

February Report of Ward Councillor Elissa Swinglehurst

Water, water everywhere.....

Just when you thought we had seen enough rain this winter Storm Dennis arrives with 43 mm in 24 hours making 100 mm of rain from 9th to 15th falling on already saturated ground. I have attached the Chief Executive recent statement to the Council's Cabinet which gives some sense of the impact on the whole county.

The Government has made various grants available and I am pleased our MPs ensured we received the Bellwin grant, which is the emergency funding Government gives to local authorities for one off events. However this funding has to be spent by 15th March. Cllr Roger Phillips has asked both Herefordshire MPs and lobbied via the LGA to extend this period.

I have visited residents affected by the recent floods and request all my Parish Councils to put flooding on their agenda so we can evaluate and learn any lessons. It is important to get an idea of the condition of the watercourses – especially the Garron and the Gamber – and I am hoping that landowners in the area will work positively with the parish council to facilitate a survey.

Herefordshire Council has offered free collection of water damaged items from flooded houses and waived the usual trailer permits to deposit flood debris. Over 250 hardship payments have been paid out this last week to residents and businesses affected. The Government's fund is administered by Herefordshire Council with up to £500 per resident and £2,500 per business.

If your home or business has been impacted by the recent flooding please go the website below and get the latest information.

<https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/info/200196/roads/345/flooding/3>

The other impact has been on our highways -- Please report any EMERGENCY Defects and Potholes by phone 01432 261800 or for non-emergency defects, by logging on the Herefordshire Council website <https://myaccount.herefordshire.gov.uk/report-a-pothole>

This has been a challenging period for our local emergency services and I would like to pay tribute to them, to the community responders, 4x4 rescue and community groups who have gone above and beyond. Two things I would hope we can all manage to do – do not drive into a flood (doh) as the emergency services are needed to deal with other things and can't spend all their time getting over optimistic motorists out of trouble. Try to clear the grids closest to you – in front of your house, through the village, whatever. The debris that collects on them – sticks, leaves, straw – really compromises the ability of the drainage infrastructure to work. It is clearly stupid for BBLP to have to send a team from Hereford to clear sticks off a grid so please – can we all do our bit. I regularly do all the grids through and around Welsh Newton but I am the only person who does this – not sure what all the other residents are up to! Perhaps parish councils might appoint a road drain monitor?

Full council meetings

At the recent Council meeting we debated the budget setting for 2020/21 and the three year financial plan. The Council will set a revenue budget of 157 million pounds which will require a 3.9% increase in Council tax (including 2% for social care). There were a few proposed amendments including one from the Lib Dems for increased funding for roads in market towns which I supported but which did not get approved, one from the Conservatives to lessen the increase in council tax by 1% and one, also from the Conservatives, to spend an additional 2m on C and U class roads which was carried by majority. 2m sounds like a lot of money but if I tell you that, even if the roads were in good condition, the maintenance bill should be 8m pa. – twice what we had but half what we need.

The full council meeting on the 6th March confirmed the council tax setting. There were a number of notices of motion put to the council including one to investigate 20mph zones in villages throughout the county. At the moment this is only an intention to explore the options and so it shows a direction of travel more than a destination. An amendment was suggested to narrow the action to around schools and known hotspots with a

clear action to implement rather than explore but this did not succeed. Another notice of motion was put by Cllr Rone but it had to be withdrawn as his seconder decided not to support it in the end. As the notice impacted councillors who live in the city I did not feel that it would have been right for me to second it – no city based councillor chose to do so. I was a bit surprised by the fact that none of the councillors who live in the city were prepared to give up their car parking perks in order to lead by example in our fight against the climate emergency. This is the text of the amendment:

(Proposed by Councillor Paul Rone, Seconded by Councillor Jeremy Milln)

That all elected members that represent a city ward and live in the city should not have a car park pass as this only encourages use of a motor car.

There was virtually no debate and no one seemed minded to support the motion in any case, make of that what you will.

In response to the leader's report I made a plea for consistent and clear messaging about ditches – contrary to what most people believe the local authority is not, in fact, responsible for a vast number of road side ditches. They are the responsibility of the landowner adjacent – the local authority has the right to drain water from the road onto adjacent land but the landowner does not have the right to drain onto the highway.

https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/info/200196/roads/345/flooding/6?fbclid=IwAR0rIKkuInlowXt1b46R68608DJZSt5Th_eELRT_x2hcuXieBAGKZLR2_E

I think I must have hit a nerve as I got a round of applause for my question.

