

P-05-1010 An independent inquiry into the 2020 flooding in Rhondda Cynon Taf so that lessons are learned, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 28.09.21

Independent Inquiry into the 2020 Flooding in Rhondda Cynon Taf

Storm Dennis affected many parts of the UK, but 25% of the damage that occurred in total was suffered by Rhondda Cynon Taf¹. Within RCT County Borough alone, 1498 properties suffered internal flooding and there was extensive damage to infrastructure including rail and highway networks, town centres, business parks and leisure facilities². As two members of the Petitions Committee reside in Rhondda Cynon Taf, they will have first-hand experience of the scale of the devastation.

This petition was originally brought forward by Heledd Fychan, Councillor for Pontypridd Town Ward and discussed by your committee. As Heledd is now a Member for the Senedd it has been passed to myself to take forward as I was a supporter of the petition. I saw the consequences of the flooding first hand as 43 homes in the lower end of Trehafod in the Rhondda Ward where I am a councillor were flooded. At the time, and as recently as September 2021 it has been noted by the First Minister that an independent inquiry would be a waste of public funds in light of the reporting mechanisms already in place (Section 19 reports) and in light of a report that the Law Commission has been tasked to publish in relation to Coal Tip Safety.

We are now in a much more informed position to look in detail at the analyses and recommendation made by these reports. As we feared there remains a chasm between what information RCT residents want to know and what the reports deliver in reality. This is why we would like the petitions committee to re-consider previous findings and give consideration again to the need for an independent inquiry.

Why an independent inquiry is needed?

Attached as [Appendix A](#) is the original submission to the committee, which makes the case for an Independent Inquiry. The original submission also includes a collection of testimonials which I would urge members to read. Therefore the comments below reflect recent development and updates, and why an independent inquiry is still considered essential.

i) Limitations of the Statutory Reports

The First Minister stated during the debate on this issue on 9 December 2020: *“All Members of this Senedd have a role in scrutinising those reports closely as soon as they're available and ensuring that the views and interests of their constituents are represented. And this Senedd has a role in ensuring that we do learn the lessons from those reports and apply them in national policy and local operational practice to keep Wales safe. I believe that the*

¹ <https://golwg.360.cymru/newyddion/cymru/563567-storm-dennis-argyfwng-stepen-drws-medd>

professionally prepared and legally required reports from local authorities will allow us to do that."

To date, only 3 Section 19 reports have been published with at least 16 more expected. Only two detailed ones have been published – one in July relating to Pentre and one recently in relation to Cilfynydd.

I, and others involved in this campaign for justice for flood victims, am still convinced that the reports, thorough as they are and written in good faith, do not allow us to answer many of the issues that need addressing urgently. They are written by the Local Authority as the Lead Flood Authority.

In relation to Pentre, the overarching conclusion is that some brash from tree felling was a contributory factor to causing the flooding in this area, and NRW contend that though some brash did enter the water causeways, it was not responsible for the floods. Some selected people from Pentre were invited to a meeting with local politicians following the publication of this report where they were led to believe that compensation should be received from NRW. Chris Bryant MP stated on twitter on the 1st of July that

".....we now know for certain what a lot of us thought for a long time which is that the main body of the flooding only happened because brash and wood was left on the mountain side near the water course, got into the water course, blocked the culvert and left to the flooding coming down the streets.....NRW must take responsibility and I will be making sure – working with Buffy Williams, Member of the Senedd that we get compensation for everyone who is involved....and at the same time it is really important that RCT have put new measures in place to make sure that nothing like this can ever happen again, that first of all means no wood lying near the water course, secondly a massive more than half a million pound has been spent on a new culvert at the top of Pentre..."

A statement released by NRW on July the 2nd states:

"We accept that woody material washed off the mountains above Pentre may have contributed to blockages to the culvert system, which also included a significant amount of soil and rock. However, a proportion of the woody debris was unrelated to NRW's felling operations and was washed down as a natural consequence of such an extreme event. NRW therefore disagrees with the report's inference that its harvesting operations were the primary cause of the flooding during Storm Dennis."

Prior to the publication of the Pentre Section 19 report on June the 7th a letter was submitted by Councillor Andrew Morgan, Leader of RCT Council and Chair of the Welsh Local Government Association to the Minister for Climate Change Julie James. The letter in essence notes various problems experienced by Local Authorities when working with the NRW and calling for a review of NRW's remit and that consideration should be given to how well NRW are performing and if there might be alternative arrangements for delivering their functions.

In view of the competing agendas at play here and the obvious blame game that is happening, it is not possible for RCT residents to have any faith that the truth of what happened at each flooding occurrence will be understood and shared publicly.

