

Cotswolds Annual Flood Forum
Virtual meeting via Livestream (via Zoom for Representative Officials)
5 March 2021, 10:30-12:00

Attendees:

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP (GCB)

David Fowles

Joe Baker – Gloucestershire County Council, Strategic Flood Risk Management Officer

James Blockley – Gloucestershire County Council, chairman, Strategic Flood Risk Group

Cllr Andrew Docherty – Cotswold District Council, cabinet member for Environment

Rhodri Grey, Highways, Gloucestershire County Council

Andrew Hagger – Thames Water, systems planning manager

Sarah Hale – Environment Agency, flooding customer risk manager

Jenny Phelps – Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group Southwest, senior conservation advisor

Andrew Tubb – Cirencester Town Council, chief executive

Peter Siret – Gloucestershire County Council, Flood Risk

Shaun Shackleford – Environment Agency

Stephen Sanderson – Thames Water

1. Welcome from Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP

Hello, I'm Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Member of Parliament for the Cotswolds. Welcome to my Flood Forum meeting and it will be held online by accessing @geoffreycliftonbrown.

Thank you everyone who helped residents who suffered flooding in their homes on 23rd and 27th December, where in some cases 54 inches of rain fell in December. I'd like to pay tribute to Ubico who provided sandbags and helped residents make their homes as safe as possible. Sadly, Cirencester and Bledington were the two worst affected areas in the constituency and we'll be taking many questions from them. Although the ground was saturated, it does appear that climate change is causing more severe frequent storms.

These meetings have normally been held physically and huge thanks to the Barn Theatre in Cirencester this morning for hosting this meeting. This year, because of the covid restrictions, we've had to hold it virtually, which involved an enormous amount of work by my staff, in particular Judith Betterton, and also David Fowles who's with me here in the studio, who worked tirelessly to put this thing together. Despite covid restrictions I felt it was important to hold this meeting, so please bear with us if the technology doesn't work instantaneously.

So the format of this meeting is unique: I invite all levels of councils, the Environment Agency, Thames Water, who will all give an account of what they've done in the last year. These meetings are open to all the public, who can ask questions and demand actions. A full transcript will be taken, and all the agencies will be held to account for what they have done or what they've failed to do. Then I, as the Member of Parliament, will take up issues with the individual agencies, and ultimately, if it's still not resolved raise the matter in Parliament. I did so recently on the Public Accounts committee, asking Sir James Bevan, the CEO of the Environment Agency, in relation to quality of our rivers in the Cotswolds. I have to say to all those who've submitted questions on the subject, this issue will not form part of this meeting, because it is to deal with the flooding of dwellings. However, I will pursue this issue vigorously and maybe we'll hold a separate meeting later on in the year. Even more recently, I raised the

issue of building in flood plain, which resulted in an article in The Telegraph. Although these meetings have resulted in considerable investment in flood prevention, which saved very many homes from being flooded in Moreton, Bourton, Lechlade, South Cerney and numerous small parishes, from the excessive rain just before Christmas, for too long there have been some who have stood on the touchline trying to score political points. Now is the time for all of us to get our sleeves rolled up, and campaign together for the benefit of the people we represent, and then we stand a far better chance of achieving positive results.

I will now ask a representative from each of the bodies here today – the County Council, the District Council, the Town Council, Thames Water and the Environment Agency – to make their opening brief statements, in three minutes. After that, I'll attempt to get through as many questions as possible. We've had a large number of questions already submitted to us in the last few days and we will try to get to a few on the livestream as well so that there is an interactivity between people watching this session. All of your questions will be put to the relevant agency, and, if we don't reach them, they will also be received by the agencies and an answer provided by me when we receive it.

So the livestream questions will, as I say, be available on my Facebook @geoffreycliftonbrown.

So thank you again for the huge interest you've shown in this issue of flooding. It is obviously an important issue particularly for those who've sadly had their homes flooded around Christmas. So without any further ado I'm now going to turn to the agencies, and the first person I would like to introduce is James Blockley, who is chairman of the Strategic Flood Risk Group from the Gloucestershire County Council. James, you are very welcome on this programme.

3. Report from County Council

James Blockley:

Thanked Sir Geoffrey for putting this this meeting together. I know it's not easy getting this amount of agencies around a virtual table. As you say, based on the research we've done since December, it's clear that this event, the 23rd/24th event, was the worst since 2007. Shortly after the event we pulled together a series of multi-agency debrief sessions to compare notes, look at lessons learnt and agree some initial next steps. As part of that we have produced a report on the flooding from the lead local flood authority, which includes contributions from Gloucestershire Highways and Gloucestershire Fire & Rescue Service. We have managed to ascertain that there were 454 properties affected in the county. 307 of those were internal. Our report does break down these reports into district areas, and I will make that report available online and via email shortly after this meeting if it's of interest. The Cotswolds were particularly badly affected, as you say, for example in Bledington, where 29 properties were flooded. Again, as you said, the event was characterised, as so many of these events are, by short, intense rainfall over a wide geographic area with dramatic and diverse effects. The report outlines some of the lessons learnt from the event. It outlines some of the next steps that we propose to take, both short-term, long-term and strategic. One of the things that I think is fair to say, in the work that we, and when I say we, I mean all of the agencies around the table, have done over the past 15-20 years, has had a positive effect, and we can see this in communities such as Moreton-in-Marsh, which, although badly affected, was not as badly affected as it would have been if our interventions hadn't taken place. The main lesson learnt for me is that the response to the event was effective, swift and collaborative. It was a multi-

agency approach, involving dozens, hundreds of individuals and a good number of agencies, particularly District Councils, Gloucestershire Highways, The Civil Protection team, water and sewage companies, EA, us, the lead local flood authority, but in particular the communities themselves. I think communities across the Cotswolds showed extraordinary resilience and a breath-taking willingness to help each other to meet the challenges, the immediate and longer term challenges from this event and I would like to pay particular tribute to those communities and pledge our ongoing support for their recovery and their resilience. As I say, the report that we have prepared will be available. I'll make that available online and via email shortly after this meeting.

GCB:

Thank you very much James. We will also include that report in our verbatim minutes of the meeting. Thank you, that's an excellent start to the meeting. Now I'd like to move to Cllr Andrew Docherty who is the cabinet member on the Cotswold District Council for environment which includes flood matters. Andrew, you're very welcome on this call. Normally we would be sitting next to each other physically in your council chamber. Sadly, we can't do that today but we're delighted to have you on the programme.

a) Comment/Report from District Council

Cllr Andrew Docherty:

Thank you, Sir Geoffrey. So picking up on some of the points that were covered there and some other ones that we wanted to bring forward. So obviously since summarising since last year the pandemic unfortunately has disrupted some of the work that we hoped might have happened since the last flood meeting, but, reviewing the notes from that meeting, many of the issues we talked about then actually remain the same. What's changed obviously over this winter is that some of those theoretical problems have then changed into real world issues across the district. Those things we were concerned about have then come to pass as a result of the both exceptional, but, I suppose in terms of over a century period, not so exceptional because it does seem to be happening more and more, weather conditions and ground conditions that we see. In terms of picking up a little bit on the flood authority notes, in terms of what's happened within the district, that does fairly well summarise what we've seen as an impact. Interestingly though as an authority, in terms of what has impacted residents most, the largest groups of people we've seen impacted have been in relation to sewage problems, and this is the combinations of sewage flooding, mostly external but in some cases internal, but certainly on a large scale the inability to use sewage facilities properly, the inability to use showers and toilets. And we've seen that definitely occurring more and more frequently in relation to high ground water conditions, and because the conditions this winter have been exceptionally high, we've seen an exceptional level of impact from that. And certainly in terms of the emergency response that the district has taken, that's ended up taking up a lot of our activity, evacuating people where needed, putting in temporary toilet facilities where needed, not necessarily because people's houses have been flooded but because the sewerage infrastructure is not coping with what's going on. As was mentioned, Ubico who are our on-the-ground team have been very active. Well over 2000-odd sandbags went out in a short period of time in the district and we were sandbagging in various areas in hopefully what was a visible on-the-ground presence in communities we could get to and help, and do either evacuation work, flood alleviation work or just helping to coordinate on the ground in local areas with agencies and other local bodies like town and parish councils.

