

Councillor Duncan Enright
Labour & Co-operative Councillor for Witney East
West Oxfordshire District and Witney Town Councils

Monday, 29 January 2024

Notes of a meeting of Witney area residents affected by the floods on 23-25 December 2020, held on Zoom on 6 January 2021 with ward councillors

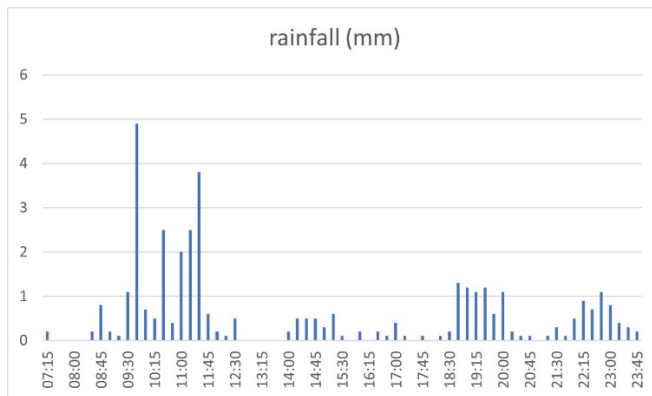
Notes below include messages from people not at the meeting, but wishing to contribute. The aim is to provide a basis for improving emergency response, and to take measures to mitigate future floods.

Photos and videos of the floods are available at www.facebook.com/witneyfloods

Introduction

December 23 Floods

On the morning of 23rd December extremely heavy rainfall (Environment Agency rainfall station at Worsham recorded over 8mm an hour for two and a half hours between 9.15am and 11.30am) led to flash flooding in parts of the District. Roads became rivers with drains, some already blocked, being overwhelmed (for instance on Newland, Eastfield Road, Hailey Road and in Delly End).

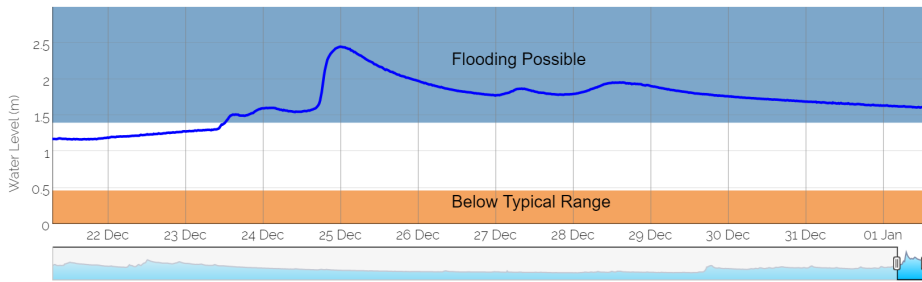


Rainfall at Environment Agency station 253861TP, 23/12/20

December 24 Floods

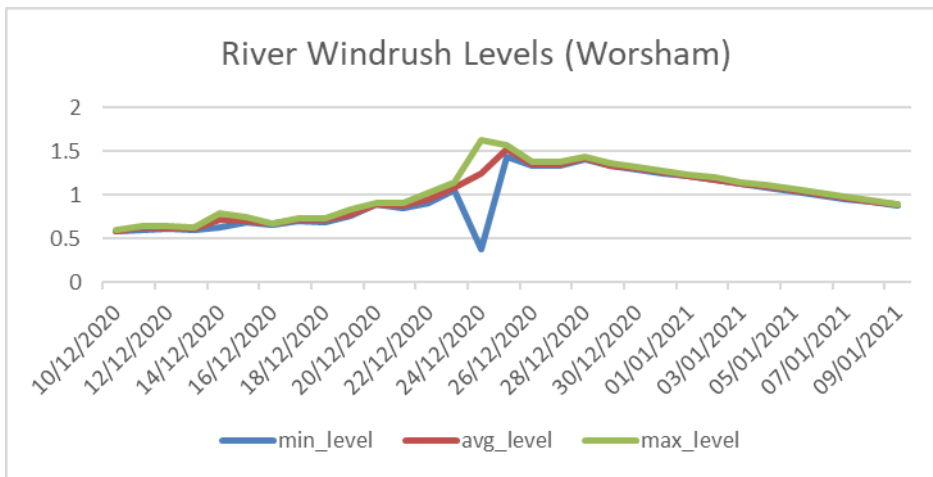
The following day, 24th December, the river Windrush levels rose extremely quickly from 1.6m around 6pm to 2.5m at midnight. Residents reported water levels This caused significant flooding in town centre locations including Millers Mews, Woodford Mill, Bridge Street and Riverside Gardens.

