

**IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday 22 October 2024**

Present:- Councillor McKiernan (in the Chair); Councillors Adair, Ahmed, Allen, Baggaley, Beck, Beresford, C. Carter, Clarke, Havard, Jackson, Jones, Rashid, Sheppard, Stables, Steele, Thorp, Tinsley and Williams.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bacon and Mault.

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

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

24. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 3 SEPTEMBER 2024

Resolved:- That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 3 September 2024 be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

25. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

26. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

The Chair advised that there were no members of the public or representatives of media organisations present at the meeting and there were no questions in respect of matters on the agenda.

27. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Chair advised that there were no items of business on the agenda that would require the exclusion of the press or public from the meeting.

28. ALLOTMENTS SELF-MANAGEMENT UPDATE 2024

The Chair welcomed Councillor Sheppard, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working, Councillor Steele, Chairperson, Rotherham Allotment Alliance Ltd, along with the officers in attendance.

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working indicating that the Council took the decision to transfer its allotments to a community benefit society on 1 January 2020. Since taking up his role in 2021, he had become part of the Allotment Alliance Board, which was chaired by Councillor Steele. He noted the lease was still awaiting conclusion to handover ultimate control to the alliance. He noted there was high demand for plots at certain sites, but the occupancy rate was in a really good position.

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He placed on record his thanks to Councillor Steele and all other members and directors of the board for the work they put in throughout the year. He explained that as part of the terms and conditions there were two seats available on the Allotment Alliance, he fulfilled one of those seats but would welcome another member to come forward.

Councillor Steele as Chairperson of the Rotherham Allotment Alliance explained there were six directors currently, which took on the work of running the allotments along with one support officer, who managed the day to day running of the allotment sites. They had currently let around 98% of sites. The sites they managed were in Wath, Rawmarsh, Kimberworth and the town centre. There were also societies who ran some allotments on their behalf, which were run by smaller committees.

There were still a few ongoing issues, some around grazing land and the outstanding lease. They were keen to be able to sign the lease and had been running the allotments since 2020. He noted that each year the allotments had to be relet and some people gave them up. This usually meant that work needed to be carried out on that site before it could be relet to another person.

The report highlighted that some investment was needed in the infrastructure. Councillor Steele indicated the alliance had some funding to invest and could also apply for grants to assist with this. There were a number of projects that could benefit from any funding provided by the Council following the sale of allotment lands. They also worked with community groups.

It was requested that all allotments were made accessible where possible and that consideration be given to installing raised beds on some sites. This includes the tracks to access the sites. Councillor Steele noted that it was very difficult to make some allotment sites totally accessible because of the nature of the sites. Where the alliance had been contacted by people with disabilities they had tried to improve the tracks to the allotments, they had also been more relaxed with the rule around cultivating 85% of the allotment.

The Allotment Support Officer noted that trackways and access gates were being considered for allotments across all sites. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working explained the Council would work on a case-by-case basis to have fully inclusive allotments across the borough and adjustments could be made through partnership working with the various groups.

Councillor Steele confirmed that the alliance would look at individual allotment sites if someone applied for it and did try to be as flexible as possible to meet people's needs.

The report listed that thirty-seven plots were unlettable. It was queried if

flooding still an issue for those plots. It was explained, those plots may not be accessible for many reasons, may be flooding in the area or the plot was overgrown. It cost around £1500 to clear a plot with the current yearly rent being £100, so plots would not be routinely cleared unless another person was ready to take on responsibility for that plot.

Resolved:- That the report be received, the contents and progress towards the lease be noted.

29. SECTION 19 REPORT FOR STORM BABET

Consideration was given to the report and the Chair invited the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion & Neighbourhood Working to introduce. It was noted that it was just past the anniversary of Storm Babet, which had a devastating impact on the borough, particularly in several local areas, last year. All Local Authorities were responsible for producing a Section 19 Report, which examined the causes of the flooding, its impact, and what needed to be done in the future to mitigate the effects of floods. The next Improving Places Select Commission meeting would receive a report on the Flood Alleviation Scheme.

One area heavily impacted by Storm Babet last year was Catcliffe, but other areas across the borough also suffered from water entering numerous properties. The Section 19 Report was extensive, as it encompassed the scale and impact of Storm Babet and included a comprehensive background and context of the events that happened during the storm. This report was then published and sent in advance to all residents across the borough who had been affected by the storm. Additionally, the Council held several drop-in events and a full public meeting where Catcliffe residents were invited to have their questions answered regarding the report's content and to ask any other questions they had.

Richard Jackson, Head of Highways and Flood Risk, introduced his colleagues Andy Saxton, Highway Asset and Drainage Manager, Vicky Townend (Operations Manager Environment Agency - Yorkshire), Kyle Heydon (Principal Drainage Engineer), Nicola McHale (South Yorkshire Partnerships & Strategic Overview Team Leader, Environment Agency) and Jenny Longley (Area Flood Risk Manager, Environment Agency).

The presentation circulated with the agenda papers set out:-

- Details of the Section 19 Investigation.
- The effects of Storm Babet.
- Response to Storm Babet.
- Regulators to divert flows.
- Environment Agency Modelling.
- Recovery Timeline.
- Next Steps for Catcliffe.
- Next Steps for Whiston, Laughton Common and other affected

areas.

The Commission were invited to ask any questions of those in attendance.

Councillor Thorp, a resident of Sitwell, had observed the flood defences implemented in Whiston, which was highly effective. However, there was a concern regarding the water buildup shown on Page 8 of the Section 19 Report, which indicated potential overflow from Catcliffe especially given the proposal to build another electrical substation in this area. Following the presentation which stated the frequency of severe weather events were increasing, he asked if they had considered the risk of flooding to the proposed power station and if the construction of this substation could exacerbate the flooding risk in the area.