Looking forward, the particular interest we've got is in seeing us all step up to have a more proactive approach all of the time, not just when flooding happens. Not all flooding is avoidable but many of the issues we've seen this winter would have been reduced or avoided if we were having more of an emphasis on proactive maintenance, and that's in particular combinations of things around highway maintenance and river maintenance work. And while we're not the lead flood authority, we think we've got a useful role to bear in bringing those areas that need attention to the fore, because obviously we've got regular on the ground contact with local parishes, towns and councils through all of the flooding, planning sorry and waste removal work to do which gives us a direct connection to those authorities all the time.

Lastly we'd very much like to highlight the fact that we think one of the things we need for them to move this forum forward is we need think to some extent above and beyond the agencies we're all with dealing with on a daily basis. Thames obviously runs the sewerage network but much of what they do and don't do is governed by Ofwat and a lot of what Ofwat deals with in terms of its effects of the economic impact of environmental damage, flooding and pollution seems a bit rooted in the past. So, we would very much like to see some action from the Government in practice to address what Ofwat thinks are priorities so what it and Thames are forced to then do. Similarly, the Environment Agency is not fully autonomous. It runs through Defra so we would like to see a renewed focus from Defra on the issues of sewage infrastructure, sewage pollution, such that they are also looking at these bodies prioritising and addressing these issues in future. I'm conscious I'm over time, I need to stop there.

GCB:

Andrew, thank you very much, very useful introduction from you on behalf of the District Council.

So we will no doubt be covering in detail through questions if nothing else the issue of sewer flooding, and in that connection I'd like to introduce Andrew Hagger, the systems planning manager at Thames Water, thank you.

4. Report from Thames Water

Andrew Hagger:

Thank you, Sir Geoffrey, thank you for inviting me today. Doesn't make for comfortable listening to, all the sewage related problems, restricted toilet use, ground water. This is by no means a new problem, we know that. So, what has Thames Water been doing? Over the summer, last year, we undertook quite a bit of considerable sewer lining in a number of catchments. What does that actually mean? Many of the sewers, the sewers are not actually falling to pieces, there are not gaps, they are just not designed to be completely watertight and when you have a catchment such as the Cotswolds, where we've already heard is highly reactive in terms of ground water, that ground water can get into our sewers. Our sewers are not designed to take significant quantities of ground water. It leads to flooding. It leads to exceeding capacity. It leads to restricted toilet use. So the answer is what we call "lining". Essentially it means inserting a lining sock within the pipe to make it watertight, to make it better than the original manufacturers made the pipes to be. Historically, what we've done is we've waited for these events to happen. We've tried to find the locations where the

groundwater is getting into the system and then seal it. This has been a very piecemeal and to my mind a not particularly effective approach. The reason I say that is it's very reliant on things to happen and then trying to solve it after the problem. So last year, what we did is we engaged with civic contractors, specialist company called Dtech that you may have seen on the ground to go out and help us map and identify all the sewer network in relation to the ground water table. We've engaged with a specialist ground water modelling company called JFBA to help us identify which sewers have the potential, so we're not just talking about the sewers we can see infiltration come in but ones that actually have a potential.

And what have we done with that information? We've turned this information into what we call a groundwater infiltration system management plan. A number of them, if you look at our website, are starting to appear. We are looking to, certainly as others have mentioned, engage with regulators and say look we need to do a step change on sealing these sewers and making them ground watertight. So those plans set out our approach to how we're going to do it. We want to move that forward at pace, so we're going to continue doing the localised problems that we see, but more importantly we want to trial some of those plans in some key areas.

For me, the Cotswolds is an important one. It happens more frequently than other areas. Many of our catchments suffer from ground water infiltration but not every year. The Cotswolds seems to be one that's, I won't say perennial, but certainly 19/20 was another particularly bad year. Prior to that we had 2 or 3 years of relative respite but it does catch like Bourton-on-the-Water, are regular problem areas. So we're doing 56 of these plans. Some of you may know that there's a regulatory position statement on groundwater impact to catchments. They take the view that it's not acceptable to have excessive groundwater in our system; nor do we. So we've had to come up with plans to demonstrate how we're actually going to tackle that particular problem. And that is one of the things we really want to take on.

So previously in my role I looked after all sewage networks. I have now focussed very much on Thames Valley, both treatment and network. I'm very passionate about dealing with the catchments in those areas, and it's not just about ground water, it's about surface water inundation. I heard the comments about watercourses, and various other systems causing ponding on the surface. Well that water can get into our manhole covers. Our systems are not airtight. The covers, they have to vent, so you can get surface water getting in there. So I want to look as well, not just at the ground water but surface water as well. My ultimate aim is to get to a sewerage system that only has wastewater in it, that is not impacted by surface or ground water. Bit ambitious but then that's what we need. So that's probably what I want to say. There's many questions locally.

GCB:

There will be Andrew, many questions. That is a really, I thought, a genuine statement from you that you want to try and improve the situation. And you're absolutely right, you as an agency can't do it on your own. It's got to be in combination with all the other agencies. You can't be responsible for all the water poured into your sewers by blocked highways drains, or trees in rivers which are the Environment Agency's responsibility. It does require all the agencies and all the councils to work together. So thank you very much for that statement. I'm afraid you will get quite a few questions in a little while.

So, without further ado I'd like to move to Sarah Hale of the Environment Agency please.

5. Report from the Environment Agency

Sarah Hale:

Hello, thank you very much for having me. I'm here to tell you what the Environment Agency has been up to. I won't reiterate what's already been said about flooding. It was a terrible thing to see properties flooding over Christmas. What were we doing while that was happening? We were continuing to monitor the river levels, make sure we that were using our flood warning service to issue warnings and alerts to warn people of the situation. We also had members of staff out on site making sure that the rivers continued to flow as freely as they could, so doing things like removing blockages, clearing trash screens, etc, and where we had property flooding, or widescale flooding, we also had people out on the ground to give out as much information as they could, live information on the latest weather situation, and advice to people on what they could be doing and actions that they could be taking, as well updating what we were doing on site. Obviously later today we've got a lot of questions about what happened about particular locations, so recognising that and not wanting to repeat myself, I'll leave those till later.

But I also just wanted to give a quick update on some of the things we've been doing this year in terms of maintenance. We've been talking about it fairly briefly and other people have made reference to the fact that we do maintain the rivers. So we've done our routine maintenance across the whole area and managed to successfully get funding to do all of the maintenance that we applied for. I'm just going to have to check my notes – so we did sections of the River Churn, the River Key, the Colne at Fairford, the Evenlode, Moreton-in-Marsh, Bledington Brook, Littlestock Brook, and all the watercourses in and around Cirencester. We do have defences on the Windrush in Bourton-on-the-Water but the maintenance is done by the Parish Council. We do repair it and occasionally we cut the grass but the channel is done by the locals. We managed to mostly keep to our planned maintenance programme, obviously a few hiccups along the way. We had a late start because of covid and for various other reasons. We tried to catch up to make sure we did get through our whole programme, which was successful. It did mean that in a couple of areas we didn't do the maintenance to the standard that we would have liked to have done, but we recognise that and will make space for that in the future. There's an issue around maintenance in Fairford and I think that's one of the questions that comes up later so I will move past that for now. But what we did do was we had the opportunity to learn a little bit more about some of the rivers, and where we had that delayed start it allowed us to see what impact that had. So, we've had a chance to change some of the timings and the planned maintenance in the Cotswolds area to make sure that we're being the most effective that we can be. For instance we've moved maintenance forward in South Cerney, we've added some maintenance back onto the programme for the Cerney Wick area, we've adjusted the Bledington maintenance as well, to make sure we can get any machinery we need to on to the site before it gets too wet. So using that delay actually to our advantage, to understand conditions and how we can make the most of the maintenance programme that we have.

