

Report title	Runnymede Borough Council Flood & Sandbag Policy
Report author	Dr Marcel Steward: Head of External Projects, Emergency Response & Bid Grant Funding
Department	Chief Executives Office
Exempt?	No
Exemption type	Not Applicable
Reasons for exemption	Not Applicable

Purpose of report:

To resolve

Synopsis of report:

A report on changes to the Council’s Sandbag policy was brought to the September Environment and Sustainability Committee. At the meeting, Members provided feedback on the report. It was resolved that a revised version of the report, incorporating the views of Members, should be brought to the November meeting of the Environment and Sustainability Committee.

The current Runnymede Borough Council Sandbag policy was created in the aftermath of the devastating flood which occurred in the Borough in 2014. This has been reviewed and recommendations brought forward which reflect current best practice adopted by the Environment Agency and other Councils in Surrey. The review considered the Council’s mandatory responsibilities, the Council’s capacity to provide sandbags, the effectiveness of sandbags in protecting property and the health and safety of residents and Council operatives.

- Recommendation(s):**
- Agree that the current Sandbag policy is outdated and no longer fit for purpose.
 - Replace the current policy with a position statement on the Council’s website, which can be updated as required. *Please see Section 2.12*
 - That the Council, subject to Member approval, embarks on a communications campaign to ensure that all residents and communities are informed of the change and encouraged to actively plan for future flooding events.

1. Context and background of report

1.1 Runnymede’s geography, geology, and hydrogeology, place it at high risk of major flooding, the most recent major event being in 2014.

- 1.2 Major natural flood events in the Borough result from fluvial (river), pluvial (rain) and clearwater (ground water) flooding or a combination of these.
- 1.3 District and Borough Councils are not mandated to provide sandbags during a flood. The primary mandate on Districts and Boroughs is to support residents whose homes have been made uninhabitable by providing respite centres and/or alternative temporary accommodation.
- 1.4 In emergency planning terms, the district and borough councils also have a role to assist communities with recovery post-emergency event.
- 1.5 The Environment Agency is the principal flood defence authority. Under the Water Resources Act 1991, the Environment Agency has permissive powers for the management of flood risk arising from designated main rivers.
- 1.6 Surrey County Council is the Lead Local Flood Authority for Surrey with numerous responsibilities under the Flood Risk Regulations 2009 and the Flood and Water Management Act 2010. In essence the County Council has overall strategic responsibility for flood risk management in Surrey other than the main rivers which devolve to the Environment Agency.
- 1.7 As the Highways Authority, Surrey County Council is also responsible for highway drainage on all non-trunk roads in the county.
- 1.8 Highways England are responsible for flooding and drainage on Trunk roads.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended

- 2.1 The Sandbag Deployment Policy has been reviewed against the following criteria:
 - Capacity to respond to a flood emergency by the provision and distribution of sandbags,
 - Council's primary responsibility to provide respite centres and temporary housing to residents whose homes are uninhabitable
 - Council's responsibility to support recovery post-emergency event
 - the effectiveness of sandbags in protecting property against fluvial and pluvial flooding
 - acceptance that sandbags do not provide protection against groundwater flooding of the type experienced in the 2014 floods in Runnymede
 - the health and safety of residents and Council staff
- 2.2 The Council's primary responsibility during a flood event is to provide respite centres and temporary accommodation to residents whose homes become uninhabitable.
- 2.3 Diverting staff to sandbag provision dilutes the Council's capacity to fulfill its primary responsibilities.
- 2.4 Statutory guidance on sandbag provision and the effectiveness of sandbags in preventing property flooding is scant or non-existent.

Having said that, the Environment Agency no longer deploys sandbags to prevent water entering properties. It continues to use sandbags to anchor objects in place such as flood barriers, manhole / drain covers, or wrapped in plastic sheeting to

divert flows. It does not issue sandbags to the public. Other Councils who have adopted a 'no sandbag' policy or a restricted sandbag policy include Spelthorne, Elmbridge, Epsom & Ewell, Guildford, and Waverley.

- 2.5 Informal guidance from the Environment Agency is that sandbag barriers must be several bags deep and wrapped in heavy duty plastic sheeting to have any potential to be effective.
- 2.6 Sandbags do not provide protection against groundwater flooding.
- 2.7 Sandbags are extremely heavy and difficult for residents to manhandle and carry an inherent risk of injury.
- 2.8 Sandbags deployed in a flood may be contaminated and may require specialist disposal after the event.
- 2.9 It is extremely dangerous to enter flood water.

Risks include:

- Contaminated water from drains and rivers presenting health risks - particularly to vulnerable residents.
 - Hidden objects and hazards, uneven and slippery surfaces make it difficult to walk with trips and entrapment being a particular concern.
 - Uncovered manholes can be difficult to see and can drag people down into a whirlpool.
 - Flowing water is a powerful force when the volume is increasing. As little as 10cms can knock an adult off their feet.
 - Drivers can easily become trapped by rising flood waters. 15cms of water can cause a driver to lose control of a small vehicle, putting themselves at risk of injury and water in the internal workings of the vehicle can cause the engine to stall.
 - Temperature – being immersed in water below 15^o can quickly overwhelm the ability to move and respond.
- 2.10 The health and safety hazards created by a flood prevent sandbag distribution in a flooded area. Residents should not be encouraged to enter flood water to go to sandbag distribution centers.
 - 2.11 The Council does not have the capacity to store and distribute adequate numbers of sandbags to the many households that are likely to be affected by a significant flood event in the Borough.

