

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
6th February, 2020

Present:- Councillor Mallinder (in the Chair); Councillors Atkin, Buckley, B. Cutts, Elliot, Jepson, Jones, Khan, McNeely, Reeder, Sheppard, Taylor and Wyatt.

Co-opted Member: Mrs. W. Birch

Also in attendance:- Councillor Hoddinott (Cabinet Member for Waste, Roads and Community Safety)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Sansome and Whysall. A further apology was received from Councillor Alam (Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Finance).

The webcast of the Council Meeting can be viewed at:-

<https://rotherham.public-i.tv/core/portal/home>

46. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 19 DECEMBER 2019

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 19th December 2019, were accepted as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

47. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Sheppard declared a personal interest in agenda item 7 (Major Incident Plan, and Future Flood Alleviation Projects) on the basis that he is a member of the Regional Flooding Committee.

48. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

There were no matters of business requiring the exclusion of press or public.

49. COMMUNICATIONS

Members were apprised of a communication about potential dates for a proposed Member visit.

50. MAJOR INCIDENT PLAN, FLOODING UPDATE AND FUTURE FLOOD ALLEVIATION PROJECTS

Consideration was given to a report detailing the review of the Council's Major Incident Plan (MIP), as well as an update on the flooding events of 7 and 8 November 2019, and furthermore, a plan for Future Flood Alleviation Projects.

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Thanks were expressed to staff and emergency services for their hard work. Although the impact was less than in 2007, it was acknowledged that there is still room for improvement. It was observed that the Council's response to major incidents, such as flooding, had been shaped significantly since austerity, which had removed a number of resources from the authority, including staff. It was reported that a number of households were still affected by loss of property, as a result of the impact of the floods. To put defences in place, the Council was seeking £51 million from central government.

Officers presented slides and spoke in detail about the events of 7 and 8 November and the Council's immediate response to the flooding incident, as well as the plans for future flood defences.

It was noted that the most significant evacuation area was in Rotherham Town Centre, and that Parkgate became an island during the floods. Details were provided as to the efforts made to provide Rest Centres for evacuated residents and the resources required, such as blankets and food. It was noted that Rotherham Town Hall had opened during the night of the 7 November and throughout 8 November as well to accommodate residents who were displaced by flooding. Coordinated efforts were made to identify everyone at the Rest Centre, identify any needs of the evacuees, and respond to those needs, even making arrangements for how evacuees were going to get home.

Images were shared of the flooding, depicting a few areas of the Borough particularly affected by the rising water.

It was noted that the Council had contributed an additional £100 to the £500 offered as part of the relief packages promised by central government in the aftermath of the event. Further information was provided as to the delivery of recovery programmes and processes, in collaboration with elected Members. Members had been and would continue to be an integral part of group efforts including drop-in sessions and refuse disposal.

Officers provided detail of the damage in the borough. A total of 81 businesses closed, many of which had subsequently reopened. 46 roads required remedial work, and many of those repairs were significant. Officers also provided an update about attenuation in Whiston Brook and Eel Mires Dyke at Laughton Common. It was reported that pumps were deployed according to plan.

The presentation concluded with a summary of the review and the projections. The Cabinet Member confirmed that the Council would continue to lobby to request £51 million for further flood defences.

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In discussion, concerns were raised about the Kilnhurst Working Men's Club drop-in and disappointment in Yorkshire Water's response. Officers provided assurance that the processes in question were fully operational.

Members also praised the response teams and voiced their thanks to staff for their efforts.

Members also sought further information about what would happen in the event that the funding request to government was rejected. The response emphasised that significant coordination of multiple assets had to be undertaken and that much behind-the-scenes work would have to be done in order to make the necessary arrangements. The Cabinet Member for Waste, Roads and Community expressed frustration with the criteria for what gets funded and what does not.