Long Term Measurements



River Windrush maximum levels at Witney (Environment Agency data, chart from Flood Assist Insurance)

Given the speed at which river levels rose at Witney, attention has been drawn by residents to the sudden drop in river level at Worsham which preceded the rise at Witney.



River Windrush levels at Worsham (Minster Lovell) (Environment Agency)

Emergency Response

On 23rd December residents reported being unable to contact the District Council and limited advice and support available. The regular contact number took over an hour to answer. The depot at Station Lane Witney was closed to visitors with no information available. The Wood Green reception was closed but answered the doorbell. Enquiries were directed to an unmarked storage unit in the car park of Elmfield, where a limited stock of sandbags (and, after 2pm, a sack of sand and supply of empty hessian bags) were available for residents to collect.

Warning messages from the Environment Agency came through too late, for example 12.42pm at Newland when the Madley Brook had already burst its banks and flooded paths and gardens. Alerts in recent years have been far too frequent and the suggestion is that they need to be far more carefully tuned and timed to be effective.

On 24th December, when flooding was predictable following rain the previous day, the District Council was not in evidence and it was reported that the Fire Service, who attended as the flood waters rose, were unable to contact them to coordinate the emergency response until late in the evening. The out of hours number in Liverpool was reported to be unable to offer advice or assistance, and those attending said that promised calls back were not made. The County Council was similarly uncontactable or did not respond.

Volunteers and fire service staff worked to help residents secure their homes as far as was possible. Sandbags were late arriving. Residents reported no advice on availability of sandbags and nor was other support available on Town, District or County websites or social media.

WhatsApp groups and other neighbourhood self-help communications were very effective in rallying support, for example in finding and laying sandbags. Council communications were non-existent or ineffective in large part. No register seems to exist properties prone to flooding, or of vulnerable residents at risk.

Questions about flood resilience

- We need an emergency plan as soon as possible. Does a register of properties prone to flooding, or vulnerable residents, exist?
- The failure of the emergency line and other communications from all councils is a grave concern. What can be done to improve them?
- Availability of sandbags is a priority. How can we improve?
- The process for coordination of the emergency response needs improvement and testing. What is the process for coordination of the emergency response?
- Concerns exist about the control of river levels. What role did river level management play in the sudden flooding and how could they be improved?
- Witney has grown substantially in recent years. Did new development in the area contribute to the floods and what is the remedy?
- New developments are planned. What is the viability of the Witney North development given the severe flash flooding in that area and subsequent town centre floods?
- Climate Change has contributed to higher temperatures and more frequent flood events. What can be done to mitigate the climate crisis?
- The bridge in Witney town centre clearly acts as a bottleneck for the river flows. What can be done to alleviate this?
- Lack of regular desilting around the bridge seems to contribute. What can be done to make this more regular?
- Drains have not been cleared across the area for some time. How soon can this be remedied?

Resident Reports

Where comments appear below in *italic*, they are verbatim reports from residents and others.

Introduction from Cllr Andrew Coles

“From my own personal experience of when I was there on the ground helping the emergency services and supporting residents late on Christmas Eve and into the early hours of Christmas morning, the response from WODC was far too slow. We did not get a satisfactory response from the out-of-hours emergency line. I was however very grateful that Mr Frank Wilson arrived on scene and used his authority to get WODC’s response moving. At one point I was wading through flood water at Riverside Gardens helping some elderly residents evacuate and sandbags still hadn’t arrived. Whether they would have prevented properties from flooding I don’t know, but it would have held the water back and bought us valuable time. WODC’s policy of allowing residents to collect sandbags and only delivering to vulnerable residents needs to change. Riverside Gardens is a retirement complex and the elderly residents cannot be expected to move and position heavy sandbags in an emergency situation. At the very least residents at Woodford Mill and Riverside Gardens, areas prone to flooding, should have their own stock of sandbags permanently on site and ready to go.

“I would also like to question the readiness and just how prepared we were. When we had very heavy rain in Witney on 23rd December, which brought flooding to many areas in North Witney, was it not inevitable that that rain water would come from further up-river i.e. Gloucestershire, off the Cotswold hills and from Burford etc, and make its way to central Witney some 24-36 hours later? To me that heavy rainfall on the 23rd should have been the warning signal and measures put in place, particularly at Woodford Mill, Mill Street, Riverside Gardens and Bridge Street, at that point. I am also concerned that the River Windrush isn’t maintained sufficiently. It has been several years since the river was de-silted at the bridge by the Environment Agency. In fact the silt wasn’t removed but simply pushed downriver. The river needs to be regularly maintained so it can hold the maximum levels of water at times like this. This includes the removal of natural debris like branches which may have fallen in.