Next year, next financial year, this calendar year, we will continue with everything we have, planned maintenance, and we currently don't see any issues with that, which is great, but if for any reason we are not able to do any of the maintenance, our asset performance team will speak to the landowners to let people know we won't be able to be there and to talk through what can be done instead. So, just to put that into context, we plan to assess and maintain 32 km of the watercourses in the Cotswolds over the coming year, and do we do have a fully

staffed team who will be looking at that, and they are willing to make visits to site where necessary, so if people have any concerns to raise them. I'm also joined on the panel today by Shaun Shackelford who's done a lot of this work with his team, so thank you to Shaun and others. So look forward to taking the questions that are coming our way and if there's any details that we can give people we'd be happy to.

GCB:

Sarah, that's very helpful, thank you. I'd now like to turn to Jenny Phelps, senior conservation advisor at Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group Southwest. Jenny, you're very welcome. You may well hold the key to what we might be able to do in Cirencester in due course. Thank you Jenny, you're very welcome.

Report from Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group

Jenny Phelps:

I'd just like to say that I feel that I represent the farming community that would also like to be part of the solution around trying to help flooding not only on their own farms but also in their community. Since we've been working in the area since 2013 with the water and integrated local delivery projects, that we've been able to demonstrate that communities really need support to be able to have a detailed assessment of the issues and opportunities on their land and around the community but also that all of their land that is feeding into their community catchments and water bodies, and that there is a real opportunity, working through farmer groups, as we've demonstrated, to look at land use and land management and actually build a complete data set of all the issues that might be solved with a community approach and also with an integrated approach with the agencies. Since 2013 we've done over 20 communities now, and Bledington brought us in to ask if we could use this approach for them. And it's very apparent very quickly that communities do need that support to be able to connect and understand how the agencies can support them and how they can support you, and through the process that we've used that actually it's been linked directly to the catchment partnerships that creates a real opportunity for coordinated action. But, more importantly, that opportunity for having that advice facilitates coordinated resource and action, and we can demonstrate the cost benefit of putting someone in to join this up for communities. What we've also learnt since 2013 is that we can build this dataset, we can share it with all the different agencies, and we can work with the farming community, but we need to continue that maintenance and advice as you were suggesting just then, but actually if there's issues have been identified that need regular maintenance, then they must be something that the continuation of the parish and town councils are able to see and recognise as being important. For example, the operation of sluices in Cirencester where I understand there's been an issue.

But I'd really like to say, in relation to the work we've done at Bledington, it seems really apparent that this a strange situation after all this demonstration, how the absolutely essential role that land management that farmers can play in helping with solutions, and actually having that coordinated support. Now communities don't know how to connect with these partnerships, with your work on the ground. As practitioner, we're actually able to signpost them. And in Bledington the community actually invested their own money to bring in our support, which we think over the next few years will be able facilitate probably over 2 or 3 hundred thousand if not half a million pounds worth of funding, by facilitating support from the Natural England, from Countryside Stewardship, from the National Flood Management budget, from budgets from the Environment Agency and from Thames Water.

And what we've been trying to champion is that this approach we use in Gloucestershire is essential for everywhere now, to take action on climate change and it really needs a route in the actual rivers and the streams and the ditches and the farms and all the infrastructure on our highways, and our grips and all the other things, to separate the clean and dirty water, and to actually enable good soil and land management and habitat management across the landscape, and reparative infrastructure to be able to make everything work together, and this needs to happen now. And if the Government could do this and invest in these advisors then they would actually align and save themselves a huge amount of money.

And just to finish off, we found that every single community that we've worked with has between 200 and 1000 issues that are not mapped or not known without walking with those individual communities, the farmers, and actually if those can easily, simply be solved, multiple small interventions, that can be co-funded by the resource and expertise of the agencies and the goodwill and land management of the farmers who are now all looking at regenerative farming systems, soil building, and trying to deliver the public goods and ecosystem service recovery that is being required by the Government. So we would really like more support for more community schemes and for our farming community.

GCB:

Jenny that's absolutely great, opening our eyes to perhaps a new way of looking at flood issues by how we manage the land and how we manage where the water goes. And now I'd like to bring in Andrew Tubb, chief executive of Cirencester Town Council

Report from Town/Parish Council

Andrew Tubb:

Good morning Sir Geoffrey, thank you. So, in Cirencester we had widespread basement flooding, roads were inaccessible, there was sewage discharge. You've heard already residents were unable to use toilets and showers. There was loss of power, and along with high water table level and river water, there was impact on gardens, open spaces and pathways. I think overall the conditions experienced created issues in areas we hadn't seen before. The severity, the speed and type of issues that arose were different from previous years, but I think highlighted issues around infrastructure and riparian responsibilities, and including Crown land where infrastructure is not adopted by statutory agencies.

So as a town council, we were able to provide lots of support, daily emergency briefings, via Cotswold District Council, and provided staffing resource on the ground deploying sandbags, barriers and a pump. The public reported issues in accessing the right type of emergency support from statutory bodies and utilities. And from the town council perspective, Jenny's mentioned the sluices gates, I've committed to commission a professional flood and river engineering advice report, in response to valuable information and ideas put forward by the public, including the Churn Catchment Flood Prevention Group and the Friends of Gunstall Brook, and would welcome multi-agency endorsement towards reviewing the operation of the sluice gates, which in Cirencester are operated by the town council, Bathurst Estate and one other private operator. We do recognise that we have a joint role to work together to do all we can to minimise the risk of flooding. But fundamentally I want to know if there is any local level of community support and resource that we can provide or facilitate to help local residents, and how such support can be delivered effectively, especially for those who are

vulnerable. Thank you Sir Geoffrey.

GCB:

Thank you very much Andrew. That concludes the reports from all our councils and agencies. I think I would just say to all of you, they're all very worthy reports but I think the real test of them is if we get another flooding event, god forbid, next year, the people of the Cotswolds, and Cirencester and Bledington in particular, would see a real improvement in what's been done and therefore a real reduction in the number of homes flooded. Because I know, from the people I've visited over the years, there's almost nothing worse than having your home flooded, and even worse if it's flooded by sewage. So I think we've really got to all do what we can to put what you've all said into action so that we improve the situation.

6. Questions from Members of the Public

GCB:

So I'm now going to move to questions. And I'm going to get through them quite quickly because we've only got an hour, and we want to get through some of the questions on the live feed into this section. So I'm going to start with Cirencester, and I would like each of you, whichever of you wants to say something on each of the individual questions, please do, but please keep the remarks very brief if you can.

So the first question I've got is from Rachel Snowball, and she says, since January 2014 when the environment and communities scrutiny committee at GCC recommended a multi-agency approach to address flooding issues, there have been multiple layers of meetings, forums, groups set up and dissolved. But we still don't appear to have a cohesive joined up plan with clear, prioritised risks. Dr Tom Cole says, I live in Abbey Ground, Cirencester, which is frequently affected by flooding. There are three problems I would like to have discussed: sewerage overload, river flooding and needing to better control the waterways. Then finally we have a question from Christopher Arnold – he has produced a history of sewage flooding in the area over eight years, and says there have been numerous promises by Thames Water and others of preventative measures. On each occasion they have proved inadequate and sewage returned to plague us. Both measures and investment by Thames Water are inadequate and they amount little more than a sticking plaster approach.

So who would like to try and address the questions in Cirencester? There were plenty of other areas flooded in Cirencester – Hereward Road, Blake Road – perhaps we can roll up all of those areas, and then I'm going to have a little section after this on attenuation and what might be done on a macro level to avoid flooding in Cirencester, but perhaps we could address some of the individual problems in Cirencester first. Who would like to start on that and the cohesive joined up approach?

Yes, please, Andrew. Andrew Hagger of Thames Water.

Andrew Hagger:

Yes, a couple of things that I want to point out. Yes, I think the approach to date has been very much localised and, as I mentioned in my introduction, it is very much about us taking a step change in considering the sewer systems, so actually that's the first thing. The second thing I wanted to say is that, some of you will be aware that there is quite a significant development happening in the area. Development is often seen as a particular concern, but actually in this

case, with the Chesterton Farm, we're actually using the opportunity to reconfigure some of the network, so actually looking at how we can actually reduce the risk in the area. And the third point I want to say is, ground water is very much, as I mentioned, our problem, but absolutely the surface water bit, so I'm very keen that we want to get a coordinated view on that surface water. Sorry if I've repeated a bit of what I said but this is exactly the type of problem that we want to address.