Members related information as to how the selection process worked and provided details regarding local levies paid by the Yorkshire and Humberside region. Such levies could be used to unlock funding and enable schemes to take place. Those funding schemes were strict about the applications because they expected results. Efforts had been made to compensate for the increased need with higher than inflation rises. The Flood Advisory Board were optimistic that their voice and others in the region would change focus to protecting businesses, as well as homes.

Concerns were also raised about whether the flood alleviation works taking place would be acknowledged by insurance companies. The response indicated that insurance around the council's response has not been examined, so it was not known how many were insured or uninsured, but there was an assumption that most of the affected properties were uninsured due to high premiums.

Members also inquired about the welfare of the 49 families who were still out of their homes and properties. The response provided assurance that the Council was still working with those families and had rehoused many of them who have decided, understandably, not to return to their previous housing after the water receded. Some displaced families were being temporarily housed by their insurance companies. Furthermore, it was noted that MPs were to raise the issue about insurance: getting guarantees for citizens so that they could get insurance for their properties.

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Members requested information about what the authority would do differently upon reflection. The response indicated that the future conversation around planning would take into account how more resilience would be built into more properties, as was the case with Riverside House, for example, which included flood defences that had worked as planned in November. Beyond that, the Council would be liaising with residents affected by the floods to undertake a review survey, but it was considered too early to identify what would have been done differently. However, it was acknowledged that there were aspects that the authority would and could improve in future, but Members and officers were confident in the response to the emergency.

Members made further inquiries into whether the damage to council properties had been assessed and repaired and were given assurances that this was the case.

Members also inquired as to whether any residents who had submitted claims had yet to be paid. The response conveyed that all the people who submitted claims would have received their recovery payment or would have received notice as to why they did not receive a recovery payment. In instances where claimants did not fit the criteria, they were referred to other authorities for which they might qualify.

In preparation for any future flooding event, Members inquired as to the feasibility of having different kinds of discussions with landowners around earth moving and watersheds and with volunteers around availability, since less than half of volunteers could be reached during the floods. With regard to landowners, officers noted that there was a possibility of having a conversation with those who had authority to go onto the land and clear ditches, for example. With regard to volunteers, officers averred that the data would be analysed, with the awareness that any proposed solution to enhance the results of volunteer recruitment efforts could not require a lot of staff, such as calling all the phone numbers in the Yellow Pages.

Members wished to know more about the means of communications used by the authority during the floods, as well as, specifically the Environment Agency's provision of a flood warning service. Members expressed caution at publicising a report that may give residents false hope, amid a very real threat of floods in the near future. Officers responded that small, localised schemes had been effective, for example, the pumps that were deployed after past floods were effective on this occasion. It was also emphasised that such events occurred only three months ago, so there was much more work to be done to fortify the borough against future floods.

Resolved:-

1. That the contents of the report be noted.

2. That officers meet with the Chair and Councillor Wyatt to discuss potential future areas for scrutiny activity in respect of flood management and emergency response by the Council.
3. That the Cabinet reflect on the lessons learned in 2009, with past incidents being taken into consideration in future works on Flood Alleviation.
4. That feedback from residents and business owners be captured in review of the Authority's response to the floods and be shared with Improving Places Select Commission in the new municipal year.
5. That clarification be provided to Members in respect of the approach to communications and decision-making in the event of flooding or other emergency incidents in the borough.
6. That the Council partner with other authorities such as the Environment Agency and Yorkshire Water to inform our response to future flooding incidents.

51. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

Two members of the public each asked a question at the meeting. The first question sought clarification about the Council's plans to improve how evacuation and emergency-related information was disseminated during the recent Major Incident. The second question was in respect of about provisions that will be available for local business owners who have sustained significant losses as a direct result of the floods. Answers to these questions were provided in the meeting by the relevant officers on behalf of the Chair.

52. URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of business requiring urgent consideration by the Commission.

53. DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

Resolved:-

That the next meeting of Improving Places Select Commission be held on 5 March 2020, commencing at 1.30p.m. at Rotherham Town Hall.