“My final thought is that we must now listen to the concerns of local residents and seriously question the plan to build 1,400 homes in North Witney. I have no doubt that the building of 270 homes on land that floods off the Burford Road (the Kingfisher Meadows development) will have contributed to the flooding downriver at Woodford Mill, Riverside Gardens and Bridge Street etc. We cannot allow the same mistake, but on a much bigger scale, to be made in North Witney!”

Delly End

Michael Hocken, Simon Mills and Annabel Stringer

23rd December, 10.30am flooding began at a pace faster and to levels higher than 2007. The water carried a lot of clay indicating it came from Ramsden/B4022. Floods in 2014 were more minor and the defences erected then were overwhelmed in minutes. Contributing factors included the drains in Wood Lane and Whittings Lane being blocked (these have been reported blocked since October 2019 but no action has resulted from these repeated reports by residents).

At the B4022 junction the culvert is choked with roots and blocked and cracked; County have been informed but no action has been taken. A fire officer cleared the overspill into fields opposite Delly End on Priest Lane, and water cleared with a whoosh. It was commented that the filling in of Delly Pool is part of the drainage problem. The District emergency number did not provide any access to sandbags or other support at the time of flooding.

"The flooding in Delly End was on the 23rd, and appears to have a possible link with the sudden release of a huge quantity of water from trenches dug to drain the land on which the projected Solar Park is intended to be built (which could well greatly increase the risk of run-off flooding).

"Some six households in Delly End were flooded, and several people have been made homeless. Others are soldiering on in their properties. The flooding at Delly Pool and at the bottom of Whiting's Lane at the Pitt's Lane intersection remained in place for many days. Had it not been for the bold action of some local residents, who cleared away the blockages around the spillover beside the B4022 Finstock Road and caused the pent up water to be released with a mighty whoosh that took the Fire Chief on duty by surprise, such was the immediate siphon effect, goodness knows what would have happened!

"The other problem is that the County Council has repeatedly failed to clear blocked gullies reported on FixMyStreet and by phone, and the number of blocked gullies was a very clear cause of the run-off flooding that affected Delly End so badly. I first reported one blocked gully I was unable to clear on Whittings Lane back in October 2019, and it remains blocked to this day, despite repeated reminders and spurious 'inspected' messages.

"It was also somewhat galling to hear the leader and deputy leader of the District Council pontificating on the radio and in the local media saying that no-one had been made homeless (and then later that 'only one person' on Bridge Street had been made homeless), as if Delly End didn't matter, despite the incident having been reported to the Council's own emergency service (and indeed the very helpful on-the-spot presence of the Fire Brigade, who assured us that they were in touch with the District and County Councils).

"The emergency contact number based in Liverpool was frankly worse than useless. They failed to even log my initial call, and demonstrably didn't put through any message to Council officers or elected members. They gave me two numbers to call the local authority, which actually turned out to be in Herefordshire, and when we were told that there was a chance of further flooding on the margins of Storm Bella on Boxing Day, and I called back, they told me that there were sand bunkers and bags scattered around the District. However, they were unable to say where!

"Graham Knaggs (Chair Hailey Parish) was wonderful, and managed to locate two (one at the Council offices in Elmfield, and another on private land in Ramsden). Sadly both were empty by the time I arrived.

"I have therefore been unable to speak to a single Council officer or Member, and feel frankly rather let down, even making allowances for the season. We'd have appreciated even a message of support and concern.

"This meeting is thus all the more welcome, and I must express real gratitude to those who have organised it. I do hope the District will take a big picture view of these problems, and that the flooding issues in Ramsden, Crawley, Delly End etc. won't get forgotten with the fully justified attention on the dramatic flooding in Witney."

Newland/Oxford Hill

Duncan Enright, 85 Newland

Madley Brook burst its banks at the allotments and overwhelmed footpaths at around 11am, also running off Newland into our property at the same time. This was reminiscent of the appalling floods of 2007, which ruined our home, its contents, and led to us spending almost a year in temporary accommodation with three young children. Not surprisingly we were justifiably alarmed.

Repeated calls to the District were not answered for more than an hour, at the height of the flash floods. A visit to Station Lane depot was useless as it is closed to the public with no information. Luckily two staff exited in a lorry, and said sandbags were available through the main offices. After ringing the doorbell at Wood Green, a member of staff said that a list of places where sandbags were available could be provided (declined) and we were directed to Elmfield. After a search (there was no

direction or signage) we found a storage bin in which a small number of sandbags were available. After returning for more to complete the barricade of our doors, we found a bag of sand and a pile of hessian sacks. We made up our own sandbags and completed the job. Other residents were collecting sandbags for Crawley. No staff were available. Calls to the out of hours number were not answered.