GCB:

Andrew, I'm wondering if you could just address a question from me, because it has been put to me by somebody that it's all very well sealing part of the sewage system, but does that then just translate the problem somewhere else, possibly downstream? So are we translating the problems from Cirencester down into Siddington and down into South Cerney?

Andrew Hagger:

I wouldn't say necessarily that far afield, but I would say that there is an element of correctness in that. And that is, in the ground water management plans we put out, this is what we are looking at. We're looking at sealing in zones. So rather than targeting individual pipes, we're saying that's just trying to fix that localised problem, let's tackle it. And what we've done with that is we've actually mapped the groundwater table. It's quite simple, if the sewer is sitting above the groundwater table then it shouldn't be at risk from infiltration. So what we're doing is we're trying to identify the sewers that are below the groundwater table and say actually those are the ones we need to target. And this is the step-change I'm talking about we're trying to do.

GCB:

So in terms of the area around Cirencester Arch, it's been put to me that some of the manholes overflowed. What is the problem with sealing manholes so that they can't overflow during flooding episodes?

Andrew Hagger:

It's a problem of pressure. If we seal the manhole covers in the road this creates a positive head in the sewerage system which could mean instead of sewage coming out of manholes in the road it instead comes out of manholes nearer to customer properties, or worse still could potentially cause sewage to escape inside customers properties. The answer is to stop it getting in there in the first place. And that is fundamentally what we need to address.

GCB:

So I would like somebody to address, probably perhaps the Environment Agency, I stood on the new road bridge on the Gloucester Road, on Christmas Eve – the amount of water coming into Cirencester, from both the Daglingworth Brook and the Churn, absolutely filled that bridge, it's a huge bridge. Now, irrespective of what was going on in the sluice gates, there was an enormous amount of surface water. I don't know whether that's your bag, whether that's the Environment Agency bag, but how are we going to deal with that huge amount of surface water, to stop areas like Hereward Road, Lake Road, flooding in future?

Andrew Hagger:

Surface water is not Thames Water. But what I would say is, because it impacts on our systems, we're not just going to stand back and say actually that's for someone else to resolve. I want us to very much be part of those discussions so we can work collaboratively. Also because, quite

simply, it may be simpler to solve that surface water flooding in general than try to necessarily completely make our system watertight at the surface if that makes sense, so it's just time for that joined up approach.

GCB:

I'm going to bring in Sarah Hale on this, and possibly Shaun Shackleford, the Environment Agency. And then I want to bring back in James Blockley to see how we're going to take a lead on all of this and actually make sure that the whole thing is coordinated and something is done. So Sarah, would you or Shaun like to comment on any ideas you've got on how to deal with this, and it was, I mean standing by the sluice gates, absolutely frightening, the amount of water that was coming into Cirencester, have you any idea how you can control that water to stop it getting into people's houses?

Sarah Hale:

So I think there's two different issues here. There's the, as we talked about, it's surface water, and I'm also not the lead for surface water, but don't want to just stand back and say, well I'm not the lead, or, we're not going to play a part in coming up with a different solution. Because what we need to do is try and get as much of that water as we can into the channels, and then get the channels free and take it through the town making sure that we're not transferring the risk elsewhere. In terms of what we can do, you said in your opener, Sir Geoffrey, that it was a lot of rain that fell over a really short period of time, but that's something that before we maybe said wouldn't happen as often, but with climate change it's looking like it will be a more frequent occurrence, so we do need to look at what we do and make sure that we try and channel that water in the best way so that it doesn't get into people's homes, but where it is surface water I'd look to my colleagues to work with them to understand what we could do to combat that.

GCB:

Right. I think we need a longer-term plan. We're going to come on in a second, next questions, a lot of questions. James, would you, or perhaps Peter Siret, like to say how you can coordinate? I mean, what I think the people of Cirencester want to hear from this whole session today is when it happens, as it will undoubtedly happen, we get a similar set of rain circumstances, ground saturation circumstances, that the prospects for people in Cirencester of not being flooded are far better than they are today. How can you coordinate all the agencies to try and come up with a plan and actually get something done to enable that to happen?

James Blockley:

Thank you, and yes I very much welcome what Sarah and Andrew have said about taking a collective responsibility for this regardless of which agency has a particular remit on main rivers, ordinary watercourse, surface water, ground water. Lead local flood authorities do have a remit for ordinary water courses and surface water. I think the key here is to carry on with the collaborative approach that we have taken thus far. But, as has been said, we need to crystallise that into a meaningful forward plan. In terms of surface water accessing the sewer network, I think there's a couple of things we need to look at. We need to look at where the rain falls. We need to look at upstream attenuation, which you alluded to.

GCB:

We're coming onto that I want to come onto that next James.

James Blockley:

Of course. And then there's the series of smaller-scale localised approaches that we can do within the urban setting. Rain gardens, property-level attenuation, small-scale actions that collectively can have a meaningful effect on the amount of surface water accessing the sewer network. That's about all I would say for the moment. I don't know, Peter, if you have anything to add from a Cirencester perspective, but the bottom line is we need to carry on working together.

GCB:

Peter, do you want to make a quick comment, Peter Siret?

Peter Siret:

Sorry, yeah, I'll just jump in there if you can hear me. So, we did have the multi-agency group that met relatively frequently over past few years but didn't meet over the last year, so I think it would be a good idea to get that up and running again.

GCB:

Peter, that actually says a lot really, that it didn't meet over the last year. And I suspect, had it met, maybe a closer working with the agencies might have alleviated some of the problems. Can we get an absolute guarantee from you and from James that it will meet regularly, so that all the agencies are in one room and coordinating together?

PS:

Well, I mean, yeah, we can meet up and certainly start that group up again. And I just want to echo Jenny's -

GCB:

Well, Peter, that sounds a little bit vague. I would like to get an absolute understanding. Because I think where it's particularly important is what we're coming on to, which is a long-term plan for Cirencester. And a long-term plan requires all the agencies coordinating together in one to produce a solution to this very difficult problem. So can we have an absolute assurance from you that that group will meet, it will report, and the records will be available in public?

Peter Siret:

Well, it's...

GCB:

James, can we come to you and get that assurance please?

James Blockley:

Many thanks Peter for jumping in there. I can see that Sarah and Andrew are both nodding their heads. The meeting, if I understand it rightly, was originally chaired by the Environment Agency, so I don't think there is a single authority that can make that commitment. But if I can ask Sarah and Andrew here just to confirm your nodded heads that you are, absolutely, so I think we can take that as -

GCB:

So James, can we take it that you will organise it, the County Council will coordinate it?

James Blockley:

I'm more than happy to take the lead. Whether or not that is acceptable with the other agencies. As I said before, Thames Water have taken the lead on that so I don't want to steal anybody's thunder, but if, in term of bringing the meeting together and getting the right people round the table, then I accept the fact that we as LLFA have the coordinating role, and yes, if the other agencies are happy for us to coordinate that meeting then yes I'd be happy to. But the outputs of that meeting would have to be a collective effort and not resting solely on one agency.

GCB:

No, that's the whole point James, that the outputs are collective, so that collectively we get a solution to these really very difficult problems. So thank you very much for that commitment, that's very helpful.

I did say I'd go on to attenuation. But I just want to knock on the head, I've had questions from George Brookes, Kerry O'Shea and Rob Gibson. I don't want to take up a lot of time with the sluice gates. Andrew Tubb helpfully mentioned that he was engaging consultants to do this. Can I just sort of get an assurance from you, and maybe from Sarah, that when you've done all that you will produce a new MOU, which you've got at the moment, which there has been some controversy about, and, in terms of that MOU, in future whenever the sluice gates are altered, the time, the date and the amount that they're altered are properly recorded, so that we can make sure that the proper actions have been taken at the proper time? Just a fairly brief reply on that Andrew, I don't want any accusations going backwards and forwards, I'd just like to move on from the issue.

Andrew Tubb

Completely agree, Sir Geoffrey. The simple answer is yes, and we have information published on our website. I want to be open and transparent. So, yes, when this is reviewed and updated that information will be available to the public.

