

**WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

HELD REMOTELY

THURSDAY, 3RD SEPTEMBER 2020 (6PM)

Present:

Councillors: M J Hart (Chairman), S J Chambers (Vice-Chairman), N J Desmond, C Edginton-White, S Griffiths, S Miah, T L Onslow, M Rayner, S E N Rook and D R Sheppard.

Observers

Councillors: J F Byng, A Coleman, H E Dyke, N Martin, F M Oborski MBE, C Rogers, A Totty and P W M Young.

OS.32 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence

OS.33 Appointment of Substitutes

No substitutes were appointed

OS.34 Declarations of Interests by Members

Councillor C Edginton-White declared that she was a member of the Committee, and would also be giving a presentation on behalf of Bewdley Town Council, which as a Councillor had a dispensation to be able to do that.

OS.35 Consideration of the flooding motion from Council – Evidence Gathering from voluntary partners, affected residents and businesses.

The Chairman announced that there were three public speakers listed on the agenda. He said that an additional four speakers from Wribbenhall Residents Flood Group has requested to speak after the deadline had passed. He said that under the procedure rules for Scrutiny Committees, up to five people were permitted to speak on one agenda item. He advised that he had used his Chairman's discretion and would allow all seven people to speak, as it was an important issue and was refreshing that members of the public wanted to engage with the Council.

The Chairman invited each of the seven registered speakers in turn to address the Committee.

Councillor C Edginton-White, Bewdley Town Council Community Flood Volunteer Group

In 2007 the Environment Agency commenced a temporary flood defence trial to

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protect 19 houses at Beale's Corner.

In 2014, at the end of that 7 years, during the last year of the trial the flood peak was 5.05 metres and the EA reported in later newsletters that the temporary barrier was "close to being ineffective and overwhelmed."

In September 2014 the barrier trial was reviewed and the EA stated that they "found that PLR (Property Level Resilience) was the most viable publicly-funded long term solution to manage flood risk for the community." The cost benefit formulae which they were obliged to use did not take into account, heritage properties, listed buildings nor the impact on the local economy which was caused by necessary bridge closures.

The EA were unable to guarantee deployment of the temporary barriers indefinitely saying "as it operates under permissive powers and does not know what funding will be available beyond the current spending round."

Bewdley Town Council Community (Flood) Volunteers Plan - On April 14th 2016 it was agreed "that the Environment Agency will take a partnership approach with Bewdley Town Council, Wribbenhall Flood Group and community volunteers to enable the temporary barrier to continue in the short term, until March 2020. The partnership approach is dependent on 3 elements being addressed. The community involvement plan will capture the details and be the basis of review. The property level protection and resilience scheme as planned was to proceed regardless of decisions around the temporary barriers. In November 2016 Bewdley Town Council in consultation with the EA drew up a Community Volunteers Plan with a handbook, published in handbook format in November 2016. The flood plan which was instituted and it was a partnership arrangement between Bewdley Town Council to be sure the barriers were continued. There was a training exercise and we then had engagement. The only engagement we had on the 23rd when the flood was when the barriers were not breached but the barriers were not put up at Beales Corner but there was serious flooding at Severn side south. The Bewdley TC Flood Volunteer Group are in regular contact locally with a team, there have been residence updates and newsletters and face-to-face. Regular flooding in Bewdley is predictable and the frequency of more significant flood events is likely. There is therefore a very strong case to be made for a permanent flood barrier at Beale's Corner and this is the position which Bewdley Town Council has consistently been putting forward.

Ruth Lemiech, Wribbenhall Residents Flood Group

There have been a lot of residents affected. Some of our neighbours are still unable to live in their own homes and I would also draw attention to, obviously when you think of Bewdley you often think of our corner of Beales Corner but actually Mill Side Court which has got much newer properties has been badly affected as well. Some of the residents were unable to live there for a considerable number of weeks due to flooding of their basements with sewerage. I also just wanted to remind the committee of the report from the Environment Agency in June who stated quite worryingly that over the next 30 years they predict that the flood peaks upstream of Worcester will be higher than those that we experienced in February, that normal winter flooding will be close to those we experienced in February and more extreme events that we experienced in February are likely. In terms of the photographs that you saw on the slides and just to try and share our experience of events, we had a significant flood event that was kind of a surprise that we really shouldn't have in Bewdley. It was so sudden that it wasn't possible to erect the full extent of the barriers that was about 10 days before we had the full barriers over topping. Once the barriers were in place and river levels rose we were actually warned as

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residents of a catastrophic failure of the barrier and a danger to life we were warned of a potential 10 foot high tidal wave as barriers were breached and we experienced the police knocking on our front door saying we've got one hour to evacuate our properties and because they felt that there was such a significant risk. I think that affected about 70 properties at that time but the Police would be able to confirm that. It was obviously very scary and really upsetting. If people know Bewdley we were evacuated as far as the Black Boy and then police moved us on. They evacuated us actually as far as the Great Western so people literally just had to abandon their residences. Most people then returned home after a couple of days but a few days later, and I am sure you saw the dramatic footage, the barriers were over topped resulting in very extensive flooding at Beales Corner. So clearly there has been a significant impact on our home and families over quite an extended period of time and obviously as we went into lockdown we are still very much in the recovery period as I know some of the other contributors will testify. There has also been a very significant impact on the town, businesses and inconvenience to other residents. My husband will talk a little bit about how the property level protection failed but what the flood group and the whole community would like is equitable protection this side of the river. We want permanent flood barriers for Beales Corner, Stourport Road and Millside Court, and that is what we will hope you will endorse this evening.

