

Environment and Sustainability Committee



Date of meeting 14 January 2024

Title	<i>Update to Sandbag Policy</i>
Purpose of the report	To review and approve the updated Sandbag Policy
Report Author	<i>Sandy Muirhead - Group Head Commissioning & Transformation, SBC Applied Resilience</i>
Ward(s) Affected	All Wards
Exempt	<i>No</i>
Exemption Reason	N/A
Corporate Priority	Resilience
Recommendations	Committee is asked to: <i>Review and approve the update to the Sandbag Policy</i>
Reason for Recommendation	There is a need to have a clear stance on sandbags in readiness for any flooding and to align our policy with neighbouring Boroughs to ensure consistency of approach when flooding from the Thames occurs

1. Summary of the report

- 1.1 This report explores staff safety and the practicalities of providing sandbags to residents during flood events within Spelthorne and a narrative to the updated Sandbag Policy.

Background & Key Issues

- 1.2 A large proportion of the borough is located in areas of flood zone 2 (area at medium risk of flooding) and flood zone 3 (greater annual probability of flooding 1 in 100 in area 3a and 1 in 20 chance of flooding in area 3b) as designated by the Environment Agency with medium and high probability of flooding from local rivers. The floodplain of the lower Thames affects all but the northern region of the borough as well as the neighbouring boroughs of Runnymede and Elmbridge. The major towns and villages of Ashford

Shepperton Staines upon Thames and Sunbury are all at least in part located in regions of flood zone 2 and 3 medium to high probability of flooding.

- 1.3 The scale of properties at risk of flooding within the borough significantly exceeds the ability of the council to meet demand for sandbags. Deployment of sandbags by the council in response to requests from worried residents, present major safety, logistical and resourcing requirements, diverting significant efforts from statutory civil contingency responsibilities.
- 1.4 In addition, most evidence points to sandbags providing little to no practical defence from internal property flooding, particularly from rivers and ground water. The number of sandbags correctly lined and placed to defend an average detached property runs into multiple pallets. In addition, even with several operators the process to correctly deploy would normally take hours, rather than minutes. There would also be no defence against ground water flooding.
- 1.5 There are substantial health and safety risks to council staff, particularly in deploying sandbags, many of which cannot be adequately mitigated, presenting a very real risk of injury or fatalities, particularly during a wide-scale event.
- 1.6 Following the flooding of 2013/14, the council, along with the Environment Agency and Surrey County Council has worked with community groups to encourage and support community resilience plans for their local area. Support has focused on residents taking significant efforts to become more resilient to the impact of flooding (and indeed, where possible defend from flooding) and establishing closer links with groups during an emergency to assist with warning and informing, support to vulnerable residents and logistical support from the council.
- 1.7 If community resilience groups could be formed in Spelthorne and they have a viable plan in place, the Council could extend efforts to provide appropriate support, which may include provision of sandbags (or similar products) where deployment resourcing, understanding and mitigation of associated risks and a demonstrable benefit can be shown. Surrey Prepared are working on encouraging the formation of such groups in Elmbridge Runnymede and Spelthorne.
- 1.8 Threats to and impacts on critical infrastructure from flooding have been observed on several occasions in the UK. Although Spelthorne Borough Council does not have direct responsibility for the management and defence of critical infrastructure, as a Category One responder designated under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, the Council may be asked to support in the defence of critical infrastructure during a major incident, including through responding to requests for sandbags.
- 1.9 The Council maintaining a small supply of sandbags and a clear route for further supplies would support both the objective of supporting community resilience groups and where necessary, supporting the defence of critical infrastructure. Therefore a new policy has been developed (Appendix 1)
- 1.10 The previous policy of community sandbag distribution centres was considered in lien with neighbouring boroughs to no longer be sustainable due to logistics, safety, staffing (even by community volunteers) and effectiveness to those areas needing some sandbags. (Appendix 2).

2. Analysis

- 2.1 Analysis clearly demonstrates that it is not possible for the council or other agencies to defend properties from flooding through the use of sandbags. However, the trauma of flooding on a community cannot be underestimated, with some residents believing strongly that the Council has a duty to provide sandbags during a flood. Spelthorne Borough Council did deploy as many sandbags as possible to the community during the floods of 2013/14. Doing so went some way to demonstrating the council's efforts to support residents during flooding, although it should be noted, despite best efforts during 2013/14, there was little notable praise of the Council for efforts on this front and put staff safety at risk.
- 2.2 In addition, providing significant numbers of sandbags presented substantial safety, logistical and operational challenges. While some of these could be mitigated with improved systems, such as cross-referencing requests against flood risk and processing requests, the number of staff and contractors available to fill and deploy sandbags means there would be little hope of meeting demand during a moderate to large flood event.
- 2.3 The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 defines Spelthorne Borough Council as a Category One Responder and places numerous duties around supporting the multi-agency response as well as maintaining continuity of critical services. Attempting to provide maximum sandbag deployment diverts significant resources from these areas of responsibility and have shown to have extremely limited benefit during previous floods.
- 2.4 Neighbouring authorities having recently reviewed their own Sandbag Policies have adopted the same approach as outlined in the proposed Spelthorne policy. Alignment with neighbouring authorities within the Lower Thames area would assist implementation of the policy and consistent messaging in those Boroughs most vulnerable to flooding.

