

Scrutiny Committee

Meeting to be held on 14 September 2012

Electoral Division affected: None

Future of Land Drainage and Flood Risk Management in the Alt Crossens Catchments - Environment Agency Response to the Task Group Report (Appendix 'A' refers)

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Executive Summary

In January 2012, the Scrutiny Committee published a task group report on the issues relating to water and flood risk management in the Alt Crossens water catchment areas. It dealt in particular with the effectiveness of the arrangements of the Environment Agency (EA) for consultation with the public as a means of informing future policy proposals.

As Lead Local Flood Authority, Lancashire County Council has powers to scrutinise the EA in its exercise of local flood risk management strategies.

This report contains the statutory response of the Environment Agency to the task group report at Appendix 'A'.

Recommendation

The Committee is asked to note Environment Agency's response to the task group report.

Background and Advice

Introduction

In early October 2011, the Environment Agency (EA) published a consultation document, seeking views on their proposals to alter the means and funding for water management of the Lower Alt with Crossens Catchment Area. This area includes a significant proportion of the land of the West Lancashire divisions administered by the County Council. In the main, it is a rural environment of high agricultural productivity. A significant amount of the national total of domestic vegetables are produced in this area.

The Environment Agency is a Government funded Agency that reports directly to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. In brief the remit of the EA is to:

- Protect and improve the environment and make it a better place for people and wildlife;
- Operate at the place where environmental change has its greatest impact on people's lives;
- Reduce the risk to people and properties from flooding;
- Make sure there is enough water for people and wildlife; protect and improve air, land and water quality and apply the environmental standards within which industry can operate;
- Act to reduce climate change and help people and wildlife adapt to its consequences; and
- Work closely with a wide range of partners.

Since publication of this document, local county and district councillors alike became aware of a strong and passionate local public reaction to the proposals made. This reaction was partly because of insufficient clarity in the document, especially around what must, as opposed to, what might happen in the future, but also on the depth and veracity of the evidence that was used to inform the document. There was particular fear and confusion about the potentially destructive effect any changes might have on the sustainability of the local agricultural economy and on people's livelihoods.

Under instruction of the Scrutiny Committee in November 2011, local county and West Lancashire district councillors established a joint task group to further explore and clarify the issues directly with the EA and to make recommendations. A key benefit of this process was the willingness of the EA to work with the task group and to ensure effective communication with interested groups and individuals as the consultation and engagement process continued. In January 2012 the task group's final report and recommendations were published under endorsement by the Scrutiny Committee. The final report can be read at this link:

<http://council.lancashire.gov.uk/documents/s7551/Appendix%20A.pdf>

The recommendations made in the report were:

- The Environment Agency provides written responses to those questions outstanding of the task group
- Councillors continue to be given every opportunity to be engaged in the consultation and debating period.
- The Environment Agency reinstates and reinvigorates its steering group as it continues through the consulting and debating period and investigates the many outstanding issues and factors that require a fuller consideration before proposals can be firmed up. This steering group should develop a more relevant membership, including elected members and officials from different councils and different political affiliations.
- The Environment Agency also ensures that the steering group includes members of the task group who have local interest, expertise and commitment to the consultation process, namely Cllr Blane, Houlgrave, Cropper and Barron. It should be noted, however, that this involvement will remain independent and out-with the corporate authority of both the county and district council.

- The Scrutiny Committee invites the Environment Agency to a meeting in summer/autumn 2012 to discuss their progress on developing a more effective public consultation process.
- The Executive of the county council plays a full and appropriate role in the continued consultations and debating period, according to its duties, responsibilities and policy commitments
- The county council submits a corporate response to the EA's consultation document, this response being informed by the findings of the task group
- This task group report be submitted to West Lancashire Borough Council and to local MPs for their information
- The Cabinet Member for the Environment communicates with the Secretary of State for Environment Food and Rural Affairs seeking clarification from Government on the reconciliation of policy commitments towards promoting growth and jobs in rural areas, in particular food and drink production, and withdrawing support for flood risk management in rural areas that are successful agricultural economies.

County Councillor Michael Green, Cabinet Member for Economic Development Environment and Planning gave oral acceptance of the report's recommendations to the Scrutiny Committee at the latter's meeting on 20th January 2012.

The response of the Environment Agency is attached at Appendix 'A'.

Consultations

N/A

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Risk management

This item has no significant risk management implications.

There are no other major implications.

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Directorate/Tel
Scrutiny Committee Agendas and Minutes	November 2011 and January 2012	Claire Evans, Office of the Chief Executive, 07917 836698

Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

N/A