New drainage installed on our property since 2007 coped well, and only the garden and outbuildings saw ingress of water. Levels began to drop at about 4pm with only minor damage.

As in 2007, no council staff, or from any agency, were in touch at any point. The Church Lane and Newland WhatsApp groups worked very well, with plenty of neighbours coming to help lay sandbags. At 83 Newland, flood barriers were in place but the water didn't reach them.

Cllr Andrew Prosser, Newland

One of the main flows of water and flooding is off the fields in north Witney down through Eastfield Road down Hailey Road to the 'cannon pool' at the bottom and onto the meadow - where one route for West End Link is proposed! I think it all started at around 1pm. Very similar happened in 2007, but it is a fairly frequent occurrence in any case during heavy rain events as the drains already can't cope with the run-off from the fields and housing/roads.

Eastfield Road

David Condon, Vanner Road and Sue Wilson, 76 Eastfield Road

David can see from his house over the back of Eastfield Road and reported water streaming across the fields and between the houses at 74 and 72 Eastfield Road. The Hailey Road drain and culvert were completely overloaded and water built up very quickly. Flash floods were evident at 11.46am. The playing field constituted a danger to life as the flow was so fast and could carry someone away. Drain covers were coming up.

Sue, 76 Eastfield Road

Sue reported the water rising twice, once on 23rd and again on 24th when the road was still covered in water. The drains were blocked by leaves. After a bit of a runaround with the District Council sandbags were obtained. The levels were about 6 inches higher than 2007, but not much higher. A lot of work was done on the playing field but it was quickly overwhelmed.

New Yatt Road

Stuart Harrison, New Yatt Road

"I don't even need to start the conversation about what is happening today outside our homes. I can't even walk out of my drive into New Yatt Road and this is the least of all our issues when you look right now at Hailey Road, Bridge Street, the fields sloping down towards Eastfield Road and the lake that is now the Eastfield Road playing field. If Thames Water are opposed to the 120 houses above Hailey Road School because of the overcapacity of the current system why don't we all start facing up to the reality that 1400 houses is nothing short of a disaster.

"Very concerning is pictures of flooding at Cannon Pool where homes were flooded entirely from the fields and the incapacity of the 0.75m Hailey Drain. Picture this when what you are looking at is currently in the plan to be a four way super junction as the end/start of the West End Link Road (with 11 pairs of pillars across the floodplain) leading to what becomes Witney's third busiest road."

Bridge Street

Martin Thomas, 20 Bridge Street

Received two email alerts from the Environment Agency at 12:42 on 23rd (a general alert) and 19:15 on 24th (specific alert about Witney flooding). The speed of the water's rise surprised everyone. Sandbags did arrive but nobody was sure about the numbers, and the response was quite uncoordinated. The police and fire service were superb and their work by the care home, in particular, was excellent. Later cars were passing too fast in standing water, pushing it back into houses, and road closures should have been in place for longer.

Environment Agency volunteers conducted a survey after Christmas which was welcome.

Water backing up from the bridge was the problem on the north side, with groundwater flooding on the south side. Water flooded the back of Bridge Street into the newly developed homes where the bed shop was, into the fitness suite and towards Jill Stew's ballet studios, and was up to 1-1.5 feet deep. Groundwater flooding occurred in 14, 16 had a little water, 18 less and 20 none came through. However in 20 Bridge Street, fuses tripped, and have been tripping ever since.

The neighbour WhatsApp group worked very well to coordinate support. Previously the District has helped with householder grants for pumps and flood gates. The piecemeal approach is no good however as this just passes the problem to neighbouring properties.

Sally and Steve, 21 & 21A Bridge Street

Sally was at work when the warning came from the EA, and at that time no water was coming in. Within half an hour at 10pm water was pouring into the house, a lot higher than 2007. She tried to get sandbags to no avail, though the response was fantastic in the end. Water was about 1.5 inches deep in the house. Their view is that the bridge is not capable of carrying the volume of water in such circumstances.

Pete and Claire Crowther, 11 Bridge Street

"We would like to ask if it is possible to widen and deepen the rivers from Burford across the meadows towards the bridge on Bridge street Witney and then beyond towards Ducklington. At the moment the excessive water coming from the Burford direction is literally trying to pass through the "eye of the needle" when it hits the bridge on Bridge street and because of this it is flooding our properties. Surely by widening and deepening these rivers it will ease the burden on Bridge Street and beyond.

"Also are there any plans to further change the structure of the bridge to make the gap higher as it is almost acting as dam!"

