

FULL COUNCIL

Date: Monday, 6 December 2021

Title: Emergency Plan

Contact Officer: Maintenance & Environmental Services Officer - Angus Whitburn

Background

The following was recommended in the stronger communities meeting on the 25th of January 2021 in light of flooding of Bridge Street and West End areas of Witney.

“that the Town Clerk drafts a policy document and emergency plan for presentation to a future Policy, Governance and Finance Committee for adoption”

There is a focus on flood risk in the report and the main purpose is to identify the councils’ responsibilities around emergency planning in this situation along with management of watercourses.

Current Situation

The Town Council input into the emergency plans section on flooding cannot stretch as far as the use of its staff and vehicles. The Town Council is not an emergency response authority nor have the responsibility to support emergency services in the event of flooding. With co-operation from community groups, the Council can agree in the plan to store sandbags and enable access for those groups in an emergency, hold contact information for the groups who can contact vulnerable residents and potentially make public halls available as evacuation centres.

A large amount of input across the plan would have to be guided by community groups. A meeting has been arranged with the Witney Flood Mitigation Group for their input. However, it is not understood yet of their physical input into emergency response. More groups may need to be formed to help enact an emergency plan.

The emergency plan would not be able to detail Town Council staff delivering sandbags to residents. That direction would have to come from the District Council. Further communication is needed but we can make them aware of our resources and pass on contact information. We can’t interfere with emergency services but can be directed to do so by the district that holds the information necessary to coordinate the emergency response. To support community groups, we can store sandbags and help them to coordinate collection from our sites if necessary.

The public halls under the Council's management can be made available in an emergency. Both Burwell Hall and The Corn Exchange have facilities to prepare hot drinks and make people comfortable enough for a short time. If the council is to make its public halls available as part of the emergency plan, detail needs written into it about how they are to be managed in that situation and by whom. The Town Council staff are not trained or employed to deal with residents suffering from shock and panic around displacement. The District Council is responsible for organising emergency evacuation centres so any emergency plan around their use would have to be run past them.

The spectrum of the emergency plan needs to reach a lot further than just flooding. And some of the content of the emergency plan will be in better control of the Town Council. Adverse weather conditions such as high winds bringing down trees and ice and snow need both need high-risk areas identified and plans created.

Ice and Snow

The Town Council does currently have grit bins in close proximity to the majority of its land, grit salt in-store and equipment to lay it. Within the emergency plan, further planning needs creating around the application of grit salt.

Public footpaths around the leys, Burwell and the cemeteries should all be salted when ice warnings are received. Vehicle access roads at the cemeteries and West Witney would also need including. The priority of these works does need addressing, i.e., are there priority above for example the backfill of a grave?

High Wind's

There are over 9000's trees in the council's ownership. All the trees are surveyed in groups on a 5yr program, additionally, officers are trained in tree inspections. This normally identifies necessary work before tree limbs are lost or the whole tree's falls. However high winds always pose a risk of bringing down large trees with no identified works.

Again, the Maintenance Team is well equipped to deal with these works as most are trained in cross-cutting and there are three chainsaws available. Further research is needed into the situation if a tree blocks a highway.

Lake And Country Park Land Management Strategy

Witney Town Council is the riparian owner of watercourses on its land. The main section in question is where the river Windrush runs along The Lake and Country Park. The Council is responsible for reporting incidents, letting the water flow naturally, preventing pollution and protecting wildlife.

Reporting incidents

The environment agency incident hotline is called to report flooding, blockages, pollution, change in flow of water and collapsed or badly damaged banks. Most of these would be

reported by users of the lake then investigated by officers and reported to the environment agency, such as the pollution at Emma's Dyke in 2019.

Letting water flow naturally

The Town Council has a responsibility to enable water to flow naturally, this involves removing all blockages that could reduce flow and cause flooding. The Council does have the equipment available to remove trees from the watercourse and trained staff to handle the task. The Country Park is a large body of land and cannot be constantly monitored by Witney Town Council Staff. The majority of fallen trees are reported by residents and these works are a high priority if they are blocking a path or affecting the river.

Environmental impact

Having declared a Climate Change Emergency at its Council meeting on 26 June 2019 – with this in mind Councillors should have due regard to the environmental impact of any decisions they make with regard to its facilities and services it operates.

Any works to the river have the potential to damage animal habitats.

Risk

In decision making Councillors should give consideration to any risks to the Council and any action it can take to limit or negate its liability.

Witney Town Council vehicles aren't covered by insurance if they are knowingly being driven into an area of flooding or due to be flooded.

The Town Council has a duty of care for all users on its lands. Injuries sustained due to slips and trips on icy paths could leave the council liable.

Reducing the flow or causing flooding to another landowners' property may leave the Council liable.

Financial implications

Currently unquantifiable.

Recommendations

Member are invited to note the report and consider the following:

1. Complete a full review of watercourses of riparian ownership and set a program of works to ensure they are cleared and maintained.
2. Agreement on the scope of the Town Council's Emergency Plan (as outlined).