also made delivery of sandbags to those requesting again with no clear policy of which staff and vehicles will be used – bearing in mind the Council has no specialist/dedicated vehicles.

Filling sandbags relies on manual labour from front line services; delivery relies on whoever is available with vehicles that are not being used for other things. It is almost impossible to calculate the number of sandbags that will be requested and - whilst there are preferred suppliers and business accounts with local traders - there cannot be certainty that sand and bags will be available at the critical moment.

The normal winter level of sandbags availability would be approx. 100-150 in Tiverton, and a smaller amount in Crediton.

This risk assessment therefore resounds that having neither dedicated resource nor responsibility to provide free sandbags, should it we strive to continue at this level?

This report balances what appears to be a heavily disproportionate burden on the Council against the risk of being seen as uncaring.

## 1.0 Introduction

1.1 The recent flooding, especially in Mid Devon, has again focussed the attention on provision of sandbags and the difficulties around satisfying the demand.

1.2 2012 saw heavy rains and floods in July, November and December. The Council filled and delivered 4500 filled sandbags to callers making requests for assistance - irrespective of tenure, in November alone.

1.3 An approximate cost of the materials is £3000.

## 2.0 Current position

2.1 As the Council does not retain a dedicated team for filling sandbags, grounds maintenance, refuse, housing, district officers and other personnel were drafted in to the role – at the expense of their primary role and including overtime working and payment. The labour and transport costs are estimated to be in excess of £19000. This does not include any costs for management, supervision, telephone answering, standby officers, etc.

2.2 Over the past few occasions, priority is given to those who call first and our own property until such time as the worst has passed or supplies are exhausted.

2.3 Sandbags are freely given but not retrieved – because of the cost, storage and transport.

2.4 Mid Devon does not have to provide sandbags – it has opted to.

2.5 Currently bags are filled on an 'as and when' basis rather than stored because:

- the space requirement to store them and where they should be stored
- filled sandbags lose pliability, shape and usefulness with time
- Damage can occur to the bags through corrosive salts in the sand, vermin and physical means.

- 2.6 Transport of filled sandbags is also a concern given that in the event of them being needed, movement around Mid Devon from Tiverton is extremely difficult because of flooding, road closures and inaccessibility.
- 2.7 The Council has a responsibility for the safety of its own staff (-including ensuring those staff delivering sandbags can return safely if deterioration takes place), its assets e.g. vehicles, its housing stock and vulnerable tenants.
- 2.8 In areas where flooding is likely to occur - or has a history of occurring – owners/occupiers should already have made arrangements for flood defences to protect their own property. The Council has no responsibility for flood proofing privately owned dwellings. The responsibility for the property is solely and remains with the owner/occupier.
- 2.9 There is currently no ‘stopping point’ at which the Council will cease its activities in general flood assistance - not that related to duty to its tenants or responsibility under other statutory instruments. This is an unquantifiable risk.

### **3.0 Flooding generally**

- 3.1 The responsibility for floods and flood defences rest with a variety of agencies. Principally the Environment Agency (EA) takes a lions share for the major watercourses and flood plains. The County Council has responsibility for highway drainage. The landowner has a responsibility for land drainage which the Local Authority is required to advise and enforce. The County Council also has a flood risk section in its Emergency planning department.
- 3.2 In advising clients on flooding, agencies above point to published literature produced by Government and emergency planners. These documents look not only at sandbagging but at the use of flood boards, air brick closures, tarpaulins, water deflectors, ditch and drains etc. What all documents seek to address is that householders have made some assessment of their risk prior to flooding and have given some thought to what they might do in those circumstances.
- 3.3 Flooding and flood prediction is a science in itself and dependent on many factors not least of which is the quantity of rainfall in a given period. Environment Agency issue flood warnings and flood alerts based on a given rise in river levels. Those living within flood areas are normally astute in having boards, bags and removing valuables to higher ground.
- 3.4 Environmental services/property services receive advance notification of flood alerts and warnings (as well as several other met office releases on snow ice, cold weather, sun, and pollen when emergency plans may be invoked) so can disseminate information firstly to our own staff but also to householders via the website. Twitter and Facebook applications could be used more in this regard.
- 3.5 In the case of the recent flooding, whilst rivers did burst and the canal over topped, the saturation of the land surrounding meant far more surface run off onto highways and ditches which were unable to cope. Debris washed down

was found to have clogged culverts and gratings, leaf fall exacerbated the highway drainage and the infrastructure was unable to cope, meaning more surface water finding unusual routes to the lower areas in which to settle.

3.6 Flood defences for buildings whether commercial or domestic are not solely related to the use of sand bags.

#### 4.0 **Observations**

4.1 Emergency planning at DCC regularly issue newsletters to Parish Clerks regarding emergency issues and how Parishes can be prepared for eventualities by consideration ahead of the event. This seems to be a far better stance for MDDC to take rather than be expected to try to manufacture sandbags to satisfy all requests.

4.2 Using the example of sandbag provision based on the assumption of 6 bags per door for two doors for half of the 22500 MDDC properties, would mean the need for 135,000 sandbags. In four days in November our available conscripted resource filled 4500.

4.3 As the Council's funding and activity become ever more under scrutiny, a decision needs making on the future direction.

4.4 The Council has 'grown' into the current level of service provision which favours a few, is not a universal service and therefore there is an inequality in what we do. Some members were angered that our service was not able to provide bags to some of their wards residents because we had used up all of the supply.

4.5 The Council has acted beyond its legal requirement by providing sandbags as described above. We will continue to retain a small supply circa 100 bags for emergency use as flooding events occur throughout the year associated with drainage/watercourse faults etc.

4.6 There is a risk that this kind of decision is viewed as uncaring, however it is redirecting responsibility for individual property to the owners and reducing the reliance on others, including the Council, as the first -and often only - line of defence. This is rightly a decision a caring organisation should make.

4.7 We need to rationalise efforts by making arrangements with County to deliver a Pathfinder bid for flooding resilience work, and with Parish Councils to be prepared for sandbagging.

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