Unfortunately, some politicians seem to show that they are willing to mislead local people and make false promises about compensation rather than present an honest report of what

happened, who did what, could things have been done any differently and what lessons have been learnt.

Heledd Fychan, Member of the Senedd recently undertook a survey of all those who occupied or lived in properties that were flooded in Pentre, after the publication of the Section 19 report. All of those that responded still support an independent inquiry and feel the Section 19 report did not provide the answers or assurances they were seeking. In response to the question 'How confident are you that work undertaken since the floods will stop your home/business from being flooded in future? Only 10% of respondents felt that they were confident that they would not flood again.

ii) Emergency Planning

As a new local councillor for the Rhondda Ward, elected only 8 months previously when the flooding hit I, along with countless volunteers got stuck into the task of helping those whose homes were under water. From my experience in Trehafod I would say the first few days can only be described as chaotic. Considering there was serious flooding and damage in so many communities at the same time, it could be argued that this was to be expected. Basic services were stretched and information hard to come by. Wondering if we were following best practice and official advice I went searching for the Local Authority's emergency plan. On the website there was a plan from 2011 (it was replaced with a more recent version a few weeks later). It is a detailed strategic plan giving guidance to officers and members about what should happen when and where. According to the plan the strategic objectives of the Local Authority in a situation of emergency is:

6.2 Objectives

- *The support of the emergency services.*
- *The provision of a wide range of support services for the community.*
- *The co-ordination of recovery and return to normality of the community including the incident site.*
- *Maintaining the authority's normal service at an appropriate level.*
- *The management of voluntary agencies.*

Their integration is essential to the effectiveness of the overall response and crucial to the care of those involved. The provision of services covering the following five functional areas will provide the basis for a coordinated local authority response to any emergency situation.

- *Information*
- *Personal Care and Support*
- *Works*
- *Feeding*
- *Accommodation*

It was of interest to note that the emergency plan also stipulated that

The use of Volunteers in an emergency within Rhondda Cynon Taf will be co-ordinated by the County Borough Volunteer Emergency Committee. The Committee will meet on a regular basis to discuss plans and strategy. The members of the Committee will be:-

- 1. A representative from Community Care*
- 2. A representative from Children's Services*
- 3. An Emergency Planning Officer*

4. The Fire Service

5. The Police

It is known that the work of dealing with the effects of Storm Dennis was a mammoth task for the Local Authority and other agencies. It is also true that many individual employees, local members and volunteers in many agencies performed above and beyond their role descriptions. Unfortunately it is not possible to truly understand the after picture of what happened, as there has been no analysis shared by Local Authority of the decisions and actions taken in the aftermath of the Storm. The statutory reporting duties does not require the Flood Authority to reveal how it performed against the emergency plan, what the logs of officers reveal about the learning actions that come from the experience and whether those who were leading the chain of command exercised their duties as expected.

Climate Emergency

In 2019, the Welsh Government declared a climate emergency. The Future Trends report, published in 2018, predicted that by 2030 the potential impacts of Climate Change on Wales include flooding, coastal changes, drought, shortages of water, risks to health and wellbeing from high temperatures, and risks to nature. An independent inquiry would help us understand the role the changes to the climate played in the flooding and determine what actions we need to take now – rather than in years to come – to save our climate. To quote Natural Resources Wales from their report into flooding in Wales in October 2020.

“Only by bringing together all levels of government, public bodies, businesses, communities, families and individuals to respond to this very real threat can we make Wales stronger in our adaptation to future floods. We at NRW are committed to doing just that.”

“But to truly learn the lessons from the February 2020 flood events, there needs to be a fundamental consideration of the choices that governments, decision-makers and society have on how the risks can be managed.”

Residents Concerns and Experiences

RhCTCBC as the main flood authority did employ a company to collate the views of affected residents. However no report has been shared outlining what the residents main concerns were and how, if and when their concerns will be addressed by the various implicated agencies.

Health Impacts

The stress experienced by local residents cannot be underestimated. The effects are ongoing and can still be clearly seen. Many homes stand empty, other homes have experienced long delays in home renovations due to the Covid pandemic that followed closely on the tails of Storm Denis. A public inquiry would have the ability to investigate the health impact of the flooding and use this information to provide services but also to plan for future climate related events. The wellbeing costs of the flooding has yet to be acknowledged or costed.

I urge the petitions committee to support this call for an inquiry as an opportunity to ensure that the destructive and damaging effects of Storm Denis is used as an experience to inform future planning and create a positive legacy for the future.