Another resident

After the floods the bins were completely full. District should consider a special free collection of flooded items from affected households.

Riverside Gardens

Ken Smith, Residents Association

Desilting was undertaken some time ago by the bridge, but this has not happened recently. Water was just hitting the bridge and bouncing back into properties. It was once higher and that didn't happen. Residents did not have air brick covers though these had been offered before, as they cause other problems if used permanently. Lots of volunteers helped shore up defences.

Keith Webb, 21 Riverside Gardens

The water rose incredibly quickly, from 8pm when they started moving property and cars, it had reached properties in 10 minutes. The emergency services were brilliant.

Maureen and Antony Hermon, Flat 6, Riverside House

It took half an hour for the water to rise right up. We had 8 sandbags from the District. We received a Facebook message from John Dow's wife at 8.42pm but no other warning. The ingress started from the side terrace and then came back from the bridge.

Vera Jordan, 22 Riverside Gardens

"1) Sandbags - These need to be not only readily available on site before flooding occurs (dictated by river levels) but someone needs to be charged with the duty of laying in front of the doors when required.

"2) There needs to be a coordinated response from Environmental (river) agencies and council - especially regarding the upkeep of the riverbank.

"3) The fire services need a regularly updated list of people incapable of vacating their premises on their own in an emergency - so they need to liaise with Grange management - if the site manager had not been available at short notice on Christmas evening someone could have been in severe difficulties."

Woodford Mill

Tony and Carol Stark, 33 Woodford Mill

"The river started to rise at around 6.00pm on Christmas Eve and continued to very sharply until it peaked at around 2:00am. We received a flood alert from the EA at 7:17pm. At this point there was water outside the front of our house so we rapidly put up our flood gates and prepared our Hydrosacks.

"The water continued to rise and flooded our garage to a depth of about five inches. It was also in our back garden against the back wall of the house. Had the water risen another inch it would have been at a level to enter both the back and front of the house and tested our flood defences. By the morning of Boxing Day the water had receded from the garage and the back garden.

"On Boxing Day we were told by a friend that there were sand bags available from WODC but we could not find any at Elmfield, Cogges or the Station Lane depot. A neighbour phoned WODC and forty were delivered on Boxing Day but that was too late as the water had receded.

"We were surprised that there was no information, at least that we could find, on WODC or Town Council Social Media platforms.

“After hearing the stories of some Witney residents last night it seems we at Woodford Mill, although three houses and an apartment were badly flooded, were extremely lucky this time. We were severely flooded in 2007 so were reasonably well prepared this time.

“A number of town houses (numbers 27 to 41) garages were flooded and those bordering the main river had water up to their back doors and those bordering The Mill Chase had water on their decking.

“The bridge at Bridge Street seems to be the problem as it is a bottleneck. Woodford Mill and Riverside Gardens get flood water from the river on its way to the bridge and then it comes back upstream and hits us again.

“Has the river under and upstream of the bridge been regularly de-silted? It was for a while after the 2007 floods but we would be interested to be given dates it has been done recently.”

They received no visits from the EA though Cllr Coles called on Boxing Day, which was much appreciated. There were no sandbags available on Boxing Day though at 11am there was still water in the garden.

Gregory Peters, 40 Woodford Mill

“Here in Woodford Mill some residents are prepared with a variety gates to place across doors. Most of us rely on sandbags. Personally I have some in my garage, but as a community we have had sandbags stored on site from before my wife and I moved here in December 2014. On Christmas Eve I unlocked the Museum and Engine Room so that sandbags could be accessed. I would say that this is being prepared.

“The fact that we have a communal store is not too different to private homes having sandbags in a garden shed or businesses having a store where sandbags are kept.

“I do not know how WODC coped on Christmas Eve. For us residents the Environment Agency provided very short notice. Only sandbags on site are available in such circumstances. This is being prepared. It would be interesting to know how well other estates near and on the river and flood plain were prepared.

“We had heavy rain on the 23rd flooding, I believe, parts of Delly End and turning Hailey Road into a torrent. This torrent added to the water already accumulating on the flood plain and perhaps some houses on the edge of the flood plain were flooded that day.

“I assume that the rain on the 23rd also fell in the Cotswold catchment area of The River Windrush. Perhaps the Environment Agency should have anticipated the surge that was registered at Worsham and Riverside Gardens. There are also river height monitors in Bourton and on the Dikler. It would be interesting to know what they registered on the 23rd and 24th.

“Here on site we have 18 houses, one apartment and 3 doors leading to apartments, all places where sand bags would be placed in the next flood emergency.”