GCB:

That's extremely helpful. That's what I hoped you'd say. Thank you very very much. So I'd now like to come on to the whole issue of attenuation and upstream measures that might be taken. So I've got questions here from Graham White, Dr James Meredith and Mark Tufnell and Jane Edwards. Basically what the questions are saying, firstly, moving upstream, particularly these questions relating to the Daglingworth stream, but I think the same issues apply to the Churn, the two big rivers that come into Cirencester and what we might do to control vast surges of water coming down those rivers and flooding Cirencester. And there was a little bit of flooding in Daglingworth village as a result of the Daglingworth stream. So Jenny, I don't want a huge long debate on this, but you were opening up the door a chink to some rather interesting ideas I thought, so on attenuation of those rivers, and working with landowners, could you just briefly share with us some of your thoughts on what might be a solution?

Jenny Phelps:

Yes, thank you. We've actually been working for nearly 5 years if not longer now with the opportunity of doing upstream attenuation in the Churn particularly and the Daglingworth stream. In fact the first study I think we did was over 7 years ago in the Daglingworth stream. There's a huge opportunity I think on the report that was last commissioned by the County

Council, we gave them support to find over 64 different places for upstream attenuation on the Churn. There's a huge number of historic meadows where the water was historically floated out, leaked out, onto the flood plains. Since then we've got over 500 hectares –

GCB:

Jenny, I'm really sorry to stop you, but for maybe some of our listeners, who are not quite as technical, could you just explain very simply what attenuation is?

Jenny Phelps:

Okay. So it's the ability of the watershed, effectively the land use, the surface roughness of the land and the soil to be able to attenuate water within the catchment itself. So what we're hoping to do is enable greater levels of percolation of water down into the ground and for it to be held for longer period in woodlands, wetlands and in soil organic matter. There is a historic footprint as to how this was done, and as I say there are many many meadows and wetlands and floating meadows and systems up-catchment, and many of the farmers have offered, and actually we've had many site meetings about how this would be delivered. And actually I know that the County Council are now trying to support some of those proposals that we've put forward, particularly in the very historic meadows around Cirencester. But it needs to go right the way up the catchment, right the way to the top of the Cotswold scarp above Cheltenham. Because this is a huge amount of water as you say. But there's many places to put it.

GCB:

That's very very helpful. Do any of the other agencies wish to comment on what might be a long-term solution? Because I think that's what the people of Cirencester and Siddington and South Cerney want to hear. You know, it's all very well sealing sewers and pumping and tinkering away sewage and everything else – these are short term measure. What we're looking for is long-term measures. I can see James with his hand up.

James Blockley:

Thank you, Sir Geoffrey. I just wanted to agree wholeheartedly with what Jenny has said about the scoping that FWAG has done for attenuation. We have been working for a number of years to identify opportunities. We had a project on the Daglingworth Stream, which unfortunately when we looked at the cost benefit analysis it didn't stack up, and there was a highly significant scheme down towards the town that was spearheaded by EA, and again the cost benefit analysis didn't stack up. So what Jenny is saying has hit the nail on the head. We can't look at individual locations as any kind of silver bullet. We need to take a much more comprehensive look, right from the upper catchment and the headwaters, right down to the town, and we will continue to work with FWAG especially on Jenny's proposal for the water meadows. And if we can back that up financially we will, and if we can back that up with our staff time we will. But I completely agree that that is the key – we need to look at the headwaters and whole catchment as opposed to just individual locations where cost benefit analysis might not stack up on that intervention in its own right.

GCB:

The only thing that concerns me James is that we've been talking about this for a number of years and nothing has happened. What I'm really hoping is your cross-agency group will seriously look at this and try and see if we can get in within a reasonable timetable some real action. Even if we start, have a comprehensive programme but actually start on it quite quickly and then build on that start. I think we at least should show the people of Cirencester that at

last something is being done.

James:

I agree. We need to give the community reassurance that something is being done. But what I will say is that we haven't been sitting on our hands over the past few years, we have looked at possible solutions and those solutions haven't been found to be viable. So we carry on looking, we look for other solutions that will be viable. So the message I want to say is that, yes, it may appear that nothing is being done, but a huge amount of research has been carried out into what may be done. And we're not there yet, but we will get there, and so we carry on building on the work that we've done to find solutions. Thank you.

GCB:

Well I think you're bringing a real breath of fresh air into this, and it's really helpful to hear you say that.

There are lots of questions from lots of different parts of the constituency, but as time is limited I'm going to go next straight to Bledington, because Bledington, sadly, had the highest concentration of houses flooded anywhere in the Cotswolds. So I really want to dwell on Bledington a little bit. I've got questions here from William Abbot-Jones, and he says, I would like to understand what the various local authorities and agencies are planning to do to mitigate the risk of flooding in Bledington. GC-B interjected and said "I have to say I've seen a map, which probably you have James, which is frightening." The number of houses in the village on that map, produced by the community group, the very excellent community group, showing red on the map where they did flood, is frightening. He says, I'm particularly interested in this as our home has a public right of way through it, I don't think we need perhaps to go into that issue. And we then go on to a question from Catherine Chichester on behalf of the Bledington Flood Group, who, as they are such a good group and such a robust group, and I have to say, well done to you for providing such a help to the community. I gather it was fantastic. Catherine, you're asking, we would like your support for ensuring the EA and GCC stand by the commitments made at our meeting on 23rd February, and I think it is just worth very briefly summarising them: carry out work to restore West Brook bank as a priority, complete the delayed work on Bledington Brook to improve the flow out of the village, continue to work with the Parish Council and Flood Group to mitigate risk of future floods. Short and medium and longer-term measures were identified including a wider catchment approach. And she then says that the Government announced funding of £170 million to protect communities – did the Cotswolds get its fair share? Finally, it says, we started a village initiative with the Flood Group and considerable work. The Bledington PC and affected villagers have funded their work with FWAG. We found it an essential support for our flooded community in allowing us to understand what we can do and how we can collaborate with the various agencies. How can we apply for funds for ongoing work with FWAG? So I think, Jenny, that puts you in the frame first to answer. You've obviously been working with them. Just tell us again, looking at longer term solutions, then I'm going to go to the agencies to work out what they've actually done and what they might do, but you're looking at a whole catchment area approach, similar to Cirencester, what you might be able to do for Bledington.

Jenny

I think the two things are very closely linked, to say it's a process that we use in every community that we go to. And it starts off by looking at the infrastructure issues and actually, we did that robustly with the community group in Bledington, and it's about mapping what are

those infrastructure issues that are impacting on, particularly surface water getting into foul drainage systems, and I would like to make some comments at another time about Cirencester. But in Bledington what we try and demonstrate is the benefits of working with your farming community. The farming community are part of your community. And actually their land and the way their land is being affected by climate change, and the support systems that Government are developing and have are essential for us to be able to enable the farmers to help us. So what we've done effectively is encourage the community to go out and actually get support from those farmers, which we do in a positive way. We're not just asking those farmers to help us with flooding, we're looking at how they as businesses can become resilient and transformative as well.

And so we map everything, with all the farming, with all the community members. We look at the whole catchment, we look at the land use, as we were saying, about the runoff, the surface runoff, opportunities for slowing the flow. And then obviously share all that information in a strategic way with the catchment partnership. It's a really good of aligning that support.

And then the flood group itself, it's a really good demonstration in Bledington about this underutilised resource of the people who want to act, and want to take action, but without support it's very confusing for people as to who does what and who has governance over different bits of infrastructure or highways drains or ordinary water courses or surface water or sewerage. So it's about then signposting them and getting that coordinated cost benefit of support of action. And then obviously facilitating in them all of the mechanisms of support. So from their investment, their own personal investment in Bledington of about £3000 for our time, we've then been able to have support from the Environment Agency for a £30,000 grant that we've already got, for helping to improve the water environment. We've got commitments and all these others that I think Catherine would very much like to see and follow through from all the brilliant support we've had from the agencies so far. But also we've had the opportunity to discuss with six different landowners the potential to facilitate countryside stewardship and woodland creation and other mechanisms such as woodland carbon code, so that there's lots of different ways that we can facilitate funding from across government to deliver land use change and support our farmers. And that that is the only long-term solution we'll be able to do together to be able to make sure that we can truly make the communities resilient to these extreme weather events.