The Principal Drainage Engineer explained that any new development proposals were subject to consultation with his team. They would not approve any new building unless it was situated above the floodplain. He reiterated that, given the increasing frequency of what were previously considered “1 in 100 years” storms, an additional 40% allowance for climate change had been incorporated into their assessments. This adjustment accounted for the anticipated worsening of weather conditions due to climate change and was now a standard consideration for all new developments.

Councillor Jones confirmed the Commission had reviewed the documentation regarding the schemes planned for implementation in 2017, following the first “100-year” floods. It was identified at that time that Catcliffe was more adversely affected than any other area in the borough. However, he expressed concern that the Council had delivered the proposed work in Catcliffe much later than in other areas and sought to understand why Catcliffe was not considered a high priority.

Additionally, the Waverley Housing Development appeared to have created a ‘soup bowl’ effect, raising concerns about potential flooding in that area. Clarification was, therefore, sought if this housing development site had created a potential issue in relation to flooding.

The Head of Highways and Flood Risk at the Council, responded by explaining that after 2019, the Council began efforts to make the schemes “shovel ready.” In 2007 significant work was undertaken with partners to mitigate the river’s risk. However, despite expectations of flooding, Catcliffe did not flood in 2019.

The Head of Highways and Flood Risk gave an assurance there was a scheme for Catcliffe but acknowledged that they did not have a specific plan to address a “1 in 200” year flood event.

Since the 2020 decision to prioritise the schemes, all six have simultaneously been worked on with the commitment to have all six

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schemes 'shovel ready' by 31st March. The Council was currently collaborating with contractors and consultants to finalise the designs. The pumping station for Catcliffe was well advanced, with a clear site identified.

Further to this, the Waverley Housing Development had its own set design criteria, ensuring no other areas were affected. The site was designed so that run-off would not exceed the run-off rate. This meant that if the site had not been developed, the natural flow of water would be the same as what was currently being discharged. The remaining run-off was managed on-site within the ponds and reservoirs. He confirmed that the building development had no adverse effect on any other area within Rotherham.

Representatives from the Environment Agency also confirmed Catcliffe already had an existing standard of protection, which made it challenging to secure additional funding. Funding was prioritised for areas without flood defences. The Environment Agency were investigating additional measures for Catcliffe and potential funding sources.

Large schemes required Government grants, which involved significant effort to secure. Catcliffe was not 'at the back of the queue' rather, the existing standard of protection complicated further funding efforts. Several options were currently being investigated as part of the Section 19 Report.

The Chair asked for clarification as to where this funding would come from and was advised the funding would be from the Central Government through DEFRA and the Environment Agency would look at different options, including Grant-In-Aid.

In terms of the 'soup bowl' effect caused by the Waverley Housing Development Councillor Jones expressed his concern about run-off from Waverley into Catcliffe and specifically about the water that entered Catcliffe which has nowhere to go.

Waverley was at a similar level and had a wider area to dissipate the accumulating water. Now, the way the housing development had been constructed it had created a basin-like area that collected water. As a result, any additional water that came into Catcliffe remained, contributing to rising water levels and subsequent flooding. The surveyor who assessed the site identified this as the only way to prevent flooding in that area, but unfortunately, this had had an adverse effect on the neighbouring village.

The Head of Highways and Flood Risk, responded by explaining the management of surface water during heavy rainfall. He stated that rainwater falling onto roofs and gullies that entered the drainage system would be managed by gravity until the river level rose past a certain point, which would trigger the closure of the Penstock valve. When this valve closed, a telemetry message would be sent, indicating the need to deploy pumps to the site. Members were told that this had occurred quite

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frequently, between five to eight times per year, when notifications were received about rising levels in the River Rother.

Teams would be dispatched and residents were made aware of the situation through trigger points in the gullies. There were also trigger points on Allgrove Road that would send notifications when water started to build up, which would require pumps to manage and reduce the rising water levels in that area. He assured Members that this method had been effective in managing surface water within the system, which is why the Council had considered installing a permanent pumping station in that area. He further clarified that while the surface water was being managed effectively, it was not the cause of the flooding in Catcliffe after 2007.

An enquiry was made about the Environment Agency's communication strategy, noting it had appeared to be disjointed. The Director of Operations for the Environment Agency had appeared on television the night before Storm Babet, assuring the public that everything was under control and there were no issues. However, by 2:00 a.m. the next day, residents were struggling to save their properties from flooding, and officers were risking their safety to evacuate people from their homes.

It was asked had the Environment Agency conducted a review of their communication strategy with Local Authorities following Storm Babet as better communications could have helped residents to move their belongings from the ground floors of their properties.

Representatives of the Environment Agency addressed concerns about their communication strategy. The information provided during the TV interview was based on the latest forecasts available at that time. The forecasts, from the Met Office, indicated that the situation was under control. However, weather conditions could change rapidly and unfortunately the forecast had changed after the interview, leading to updated messages and warnings.

On the morning of the event, the Environment Agency had issued a flood alert for Catcliffe residents, followed by a flood warning later that night at approximately 2:44 a.m. Messages were updated as new information became available.

The Environment Agency conducted a review of their communications and processes after every incident, whether or not flooding occurred. This process, called validation, involved assessing flood alerts and warnings to identify areas for improvement. Following the event in Catcliffe and Treeton, the Environment Agency reviewed and adjusted the trigger levels for flood warnings to enhance and improve communication and response times.

The current trigger levels for Catcliffe were deemed appropriate. There were challenges with the flood warning system. Those issues had been discussed during the public meetings and drop-in sessions they had with

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the Council and the local MP. The importance and necessity of community involvement in understanding flood warnings and alerts, developing flood plans, and implementing them effectively was important. The goal was to work collaboratively with local residents and flood wardens to improve the overall communication and response strategy.