Kathryn Liddell, mother of a resident at Woodford Mill

“I am concerned as we took the plunge and bought a house in Woodford Mill about three years ago to provide a home for India and three of her friends who all also have learning disabilities.

“Whilst we were aware that there had been flooding there in the past - we were under the impression that this had been caused by unopened sluice gates and that the rivers had been cleaned since the last major incident and that the chances of this happening again were relatively low.

“Therefore, we were somewhat dismayed to get a call from the staff member on duty on Christmas Eve to say that the water had risen so much that it was in the garage (which is where they keep a tumble dryer and freezer) and a rear room and was worried it would rise further and cover the whole of the ground floor. Obviously we then had to think about how we would have to evacuate the residents as the street was then closed. All the ground floor electricity went out. Thankfully the water did stop rising and the residents were ok but obviously it caused a lot of stress for the staff member who was there on her own.

“Aside from all the insurance issues it brings, it also raises a lot of questions around safety etc. so we would be very keen to know more about what is happening within the council to tackle this issue.”

George Stobie, 11 Woodford Mill

“I live on the ground floor of The Old Mill building and my living room windows overlook the Millstream with the northern bank about 1.5 metres away from the external wall of The Old Mill. During the weekend of 19/20 December, 2020 I had noticed that the water levels in the Millstream were slowly rising and would soon be higher than the floor level inside our apartment. By 23 December, 2020 I was so concerned that I contacted The Environment Agency to advise them and was told that they would send an officer to Woodford Mill to investigate. Nobody contacted me and I do not know if in fact any officer attended this site

“At this point I contacted WODC to request a supply of sandbags only to be advised that “the Council do not supply sandbags” and I should therefore purchase my own from a local builders' merchant! I am 72 years old and my wife is disabled following a stroke. It would have been totally impractical for me to attempt to fill sandbags, load them into my car, unload them and then distribute them along the length of the Millstream where I expected the flooding to come from.

“I had previously registered with the Environment Agency to receive automated calls and e-mails of flood warnings. However, I did not receive an automated call advising of a flood warning until 7.17pm on Christmas Eve. The warning was that flooding of property was imminent and sure enough, 10 minutes later, flood water started flowing along the block paving between The Old Mill building and the 2 detached houses opposite (nos 24 and 25 Woodford Mill), which houses back on to the River Windrush. Thankfully there was a supply of sandbags found in the “Museum” and “Engine Room” of The Old Mill and residents throughout the estate proceeded to use these to try to protect properties against flooding. By 10.30pm the supply of sandbags had been exhausted, but not before at least 4 properties on site had been flooded.

“The next day I looked at the Environment Agency's website and found the graph of river levels recorded at station 7043 (downstream from The Old Mill). This looked more like a Covid-19 graph than a record of rising river levels. The steepness of the rising curve must have been obvious to officers of the Environment Agency and should have raised alarm bells to issue a flood warning far sooner than 10 minutes before the event.

“Looking to the future I am seriously concerned about the development that is being built upstream of Woodford Mill (Kingfisher Meadows). It is patently obvious that if agricultural land is converted into housing land, rainfall will no longer percolate through the subsoil and gradually disperse into the River Windrush, it will run off the hardstanding and other impermeable surfaces into the river far more quickly and will then always have the potential to cause flooding. I have no doubt that when Kingfisher Meadows was granted planning permission by WODC conditions would have been attached to the permission requiring the inclusion of a flood attenuation scheme to be completed prior to the occupation of any houses to reduce this potential risk. However, what authority checks on the practicality of the scheme and the proposal's ability to reduce the risk? Clearly in this instance it did not work. Further I am concerned that after last year's repair of the breach upstream of The Old Mill, neither the Millstream nor the River Windrush downstream of the breach were ever dredged. Since

the breach lay unrepaired for at least 18 months, a considerable amount of silt built up along the beds of these 2 watercourses thereby causing surface levels in both watercourses to rise.

"I understand that a considerable volume of water discharged down Hailey Road prior to the flooding. This has happened in the past. If a further 1400 houses are to be built to the north of Hailey Road (as proposed in the emerging local plan), then I can only see the potential for even more severe flooding in Witney."

Millers Mews

Matt Perry, Millers Mews

They had a knock on the door at 7.15pm on 24th to move their car, at which point there was half a foot of water outside the house. By the time they returned after moving the car water was in the store house. Calls to the District went unanswered. The Environment Agency said they would send someone next week. They received sandbags from neighbours by which time there was 1.5 inches of water in the lower floor. The water only began to recede at 2am. As a former member of the emergency services he was concerned to note no coordination on the night.

Millers Mews neighbour Michael noted the trend of increasing rainfall as a result of climate change.