GCB:

Jenny, that's really helpful. I'm going to have to cut you off there because I really want to get to the meat of some of this. The Environment Agency, could we have your take on this, please Sarah? Jenny's work is fine, trying to hold up water, but actually we need to maintain the existing water works a little better. Can you give any sort of comment on that, and actually I'd like you to link that please with Cirencester, Siddington, South Cerney and Bledington. What more can the Environment Agency do to make sure that these rivers, one branch on a culvert can cause an area to flood, so what more emphasis can we have this year on cleaning out some of these watercourses by the Environment Agency?

Sarah Hale:

Absolutely right, one branch can cause quite a lot of issues when it hits the wrong culvert, so we do have a maintenance programme that is in place that we do every year, and we have made adaptations to that, as I said at the start, just to, from learning what we've done across the catchment. I think where it comes to the fore is that we really do need to continue to work

with Jenny and others to make sure that we are looking at it as a whole, rather than individual bits and pieces, so we can do things like Jenny said it's very confusing sometimes about who leads on what, making sure that we offer that support, and we absolutely have committed to meeting as many groups as needed in order to make sure that we're very clear, supporting through some of the more difficult elements in terms of permissions and permitting to make sure that people have the right things in place that they need to do works themselves, but also understand what we can do to help. So across the whole patch, you named lots of different places there, but actually I think the answer still is that we all need to work in partnership together to understand what's the best course of action.

GCB:

Thank you very much. Time is moving on quite fast, so I now want to move us to Siddington and South Cerney, just downstream from Cirencester, and I want to particularly zero in on Melmore Gardens. I'll take all the issues relating to Siddington first. So, I've got a question here from Jan Bailey who flooded I gather very badly this year since, Jan, so you have my sympathies. She says, with regard to the Environment Agency, I was in communication in 2019 and 2020 with Shaun Shackelford of the EA, as the obstructions, going back to what Sarah was just saying, in the Churn river channel, which he said he would address, with regard to the blocked culvert at Siddington Mill bridge, this request was submitted to Gloucestershire Highways. So perhaps we could hear, quite briefly, on that, and then I'm going to move to Melmore Gardens. So perhaps just basically Jan's points please. If you could address both please Sarah, or Shaun Shackelford, apparently your agency was heavily involved in this, and perhaps then on to the County Council for dealing with culverts generally. I think there is dissatisfaction about the frequency of culvert clearance so that warning for Highways, I think it's James Grey, that we will be asking that question. So perhaps Sarah, Shaun might answer what he's been doing at Siddington and South Cerney if that's all right please.

Shaun Shackelford:

Absolutely, so we've been working with Jan in particular to recognise what some of the issues are in and around Siddington. We do some of the maintenance within the catchment. We agreed that we would let the riparian owners know in the area, which I've done, I've spoken to the Bathurst Estate and the people that are responsible for the maintenance in that area, but, as a result of the issues that Siddington has received, we've agreed to undertake some maintenance on behalf of the riparian owners. So this year, this financial year, we intend to go through all of the channels that are in and around the Siddington area under our jurisdiction, and we'll clear them out, so that we've got a good understanding, or at least we'll leave them with a good level of maintenance in the area so that the riparian owners can continue to do that going forward. We're not always funded for all of the channels in and around Siddington, so we do tend to stick to the main channels, we do come through once a year, but we're going to go over and above and do more this year than we would normally do. But it would remain to make sure the highways drain in and around Siddington there on the main road is clear, which would help drain the meadow when it does get flooded. It's inevitable that that meadow's going to get flooded, but, like I say, if we can remove all the blockage we can keep using those channels for as long as we can, and hopefully that will keep the water flowing where it's supposed to, but it does involve lots of other little bits to happen in and around Siddington like ongoing maintenance by the riparian owners and clearing out of the -

GCB:

That's very helpful Shaun. I have to say that Jan isn't alone in that question. We've had

questions that are critical about the Churn maintenance from both Paul Berkeley and George Reading, so I think really some visible reassurance that when the weather dries up a bit you are doing some maintenance would be really helpful there.

Shaun Shackelford:

Absolutely, we always do.

GCB:

Perhaps step it up a little, would be helpful.

Rhodri, I don't know whether you're able to answer, I know your area really is north Cotswolds, but are you able to answer for the south Cotswolds and the criticism on the maintenance of the culverts in general, what you can do to step up clearing these culverts out? Rhodri Grey? Do we have anybody from the Highways department at Gloucestershire County Council on the line? No? Well I'm going to have to then turn to James. I'm sorry, this is not your direct responsibility but could you sort of give us any reassurance that the County Council will do a little better in terms of clearing out culverts and blocked drains and so on?

James Blockley:

Thank you, Sir Geoffrey. I mean it's not directly my area but we do work very closely with Highways. We do support an enhanced drainage network maintenance schedule through an annual transfer of funds from our budget to theirs to make sure that the maintenance schedule is as detailed and optimum as it possibly can be. I can't comment on the specifics at Siddington I'm afraid, but I can take an action away to speak to my Highways colleagues to feedback on any individual areas, to say what the schedule is and what the priorities are for these areas. I'm afraid I can't comment any more directly.

GCB:

That's fine, time is really pressing on. So I then want to go, and this will particularly put Thames Water in the frame, to the vexed question of Melmore Gardens, which I think is Siddington rather than Cirencester, but I assume it's Siddington. And we've got a question here from Nick Bridges, and he says, over the last month I've reported two incidents of the combination drain gully at the end of Melmore Gardens surcharging. The last time I called it took 50 minutes to get through and half an hour for the Thames Water operator to record these repeated details and issue an incident number. That's half an hour that could have been spent helping somebody. He has a problem about the sewage system in Cirencester, well let's read that out because it's relevant: My problem is that the sewage system in Cirencester is overloaded when it rains. Stormwater enters system and cannot flow out of Melmore Gardens into the main sewage system so it backs up as a reservoir. So he's asking what we can do to get it fixed – can we have extra capacity in the main sewage system, can we have a decoupled system with separate highways storm drains retrofitted, can we have a Suds system, water butts or something else? So I think this whole issue of Melmore Gardens has been going on since I've been a Member of Parliament, so I think probably for nearly 30 years. It really is time we came up with some sort of solution to this.

Shaun Parsons says, Thames Water strategy for Cirencester, which includes Siddington, indicates that Thames Water are now at the implementation stage of their strategy, and that this will be completed in 2025. Well that's all very well but I think that's too long for the residents of Melmore Gardens. So can we really have this addressed by you, Andrew, or I don't

know whether you're dealing with it or whether Stephen Sanderson is dealing with it. It really is a problem that's been going on for too long.

Andrew Hagger:

I'll start and then I'll pass over to Stephen if that's okay so he can deal with the response on the ground. As I commented before, the surface water gets into system, things like water butts, Suds aren't necessarily a good solution in this particular situation because of the ground water, so what we want to be careful about is not transferring one problem to a different problem. In my view the simple solution, as I alluded to before, is to understand where the highways drainage and surface water gets in there, and work through a plan. Many people talked about this, this isn't a simple fix, this is a plan, it needs to be sustainable, so my point is this is where we need to understand, if we take the highway drainage away it's got to go somewhere else. And this is part of being responsible in all the aspects. What I mean by that is that we can't simply just solve one system to the detriment of another system. So I won't dwell on that too much. But I think to the point is sealing, culverts, manholes, separating groundwater, that is part of the master plan. If it's okay, can I pass on to Stephen now?

GCB:

Yes, please do.

Stephen Sanderson:

Hello Sir Geoffrey. I'm Stephen, I'm the area network manager for Cirencester. Like Andrew was just touching on, it's around getting down to the root cause where these volumes are coming from, and I've spent a lot of time looking into the Churn, the flood prevention group, the report they release, it's 55 pages. It's around understanding what the rivers do, understanding when the rain's coming down and how much is getting into those highway combined systems. Decoupling, absolutely, I'd love to work with the other agencies to do that. The new main for Chesterton catchment, that's going to be coming online, we're hoping that that's going to reduce sort of towards 40 litres per second through that Melmore area. I'm also going to be very much more data driven, so there is sewer depth monitors there, so we basically want to get smarter and understand what that actual network is doing and when things are starting to trigger out. So that's purely around reduction on volume in there.