Councillor Baggaley explored the issue around flood warnings and the time that residents received those flood warnings. At the public meeting there was a 40-minute delay about the warnings actually being triggered and residents actually receiving them, which was concerning. What reassurance could the Environment Agency give the next twelve months that there would be no further delays with the system for issuing flood warnings.

Representatives from the Environment Agency confirmed that this concern of the delay with the warning system was raised by residents at the public meeting. The intention had always been to give a two-hour warning in terms of when the warning would be issued to when the first property had flooded. It was acknowledged and accepted in the meeting that this timeframe was not met as intended. The Environment Agency aimed to meet this target but even with their best endeavours in respect to their flood warning when Storm Babet happened, the Environment Agency were responding to multiple incidents across the whole Yorkshire region at the time.

The Environment Agency accepted accountability and that they could have done better and they would want to do better in the future. In terms of this delay element with the flood warnings, the clarity in terms of their responses were not as clear as hoped. In terms of how processes worked, this had not been explained clearly and provided a clearer understanding for those who had attended the meeting. However, since that meeting, the Environment Agency had been collaborating with the Council to answer all the questions raised at that meeting and had an updated response which would be issued shortly to the public shortly.

In terms of this delay element, having reviewed the issue there was no actual delay in terms of how the system worked. What was identified as the delay was the process itself and the process of looking at the levels and when a level was hit. This was when a flood warning issued through the system.

The process was extremely complicated and an explanation provided the detailed timeline of what happened during exact time period.

In terms of reassurances going forward, the Environment Agency would ensure that process and automation were based on the flood warnings and at that time were automated. In October, 2023 the Environment Agency had been in dispute with industrial action, so the automation was in as a fail-safe to ensure that if there were staff shortages they would be able to fulfil their flood warning service. The Environment Agency were

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committed to providing a more individual based system based on people in the incident rooms being able to deliver that service.

The Chair pointed out the Environment Agency had worked incredibly hard, as did all the Council managers, staff, and partners, especially last year when Storm Babet hit. It was important to recognise and thank everyone for their hard work.

Councillor Baggaley further raised concerns about residents affected by flooding and their properties. Despite it being a year since the flooding in Catcliffe residents were only just returning back to their homes. What had been done over the past twelve months to better prepare for future flooding in Catcliffe, especially when there appeared to be no proper warnings or improvements to the warning systems in place. Additionally when would residents receive the flood resilience grants as these were needed to enhance the flood defences to their properties.

The Principal Chief Engineer explained that it would be a long process looking at flood defences and any proposed flood defence would not cause flooding elsewhere. Modelling had been conducted to look at all the different options and which would be the most viable and feasible option. Work had been conducted on this, but it would unfortunately take a number of years before anything would be built to reduce the risk of flooding.

In terms of the Public Flood Resilience grant, all surveys had been conducted and completed and a tender to procure a contractor had been submitted.

In terms of the grant this was really small for the amount of actual work that would be required on each house. The contract was now in place and would be in place by January 2025, after that work would then take place to start the process of putting all these Public Flood Resilience products in place.

Representatives of the Environment Agency confirmed the team was responsible for planning, maintaining, and overseeing the flood risk assets. The importance of recognising Catcliffe still had a flood defence system that needed ongoing maintenance to ensure its resilience against future high river levels.

Flooding may still continue between normal water level and the top of the defence, which the community recognised and understood with assets still being maintained and assessed. The team had conducted multiple inspections of the wall since the flooding and had identified areas for improvement, despite the senior engineer's confidence in the wall's current effectiveness. Funding had been applied for to address the improvements which would address issues such as leakage at the clutches of the sheet piles, which was a common occurrence in such defences.

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Additionally, there was a cap on top of the wall, shown in one of the photos, which did not form part of the flood defence but was there for health and safety reasons. Water had started to seep between the top of the defence and this cap. The team were exploring ways to integrate this cap into the defence system to provide additional protection, while ensuring compliance with all permitting requirements and not increasing the risk of further flooding. These teams are also working to continue to maintain the flood defence system ensuring the resilience over the longer term.

Councillor Baggaley asked what more work could be done in terms of flood wardens as he believed that in Catcliffe, the number of flood wardens had dropped from eight to two, which was concerning. What work could be done by the Council and the Environment Agency to make sure that the appropriate number of flood wardens were in place, they received the right training and they were listened to in a flood incident.

Representatives from the Environment Agency confirmed there had been several productive conversations with flood wardens at the Catcliffe drop-in meetings.

The Environment Agency have regularly trained all their flood wardens and there were currently three flood wardens in Catcliffe, although there had been more previously. The Flood Resilience Team were responsible for maintaining effective relationships with all flood wardens, and this was an ongoing process.

The Environment Agency had also taken steps to improve those relationships and better understand the flood wardens' experiences following Storm Babet, aiming to improve their approach in the future. Following previous comments, the Environment Agency had conducted extensive validation after the flood events, focusing on the flood warnings and also on managing relationships with communities and its partners, which was why close collaboration with flood wardens were crucial for improving their response during incidents.

In addition, the Environment Agency had also looked at how they could work and help the community, such as developing a flood group, and a community action plan so that the community would know what actions they would need to take and how they could help each other if another flooding incident occurred in the future.

The Head of Neighbourhoods explained that the Neighbourhood Team had been working with Catcliffe Parish Council on their emergency planning, alongside colleagues and the Council's Emergency Planning Team, to review their community flood plan and emergency plan. Their work also linked to that of the Environment Agency especially in relation to flood wardens and the extension of community self-organisation. Meetings had been held to discuss how they could collaborate more

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effectively with the Parish Council, the Environment Agency and the Council to improve flood response preparedness.

