

TITLE OF REPORT: **Strategic Review of Flooding Response and Distribution of Sandbags**

REPORT OF: **Paul Dowling, Strategic Director, Communities & Environment**

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to present findings and outcomes from a Strategic Review of Flooding Response and for Cabinet to endorse and recommend Council to approve a Sandbag Policy for Gateshead.

Background

2. Gateshead experiences severe weather on a frequent basis, most recently heavy rain and subsequent flooding in January 2016. A debrief of events was undertaken by all responding officers which resulted in a strategic review of flooding response with a summary of lessons learned identified for future flooding incidents. As this type of incident can occur at any time there needs to be an assurance to the public that the Council has the capability and capacity in place to respond to flooding in Gateshead, including having a clear and concise policy on the approach to sandbags.
3. Currently the Council will provide sandbags to residents and businesses who contact us in a flooding event, pending an assessment. A decision is then made as to whether to provide sandbags or not but this is an informal process. The production and distribution of sandbags has a significant impact on the capacity and capability of the operational teams responding to a flooding event and stretches limited resources during the response phase. Some flooding incidents occur with little or no warning and it can be difficult to deliver sandbag supplies to communities in time to be of any benefit to prevent flooding.
4. Whilst the use of sandbags may restrict some flooding, they will not completely prevent the encroachment of floodwater into a property. Sandbags may be used to manage surface water on and from the public highway and can be effective in deflecting running water. However there are more effective flood defences that if prepared in advance of a flood event, can provide more effective protection to properties than the issuing of sandbags to individual residents and properties
5. A Corporate Resources Advisory Group considered an options paper on the Council's emergency response arrangements to flooding, in particular around the current and possible approach to issuing sandbags. The Group provided

views on the potential options for a future Sandbag Policy in Gateshead and a summary of the Group's advice is attached at appendix 2.

6. The proposed draft Policy is attached at appendix 3 and a draft communications strategy is attached at appendix 4.

Proposal

7. It is proposed that Cabinet endorses and recommends Council approves a Sandbag Policy for Gateshead that in summary will mean the Council will not provide sandbags to individual residents or businesses in a flooding event.

Recommendations

8. Cabinet is asked to recommend the Council to approve the proposed Sandbag Policy for Gateshead as set out in appendix 3 to the report.

For the following reasons:

- (i) To ensure more sustainable prioritisation of operational resources during a flooding incident therefore increasing the Council's capacity and capability to respond
- (ii) To instil an onus on the community to become more resilient and rely less on the Council to pro-actively protect their properties from flooding – achieving more together.
- (iii) To ensure communities utilise more effective protection methods to protect their own properties from a flooding event.

Policy Context

1. The proposed draft policy is in line with Vision 2030, and in particular will support the creation of sustainable and thriving communities, and prosperous communities with a focus on the environment. The overall aim is to strengthen response arrangements in all communities and for volunteers to work with us during an emergency, with the overall objective of 'achieving more together'. The proposal also supports Gateshead Volunteers to encourage more of us to volunteer and contribute to our communities.
2. The proposal is in line with the Council Plan 2015-2020 and supports the delivery of all policy objectives within this. The proposed policy is also consistent with the aims and objectives of the Council's new Flood Risk Management Strategy.

Background

3. Gateshead experiences severe weather on a frequent basis, most recently heavy rain and subsequent flooding in January 2016. A debrief of events was undertaken by all responding officers which resulted in a strategic review of flooding response. A summary of lessons learned was identified for responding to future flooding incidents which included:
 - Clarification of the role of Councillors in an emergency situation or major incident
 - Considering and revisiting the implications of statutory legislation, national directives, initiatives and obligations relating to the flooding
 - Further development of the strategic approach to areas regularly affected by flooding and how this will be supported in the short term
 - Gaining a greater understanding of the various metrological warnings and alert systems, adapting our response to the expected impacts
 - Reviewing the multi-agency co-ordination and response plans, in relation to responding to flooding issues to ensure there is sufficient resources, capacity and capability
 - Ensuring all flooding hazards, risks and infrastructure are identified and mapped within Gateshead
 - Strengthening relationships and networking arrangements between partner organisations and the local authority
 - Improving communications with the public and managing the expectations of each partner organisation
 - Reviewing the sandbag allocation and distribution protocol for Gateshead utilising best practise from partner organisations and other local authorities
4. As this type of incident can occur at any time there needs to be an assurance to the public that the Council has the capability and capacity in place to

respond to flooding in Gateshead, including having a clear and concise policy on the approach to sandbags.