GCB:

And Stephen, perhaps you can answer Shaun's point. He says that you have an action plan and a strategy which you'll complete in 2025. Can we just get very clearly from you, or maybe Andrew, where you've got action plans and what the timetables are on them?

Stephen Sanderson:

I'll pass this back to Andrew. My action plan from my point of view as the network manager is very much a reactive one, so that's getting a human eyeball on where the stuff's getting in and doing those patch liners, but those patch liners aren't the fix for this type of catchment so I'll go back to Andrew in terms of what's been promised as delivery.

GCB:

Thank you.

Andrew Hagger:

As I mentioned at the outset, 19/20 was a wet year, and this one has been another particularly

wet year. There's 56 catchments in total that we've identified, including places like Lambourn, Aldbourne, Whitney, and obviously Bourton-on-the-Water, which is in your area. The stage we're at at the moment is we're capturing all the data, we've got people on the ground, we've got monitoring equipment in all the sewers. What we're putting together is the programme that we can actually identify which areas we need to target first, where the intelligence is advanced enough to be able to put boots on the ground. So I can't give a commitment today to say whether it's going to be this month or this year, but what I am saying to you is that at the moment we are prioritising those catchments in order to understand which ones we can progress the quickest with because we understand quite simply what we need to do. Because we can't just be going back again, we need to come up with a more permanent solution.

GCB:

Andrew, with great respect, we've been hearing for at least five years that Thames Water is collecting data. I don't know how much data you need. But what really the residents on the ground, and I really make a plea to all the agencies and for Melmore Gardens in particular, I think it's the most long-standing problem in the entire constituency. But I think what we really want to see is action taken that's going to affect real people's lives and prevent real flooding in real homes. So can you really concentrate on that this year.

I see Jenny's got her hand up. Jenny, maybe you're going to tell us about both Siddington and South Cerney, because I'm not going to have time to get on to South Cerney, because after you I think I'm going to go to the live questions.

Jenny Phelps:

If I could, really quickly, because this is so important, in the last 7 years we've got all the information as to what is wrong in these communities. You know I've sat in all of the multi-agency meetings that we've had, and people from Thames Water, the County Council, the District Council, the regional flood and coastal committee, we know what's wrong, we know what's wrong in Melmore Gardens, we know that there's three lost ditches, we know that one people's deeds there is an old channel that has been built over that had taken the surface water away, we know there's a lost bit of drain that runs adjacent to the river that's been lost over about a hundred yards, we know the highways is draining directly into the foul system, we know all the route to runoff in Cirencester. We know what is wrong. The difficulty is that the mechanisms for, as James was alluding to, the cost-benefit for the different particular ways that enable these agencies to fund action, or for Thames Water to put it into their asset management plans, all of these fall outside.

So what has been happening over the last decade is that we now have the detail, we know what we want to do, but nobody has the funding, or the remit to be able to counterbalance those mechanisms to enable, to allow them to invest. So I can tell you what's wrong in Melmore Gardens, I've walked it. But we need the money, we need somebody to be able to say, yes we can support this, because all the agencies want to solve it, they just don't have the mechanisms.

GCB:

Well that's really helpful. I think what I'm going to suggest is that James coordinates this meeting with all the agencies including yourself, and hopefully pressurises them for the money, but if he can't get the money out of all the agencies then I will get involved, and try and see if I can pressurise them. So I think we need to all of us work just a little bit more closely together

than we have in the past. You need to sort of prompt all the rest of us, and we need to actually get on and get something done. But thank you very much for that.

We're now starting to move into the unknown part of the proceedings today. We're going to go to live questions. I'm really sorry, to the communities in South Cerney, in Fairford, in Lechlade, in Kempsford, in Moreton-in-Marsh and Bourton-on-the-Water, that I haven't managed to be able to get to you because of time, and I want to allow enough time for live questions. It may be that David will produce some live questions for us from those communities. David, over to you. Please tell us what we've got in terms of live questions.

David Fowles:

Thank you, Sir Geoffrey. We have a combination of comments and questions. And the best thing I can do is go through the chronology. Most of the questions and comments are from people who've already sent in questions but I do think it's worth going through and trying to highlight some of them.

First question, directed at you Sir Geoffrey, from James Quick and Jane Chambers, both of whom have lived in the area for ten years and been affected by flooding numerous times, is they've never met you and they wondered where you've been over the last ten years across the Cotswolds looking at flooding. Would you like to comment on your trips around the Cotswolds?

GCB:

Could you tell me where they live?

David Fowles:

I don't have an address.

GCB:

Well James and Jane, I don't know where you live so clearly that's why I haven't met you. I'm always happy to come and look at any situation. I hope we've covered your particular situation. You can hear from the proceedings this morning that there is a real sense of urgency, urging the agencies to get on and solve some of these deep-seated and longstanding problems. You may rest assured that I will keep chasing it. Everyone whose email we have will receive the transcript of this meeting. You can keep chasing me, I can keep chasing them. But we really want to get something done, that's the purpose of this meeting.

David Fowles:

Moving on. Nick Bridges comments on Cirencester and the Tesco roundabout, which has only literally just cleared in the last couple of days. It's dangerous, cars have been aquaplaning around there. The Kingsmead Estate field nearby is very close and that could be a good area to divert and store water. Any comments on that?

GCB:

Sadly we don't have a Highways person here, but can I ask you, James, to take that away. I agree with that comment. I've driven around that Tesco roundabout, when significant quantities of surface water remain for days. It is dangerous. You could get aquaplaning of cars there. It does seem to me that it'd be a relatively easy Highways fix to get the water off the roundabout. Where it goes then is difficult, but let's just see if we can get the water off the

roundabout when it floods. So, James, could I ask you to take that action away and see what can be done.

David Fowles:

I am going to jump ahead because I can see that Highways have come in for some criticism here because they're not on the call. And Jon Hill says it's scandalous that Gloucestershire Highways have not represented. I know you've tried, Sir Geoffrey, to get them. Do you want to comment on Gloucestershire Highways?

GCB:

Well I thought that we did have a representative from Highways here, but we have a man who's on the cabinet of the County Council, in James. He has given various undertakings. Maybe we could ask him to ask the Highways department to give us a written report on the issues that have been raised at this meeting, so that we can include those in the minutes for everybody to see.

David Fowles:

Thank you, Sir Geoffrey. Comment from Simone Clark, said that today she's looking at the latest National Trust partnership research on hazard mapping which has been published and could help with future flood planning and understanding. That's a message to all the agencies. She's happy to share this information.

GCB:

I think that we've got tons of data in the Cotswolds. I think what we're really asking now, as a matter of urgency, is to get some of that data, not translated onto maps, but actually into physical actions on the ground.

David Fowles:

Okay, moving on. Nick Bridges. The sealing of Watermoor Road has been very good, but the lido at Watermoor End is no more. Does this then mean that the flooding ends up getting redirected into cellars in St Peters Road and Victoria Road?

GCB:

Who would like to pick that up, who's an expert on Cirencester and Watermoor Road? Andrew, do you want to just tell us who you think should be involved in this problem?

Stephen Sanderson:

If this is related to the line of sewers, then ultimately, yes, the water's got to go somewhere else. I can't impact that. Generally I've seen comments around "when you seal a sewer, is the problem going to move?". Yes, because water by its nature will find the next route. That's either going to be back into my sewer where there's a deeper and unsealed joint, or if I completely line the sewer through and make it leakproof then the water will potentially go and find its way into someone's basement. That's the nature. I'm designing out the issue of it getting into the sewer, but that water will go somewhere.

GCB:

I accept that Stephen, but nevertheless I think lining of the sewers is going to be part of the solution, but actually also Jenny Phelps's work and the County Council's lead work on trying to attenuate some of the water will help you. So I think we need to get on with that, what I call,

macro planning work. So, Nick, I can't provide you with an instant solution, all I can do is urge everybody to get on with trying to come up with these longer-term solutions.