The Environment Agency had provided training in flood preparedness and the aim was to build on the community's desire to enhance their readiness and protect their homes and communities, which would be further supported by the various teams across the Council and the Environment Agency.

Councillor Baggaley further asked about the Council's incident management plan and what lessons were learned over the last twelve months as a result of Storm Babet, which would help improve the collaborative multi-agency work and responses to floods in the borough.

The Principal Drainage Engineer confirmed a full debrief had taken place following the flood event. Several steps had been taken, including a visit to the Environment Agency's operational room in Leeds, where they discussed communication with the emergency planning room and addressed conflicts and issues that had arisen as a result of Storm Babet. This approach facilitated a more effective and collaborative working relationship, which has led to further improvements in their operations and how they work together.

Additionally, several enhancements had been implemented with the forward liaison officers, focusing on communication during a flood and improving response times. These measures aimed to ensure quicker reactions and further improvements in their flood management processes.

The Head of Neighbourhoods further added that the Neighbourhood Team had been actively working on community recovery over the past twelve months. A further session was planned for early November with all key partners, including Ward Councillors, to review community recovery efforts. The aim was to improve systems and partnership working for long-term community recovery in the event of future flooding or other emergency incidents.

Questions were raised as to whether all Parish Councils been contacted and involved in any review of the floods and Storm Babet.

The Head of Highways and Flood Risk confirmed invitations to the drop-in meetings had been sent to all the Parish Councils. In the areas affected by flooding, such as Catcliffe, Whiston, and Laughton Common, those Parish Councils were specifically invited to the community engagement events. However, these invitations were limited to the flood-affected areas.

Moving forward, the Council planned to prepare a comprehensive note for all Parish Councils, detailing the actions taken and the progress made within their respective parishes.

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The Deputy Leader also pointed out that Parish Council Network meetings were held and would discuss two or three main topics. He expressed his willingness to bring relevant topics to their attention such as flooding and what was happening across the borough and in their areas.

It was also noted that all Parish Councils received updates over the past twelve months through the Ward E-bulletins. Additionally, they had also received a bespoke Parish Council E-Bulletin which was sent out periodically. This information included not only the Section 19 Report, but regular updates on the progress over the last twelve months.

Councillor C. Carter raised concern about the communication plan regarding the delay in alerting residents who had been affected by flooding. The 14-hour delay in the Catcliffe area was problematic and stressed the need for an improved approach to prevent such delays in the future.

One of the key frustrations for residents was the lack of time to prepare and move their belongings to safety and the importance of learning from this experience to prevent similar issues in the future was stressed.

There was a clear need for visible action and improvements to flood defences, which were crucial for residents. Referring to the report, the option appraisals and studies expected to be completed within twelve months, but when would the 12-month period begin and what the subsequent steps would be.

The Head of Highways and Flood Risk explained the document had been prepared over an extended period and contained information on actions previously taken. The Chief Executive was extremely keen to offer hope to residents which he had highlighted within the presentation by outlining the options being considered to address the situation.

One of the challenges highlighted was the lengthy process involved in delivering projects, such as the canal barrier and associated works at the lock, which took seven years from conception to completion.

One option was the bridge as this would provide an opportunity to find areas for water storage upstream of Catcliffe. The Council had been collaborating with colleagues in Chesterfield and Derbyshire and worked with the Environment Agency to examine the River Rother. This collaboration aimed to benefit the communities by slowing the water flow and exploring opportunities to divert flows away from vulnerable areas.

Alterations to the Treeton Lane bridge which was owned by the Council, provided an opportunity to make necessary changes and a small modelling exercise had been done, which indicated potential improvements in water conveyance.

It was the Council's intention to involve industry-recognised experts in the

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early stages of the design process, to obtain realistic estimates for replacing the bridge and ensure the proposed design would be effective. He also addressed the importance of demonstrating tangible progress to the community, acknowledging that the team often faced questions about actions taken since the last flooding event. The need for a pragmatic approach, regularly reporting on the works delivered and maintaining transparency with the community was emphasised.

The Council was committed to returning to the community with tangible information and engaging in further discussions at a later date along with Ward Members to ensure continuous improvement and effective communications in the areas that had been flooded or could be flooded in the future.

Councillor Jackson welcomed the report, but referred to the risks associated with these projects, particularly if a point was reached where, due to the existing flood defences, none of them were viable? Could this happen and how transparent would the Council be with the public regarding the cost-benefit analysis of proceeding or not proceeding with these projects?

The Head of Highways and Flood Risk would share the information with Members and the public. There was flood protection at Catcliffe and this was designed for a 1-in-75-year storm event. Whilst this terminology may not be well understood by the public, it was important to include within the report. The Council's mitigation efforts focused on enhancing existing defences and by improving the flow past the defences and increasing upstream storage, then the effectiveness of the current 1-in-75-year wall would be maximised.

Funding for these projects was complex. If existing protections were in place and they needed to be enhanced then this presented a challenge to quantify the additional properties protected beyond those already safeguarded by the current wall. The Council's immediate focus would be on the bridge that it owned and it could proceed with that project, which would allow tangible progress to be made whilst continuing to explore broader solutions.

The Principal Drainage Engineer further added the Council had three options, which provided flexibility and potential benefits. The second option, involving the construction of high defences, was the most expensive option which had been estimated at around £40 million. The first option, focused on upstream storage, which was more cost-effective but by having those three options would allow the Council to explore alternatives if one was not cost-effective or did not provide the desired benefits. This approach would ensure that some level of benefit could still be achieved, even if the highest benefit were not attainable. He reiterated that this strategy would give the Council the best chance of implementing one of the options in the coming weeks.

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The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board referred to the three options and whether these considered the value of properties or the number of properties. Was the aim to protect more properties or was it based on the value of the properties when implementing these schemes.

