



**To/
Councillor Mark Thomas
Cabinet Member for Environment
Enhancement & Infrastructure
Management**

BY EMAIL

cc Cabinet Members

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NE/2019-20/7

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Summary: This is a letter from the Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Panel on 1 September 2020. It is regarding Local Flood Risk Management.

Dear Councillor Thomas,

Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel – 1 September

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Performance Panel meeting on 1 September 2020 to present to us on progress with Local Flood Risk Management. We also thank lead officers for their input to support the session, answering questions, and their contribution to the debate.

This topic was previously the subject of a Scrutiny Working Group, which last met in April 2019. Now that this Performance Panel has been established we will carry out ongoing scrutiny of local flood risk management, at least annually. We will monitor progress against local flood risk management plans and actions.

Picking up from where the Working Group left off the Panel wanted to hear about activities and achievements, and the experience over the past year or so, issues / challenges, and current assessment. It is clear to us that flooding is a growing problem.

We are writing to you, as relevant Cabinet Member, to reflect on the discussion, share the views of the Committee, and highlight any outstanding issues / actions for your response.

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We heard from you and officers that:

- Flooding is becoming more prevalent but not all flooding occurs on Council owned land and it is not, therefore, always the Council's responsibility. However, the Council is usually first point of contact for the public in times of need and the general expectation is to fix the problem; however, this sometimes occurs on non-Council owned land or private watercourses. Flooding can also be fluvial (river flooding) resulting from overspill off watercourses onto the urban environment. The team will try to help if required and able, but there is a need to manage public expectations in terms of what the Council is responsible for, given the pressure on us.
- The flood incidents this year have been exceptionally high and demanding, putting a strain on the service. Some members of the Highways Team have not experienced such flooding in their careers of 35 years. The last 3 years have been exceptionally difficult and the situation has changed drastically. Storm surges have been dramatic and the team have been faced with very difficult circumstances.
- There have been three significant incidents in the last 12 months that have had a devastating effect. In the autumn of 2019 Atlantic weather fronts saw storms cause major flooding affecting 20 houses in the Llansamlet and Birchgrove areas, and the highway infrastructure from over-spilling watercourses. In February 2020, Storm Dennis caused significant impacts across Swansea with unprecedented levels of flood warnings, alerts and rainfall. A one-month average rainfall fell on one day. 65 properties (residential and business) were attended by the Fire Service to pump water out. The worst affected areas were Gorseinon, Clydach, Gowerton and Penllergaer, with many properties suffering internal flooding. Thunderstorms in June 2020 rendered some roads impassable and brought a multitude of flooding incidents.
- If more than five properties are flooded in an area the authority is duty bound to investigate and report, but this costs. COVID-19 has affected this work. We need to fund further investigations and there is concern around the ability of limited Welsh Government funding to cover these.
- Drains are cleared every three years as standard, however there is a process in place to clean problem drains every six months or annually, where necessary. However flooding can occur despite clearing drains. Extensive survey work has also been carried out, e.g. survey of culverts, to identify repairs.
- An Assistance Fund has been awarded to the team for the first time, which enabled them to assist and help with flooding properties, for example sand bag delivery.
- An All-Wales Asset Management Group works to promote best practice, and identify improvements to drainage management. We are currently meeting about 80% of what they recommend – this work is all related to gully emptying.

Main points from our discussion and views:

- Climate change is clearly having an impact on the frequency and severity of extreme weather events locally. If these patterns of flooding continue to be repeated, we need to be better prepared going forward. The frequency and severity is likely to worsen in the future. The Panel recognises the scale of the problem and challenge, which decision-makers (local and national) will need to meet through better resources to tackle and manage flood risk and measures that will prevent flooding, particularly where it is a common occurrence.
- The Council needs to be able to provide reassurance to local residents affected by flooding incidents that action is being taken to support the prevention of flooding in their areas. We understand the fear and distress that flooding can bring to people.
- Parked cars can hamper gully clearance. We raised the possibility of greater collaboration between the Highways Department, Councillors, and their communities. However, we accept that it is impossible to co-ordinate a community wide action to move parked cars at the right time. It was explained to us that coordinating with the public is not always feasible for the gully cleaning team who may visit 20 roads per day.
- The Panel was concerned whether the Council is spending more on reactive emergency flood responses rather than preventative maintenance. We asked whether cutbacks and savings in road sweeping and routine maintenance were adding to flood risk and flash flooding, as we understood that silt (we understand a bigger problem than leaves) can build up and is washed into gullies causing blockages. We asked whether that was a genuine saving or whether it would be more cost effective to revert to more planned cleaning / maintenance that may avoid flash flooding.
- We noted that there is coordinated pre-storm activity between cleansing and highways teams, which targets areas. We welcomed news of extra resources this year which has enabled purchase of an extra gully machine, taking us to 4, and that the post for this has just been filled. We are happy to hear that there is synergy between the work of cleansing teams and those responsible for drainage and flood management and hope that means flexibility to prioritise and respond quickly to issues.
- We felt that there is a need to better communicate flood risks and share that information with communities, for example advice and guidance on what to do next in the event of flooding and key contacts. We noted that there is a public FAQ page on the Council website providing a range of information.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would welcome any further comments, but we do not expect you to provide a formal response on this occasion.

However, the Panel will be scheduling a further meeting on this subject and will follow up on our discussion and your thoughts, including what longer-term planning and steps can be taken to counter the likely flood consequences of climate change. It would also be helpful if the Panel can have a report on every serious flooding event on each occasion that we meet to discuss progress on local flood risk management.

Yours sincerely,

COUNCILLOR PETER JONES

Convener, Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel

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