David Fowles:

We've got a similar question relating to Dugdale Road. Dugdale Road, Cirencester, flooded as water came back up the gulleys. Question here from Michael Poulet, would it be possible to fit a one-way valve to prevent that from happening? There's another question related to one-way valves and stopcocks throughout Cirencester, but that's a specific question on Dugdale Road which has kind of been answered just now.

GCB:

Well I think what these questions are demonstrating, if I may say to everybody on the call, the agencies, is that clearly nobody can expect the sewage system in Cirencester to work under water. So what we've got to do is really important and urgent I would say. Jenny, the Environment Agency, Gloucestershire County Council have got to come up with a macro scheme. If necessary I will push for Government, because I think the situation now has got so serious that we do really need to try and prevent some of this massive surge of water getting into Cirencester. And then push Thames Water to upgrade their pipework to make sure that it works. So I think these questions all form part of the same pattern, with the same solution.

David Fowles:

Nick Bridges has said, Highways, could they commit to ensuring every section of road has a storm drain?

GCB:

James is taking that away.

David Fowles:

A comment from Michel Poulet. He estimates that the cost to Cirencester on a capitalised basis is over £7m, is there an estimate of total cost and can our response be proportionate, or build a relief pipe around Cirencester in the same way that we did around Moreton? It's a huge sum of money.

GCB:

I think that's part of James's committee's planning. Whatever it costs, we need to come up with a plan, and then we need to see whether somebody will fund it. We need to let the agencies do their work and work out what is feasible

David Fowles:

Interesting comment from Ashleigh Smith on the way Thames Water charges people for surface water drainage. He's taken that direct from the Ofwat website for highway drainage. Water that drains from roads and footpaths flows into public drainage systems, he says, and that's known as highway drainage. Water companies recover the cost from their customers. Since highway drainage benefits everyone that uses the road, wouldn't it make more sense for them to recover the costs direct from roads authorities and users, via a change in the legislation?

GCB:

Well it's an interesting idea. I'll look at it and perhaps just put that to Department of Transport and see what they say.

GCB:

I don't want Stephen, or Andrew, Thames Water, to get off scot-free about Cirencester. Because, although I did say that you can't expect a sewage system to work under water, I think there may be still a lot more that you can do in terms of valves, sealing water pipes. And there is a feeling that Thames Water hasn't put enough investment into Cirencester. Can you just say a little bit more about that?

Andrew Hagger:

Absolutely. It's fair to say that even if we solve the surface water problem, foul water's probably still going to be a persistent problem. So I'm not going to wait until all the surface water gets done. The ground water infiltration management plan that we just published, that is looking at large areas of sealing. But in addition to that, I know Jenny wants to come in, we want to put in some sealing plates into the top, but the bit that we haven't been doing a lot of is actually sealing the manholes. So my point really is very much around absolutely, it's not sort of about just maintaining bits here, it's about making that step change. So loud and clear, that's the need of it and that's the sort of commitment I'm making here today.

GCB:

I'd like to think that you've got the sense from this meeting, Andrew, that there is a feeling of immense frustration in Cirencester. Understandably about the surface water, I understand that, but actually people's homes flooded with sewerage flooding is about the worst possible thing that can happen. So I think more emphasis on what you've just said, passing it up the line to say that we here in Cirencester, on the very west of your catchment area, are getting more than a little frustrated by how slowly things are going in this area, and we would like to see a little faster progress in this year please. Jenny?

Andrew Hagger:

Just very briefly, I'll only be two seconds. There's an awful lot of knowledge, both on here and on Facebook, which I'm absolutely adamant needs to feed into it, so one of the things I will take away in addition is more transparency about what we're going to do and why we're going to do it. Because I think it's important that there's visibility of what our plans are. I'll shut up now and let Jenny go.

GCB:

I think you've absolutely said it. We require action, but transparency with action is really important, so that people know what's going to be done when, would be really, really, helpful. Jenny.

Jenny Phelps:

Just two things. One, to say that we've got all of this digitised, so in Cirencester and for others, across the county, we've got on Arc GIS, very happy to share data, we've offered many times before, with all the agencies. In Cirencester and Fairford there's been recognition around 3 years ago now from a brilliant roof to foul survey I mentioned earlier. I think there's over three or four hundred houses that are connected in Cirencester where their roof runoff goes directly into the foul, and some really big buildings as well that have quite significant impact into the foul system. I know that Laurence King was looking at some of those but there should be, we wanted to really connect with those houses and offer, with Thames Water, water catchment systems. But that's never been progressed, and neither in Fairford, and we'd really love to do

that. We know a lot of the places where we need infrastructure improvements. That would be a multi-agency approach as we mentioned earlier. But we have mapped all of this and we can share that data, the non-sensitive data. But obviously we wouldn't share it externally because it wouldn't be appropriate. If anybody wants that information electronically then let me know. We have the records from ten years of work for 20 communities on GPS.

GCB:

So I'm afraid, Andrew, I'm going to come back to you again. This is both in your interest and the residents' interests that we try and sort out in Fairford and Cirencester where it seems to be worse, Jenny was mentioning it, the connecting of stormwater drains from houses, gutters and drains and so forth, into the sewage system obviously makes it that much worse in a period of excess surface water. What more can you do about that issue?

Andrew Hagger:

Absolutely. I can't go into a lot of detail but I know that there's people on this forum that I'm actually talking to. I'm almost of the view that we need to almost do an amnesty in a sense, to understand which properties are connecting their surface water in. We need to understand where we can use things like water butts, or where we can do disconnection. Because once we solve the ground water we need to solve the misconceptions. As I started out the conversation, it has to be a waste only system and that is something I want to progress over this coming year.

GCB:

Can I just connect one thing you've said there, "once we have solved". Can the two things go concurrently? Because clearly one affects the other. So we would like to see concurrent action please rather than sequential action.

Andrew Hagger:

Indeed. I see the infiltration is very much as a Thames Water problem. I see working on the surface water, that's where we need to partner, whether it be communities, other risk management authorities, or whatever. Why I make distinctions, one is slam dunk Thames Water, the other one is we need help.

GCB:

Thank you. I'm sure through James's group, and through me if you're still not getting the right funding, we can try and put some pressure on. So I'm afraid that's all we've got time for. I hope you found that helpful. I'm not prepared to just rest on my laurels and hear the good words that I've heard today. I want to see real action taking during this year, once the weather clears up a bit so that things are drier and people can get onto the land. We want all the agencies to take action on the assumption that we're going to get the same sort of storms next year as this year, and work out what can be done in the meanwhile to make sure that if we do get them we are much better prepared than we were this year.

So thank you all very much for participating in this forum today. I know there were certain communities that we haven't said anything about. I know that there are quite a few questions coming in on the live feed that we haven't had time to go to. I repeat my pledge at the beginning of the meeting – they will all be put to relevant agencies, and anyone who asked a question will be advised the answers as soon as I receive them. If there's anything else that's on your mind that I haven't covered, please contact me at cliftonbrowng@parliament.uk on my

email and I will be happy to try and find an answer for you. Can I thank everybody, particularly the agencies who've spent so much time here today. I'm getting a sign from David, as always.

David Fowles:

Just to say, Sir Geoffrey, that those people that have come on on the live stream, if we've got their email addresses, because several of them have already asked questions, that's great, we can go back to them. If they haven't they need to email you, because otherwise all we've got is a name.

GCB:

Rather like James and Jane, we need to know an email address at the very least, and if you want me to come and look a problem I need to know where you live.

So thank you again for participating today. The minutes will be available as soon as we can turn them around which is quite a big job, and I hope you found today useful. But whatever you believe about this forum, I always welcome to hear comments from you by email. Thank you very much indeed.

The date of the next flood meeting, subject to any covid restrictions, is Friday 22 October 2021, 1030-1230hrs at Cotswold District Council Chamber, Cirencester and 1400-1600hrs at Moreton Area Centre, Moreton-in-Marsh and will be available on the livestream on my Facebook page for all those who don't physically wish to attend.