Representatives from the Environment Agency confirmed the Government had set a target for the number of properties to protect, which guided the development of these schemes. The 148 properties in Catcliffe would be better protected if these schemes were implemented, which would contribute to the Government's target. Therefore, the focus was on the number of properties, not their value.

Councillor Adair referred to the floodgates at Rother Valley and Woodhouse Mill failing, wanted to know if they were now fully operational and if they would they have contributed or benefited at the time to saving Catcliffe.

Representatives from the Environment Agency explained the Meadowgate Regulator was the first of the regulators on the River Rother to become fully operational. Contractors were expected to vacate the site by the end of the week, subsequently handing it back to the Environment Agency. Since Christmas, this regulator had been fully operational.

Woodhouse Mill experienced an incident over the summer where the gate, which dropped into the river became stuck. As a contingency, the Environment Agency deployed three large pumps and cut holes in the gate to allow water to flow. Pumps were also placed in areas at risk if the storage area filled earlier than expected and sandbags and dumpy bags provided for local property protection.

This incident was ongoing and work would continue with delivery partners to lift the gate by early next year. The community would be kept informed and updated, ensuring they were aware of the activities and efforts being made.

This situation highlighted that the three regulators, built between the 1960s and 1980s, were beyond their designed life cycles. Securing funding to refurbish these assets had been a lengthy process, but the necessary funds have been obtained and work would be able to take place. It was anticipated that within the next eighteen months to two years, all regulators would be updated, providing protection for the next fifty years.

In addition, following the incident, the Environment Agency conducted a review, as referenced in the Section 19 Report, to assess the impact of Meadowgate not being operational. The findings indicated that the river levels and flows upstream of Meadowgate were such that Catcliffe would still have flooded and the existing defences would have been overtopped. Although there were slight variations in the impacts, the outcome would

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have remained the same. This event marked the highest recorded river level on that stretch since the 1970's. It had been recognised the necessity of a thorough investigation to ensure clarity on the events that transpired.

The Chair raised a concern regarding Laughton Common, noting that it had flooded many times and questioning why this had become routine. Was this issue a priority and was it being actively addressed. If the routine nature of the flooding implied an acceptance would it always occur.

The Head of Highways and Flood Risk explained that the reference to a "familiar routine" pertained to the ongoing issue of flooding from the watercourse overtopping. The routine of deploying sandbags had been discussed with the Parish Council and an operational process was in place to manage this. Laughton Common was identified as one of the six priority schemes aimed at reducing flood risk. To improve the situation, the Council had purchased L-shaped barriers to replace sandbags, providing better equipment to divert water.

The Council was not accepting the flooding as a permanent routine but was continually seeking to reduce the risk and improve operational management.

Councillor Thorp further asked if the Council were informing Ward Members where there was a problem of flooding in their Wards.

The Head of Highways and Flood Risk confirmed warnings described were issued by the Environment Agency and residents could register to receive them on their telephones or other devices. By specifying the areas of interest and entering the relevant postcodes, residents would receive the information discussed today.

Stakeholders would contact the Local Authority about any potential events, usually weather-related and any potential impacts assessed. This information was then shared internally, not just by our drainage team but by the Council's Corporate Emergency Planning Team. As the details became clearer and confidence in the forecast grew, the corporate team took over the dissemination of information and the corporate message shared with Ward Members and other stakeholders.

The Environment Agency once receiving early notifications from the Met Office about Storm Babet indicating heavy rainfall assessed the potential impact on the ground using models. Initially, the forecast indicated that North Yorkshire would be more severely affected than South Yorkshire, so resources were allocated to that area accordingly. However, the storm shifted and impacted South Yorkshire more significantly.

In the incident room, staff constantly monitored updated forecasts, considering when to issue flood warnings. They aimed to issue warnings only when they were confident that properties would flood. At the time, river level forecasts suggested that the defences in Catcliffe would hold,

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which was why a flood warning was not issued initially. However, conditions changed rapidly, highlighting the many variables in flood prediction. In hindsight, the warning should have been issued earlier, but it was on the best information available at the time. The automation process that occurred was not typical. The telemetry system, which measured river levels, communicated with the forecast system, which then had to relay information to their flood warning system. Locally, there was a lag in this process. This issue had been reported nationally, emphasising that human oversight could not be entirely replaced by automation, especially during a period of industrial action.

Councillor Thorp referred to communication of flood warnings, noting that he was unable to inform residents via Facebook. He mentioned that residents felt Ward Members had been unresponsive during the flooding, as they were not informed about the situation. Could the Council better notify Ward Members in such events.

The Principal Drainage Engineer clarified the Council did not receive specific flood warnings or alerts. During a storm event there could be twenty to thirty flood alerts across the borough, so the Council focused on flood advisory statements rather than specific alerts. Those advisory statements guided their operational decisions, while the Environment Agency handled the communication of specific alerts.

The Deputy Leader promoted using the Environment Agency's website, which provided real-time information on river levels and flood warnings suggesting Councillors disseminate this publicly available information in their Wards.

The Chair shared his experience of using the website during recent storms to monitor river levels thus supporting the idea of improving communication with Ward Members.

The Head of Highways and Flood Risk proposed consulting the Emergency Planning Team to determine what notices were sent to Ward Members during different events. While specific ward-level alerts might not be necessary, sharing information as situations developed could be beneficial. The importance of early communication would be taken forward.

Councillor Baggaley also wanted to know about plans to enhance the warning alert system, particularly for residents who did not have mobile telephones. It was suggested alternatives to text messages or phone calls be explored to ensure that all residents received timely warnings. The need to consider different methods to improve the effectiveness of the alert system for the entire community was necessary, as older residents who were more vulnerable would struggle and did not have computers or emails.