5. Traditionally, sandbags have been used to block doorways, drains and other openings into properties to prevent water backing up. Advice provided by the Environment Agency states sandbags can keep water out for short periods; can filter out some muddy sediment found in flood waters and are cheap and easy to obtain. However, sandbags are relatively ineffective when compared to purpose-designed flood protection products. Sandbags are a poor form of flood protection and effective flood defences prepared in advance of a flood event can provide far more effective protection to properties.
6. There is no statutory requirement for the Council to provide sandbags or protection to private property from flooding. However under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 the Council and other emergency responders have a statutory duty to respond to incidents deemed as emergencies and risk to life incidents which may include flooding.
7. Following severe weather experienced in 2008, a sandbag allocation and distribution protocol was developed for flooding incidents which provided operational information on stocks and supplies, local distribution points, priorities for provision, collection / disposal and the associated health and safety issues. This is now outdated and requires a review.
8. Currently the Council will provide sandbags to residents and businesses who contact us in a flooding event, pending an assessment. A decision is then made as to whether to provide sandbags or not but this is an informal process. The production and distribution of sandbags has a significant impact on the capacity and capability of the operational teams responding to a flooding event and stretches limited resources during the response phase. Some flooding events occur with little or no warning and it can be difficult to deliver sandbag supplies to communities in time to be of any benefit to prevent flooding.

Proposed Policy

9. In light of advice set out in paragraph 5 above, the proposed policy is that the Council will not provide sandbags to individual residents or businesses. The onus would be on the community to become more resilient and rely less on the Council to pro-actively protect their properties from flooding.
10. Instead, the Council's main focus will be to provide community resilience via interactive information and advice to residents and businesses about more effective methods of protecting their own properties.
11. The proposed policy will build on the cohort of Community Resilience Volunteers to assist their communities in the known flood risk areas and will relieve the pressure on operational teams responding during a flood incident and increase the response capacity and capability. This approach is also

consistent with the majority of approaches throughout the north east and around the country.

12. A pro-active communication campaign will be undertaken to all residents and businesses to advise residents on what the Council will do in the event of flooding, and will be up front advising people that sandbags will not be provided anymore. Awareness raising sessions will also take place with all operational Council staff on the implemented policy. A detailed briefing will also be produced for all councillors with information to provide to constituents when required.
13. The draft Communications Strategy is attached at appendix 4.

Consultation

14. Consultation has taken place with a small internal task and finish group that was established with representatives from key Council services which included The Gateshead Housing Company. An options report has also been presented to the Cabinet Members for Communities and Volunteering who support this policy direction of not issuing sandbags to individual residents and businesses.
15. The views of members were sought with a Corporate Resources Advisory Group held. Members considered an options paper on the Council's emergency response arrangements to flooding, in particular around the current and possible approach to issuing sandbags. The Group provided views on potential options for the future Sandbag Policy in Gateshead and a summary of the Group's advice is attached at appendix 2.
16. The Gateshead Multi-Agency Resilience and Emergency Planning Group which includes our multi-agency partner organisations have been briefed in relation to the proposed policy. It was acknowledged by partners that this is the policy approach being undertaken in many areas across the country.

Implications of Recommended Options

17. Resources:

a) Financial Implications – The Strategic Director, Corporate Resources confirms there may be long term savings however this is difficult to quantify as only estimated figures exist for current costs of sandbag provision.

b) Human Resources Implications – There are no human resources implications from the recommended options. Operatives who are involved in the production of sandbags will be allocated other roles within the response.

c) Property Implications - There are no property implications from the recommended options

18. **Risk Management Implications** - There is potential for residents to attempt to claim damages from the Council as a result of the policy decision not to provide sandbags. This is difficult to quantify. All claims would be strenuously defended. The policy does not breach any statutory duties so no liability would attach to the Council.