3. Options

- 3.1 Option 1 to agree the revised sandbag policy to be clear to residents, and in line with neighbouring boroughs, our role in relation to the provision of sandbags during flooding.
- 3.2 Option 2 Not to agree to the policy and provide sandbags which would potentially endanger staff delivering to flooded areas and sandbags have limited effect in preventing flooding from the River Thames or ground water flooding.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 An operating budget for a small stock of sandbags (or similar product) and associated management costs, including safety training, will be required. This would be in the order of £1,000 to £3,000/annum (depending on winter flooding).
- 4.2 It is proposed funding derived from dividend payments from shareholdings in Applied Resilience could potentially be used to support an operating budget for emergencies.
- 4.3 Neighbourhood Services by the nature of the service, will be required to maintain supplies and arrangements for their deployment. This may include

provision for out of hours response where the deployment criteria have been met and deployment agreed by the Incident Management Team. An example maybe sufficient sandbags to avoid wash from vehicles travelling through floodwater entering properties.

- 4.4 During a major flood there would be a reliance on the Government activating the financial relief Bellwin scheme to support emergency response costs.

5. Risk considerations

- 5.1 There is substantial risk to council staff in filling, delivering and deploying sandbags. While some of these risks can be mitigated, for example heavy lifting, others, particularly those associated with operating near flood water, particularly at times of Flood Warning or Severe Flood Warning (Risk to Life) impossible to fully mitigate.
- 5.2 There is no possibility of delivering the number of sandbags required to protect properties at risk during a major flood, and so a strategy of attempting to do so will ultimately fail.
- 5.3 Significant resources are allocated to managing requests for, filling, delivery and deployment of sandbags when taking requests from the public. These resources are required to support statutory services and emergency response arrangements such as rest centres.
- 5.4 The risk of failure to critical infrastructure during a major flood is not trivial and there have been several successful attempts in defending infrastructure during flood events, maintaining critical power and water supplies to hundreds of thousands. The Councils newly flexible policy would allow for better support to partners in these efforts.
- 5.5 Flooding leaves devastation in its wake and for those internally flooded can be impossible to get over. While there is no evidence that a meaningful defensive policy to flooding can be delivered by the Council, particularly through the supply of sandbags, some residents may feel that the council should provide large numbers of sandbags when requested in order to assist in defencing properties.
- 5.6 Longer term, it is hoped the River Thames Scheme will dramatically reduce flood risk within the Borough and should prompt a full review of the Sandbag Policy.

6. Procurement considerations

- 6.1 If agreed, procurement of sandbags or similar products would be required.

7. Legal considerations

- 7.1 There is no statutory responsibility on Spelthorne Borough Council to provide sandbags.
- 7.2 The council has a number of statutory duties under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 as well as numerous expectations as part of Local Resilience Forums Emergency Plans. These do not include the provision of sandbags.
- 7.3 The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 is relevant with respect to risks to responding staff.

8. Other considerations

8.1 Adoption of the updated Sandbag Policy would bring it into line with neighbouring authorities at similar risk, Runnymede and Elmbridge Borough Councils.

9. Equality and Diversity

9.1 Residents unable to deploy (or collect) sandbags could be perceived to be at a disadvantage. However, as the use of sandbags to successfully prevent internal property flooding for the majority of the borough is highly unlikely, the disadvantage is not clearly present. The Council shall focus on providing appropriate support to vulnerable residents, working in partnership with other relevant agencies such as Surrey County Council and the NHS. In most cases, remaining in-situ in a flooded property, or a property isolated by flooding and/or with a loss of key utilities such as drinking and wastewater or electricity, is not suitable for more vulnerable residents and support should focus on safe evacuation or/ or welfare provision.

10. Sustainability/Climate Change Implications

10.1 Extreme weather events and associated flooding are expected to become increasingly frequent as a result of climate change.

10.2 Sandbags collected by Spelthorne Borough or Surrey County Councils must be considered hazardous waste and disposed at an appropriately licenced landfill.

11. Timetable for implementation

11.1 Upon approval, procurement will commence for a small supply of sandbags or similar.

12. Contact

12.1 Sandy Muirhead – s.muirhead@spelthorne.gov.uk

12.2 Applied Resilience – emma@appliedresilience.org

Background papers: None

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Proposed Sandbag Policy

Appendix 2: Current Sandbag Policy