Representatives from the Environment Agency explained that the siren

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system had been previously used in Calderdale, which was implemented before the flood warning service became as advanced. However, feedback from residents indicated that the sound of sirens, even during tests, had caused significant panic and anxiety. The flood warning service had been better received by the public than sirens.

Additionally, the siren system was quite old and had a higher chance of failure. It would be triggered at the same levels as the flood warning service. The flood warning service did not rely solely on mobile phones; residents could register their landline numbers, email addresses, or receive text alerts. This method increased the likelihood of the message being received and reduced the risk of failure compared to sirens.

Discussions have taken place internally as to whether it would be feasible to implement sirens, but this had been less effective than the flood warning service.

Cllr Jackson suggested consideration of an 'opt -out' system rather than 'opt -in' for flood warnings.

Representatives from the Environment Agency confirmed flood warning service was an opt-out system. Registered landlines received daily updates and residents could fully sign up online or by telephone for comprehensive alerts. Community flood plans were, therefore, very important especially for elderly residents without devices who might need assistance during flood alerts. The Neighbourhood Team and Ward Members should work together and help identify and support vulnerable individuals.

The role of flood wardens was critical despite the challenges and reduced numbers from six to two. Councillors were encouraged to promote the role within their communities. While sirens were considered, the existing flood warning service was highly effective and provided detailed information about river levels and areas at risk. It was important that communities were in tune to mobile devices during periods of high rainfall.

The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board point out that while many residents did have mobile phones, many did not keep them by their bedside or have them turned on at night. Instead, they relied on local news and radio for updates, especially in flood-prone areas. Was it not possible for the Council to install permanent flood guards on properties instead of relying solely on sandbags, as it was felt this would be a better long-term solution, reducing the need for sandbags and offering better protection.

The Principal Drainage Engineer confirmed property flood resilience (PFR) was considered, but it was not always the most effective solution. In areas like Catcliffe, this action could only handle up to 600 mm of floodwater before failing. Higher water levels could cause more damage due to pressure against the structure. Therefore, while this method of

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defence was an option, other measures should be also implemented. In Whiston and Laughton hydro sacks were provided, which expanded when soaked with water. These could be stored by residents and used as needed, reducing reliance on Councillors to deliver sandbags. The Community Flood Plan would help to identify vulnerable properties, ensuring better targeted support.

Councillor Clarke referred to community involvement and the role of Elected Members. Following the last Full Council meeting, a question had been submitted a question regarding support for voluntary Flood Wardens. An online meeting was scheduled at the beginning of November and was willing to share the information, suggesting that the meeting could be opened to other colleagues.

The Chair was aware of the significant focus on highways drainage and improvements and queried whether these were part of the flood alleviation scheme.

The Head of Highways and Flood Risk confirmed that since 2020, the Council had presented annually to the Improving Places Select Commission about the work delivered and the progress on the six priority schemes. The Council had allocated additional funding, including a £300,000 capital award for highway drainage.

The Chair then asked if the Environment Agency engaged with farmers regarding drainage in their fields.

The Principal Drainage Engineer described the challenges of implementing protection for surface water runoff. The main issue in the previous year was continuous rainfall from June to November, which saturated the ground.

The Council had engaged with landowners to explore options for improving ditches and farming practices to slow water flow. Whilst there was no legal obligation to prevent natural runoff, the Council could enforce regulations on pipe discharge. Work was taking place with farmers to reduce runoff and had implemented protective measures on Council land to help improve the situation.

Resolved:- That the report be received and the contents noted.

30. **DRAFT HOUSING REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE POLICY, NOVEMBER 2024**

The Chair welcomed Councillor Allen, Cabinet Member for Housing, Lynsey Stephenson, Head of Housing Property Services and Wendy Foster, Improvement Manager, Housing Property Services. to the meeting and invited the Cabinet Member for Housing to introduce the report.

The Cabinet Member for Housing explained the Council was committed to

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delivering high quality, value for money repairs services. The draft Housing Repairs and Maintenance Policy set out the Council's approach to meeting those aims. The Policy met the needs of the tenants, which was a key aspect because it was their homes that the Council was maintaining and repairing along with meeting the Council's statutory, regulatory and contractual obligations.

The report also provided an update on the work being undertaken to consider the future of the repairs and maintenance service in the context of new customer regulations.

The Head of Housing Property Services explained she had responsibility for repairs, maintenance, and investment within the Council housing stock. The Housing Repairs and Maintenance Policy was a key document that was required following the implementation of the Regulator of Social Housing's consumer standards. There was a standard specifically regarding transparency, accountability and influence. This was in response to some of the issues within the housing sector, following the sad passing of baby Awaab, following damp and mould in his home and Grenfell. This standard would enable tenants to hold landlords, such as the Council to account.

The Council needed to be transparent in how it operated and if it did not have a Policy that detailed what the Council would and would not do along with the respective timescales, people would be unable to challenge those. The Council often received challenges on why it would not repair a light bulb or toilet seat and some of the timescales are also challenged. For example, if someone's boiler broke down there was an expectation that the Council would respond within an hour. Another was if the Council repaired a kitchen cupboard, leading to a colour variation, the tenant may well then ask for the whole kitchen to be replaced and this was not something the Council could do due to the costs involved.

The draft Policy set out the types of repairs that the Council was responsible for and what tenants had responsibility for themselves. It set out how the Council would manage reports, including prioritising more vulnerable tenants. For example, if a tenant had a health condition affecting their chest, they would be more vulnerable to damp and mould in their property, so therefore that should be prioritised over a lower level of mould or someone who did not have a health condition.

The Policy also set out timescales for completion, such as what the Council deemed was an emergency, for a response within 4 hours, what was urgent for a response by the end of the next working day and what is categorised as a non-standard repair for completion within 28 days.