Other Contributions

Mike French, Witney Flood Action Group

"Being born during the war, overseas holidays for many years were out of the question, children of my era spent their holidays on the banks of the crystal clear river Windrush and the open fields in the vicinity. We knew where every ditch was and where springs bubbled from the ground and its cool clear water could be drunk.

"After leaving school it was time to learn a trade and my first five years of employment was spent with a small engineering firm that was situated in the back section of the Blanket Hall, which was at one time, the lemonade factory. And, it never flooded.

"On leaving there, Early's employed me as an engineer. One of the team of engineers' daily jobs was to inspect the water levels and maintain them at a certain height; without this happening the mill would be brought to a standstill. Thousands of gallons of water were needed each and every day to keep the factory running. During this period of time and possibly up to the late 1900's the National River Authority were in charge of the river. They cut the weeds yearly and removed obstructions, as and when needed. When the Environment Agency was formed the NRA was scrapped, the outcome being the river started to fall into a bad shape, as we see it today.

"During this period of time I bought the house that I live in today, what more could I want. A house that backs onto the river. The first possibly 20 years of living here my garden never flooded, but since then it is a regular happening. With each year the flood water creeping nearer my house. Looking on the bright side, to enter my back door you have to climb three big steps and in 2007 the flood water never reached them. In fact I firmly believe that Witney Hospital would have flooded before my home did and according to the flood water that accumulated along Woodford Way last year, it is a good possibility.

"Going back to working at Early's as I stated earlier and how we controlled the river levels through flood/sluice gates. When Early's closed down in 2002. All Souls College bought the land. They knew

the importance of controlling the river heights, they indirectly employed me for another 13 years, until a fixed weir replaced the flood/slucice gates. Fixed weirs look nice and they don't need any maintenance once built, but they cause damage to the actual flow of the river. With a sluice/flood gate water is diverted through the bottom of it, with a fixed weir water flows over it, the result being silt beds form at its base.

"Before this new weir was built at Woodford Mill and the gates were in use, you were able to dive off the river bank and swim under the opening at the bottom of the gates. Now, because of the build up of silt the river has lost possibly a metre of its depth. This backup of water causes our flood plains not to be able to work as well as they should. The result being we are accumulating water that we should be expelling under Witney bridge and out of our locality.

"This isn't progress. In my opinion our forefathers left us a legacy, they worked with primitive tools in all types of weather and left us a town to be proud of. We in return are going against their legacy and hard work.

"Most probably my knowledge of the town goes back farther than any of you, therefore here is a basic history lesson as I remember from an early age. I can remember moving into No. 5 Moor Avenue in the late 1940's, when Welch Way and Moorland Road was a series of ditches with footbridges over them. The ditches as I remember them drained the water into one main stream, it flowed under a bridge that was situated at the bottom of Corn Street, on the eastern side of the bus garage. This bridge was an open bridge with only a couple of metal bars across it, that you lean on and drop things into the following water. Well that's not quite true I can also remember in the long summer months, it was quite often dry.

"Possibly the last statement isn't quite true, this series of ditches also had another exit point, but it was filled in many, many years before I was born. This exit was called 'Gunn's Hole'. It was situated somewhere near where the Co-op stands today. After heavy rainfalls water flowed across the road and made its way across what is now the car park before exiting into the river.

"As the town progressed this flow of water was piped under the road, but Victorian drainage systems, similar to the ones we have in force today constantly blocked up and properties flooded. Most of the Victorian and Edwardian photographs that show this area of Witney flooded, because of the primitive drainage system.

"Going back to the area of Welch Way and Moorland Road. This area of ground going back 100's of years was called the 'Moors'. The ditches that covered it should never have been filled in and houses built on top of them. A good proportion of the houses were built on concrete rafts/beds because it was impossible to find solid foundations. This resulted in a lot of them being clad in plastic boarding, because the contractors thought that any extra brickwork would cause the properties to sink.

"When Marriotts Walk was being built, pumps were working constantly pumping water out of the site foundations, for weeks on end. This was to allow quick drying concrete to be poured in, to make a base for the units to be built. I did question our council about the pumps, they couldn't answer my questions and forwarded my emails to the site manager. He simply replied by stating we had just recovered from a wet winter, which resulted in a high water table in the area. Quite simply he didn't realize Witney has a high water table.

"Now, let's go on quickly to Woodford Way flooding last year. This was bound to happen and it will happen again. It's all very well to keep cleaning the roadside ditch out, but its exit drain which is visible is completely under size and will not take the water that is generated from the new builds built in the area.