Richard Perrin, Bewdley Civic Society

First of all, may I say that Bewdley Civic Society wishes to acknowledge how hard the EA has worked to combat the long term and ongoing issue of flooding in Bewdley.

My question relates to the deployment of the temporary flood defence barriers on Beale's Corner and the first part of Stourport Road.

In 2000 the flood that year saw the river level at Bewdley peak at 5.56 metres and we all know that consequent upon that event Bewdley got its defences on both sides of the river, albeit the Wribbenhall side were provided with the temporary pallet type structures. I have examined the Environment Agency's Official website for River Levels at Bewdley <https://riverlevels.uk/river-severn-bewdley#.X0zMM0BFzIU> and, according to the historic information thereon, it can be seen that one occasion in February 2014 the river peaked at just over 5 metres. I understand from a previous Oversee and Scrutiny meeting about the 2020 floods that the Environment Agency (EA) advice that the Wribbenhall barriers have an operating limit of 5 metres yet from memory I have no recollection that barriers were close to being overwhelmed on that occasion. This year the flood level exceeded the height of the Wribbenhall barriers reaching a peak of 5.48 metres with resulting devastation. I have spoken to some residents who live in Stourport Road and who experienced flooding in their properties, and they tell me that the barriers in February this year had markings on them which differed to barriers previously deployed and are of the opinion that the barriers were lower than those previously deployed. I cannot vouch for this myself but, in my view, it does beg the question " were the barriers deployed in February different to those usually used? Furthermore should the EA, in the knowledge that the flood in 2000 reached 5.56 metres, have installed barriers that are fit for purpose and can deal with levels of 6 metres or more as they do on the Bewdley side? Indeed, we would like this Committee to contact the EA to see if that is an avenue they can explore before another large flood comes along.

I am assuming that we will not get permanent barriers before the upcoming winter when we may well get another very large flood.

David Hegarty, Wribbenhall Residents Flood Group

I will reiterate the thanks to the elected members and the officers that all the efforts they put into date. Putting it simply our house flooded; it didn't flood with water it flooded with contaminated flood water. It was contaminated with diesel, sewage and a whole host of other chemicals that are as yet unknown. The damage has been catastrophic to one of the most historic houses in Bewdley because we live in the house called the Dog Wheel. The personal property protection I've been asked to talk about well it didn't work, you know, our house flooded. There are real questions about the standard to which it was installed by the subcontractors that had the contract for the Environment Agency. If it had been installed to a high quality and effectively maybe we wouldn't have flooded but we do not know. I would put forward some very simple suggestions. So the barriers overtopped and that resulted in a massive evacuation, as you heard my wife say a few minutes ago say we have been told that 70 houses were evacuated, I was told by the police on the night that they think up to 140 houses were evacuated. We don't know if that was necessary to that degree or not? But our house protrudes out slightly, it's a timber frame with wattle and daub infill and the catastrophic impact of a wave of that size coming over could have resulted in a loss of life. Aside from that there was always the real risk of loss of life with the temporary barriers, and with children that will go the wrong side of the barriers to get to school. There are real issues here and the cost benefit analysis that was always previously applied, 19 houses protected didn't merit the investment. Quite clearly a number of the emergency services don't believe only 19 houses were at risk, if that's the case why was there such a mass evacuation when the barriers were going to be overtopped?

Councillor A Totty joined the meeting at this point, (6.22pm).

Irene Buxton, Wribbenhall Residents Flood Group

I live on the corner and the barriers that were put up at that time weren't the right barriers, they were too low. I argued the point with the Environment Agency and they said that they were the ones but they wasn't, we have had them higher than that. When I spoke to them after, they said that it would have over toppled it anyway because it would have come around onto the bridge and down. We were all evacuated, well we evacuated ourselves because it got a bit scary and I've lived in this property for 19 years and I have never experienced this in all them years. I had nearly 3ft of contaminated water, sewage you name it, everything, in my property and it has resulted in over £40,000 worth of damage. My opinion is we need permanent flood barriers and I don't believe anything else will work because I've had all the property level protection that they can offer us and it all failed miserably unfortunately, but that's how it is and I can't really say a lot more now because I'm so upset about it and I am too scared to now to live in my house when the river comes up, it is frightening.

