

P-05-1010 An independent inquiry into the 2020 flooding in Rhondda Cynon Taf so that lessons are learned, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 08.03.21

8 March 2021

Dear Chair,

Many thanks for affording me the opportunity to respond once again on the Petition calling for an Independent Inquiry into the Floods in RCT in 2020.

I am disappointed, but not surprised by the responses received, especially the Ministerial response. Having seen Pontypridd come close to flood once again last month, and witnessed the distress of those previously affected, I am more convinced than ever that an Independent Inquiry is needed. It was a matter of pure luck that flooding didn't occur again, and I find it unacceptable that not more has been done to better understand the pattern and causes of flooding all across Wales in response.

It is not cost effective for Government, nor strategic, to simply be providing funds to patch-up and fix previous defences which have proven inadequate in light of climate change. This is now urgent, and I find it irresponsible of our Government to not be more proactive and open in supporting businesses and residents who have been flooded to find the answers they deserve into what has gone wrong and why in recent years; whether anything could have been done differently to protect some of the homes and businesses and further, what is the risk to their homes and businesses in light of climate change and more frequent and extreme weather events. The Section 19 reports will not provide these.

I will comment first of all on the Ministerial response:

In response to the first question, the Minister states: *“Despite our ongoing investment, we cannot stop all flooding from occurring. Through our interventions, we can help to reduce this risk, but not remove it completely. Residents should make sure they are prepared and have adequate insurance.”* As I have stated in previous correspondence, I understand that we cannot stop all flooding from occurring. But we can do more to better understand what happened and why if our approach to flooding is to as effective as possible.

The Natural Resources Wales report into the floods clearly stated that they were significantly understaffed. We need to understand why this happened and if this, along with other decisions taken eg the felling of trees and cutting back of forestry, or lack of maintenance of drains, culverts and flood defences, were contributing factors to some homes and businesses being flooded. These are all unanswered questions, and work should have begun in seeking these answers a year ago.

An Independent Inquiry is the only way the true risk to homes and businesses can be assessed. It is disappointing too that the Minister still puts the emphasis on businesses and residents, not understanding that there is little they can do to prepare for six feet of water coming into their homes and that for many, insurance is either

now impossible to obtain or they are costed out of insurance. Many of the communities affected last year are not affluent ones, and the Government should be much more supportive of them than this.

In the answer to the second question, the Minister states: *“Whilst the Section 19 reports provide useful information to the impacted Local Authority and relevant agencies, our national approach to managing risk is set out in the National Strategy for Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management which I published last October.”*

Yet again, the Strategy does not provide answers into what went wrong and why, and neither does it provide any assurances for homes and businesses in the future. If the strategy is delivered, they will be made more aware of the risk, but not afforded the answers into why they were flooded in 2020 and neither will this strategy help protect them in the future nor support them to cope with floods and issues with matters such as insurance. A strategy has to be based on an understanding of the situation now faced by so many communities across Wales who are at risk of flooding, and why the Government’s response over the past decade has not been effective.

In response to the answer to the third question, if she has not already read the testimonies previously submitted to this committee, I would urge the Minister to read them to understand the trauma that many people continue to suffer. They are available here:

https://busnes.senedd.cymru/documents/s105130/21.09.20%20Gohebiaeth%20Deis%20ebydd%20at%20y%20Pwyllgor%20Saesneg%20yn%20unig.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1AtKE-NoXsPNlaE0jinz99OLSoa3S5t5lG1kFRwkjnDe2Yl_upHn35_e0

A programme recently broadcast on S4C also evidenced this, and be watched here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p096bt9x>

When we came close to flooding again last month, I received phone calls with people crying and texts where they were telling me they simply could not go on with this continued risk. There are children traumatised, not able to sleep and scared in their own homes and people can’t afford to move elsewhere. All they want are answers and greater support. Yet this Government denies them both, and repeated requests from Councillors for counselling have also not been progressed. I have also been contacted by people from other parts of Wales, that have been following this petition, wanting to know how they can get the answers they deserve as well and greater support. The current approach of the Government is not working.

I am shocked by the Minister’s fourth response, and that there is no concern for the future of the Treforest Business Estate in particular – a Business Estate which has been invested in heavily by Welsh Government and where so many businesses which are important for the local and Welsh economy are based. Why is the Government not working with these businesses and being more proactive in supporting them? Many cannot now be insured because of flooding, and if they were to be flooded again, would close. This is not good enough as a Government response.

The key question for me has not been answered – why is the Welsh Government against an Independent Inquiry when it would be a crucial piece of work to better understand the funding and strategy required for the future? If the Government is serious about instigating a national conversation about flooding, then it needs to provide people affected with answers.

In relation to the response from Natural Resources Wales, I would like to make the following reflections:

- NRW does not voice an opinion here, but it is clear from the response that an Independent Inquiry would be beneficial to their work as it would provide much of the action that is needed by providing answers into what went wrong so that lessons can be learnt for the future: *“The February 2020 floods should be a pivotal moment for flood risk management in Wales, and we must use the **lessons learnt during those events to drive forward the action needed to adapt to the challenges of the future.**”*
- Further Mr Evans states: *“The Welsh Government recently launched its own Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy. In it, they state that we can’t stop all flooding and one of the aims of the strategy is to spark a conversation on how we manage flood risk in the future.”* This conversation is yet to progress, and yet is seen as being key to our approach to flooding in the future. Who is leading on this, and how?
- Mr Evans also states: *“The scale of the challenge before us means that we cannot address the issues on our own, nor without significant investment and resources. We also need to deliberate on what level of service Wales wants and is willing to pay for from its flood risk authorities.”* I would like to know who is progressing this work as well. Surely an Independent Inquiry would greatly assist this work?
- Finally, Mr Evans writes *“Only by taking a holistic approach can we make the best decisions about the actions and investments needed to mitigate future risks of flooding.”* An Independent Inquiry would inform that holistic approach, by providing answers into what went wrong and why. The Welsh Government wants there to be a national conversation to determine this, but this will remain aspirational at best if we do not see a concerted effort to better understand the risks and investment required.

The questions posed above are ones that should be directed to the Welsh Government, to understand why there has been underinvestment in Natural Resources Wales and how that is being addressed. I believe from my informal conversations with Natural Resources Wales that this would be welcomed.

I have also shared these responses with my fellow Plaid Cymru Councillors on Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, and Councillor Shelly Rees Owen has reiterated the need for greater support and counselling for those affected. No bespoke package of support has been provided by anyone, and it is expected that counselling requirements would be provided via normal routes.

Pentre also continues to be at risk of flooding, and despite the work that has been carried out there are still issues and blocked pipes. Residents do not feel reassured.

During the heavy rain a few weeks ago, Cllr Rees-Owen was contacted by a resident. They live near the Pentre Culvert and were told by a worker that rain brought more debris down the mountain and it blocked the new outlet to the culvert sending the water up over the top of it and into the old outlet. Workers manned the culvert all night and had to remove debris as it fell.

I am aware that the term of this Government is fast coming to an end, but the issues of flooding will not disappear. There are far too many unanswered questions, and communities across Wales deserve answers and greater support. I hope a new Welsh Government will instigate an Independent Inquiry as a matter of urgency. I hope the Petitions Committee can continue to support this fight for justice.

Kind regards,

Cllr Heledd Fychan,

Pontypridd Town Ward.