The policy will be fully communicated and publicised to all members of the public, staff and councillors before implementation.

19. **Equality and Diversity Implications** - None
20. **Crime and Disorder Implications** – There are no crime and disorder implications from the recommended options.
21. **Health Implications** - Effective management of responding to flooding incidents is important in protecting people from the adverse health impacts of the issues, including immediate threats to health and safety. Any sandbags used in a flooding response will be the responsibility of the Council to remove after the event and possible implications to consider may include contamination and safe disposal.
22. **Sustainability Implications** - There are no sustainability implications from the recommended options
23. **Human Rights Implications** - There are no human rights implications from the recommended options
24. **Area and Ward Implications** - This report affects all wards.
25. **Background Information**
- Sandbag Allocation and Distribution Protocol (Gateshead Council, 2008)

Corporate Resources Advisory Group

12 July 2016

Report to Cabinet

Strategic Review of Flooding Emergency Response and Distribution of Sandbags

Purpose of the Meeting

This Advisory Group was asked for views on the Council's emergency response arrangements to flooding, in particular around the current and possible future approach to issuing sandbags.

The group was taken through a PowerPoint presentation which detailed the strategic review of flooding emergency response, the current approach to using sandbags and potential options for a future Sandbag Policy in Gateshead.

Summary of Advice:

- Concerns were raised that some vulnerable residents would not receive sandbags and it would be prudent to have stores of sandbags near flooding hotspots. It was clarified that response teams would still use sandbags as and when appropriate rather than giving them to individuals.
- The group agreed that the main issue would be communicating to residents why sandbags would no longer be provided and that work needed to be undertaken with residents to identify problems and ensure they know how to respond if an event occurs.
- It was suggested that more should be done to protect Council housing stock. It was confirmed that the response to flooding is tenure blind and that any issue would be dealt with by response teams and could potentially involve the use of sandbags, however the aim would be to use current stock better rather than distributing them to residents.
- It was queried whether currently the use of sandbags is monitored and whether there are any alternatives to deflecting flood waters. It was confirmed that the Flood Risk Management team do monitor use once distributed. It was also noted that alternative forms of protection are being looked at and better links between services have been made in order to alleviate the risk and occurrences of flooding.
- It was suggested that potential flooding risks should be identified in each Ward so that Councillors are aware of what is going on, this should also include other local authority boundaries and maps of localised flooding.
- It was commented that option one was not effective because often it is too late once sandbags are received by residents, also this is too labour intensive and responders would be better placed elsewhere during a flooding event.

- It was also commented that option two is good in theory, however when in crisis residents will panic therefore it is essential to inform people so they understand what they need to be doing. It was suggested that option two would be preferable if sandbags were placed in strategic places.
- It was noted that option three would inevitably mean trading at a loss because the infrastructure would initially need to be set up and would not look good if old and vulnerable residents were being charged.
- The group agreed that there should be a general communications strategy to advise residents on what the Council will do in the event of flooding. It was also noted that the communications should be upfront in terms of advising people that sandbags would not be provided anymore.
- It was suggested that more permanent measures be looked at in those areas prone to flooding, therefore save money in the longer term through implementing preventative measures.
- It was suggested that 'Aqua Sacks' be used rather than sandbags as they have a longer shelf life and are easier to store. It was also suggested that a one-off education programme be rolled out to places such as community centres where there has been flooding in the past. It was confirmed that the Emergency Response team is currently working with community centres so links have been made already and such programmes could be looked to be rolled out.
- The group agreed that option two should be taken forward, and should include an effective communications strategy.