It was noted that the Council did high volumes of repairs, around 6,000 per month, equating to 200 repairs per day, so the Council was unable to class everything as a priority, which was when there was a need to consider the individual circumstances and the impact of that repair. She

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clarified that the number quoted did not include the capital programme, such as replacing kitchens, bathrooms and roofs etc. It also did not include the Council's cyclical servicing such as the gas services, fixed wire testing etc. If all of those aspects were included the Council would carry out around 127,000 jobs per annum.

If the Council wished to have a quicker repairs timescale there would be a need to have more repairs operatives on standby to be able to respond to those needs which would then increase the costs of service delivery. It may also lead to elements of the capital programme or elsewhere needing to be sacrificed to accommodate a quicker response time.

The Policy also considered the 'no access' procedures. For example, if a tenant wasn't letting the Council in to address the damp and mould issue they'd reported, which could create health risks. There had been instances where tenants had a water leak and not allowed the Council to fix the leak which had then developed into damp, which meant that the kitchen had needed to be replaced. It was noted, if the tenant had let the Council address that repair when it was reported, it would not have accrued additional costs.

The Head of Housing Property Services explained that the decorating allowance had not been revised since 2005 and noted there had been inflation within that period. It was recommended that this allowance was increased to £50 per room along with increasing the number of rooms. The existing policy looked at habitable rooms and the updated policy would include all rooms within the decoration allowance. She highlighted an error in that section of the report, which should indicate implementation from April 2025 not April 2024.

The policy did not address the Council's approach to investment and stock improvement, which would be considered in a later Asset Management Strategy. It also did not include compliance, which covered areas such as gas servicing, damp, mould, and condensation. Those were covered in separate policies.

The damp, mould and condensation policy, which was approved around 12 months ago, spoke about inspecting all cases of damp and mould however Awaab's Law would be introduced imminently, which would bring about specific timescales by which to respond by.

The Council would not know if an instance was serious unless it inspected it, so therefore it was reviewing its triage process, which could be inspection via photographs.

The Policy also considered the future delivery of the repairs and maintenance service. The Council had 2 large contracts which had been extended until March 2027, this did include an option to extend that for a further 3 years. The Council was considering how the service operated. The contracts specified how the Council operated now but consideration

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would be given to if that needed to change. An engagement programme was beginning to understand what the future service needed to be and what tenants wanted.

The tenants had been consulted on the draft policy, some feedback received was that some people with a vulnerability, or health condition, or disability may not class themselves as vulnerable so some of the language used in the policy had been updated.

The policy was being submitted to Cabinet for approval on 18 November 2024, which provided an opportunity for the Commission to feed into the process and suggest amendments prior to approval.

Concerns were raised regarding the Council's ability to extend both repairs and maintenance contracts for a further three years. The preference would be to have the viability of the option to bring those services in-house fully investigated prior to extension of the contracts. The Cabinet Member for Housing gave assurance that one of the options being considered was to bring the service back in-house. The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board (OSMB) expressed the benefits of having in-house services including retaining full control over the service and ease of monitoring that service.

It was noted that the Council was one of the largest housing providers in the country and conducted repairs and maintenance really well. It was noted that sometimes elderly residents had be added to the 28-day repair turnaround during the triage process. It was asked that this was assessed at the point of contact. The 4-hour repairs are usually categorised as emergency repairs and the policy did not indicate what happened if a follow up visit was required.

The Head of Housing Property Services explained the introduction of the Regulator's consumer standards meant there was a need to prioritise based on vulnerabilities. It was noted that calls were process via staff within the corporate contact centre and everything was scripted. Any particular requirements were usually picked up when it was escalated to the housing team. The Council needed to ensure that this was being addressed at the first point of contact, so work was being undertaken with contact centre to introduce within the script a question that asks if the tenant has a health problem that was being impacted by the repair. Regarding follow up visits for 4-hour repairs, they may be categorised to be followed up within the 28-day timescales. It was noted that further work could be done regarding communication to set expectations regarding any 4-hour repair requests or visits.

The Council had a number of people who used the Rothercare facility and it was queried if the Council would know if they were vulnerable when they contacted for a repair? It was good that the decorating allowance had been increased to £50 and clarification was sought if hallways were included?

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The Head of Housing Property Services explained that the four-hour repair would not be for heating breakdown it would cover aspects such as burst pipes or electrical faults so was more to make the property safe and secure. She clarified that a boiler breakdown was classed as an end of next working day repair. The triage process needed to be reviewed to enable prioritisation of the more urgent cases. The housing system shows that a tenant is part of the Rothercare facility, but it was not part of the script for the contact centre. She also clarified that hallways were now being included within the decorating allowance.

The Head of Housing Property Services explained that benchmarking regarding the £50 decorating allowance had been carried out against other local housing providers. Sheffield offered £20 per wall, so consideration was given to offering the allowance per wall or per room. It was noted that on some occasions, only one wall in a property may have been affected by the repair therefore it was felt that it would be fairer to have the allowance per room.

A suggestion was put forward that Cabinet be asked to consider the slightly higher amount of £75 per room or some form of inflation linked increase. This was because the policy may not be reviewed again for a number of years. The Head of Housing Property Services indicated that the policy would be reviewed on an annual basis under delegated authority. This approach was also being considered for other policy's such as Damp, Mould and Condensation, and Fire Safety to seek delegated authority to make annual changes to enable the service to react to changes much quicker, for instance when legislation changes. Some members felt that the amount offered was too small.

The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board noted that if the policy was to be reviewed annually or every two years, then scrutiny needed the opportunity to comment on any proposed revisions. The Head of Housing Property Services explained that in 2021 the Council spent £2,918. The forecast with the increase in allowance would mean the budget would rise to an estimated £50,000 so any further increases would have an impact on that budget. The plan for the delegated authority would be an officer decision record which would be published.