Linzi Wilson, Wribbenhall Residents Flood Group

I am an owner of a property on Beales Corner, number 4. I brought 3 and 4 at

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auction in 2004 and we had several floods during the period of restoration, but this final flood was the worst I had ever experienced and I had done a lot of flood mitigation work myself prior to the floods. The PLP measures by the Environment Agency haven't been completed yet at that point. So I have only recently had the doors fitted, the front and back, in the last couple of weeks. So as yet I don't know how that will work but we were given or we were all given temporary barriers to place in the doorways and sandbags, but that obviously didn't work as it all seeped through the floors and the walls etc. So it was pretty bad in my property which was tenanted and the tenant had to be saved by the rescue services over the stable door; she was in her 70s so it wasn't terribly clever. She did appear on Sky News, so she had a lot of coverage that day. Suffice to say the property is still empty; I have lost my rental income. The work has started this week now that it is all dry, I am having a kitchen fitted which is stainless steel and if it floods again I won't have to rip it out hopefully and so there's some more mitigation work that I've done. We certainly need the permanent flood barriers in order to keep the town running.

Paul Smith, Wribbenhall Residents Flood Group

Six months later I am sitting here in my flooded lounge; you can see the drying machines behind me, they haven't been turned on yet, six months later. This is the problems we are dealing with. We purchased the oldest house in Bewdley in 2012 safe in the knowledge that it was protected by demountable flood defences. Since then the EA advised us that the barriers were to be withdrawn and property level protection installed instead. I could not comprehend that the only solution on offer was to allow the filthy flood waters of the Severn to rise up against our 700 year old house, our grade 2 star listed property in what I consider to be an embarrassing backwards step for Bewdley. EA contractors surveyed my property and decided that a cellar pump and a flood door were required. Contractors began working in our cellar, wrongly sinking the pump into the cellar floor, it was re-fitted a further 3 times. The flood door was only fitted last month, far too late to protect us from the flood event in February. When the flood event in February happened our cellar pump failed as soon as water touched it. As an interim measure we were given a flood gate on the front door; this failed. Property Level Protection failed on a spectacular level. Since the flood event in February Watertight have reassessed our property and they found an additional 31 points of water ingress that were missed during the first inspection, errors that contributed to our property being flooded. I could talk in length about the flood events in February; I could talk for half an hour. The 3 peaks over the 3 weeks about how Storm Dennis was widely covered on national news yet the flood defences were not deployed during the first peak, and several homes and vehicles were destroyed. I had the opportunity to speak with our Prime Minister here in Bewdley and I fed him the line, Get Bewdley Done; he seemed to like that. It's my understanding that money has never been allocated to investing in permanent flood defences for Beales Corner. We must take this opportunity to get it right. No more contrived financial equations that try and prove its only 19 properties that are protected by flood defences. This has now been dispelled completely after February's events. The Black Boy Inn on Kidderminster road was advised to evacuate along with many surrounding properties. The threat of flooding, damage to properties and risks to life far exceeds the figure of 19 properties used to justify property level protection. February's events have demonstrated that hundreds of properties and businesses were affected. Property Level Protection has failed and now has to be dismissed as the sole solution for Bewdley. Friendships have been forged, heroes have emerged and people need to be recognised for what they did,

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but these events are going to be far more regular and risk to life is going to be more frequent. My family is the subject of a documentary which will be aired on the BBC later this year following our experiences being flooded, our experiences with our insurers, the EA and our local Council.

The Chairman thanked the speakers for their participation and for the two written representations received from local residents.

OS.36 **Consideration of the flooding motion from Council – Final Report and Recommendations**

The Committee considered the draft report to Council. A full discussion ensued and having heard the public participation, Members acknowledged the impact that the floods have had on those residents affected, and agreed that the Environment Agency should be invited to respond to the issues raised by residents, particularly in relation to the height of the temporary barriers.

Having fully considered the written and oral evidence presented to the Committee, Members recognised that whilst other areas of the district had been flooded, in light of the compelling and persuasive arguments, it was agreed that the priority should be to press for permanent flood defences at Beale's Corner, Bewdley. The Chairman asked the Principal Committee and Member Services Officer to incorporate the comments made by Members during the meeting into the final report, prior to it being circulated to Committee Members.

The Cabinet Member for Housing, Health, Well-being and Democratic Services thanked the Chairman and his Committee for a very professional, proactive and inclusive meeting. She said that she hoped that residents felt that the Committee understood and emphasized with them and would take the issues raised forward for them.

The Chairman thanked everybody for their diligent contributions and said it had been a very interesting and important scrutiny exercise to undertaken.

Agreed: Having fully considered the evidence gathered from the Environment Agency, Worcestershire County Council, West Mercia Police, Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service, Severn Trent and the public participation, the Committee agreed in principle draft wording for a set of recommendations a) to h) for Council. In consultation with the Principle Committee and Member Services Officer, delegated authority be given to the Chairman of the Committee to finalise the report for Council.

There being no further business, the meeting ended at 7.24pm.