

## ENVIRONMENT PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

**Date:** Wednesday 13 December 2000

**Time:** 2:00 pm to 5:00 pm

**Venue:** *Committee Room 2, National Assembly for Wales*

## OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 2000 FLOODS

## STATEMENT BY THE WELSH LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION

### Introduction

1. Local authorities have significant responsibilities for drainage, flood defence and the emergency response, and played an active role in the response to the October / November floods. The Association welcomes the opportunity to make a statement alongside the Environment Agency on this important issue.

### Recent Events

2. The October / November floods most seriously affected north Wales. But there have been other incidents immediately before (e.g. in August in Pwllheli), and elsewhere in Wales in previous years. Without wishing to detract in any way from the difficulties facing communities in the north, the Assembly and Environment Agency's response **must** be based on wider picture.
3. Some authorities have also reported more widespread flooding than described in the Agency's report, for example Newport County Borough Council identified 18 separate flooding sites in its area and Denbighshire County Council considers that events on the Rivers Clwyd and Elwy should be mentioned as significant events.
4. Flooding arising from land drainage problems was a significant factor in recent flooding, as well as that from rivers overtopping their banks. Many authorities have referred to the

detrimental impact of long-term under-investment in highway and land drainage infrastructure, for example blockages caused by leaves being washed into drainage ditches, silt in old stone culverts, blockages caused by flytipping, and under-capacity. Authorities' powers to act against land owners who do not fulfil their responsibilities for maintaining drainage and watercourses need to be clarified, and authorities provided with resources to take action.

5. Some authorities (e.g. Newport and Denbighshire) have advised that defences were breached in their areas (contrary to the Environment Agency's report), and that the view that defences were effective in protecting property is somewhat rosy given the numbers that were nevertheless flooded.
6. Recent heavy rain has had other serious effects that must be taken into account. Many authorities have concerns about land stability, with risks of land slips and tip movement. Local authorities are monitoring local risk areas closely. An additional concern is that trees become unstable in saturated ground and in high winds can fall on roads and property, with serious safety implications.

### **Flood Forecasts, Warnings and Severity**

7. Some authorities have expressed concerns about the accuracy of flood forecasts they received, and the appropriateness of the Environment Agency's river monitoring points. These made it more difficult for authorities to respond when flooding did occur. In other areas, such as Newport, Mold and Ruthin, no warnings were issued at all.
8. An area of growing concern is the revision to flood warning codes and advice. The inclusion of phrases such as 'imminent danger to life' and advice to activate major incident plans and establish rest centres is felt to be unachievable, unrealistic and creates inappropriate expectations that could lead to liabilities on local authorities.
9. Damage to property is of course one important measure of the impact of flooding. But roads and farmland were also affected, with knock-on effects to the community and economy as a whole.
10. During the event numerous comments were made about development on river flood plains. Local authorities consult the Environment Agency on proposed developments and take their advice into account. It is important that advice is timely, clear, and consistent, especially if an applicant subsequently appeals against refusal of permission.

### **Emergency Response**

11. Local authorities provided a substantial emergency response and were often the sole organisation to do so. Authorities are often involved in long-term follow up following flood events. For example Conwy County Council was the only body to issue sandbags in its area, with expenditure on this item alone amounting to £80,000. Other authorities, such as Powys, Gwynedd and Denbighshire have issued many thousands of sandbags and are continuing to do.

## **Funding**

12. The costs to local authorities of the emergency response to the October / November flooding are likely to be substantial, even in areas that were not severely affected. For example Gwynedd is not mentioned in the Environment Agency report yet has already exceeded the Bellwin threshold. Some authorities may experience difficulty meeting the costs where they fall below the threshold for the Bellwin formula.
13. Authorities face costs of repairing defences damaged by the floods, enhancing those which were barely adequate in the October / November flooding and in previous events, and to meet future needs. Improving flood defences is only part of the solution. Investment will also be needed in the land drainage system, for example to increase the size of culverts and improve capacity.
14. The Association is currently preparing an initial assessment of costs of repairs and improvements to flood defences. Some initial estimates from different parts of Wales are given in the Annex and show the likely scale of investment required even outside the worst affected areas. These show that in just ten authorities, most of which were not the most seriously affected, flood defence needs total over £42 million.
15. Local authorities are also incurring substantial costs dealing with and repairing damage caused by flooding, e.g. to highways, bridges and retaining walls.
16. The Association is deeply concerned at the proposals to increase the Local Flood Defence Committee's levies on local authorities by up to 45%. We acknowledge the need for increased funding, but they are far in excess of increase in the general local government revenue settlement, from which the levies must be paid.

## **Review**

14. The Association looks forward to working with the Minister and the Environment Agency to review flooding.

## **INITIAL ESTIMATES OF LOCAL AUTHORITY FLOOD DEFENCE COSTS**

### ***Denbighshire County Council***

Immediate costs £1 million

Reinstatement costs £3.4 million

New prevention and improvement schemes £5.5 million

***Pembrokeshire County Council***

£1.8 million to tackle immediate problems;

***City and County of Swansea***

£582,000 to tackle immediate problems

***Carmarthenshire County Council***

Emergency Repairs £50,000

Improved Level of Service £375,000

New flood defence works £145,000

***Ceredigion County Council***

Emergency repair work £50,000

Improved level of service £1 million

New flood defences £0.5 million

New coastal defences £5.6 million

***Powys County Council***

Improved level of service £2.9 million

New flood defences £200,000

***Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council***

£50,000 for emergency repairs

£950,000 improved level of service

£1.1 million for new defences

***Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council***

Improved level of service and new works £3.15 million

***Torfaen County Borough Council***

Emergency repairs £100,000

Improvements £250,000

New flood defences £50,000

***Newport County Borough Council***

£223,000 to tackle on going needs in 2001/2

£220,000 to meet immediate capital needs

***Vale of Glamorgan Council***

Repairs and Immediate works £150,000

Remedial measures to help resolve flooding £6.7 million

Flood defences to main rivers £6 million