Members noted that officers had carried out a benchmarking exercise when considering the decorating allowance amount and some members felt that it should not be raised above their suggested amount as it was doubling the previous amount available. The provision of remuneration for the decorating allowance on a sliding scale was also considered. Another suggestion included having one rate if decorating was required for one wall only and if further work was needed, tenants would then qualify for the full decorating allowance.

In response to a query the Head of Housing Property Services explained that tenants could apply for the decorating allowance when the Council

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had disturbed someone's decorating, for example if a new socket was installed. The Cabinet Member for Housing explained that it would be very hard to please everyone if the decorating allowance was provided using a sliding scale. The Head of Housing Property Services explained that a sliding scale had been in place previously however this was controversial and had not been applied consistently.

It was felt that the policy should be fully embedded before any further amendments were made to the decorating policy taking it above the £50 proposed. Opportunities would be available in the future to amend this if needed.

The Head of Housing Property Services explained that in 2023/24 the Council spent £11,931, which was the reason for the forecasted spend had been set at £50,000. The spend for this financial year so far had been £15,750. More cases of damp and mould were being reported now than previously.

The Head of Housing Property Services indicated that the per wall, per ceiling allowance had not been considered because the per room allocation allows more freedom for tenants. The Council did not have a legal duty to decorate properties when work had been carried out. It was being done to be a good landlord and properties were not decorated during the VOIDS process. Properties were only decorated when a new kitchen or bathroom was installed.

In response the Head of Housing Property Services explained that fencing around a property would be difficult for the Council to maintain and there was no legal duty to provide fencing. If this were to be included it would require further debates to determine what the Council's investment priorities were.

It was suggested that a separate allowance be considered when decorating was required as a result of damp and mould. The Head of Housing Property Services clarified that the Council did have a Damp, Mould and Condensation Policy in place which was agreed by Cabinet in September 2023. There was a three-stage process to manage reports of mould.

In response the Head of Housing Property Services noted that the Tenant Scrutiny Panel had not raised any concerns regarding the amount put forward for the decorating allowance. The Council was looking at how it could improve the thermal efficiencies of its properties but was also looking at ways to ensure the properties had adequate ventilation.

With there being no further questions, the Chair sought a proposer and seconder for the motion to recommend that Cabinet increase the decorating allowance to £75. This was proposed by Councillor Beck and seconded by Councillor Havard. The motion was the voted upon by those members present with three members voting in favour of the proposed

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increase, six members voting against the proposed increase and four members abstaining from the vote. This motion to recommend that Cabinet increase the decorating allowance to £75 fell.

Resolved:- That feedback provided on the draft Repairs and Maintenance Policy be received and noted.

31. IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION - WORK PROGRAMME 2024 - 2025

The Governance Manager introduced the work programme report explaining the programme had contained an item to hold an Anti-Social Behaviour workshop. This item had been brought forward as a suggestion from previous commission members. This item had first been added to the work programme in July 2022 but further information on the scope of that item was not available. When asked none of the members present at the meeting knew what the scope for that proposed workshop was so it was agreed that it would be removed from the work programme.

The work programme had also included a proposed review of Green Spaces. This item was being considered within the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board's (OSMB) work programme and as such had been removed from this commissions work programme. It was noted that the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board had extended an invitation for a couple of members from this Commission to join the review.

The Vice-Chair provided an overview of the School Road Safety and Street Motion which had been agreed by Council on 29 November 2023. He stated the motion covered a few topics around road safety at schools. The last major change in road safety around schools in the Rotherham Borough was back in 2009, which resulted in the introduction of Traffic Regulation Orders to enforce School Crossings and advisory 20 MPH speed limit signs that were fitted near schools more recently. Part of the review would be to consider how they were working, the enforcement methods and potential new methods using technology. Safety around Crossing Patrol Operatives was to be considered along with consideration of initiatives around school streets and travel plans.

The Governance Manager sought expressions of interest from members of the Commission to take part in this review. The following members put themselves forward:-

- Councillor Baggaley
- Councillor Beck
- Councillor Thorp
- Councillor Tinsley
- Councillor Stables

The Governance Manager explained the Housing Allocations Policy was

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being refreshed and Councillor Allen, Cabinet Member for Housing, had asked for members of the Commission to attend a series of three or four workshops in the new year to review the proposed changes prior to its submission to Cabinet. The Chair clarified that he was involved with the initial workshops, which were currently taking place. The following members put themselves forward to take part in these workshops:-

- Councillor Beresford
- Councillor Thorp

The Governance Manager noted that the Commission had been asked to review the findings of the consultation conducted for the 2025-2028 Housing Strategy prior to the strategy's final development. This workshop would also be conducted in the new year at a similar time as the Housing Allocations Policy was considered. The following members put themselves forward to be involved in this workshop:-

- Councillor Beck
- Councillor Beresford
- Councillor Havard
- Councillor Jackson
- Councillor McKiernan

Councillor Beck welcomed that the Cabinet Member for Housing had sought scrutiny's involvement with these items and hoped this could be replicated across other Cabinet Members portfolios.

Councillor Williams noted Councillor Jones' previous comments regarding grass cutting and grounds maintenance and asked that Councillor Jones be involved in the Green Spaces review.

The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board explained he had written to all members of the Council seeking nominations for items to be scrutinised. As a result, items had been added to the relevant commissions work programmes.

Resolved:- (1) That the outline work programme as discussed and attached be noted.

(2) That the proposed members named above take part in the reviews and workshops put forward for consideration at this meeting.

32. URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that there were no urgent items of business requiring the Commission's consideration and updated the Members that the next meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission would take place on the Tuesday 10 December 2024 commencing at 1.30 pm in Rotherham Town Hall.