"From Moor Avenue my parents and myself moved to Eastfield Road. We were possibly amongst the first 20 families to be allocated new homes there. During my time there, possibly 20 years, I never

experienced flooding like the residents have to cope with today. We did experience flooding, but it was flash flooding and soon disappeared.

“And, I can honestly say that during the many years I lived there 'I never lost a day off work or school because of floods', or remember any houses being flooded. You might ask, what has changed, well the answer is quite simple. This area of Witney wasn't really occupied with houses, there was no Farmers Close, Early Road or the other estates in that area. Schofield Avenue had possibly a quarter of the houses that it has today. Quarry Road hadn't been built. And of course the water that is generated from the roadside drainage systems. All of the surface water from these houses and roads is now expelled into the over-burdened Hailey Road Drain. This drain starts the other side of Hailey and during the 2007 floods properties in Hailey also flooded. The culverted part of this drain starts on the northern side of Eastfield Road and is roughly a metre in diameter; as soon as it reaches the Hailey Road it reduces its size by about a third. Quite simply this drainage system does not cope.

“As I see it, we are now fighting against 'Mother Nature and her climate change'. We will never beat her, therefore it is time we worked with her. We need to forget about any more houses being built in our area and put our own house in order first. We need to look into the future and see what damage a 15% climate change will do. As I see it new plans should be drawn up for a new bridge which will need to be higher and without its centre support. I'm also aware that it will not completely solve our problems but it will ease them to a certain extent.

“Some type of holding ponds or flood wall will need to be built between Witney and Hailey, without the proposed 1400 houses. We need to think of an alternative river crossing and not the West End Link road, this in my opinion will cause more localised flooding upstream from the bridge. Millers Mews is a good example of why we shouldn't build on flood plains. I could be wrong, but I don't think that I am. The houses that are situated on the bottom of it that flooded, were built upon it. Even one of the drainage ditches was moved to accommodate them. And, their surface water is drained into the river through one large pipe. Did this pipe back fill with river water, or is it blocked?

“The bottom section of this housing also takes the water that is expelled into the floodplain, from two sources. The river and the Hailey Road Drain, therefore it gets hit from two different sources. After the 2007 floods, the West End Industrial Site obtained various 'grants' and bought their own portable flood barriers, but I don't know if they were fitted before the last floods or not. If they were this would have caused the height of the floodplain to raise a little.

“Also I know of at least three private properties in this area that had flood walls built in their gardens after the 2007 floods. All of this flooding and climate change must go back to the bridge. I'm fully aware that a new bridge of better design will not solve our problems, but if we could get a better flow through it at times of high water levels our flood plains would not fill as fast as they do now.”

Cllr Luci Ashbourne

I took part in the volunteer effort as the waters began to rise on Bridge Street. We had no access to sandbags. The Council emergency line was not useful. The Council response was too late, and there was no plan to identify vulnerable residents or to prioritise those homes most at risk.

Cllr Toby Morris

The masterplan for development is coming up for consultation in February, and we need to feed in lessons from the floods.

Cllr Laura Price

The fire service couldn't get in touch with the councils. The District emergency line promised to call back on numerous occasions but didn't. The Fire Service are not legally responsible for leading in situations like this; the District is meant to lead. Where were they?

Cllr Owen Collins

There needed to be more coordination of the response. We need a register of vulnerable residents and a list of properties in most peril.

Cllr Richard Langridge

"One of the most urgent priorities for me remains to remove the Witney North development from the local plan. Given the recent appalling floods again, it would be absolute insanity to blindly persist with this development that not only requires putting 1400 homes right across the path of the surface water that streams from the fields above Eastfield Road and floods Eastfield, Hailey Road and New Yatt Road but also a huge road bridge right across the Windrush floodplain. The whole of the centre of Witney would then be at huge risk of devastating floods. This must be rethought urgently."

Michael Brooker, Witney Fire Service (in personal capacity)

The service received calls from 23rd at 10.24am onwards, from Spelsbury to Delly End, Minster Lovell to Bushy Ground. This included groundwater flooding. The normal number of calls is 35 calls in a week, and in the week up to Christmas the Thames Valley call centre received 5000 calls. The river was rising by two inches an hour. The service struggled to contact the District Council.

Laurence King, West Oxfordshire District Council

"I have been receiving reports of flooding from across West Oxfordshire from various sources which we are collating into a list for future correspondence, site visits and actions. This process has not really been instigated in West since the flooding of 2007. Forming the list will take some time as the flooding incidents at each property need to be validated for several reasons. I cannot currently physically go into the properties (due to Covid restrictions) to carry out the meetings and surveys to look into what could be done and what the sources of the flooding were. Can I ask that I am sent addresses of flooded properties (with the owners consent) for me to follow up on asap."

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