Until the council stops equivocating and starts enforcing I doubt that our watercourses and ditches are going to improve – the condition of watercourses, partially blocked with debris, silted up and obstructed is a contributing factor in flooding – both of roads and of property. Wouldn't it be great if everyone did their bit for the good of others and without enforcement or even having to be asked – wouldn't that be fantastic? Actually it would be an improvement if we could keep the soil in the fields in the first place.

I have taken a sample of silt washed out from a local field and I am going to run an experiment – three pots – one with builders sand, one with silt from a field and one with soil, I will plant crop in all three and observe the results. I wonder what will happen.....

Ttfn.

Statement from Alistair Neill to Cabinet regarding recent flooding

Thank you for this timely opportunity to update Cabinet on the recent flooding in the County.

Communities across Herefordshire were heavily impacted by Storm Dennis, with a month's worth of rain falling in two days over the weekend of Saturday 15 and Sunday 16 February 2020. The sheer volume of water caused generalised flooding in many areas severely affecting properties and roads, and the rivers Wye and Lugg both rose to their highest ever recorded peaks bursting their banks. What this means is that these levels were the highest in over 200 years. At one point around 700 tonnes of water per second were flowing under the Old Bridge in Hereford. With widespread disruption experienced by residents and businesses, a major incident was declared on Sunday 16 February 2020 at 11.20am.

Major incident response

A Tactical Control Group (TCG) was convened working out of Plough Lane, chaired by Sue Thomas, Superintendent Herefordshire, West Mercia Police. This brought together a number of key agencies including Herefordshire Council, Public Health, the Environment Agency, West Mercia Police, Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service, West Midlands Ambulance Service, our health partners and utility services. Through the TCG, services were coordinated to protect and provide assistance to Herefordshire residents and businesses, focusing our early efforts on the most vulnerable members of the community.

Travel and transport across the county was extremely difficult with around 80 major and minor roads impassable at peak flood. Road and bridge closures were put in place where they were flooded or where their condition had become unsafe. Whilst a priority was to keep Herefordshire moving, the top priority has been to keep people safe.

Some areas experienced power cuts, however these were generally short term.

More than 300 residential properties experienced devastating flooding. Recovery and rest centres were opened in Ross, Leominster and Holmer Leisure Centres and at Point4 for people whose homes were flooded, providing shelter and refreshment.

In Whitchurch, 24 residents were evacuated from a privately-run care home and moved safely to alternative accommodation. The eldest of the residents was 97. In Hampton Bishop a care home became inaccessible to normal vehicles, so staff were transported to and from the home by military and fire and rescue services, and the basement was continuously pumped so that residents could remain in their home.

In total, 204 people were rescued across the county by fire and rescue services from either properties or vehicles.

Due to its proximity to both the rivers Wye and Lugg, much of Hampton Bishop remained inaccessible by road for many days. The delivery of essential food and medicine supplies was arranged, with council staff visiting the local ASDA supermarket, who kindly provided the food free of charge, on behalf of stranded residents.

During this time information was provided to residents across the county through a dedicated page on the Council website and via the Council's social media channels - which were viewed more than 6.5million times in the last 11 days - with the latest situation updates and general advice on what to

do if affected by the flooding. Information was also shared through local newspaper, radio and community social media sites, and interviews on regional TV. With national and international media interest, the online news reach (that is number of people who have read about the flooding) is 1.18billion to date.

In addition, video messages were sent to residents in Whitchurch and Hampton Bishop providing information specific to those communities. These were circulated through Whatsapp, the local parish council and local residents through electronic messaging.

On Tuesday 18 February 2020, under emergency provisions, the decision was taken to allocate £1million of council reserves to support local residents and businesses impacted by flooding. Since this decision, the Government (Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government) has announced community and business flood recovery grants, which the council will assist people to access, with £500 available to residents and £2500 for businesses. Payment of grants started on Monday 24 February 2020 to the 322 residents and 64 businesses who have applied to date. In addition council tax and business rate relief is available for three months for flooded properties. At the this time we await word from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) as to whether local farmers affected can access its Farming Recovery Fund.