The Environment Agency does not provide policy advice on the subject.

Informal advice from the Environment Agency as an approximate 'rule of thumb' indicates a minimum of 30+ sandbags wrapped in plastic to offer any protection to an 'average' domestic property.

In the 2014 flood, it is estimated that a minimum of 2, 500 homes were affected. The Council does not have the capacity to hold sufficient supplies to provide sandbags of this scale.

- 2.12 Taking the considerations together, the proposal is to replace the current policy with the following Position Statement on the Runnymede Council Website:

“The Council cannot provide sandbags to all households affected by flooding. The Council will retain a small store of sandbags and in exceptional circumstances, on a case-by-case basis, may exercise discretion in supporting vulnerable residents affected by localised flooding. This support will be subject to the availability of sandbags and the specific nature of the localised flooding, to ensure that the deployment of sandbags would be possible, would not encourage residents to enter flood water where there is an identifiable health and safety risk in so doing, and where it is identifiable that sandbags would be effective in diverting the flow of flood water.

Once provided, save in exceptional circumstances, sandbags become the responsibility of the householder. The subsequent collection and disposal will not ordinarily be organised and paid for by the council.

All households in areas with a known flood risk are encouraged to make their own forward planning arrangements to ensure that their properties are protected by appropriate preventative measures that may be deployed in the event of a flooding incident. Further information on measures households could consider taking, is included at [Prepare for a flood – Runnymede Borough Council](#)

Residents can also sign up for flood alerts and obtain guidance on making flood plans at: [Prepare for flooding: Protect yourself from future flooding - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

3. Policy framework implications

- 3.1 The current sandbag policy no longer reflects best practice and is not fit for purpose. It would be costly for the council to try and continue to deliver this policy.
- 3.2 The Council will continue to encourage residents and businesses in the Borough to consider and implement their own, flood protection measures.
- 3.3 The Council will retain a small store of sandbags and in exceptional circumstances, on a case-by-case basis, may exercise discretion in supporting vulnerable residents affected by localised flooding.
- 3.4 The Council will support residents and flood groups by directing them to support networks, providing relevant contact numbers and advice where appropriate.
- 3.5 If the recommendations are approved, the revised sandbag statement will be updated on the Council’s website and a communication campaign carried out to ensure that residents are aware of the change ahead of the winter flood season.
- 3.6 The campaign will prioritise residents who live in areas of the borough which are vulnerable to flooding. Local ward councillors will be supported to ensure they are fully briefed with respect to options for residents, including self-resilience in a flood situation.

4 Resource implications/Value for Money

- 4.1 In the event of flooding, the Council’s current sandbag policy would not be fit for purpose. It is costly and there is no longer any adequate budgetary provision for the policy to be implemented.

- 4.2 Moreover, as discussed in this report, informal guidance from the Environment Agency and from other local authorities indicate that sandbags are not an effective defence against flooding. If the Council provide sandbags to residents to protect property against flood knowing that they would fail, it is potentially open to criticism and potential claims if negligence could be established for raising false expectations.
- 4.3 The most significant insurance risk to the Council arises from the risk of injury to volunteers manning sandbag distribution centres sustaining long-term work injuries due to a lack of proper training in an emergency situation.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 There are no legal implications from the proposed change in policy, as providing sandbags is not a statutory duty for the Council.

6. Equality implications

- 6.1 The Council has a duty under the Equality Act 2010 (as amended) (the Act). Section 149 of the Act provides that we must have due regard to the need to:
- a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, and other conduct prohibited by the Act,
 - b) to advance equality of opportunity
 - c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share protected characteristics.
- 6.2 The current Sandbag Policy was assessed by way of an Equalities Screening followed by a Full Impact Assessment based on the need to consider the impact the Policy may have had on the nine characteristics protected by the Act. The Equalities Screening identified that the characteristics of age, disability, pregnancy and maternity and race may have been affected by the Policy. The Full Impact Assessment highlighted that there was a lack of information in terms of the number of vulnerable people who did not have a support network but concluded that the Policy had put in place mitigation measures mainly in terms of access to Community Resilience Groups.
- 6.3 If the decision is to amend the current Policy, it is recommended that a new Equalities Screening Assessment is undertaken to consider any impact the changes may have on the people with characteristics protected by the Act.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 7.1 There are no environmental/sustainability/biodiversity implications of the proposed amendment to the Council's Sandbag policy other than the potential reduction in the generation and disposal implications of contaminated waste.

8. Other implications (where applicable)

- 8.1 Risk management - The adoption of the change in policy will reduce the Council's risk exposure.

- 8.2 Communications issues relating to report - If the recommendation of the report is adopted, the Council's current Sandbag Policy and website will be amended, and a communication campaign will be carried out to inform and ensure that residents are aware of the changes ahead of the winter flood season.

9. Timetable for Implementation

- 9.1 If the recommendation of the report is adopted this will be implemented with immediate effect.

10. Background papers

None stated.

11. Appendices

Runnymede Borough Council's current sandbag policy