Chair: M Gannon (Chair)

Councillors Present: G Haley, M Hood, J McElroy, I Patterson, J Wallace, P Mole, M Charlton, L Twist, M Henry and T Graham

Officers Present: Anthony Alder – Communities and Environment
David Patterson – Communities and Environment
Rosalyn Patterson – Corporate Service and Governance

APPENDIX 3

Sandbag Policy

Overview of Sandbag Policy

1. Gateshead Council will not provide sandbags to individual residents or businesses in a flooding event
2. The Council may use sandbags to protect the public highway from surface water flooding
3. The Council will provide information and advice to residents and businesses as to how best protect their property from flooding

Section 1 – Background Information

- 1.1 There is no statutory requirement for Gateshead Council to provide sandbags or protection for private property from flooding.
- 1.2 Sandbags are a poor form of flood protection, and proper flood defences, prepared in advance of a flood event, provide far more effective protection to properties
- 1.3 The distribution of sandbags during a flood event can have a significant impact on limited resources that are already stretched.
- 1.4 With little warning of some types of flooding occurring it is also difficult to get supplies to communities in time to be of any benefit to prevent flooding of property.
- 1.5 Therefore our approach to responding to flooding rather than supplying sandbags is to promote the benefits of preparing for flooding in advance of it occurring.
- 1.6 Residents and business owners are in a better position than the Council to respond to the threat of flooding, which can be unpredictable and happen quickly. This means that property protection measures can be deployed sooner than the Council could provide sandbags or mobilise other resources.
- 1.7 Gateshead Council aims to inform residents and business owners of the level of help that will be available during a flood event so that they can prepare themselves accordingly.

Section 2 - Sandbag Provision

- 2.1 Whilst the use of sandbags may restrict some flooding, they will not totally prevent the encroachment of floodwater into a property. Sandbags may be used to manage surface water on and from the public highway and can be effective in deflecting running water.

- 2.2 Gateshead Council holds a stock of sandbags which is primarily to assist the response in preventing flooding of the highway and assisting with the response in known 'at risk' flooding areas.
- 2.3 Sandbags will no longer be provided by the Council to individual residents and businesses to deploy on their own properties, and are encouraged to undertake the advice in Section 3 for protection of property.

Section 3 - Protection of Property

- 3.1 The responsibility for the protection of private property rests with the owner as does the chosen method of protection. Gateshead Council encourages everyone to be aware of the flood risk in their area and take any appropriate measures to protect themselves and their property such as purchasing their own flood protection equipment prior to a flood event.
- 3.2 There are more effective methods for protecting property than the use of sandbags such as purpose built door gates/barriers and air brick covers. These are easier to install, form a more effective seal, can be cleaned and re-used, and are more cost effective. Property owners should consider the type of flooding they may be at risk from and the potential water depths likely to be experienced when choosing which property protection methods to use. Useful websites include:
 - <http://www.smartfloodprotection.com/data-collection-form-2/>
 - <http://www.bluepages.org.uk/>
 - <https://www.gov.uk/prepare-for-a-flood/find-out-if-youre-at-risk>
- 3.3 Gateshead Council recommends that if property owners are considering using property level protection measures they carefully consider all the potential entry points that floodwater can use and seek professional advice where needed.

APPENDIX 4

COMMUNICATION PLAN

Communities and Environment

Sandbags

BRIEF SUMMARY OF CAMPAIGN			
Notify public of changes to council's policy regarding sandbags			
Comms lead	Graphics lead	Service contacts	Partners/others contacts
Emma Richardson	n/a	David Patterson, C&E	TGHC
Budget/Cost codes	Timescales	Key audiences	Proposed comms channels
tbc	September – December 2016 and ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public • Councillors • Employees • Businesses • Volunteer wardens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council website • Publications - Council News, Members' Briefings, Employee briefings via team brief (service level) • Social Media • Gateshead Now e-bulletin • Business e-newsletter • TGHC website and newspaper
SERVICE OBJECTIVES/GOALS/POLICY CHANGES			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council has a responsibility to ensure that measures are in place to plan for, prepare for, respond to and recover from any emergencies that occur in or have an effect upon Gateshead. • In the past the council have given out sandbags to residents and businesses to help them protect their properties. This policy has been reviewed and sandbags will no longer be given to individual residents and businesses on request to use on their own properties. • The Council will hold a stock of sandbags which are primarily to assist the response in managing surface water flooding on the highway and assisting with the response in known 'at risk' areas 			

COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT SERVICE GOALS	
Action 1	Council website to be updated with new advice and information on how to prevent flooding/policy change re sandbags
Action 2	Advice leaflet for residents on what the Council does in a flooding event and how residents can reduce the impact of flooding on their homes
Action 3	Members Briefing to be issued explaining new policy and process
Action 4	Employee briefings in relevant service areas (customer services, construction services). Volunteer wardens to be notified.
Action 5	Social media messages to go out if Met Office warn of risk of flooding – residents to be warned that no sandbags will be given and to look at council website for advice
Action 6	Council News article in Winter 2016 issue and Autumn 2017
Action 7	Gateshead Now (e-bulletin) item to direct residents to new web page showing flooding prevention advice – October 2016
Action 8	Item in Business Newsletter to inform businesses that they can no longer request sandbags

KEY MESSAGES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The council will no longer provide sandbags to individual residents or businesses in a flooding event
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sandbags outside individual properties are not the most effective way to protect properties from flooding - there are more effective flood defences that if prepared in advance of a flood event, can provide more effective protection to properties than individual sandbags
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sandbags may be used to manage surface water on and from the public highway and can be effective in deflecting running water
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sandbags that are used will be used differently to deflect water, this will still give protection to many properties
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residents and businesses need to take more personal responsibility for protecting their own properties – need to rely less on the council to protect their properties from flooding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Filling sandbags and delivering them can be time consuming for the council so by the time the bags are filled it may be too late to offer any benefit to prevent flooding. By not filling sandbags this will ensure more sustainable prioritisation of operational resources during a flooding incident therefore increasing the Council’s capacity and capability to respond
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The council does not have a statutory responsibility to protect private properties and businesses from flooding. We do have a responsibility to protect our own properties.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More effective information and advice to prevent flooding is available on the council’s website
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a team of Community Resilience Volunteers across the borough who will assist their communities during a flooding incident

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN			
ACTION 1 - Website	Deadline	Status	DONE
Write copy for website/amend existing web pages	31 Aug	DP to redraft webpages and consult with key officers	
Web team to create web pages	16 Sept	Web team to update web pages in conjunction with launch of policy	
ACTION 2 – Advice Leaflet			
Draft an advice leaflet for residents and councillors on what the Council does in an event and how residents can help themselves to protect their properties	31 Aug	DP to draft leaflet and ER to arrange for Graphics Team to design	
Arrange for a print run for councillors and update website with a PDF copy	16 Sept	DP to liaise with Print Unit, web team and members’ services	
ACTION 3 – Members Briefing	Deadline	Status	DONE
Write and issue members briefing if cabinet approve policy on 13 Sept	16 Sept	DP to draft and issue via members’ services	
ACTION 4 – Employee briefing	Deadline	Status	DONE
Update and amend Customer Services scripts for call takers to follow when a call is received	31 Aug	DP to meet with Heather Marshall Customer Services to map out new process for call takers following the implementation of the	
Write employee briefing note if cabinet approve policy on 13 Sept	16 Sept	DP and ER to draft, and circulate to key groups and services	
ACTION 5 – Social media messages	Deadline	Status	DONE
Draft social media posts, Twitter/Facebook	As & when	ER to draft	
ACTION 6 – Council News article	Deadline	Status	DONE
Draft item for Winter 2016 Council News	24 Oct	ER to draft	
ACTION 7 – Gateshead Now			
Book space in future issue of Gateshead Now	31 Aug	ER to book	done
Draft text for Gateshead Now	16 Sept	DP and ER to draft	
ACTION 8 – Business e-newsletter	Deadline		DONE
Book space in October issue of Business e-	31 Aug	ER to contact Joanne Proud	done

newsletter			
Write copy for Business newsletter	16 Sept	ER, JP and DP to draft	
Promote business continuity messages as part of article	16 Sept	DP to co-ordinate	

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