Recovery

With the impact of further rainfall and possible raised river levels, the formal position of emergency response was maintained until Tuesday 25 February 2020 when we formally moved to a 'recovery' position. However recovery for many communities started sooner than this.

The council provides recovery support and signposting to assist affected communities during recovery so that they can work towards restoring local services and facilities and returning to normal.

Additional resources have been deployed across the county to expedite road cleaning and inspection and assessment of the condition of roads and bridges. Surveys using specialist equipment are being carried out. Of the 71 roads inspected so far 51 require extensive work to remedy the damage caused which is expected to cost upwards of £1.6million. Whilst work to repair damage has commenced, several roads and bridges will require longer term attention and investment to fully address flood damage and secure their resilience. As such I expect the final repair bill to multiply.

We are extremely mindful of the experiences of people who live and work in the communities affected by current road and bridge closures, however it will take weeks before many are safe to reopen. As of 27th February, there remain 28 road closures in place, with restricted access particularly problematic around Fownhope/ Holme Lacy and Walford/ Leintwardine. We ask people to continue to adhere to road these closures and bear with us while this work takes place. We will be looking for Government funding under the Bellwin scheme for the repair of roads and other infrastructure. Clearly travel through the county will continue to be impacted and additional bus services have been established in those areas that are impacted by prolonged road closure. School transport services have also been supplemented.

Communities across the county are facing the unenviable task of cleaning-up their homes and businesses. Herefordshire Council are providing a free service to collect flood-damaged household items from outside residents' houses, and commercial vehicles won't need permits at household recycling centres in Herefordshire until Sunday 1 March, for the disposal of flood damaged items. Lost wheelie bins are being replaced.

Helping with the clean-up effort, Herefordshire Council staff joined with others from local response services to deliver cleaning supplies and assistance to a number of communities affected by flooding. The Talk Community Big Herefordshire clean-up has involved hundreds of staff who volunteered to visit residents and businesses in prioritised areas to distribute information about flood recovery, provide help with completing grant forms and deliver cleaning essentials to designated community hubs. These door-to-door visits by our staff have been very gratefully received by residents and businesses. Among the other volunteers were retired firefighters who had driven from Kent, east London and north Yorkshire to support our efforts by clearing out flooded properties. In total more than 400 volunteers have now visited 42 different sites. Those volunteers were not only from the council, but also from:

- Police
- Fire and Rescue
- Herefordshire Council
- British Red Cross
- Tunnels to Towers provided support to lift and move heavy furniture and equipment out of homes ready for waste collection.

With many local play areas affected by the flooding, the council funded sessions in local leisure centres offering a safe place for children to play during the half term. And as pupils returned to school, the Council's school transport service put alternative services in place for those communities still impacted by flooding and road closures.

Information has been sent to local businesses and representative groups about how to access short-term desk or office space to aid with business continuity, and recovery grants. Our farming and agricultural businesses will be impacted beyond a single season.

Over the coming weeks we will be working with residents and businesses to access flood resilience grants, once details on this have been received from Government.

Future considerations

Although the recent high river levels and extent of flooding across the county was unprecedented, climate changes mean that it is sensible to assume that they will become a more regular occurrence. If unprecedented is the new normal, we need to think and plan differently. It must be a priority for us to work to build community resilience to flooding across the county and work with partner agencies to consider and plan flood defence and prevention measures.

We will be looking to Central Government to provide special funding to support this and repairs to our road network, bridges and other infrastructure to a standard that will be able to better withstand extreme weather conditions, and are writing to government departments and MPs in this regard.

In the longer-term, the council will need to give careful consideration to planning issues, where we build and how we manage our environment appropriately, and again we will be looking to Government to support this through policy and action.

I am mindful that whilst Herefordshire is well into recovery mode, our west Mercia neighbours in Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin in particular remain in emergency response, with once again, unprecedented flooding. We continue to liaise across west Mercia through the Strategic Control

Group, where Herefordshire Council will chair the region's communications as all areas move into recovery.

I would like to round-off by recognising and thanking people from across the county during this time of extraordinary disruption. The impact of this flooding has been substantial and significant, and we do not underestimate how upsetting and disruptive it has been for many. It may take several months before the county can return to 'business as normal'. However, residents have responded with resilience and a wonderful sense of community.