

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE

18 MARCH 2014

BOWLING GREEN ROAD, TOPSHAM – DAMAGED FLOOD DEFENCES

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek approval for emergency works to repair flood damage to coastal defences affecting our land at Bowling Green Marshes, Topsham.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Bowling Green Marshes are owned by the City Council and are leased out to the RSPB on a 20 year lease. This area is designated as a site of special scientific interest (SSSI) and also has European status as a nature reserve for wild life & estuarial habitat. Around 80,000 people use this area every year.
- 2.2 The public highway of Bowling Green Road is located a short distance inland from the reserve and provides a vital vehicular link to the 5 residential properties collectively known as Riversmeet which are located at the confluence of the River Clyst and River Exe. These properties have their own private coastal defences with masonry faced walls which effectively extend around the river frontages. They also rely upon the Bowling Green Marshes defences for protection from flooding from the fluvial & tidal waters of the River Clyst.
- 2.3 The road and the reserve area is protected by a continuous earth embankment approximately 2-3.5 metres high above the natural ground level as far upstream as the Network Rail over-bridge which is the Exmouth Branch line. This embankment has a sloping stone revetment to the riverside which has inappropriate planting of non native species of bushes, Tamerisk, which is eroding the bank's stability.
- 2.4 The Environment Agency has maintained these river defences for more than 30 years as the river is classified as a main river, which they are responsible for.

3 RECENT STORM DAMAGE AND THE NEED FOR EMERGENCY REPAIR WORK TO THE FLOOD DEFENCES

- 3.1 Early in February this year the combination of high spring tides, strong southerly winds and low pressure caused a tidal surge and resulted in both river frontages in Topsham being overwhelmed and inundated.
- 3.2 At Riversmeet, the damage to the privately owned protective walls was extensive and the raised defences in Bowling Green Marshes were overtopped in several locations. More seriously, it breached the embankment, leaving a gap of some 30-35 metres in length, down to a level which would be overtopped by monthly spring tides.
- 3.3 The residents immediately alerted the Environment Agency to the problem, who, following an inspection of the storm damage and a quick assessment of the cost of its likely repair, together with a rough cost/benefit exercise, took some weeks to make the decision that repairs would not be undertaken as the cost would be too high to justify the benefits. The Environment Agency considered that, although flooding could occur, the risk to life from flooding was low. Hence, as these damaged defences had become beyond economic

repair and low priority, they decided to change their local strategy to retreat management as their preferred solution. This decision was made without any prior consultation and has effectively changed the Environment Agency strategy for this area which is set out in the Exe Estuary Management Plan of 2012, where this defence had been identified as being held for the foreseeable future.

- 3.4 The impact of this decision is significant for the residents of the five properties at Riversmeet. As the abandoned defences gradually fall into further disrepair, the public highway in Bowling Green Road will be regularly flooded and temporarily impassable at spring tides, potentially several times a year. Effectively the road would relatively soon become a tidal causeway for the properties at Riversmeet.
- 3.5 The City Council was made aware of the issue by the owner of Riversmeet House on 3 March following a 4.4 metre high spring tide which overflowed into the reserve via the breach in the defences and temporarily flooded the marshes and the road beyond. This subsequent incident brought to light the sudden change in the Environment Agency's stance on the future protection and the City Council, as riparian owner of these defences, was left with a decision of whether to intervene or not.
- 3.6 The RSPB also met on site and stated that they are very keen not to see any sudden change the habitat of the marshes from freshwater marshes to salt marshes. Further, they were found to have no liability for the maintenance of the defences under their current lease.

4 BASIS OF THE CITY COUNCIL'S DECISION TO INTERVENE

- 4.1 The options for the Council were considered at an emergency meeting between the Chief Executive and Acting Leader of Council and Portfolio Holder on 5 March. The Council could either do nothing or intervene under emergency measures offered to Local Authorities under the Bellwin Scheme as a result of the recent extreme weather. This funding scheme enables Councils to recover costs of the repairs to existing flood defences where property and local communities were left at risk of flooding or disrupted as a consequence of the recent severe weather. Given the other extensive & prolonged emergency sand bagging work carried out in Topsham, the cost of which had already amounted to over £20k, it was considered that this situation represented an emergency resulting from the recent storms which had been left unresolved.
- 4.2 The consensus at the above meeting was that the City Council should, on this occasion intervene, and carry out the emergency repairs to reinstate the breached embankment. This would attempt to reinstate the status quo and would allow all interested parties time to be actively consulted and involved in the future assessment and review of the long term protection and sustainability of this area from flooding.
- 4.3 An initial cost estimate for repairing the breach and several localised areas along the embankment is £50,000. This work has to be carried out before the end of May 2014 to qualify under the Bellwin Scheme. Therefore the necessary consents are currently being obtained in an effort to start works by the end of this month. It is anticipated that the work will take 4-6 weeks to complete dependent upon tides and river levels.
- 4.4 This would collectively take the Council's costs for emergency repairs and undertaking preventative measures to avert serious flooding to in excess of £70,000, which can be recovered from the Government.
- 4.5 A meeting with the Environment Agency and Riversmeet residents is being arranged to review of the long term protection and sustainability of this area from flooding.

5 CONCLUSION

- 5.1 Given the concerns of the residents and the leaseholders of Bowling Green Marshes in the light of the decision made by the Environment Agency not to repair the coastal defences and the Council's ability to reclaim the costs of emergency repairs and response from the Government the pragmatic approach to this emergency situation is for the Council to undertake the emergency repair.
- 5.2 The long-term strategic approach to coastal defences in this area will be discussed with the Environment Agency in due course.

6 RECOMMENDATION

- 6.1 That Members approve emergency works to repair flood damage to coastal defences affecting land at Bowling Green Marshes, Topsham;
- 6.2 That the cost of these works be reclaimed from the Government's Bellwin Scheme for emergency financial assistance to local authorities

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Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)
Background papers used in compiling this report:-

Exe Estuary Interim Management Plan 2012 – 2015