

**MINUTES OF 135th MEETING OF THE DRAINAGE COUNCIL FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND HELD AT 10.30am ON WEDNESDAY,
22 JUNE 2005 AT THE BEECHLAWN HOUSE HOTEL, BELFAST**

Present:

Dr R Myers (Chairman)
Mr J Hagan
Mr R G Cummings
Mr G Crawford
Mr C Mairs
Mr P McBride
Councillor H Nicholl
Councillor A Graham
Councillor C McCambridge
Councillor M Gillespie
Councillor G McHugh
Councillor G Rainey

In Attendance:

Mr A Morton (Secretary)
Mr R White
Mr P McCrudden
Mr M McLean
Mr P Mehaffey
Mr D Maguire
Mr D Nixon

1. INTRODUCTION TO BUSINESS

The Chairman welcomed all Members to the 135th meeting of the Drainage Council and introduced Mr Paddy McCrudden who was standing in for Mr Hamilton.

The Chairman also welcomed Mr Philip Mehaffey of Rivers Agency, who was attending to give a presentation to the Drainage Council on the Burren River and Ballyskeagh schemes. He explained to members that there would be a visit to the site of the Ballyskeagh scheme during the course of the meeting.

2. APOLOGIES

The Secretary offered apologies from Councillor Savage and Mr R Watson.

3. MINUTES OF 134th MEETING

The Chairman asked if Members agreed that the minutes of the last meeting were an accurate record. The minutes were agreed and signed by the Chairman.

4. MATTERS ARISING

No matters were raised from the previous minutes.

5. UPDATE ON MAJOR WORKS PROGRAMME

Mr White made a presentation on the Major Works Programme.

5.1 Schemes achieving substantial completion since the February 2005 Drainage Council Meeting

Londonderry – Coshquin Burn (Slides shown to members)

5.2 Current Schemes

Coleraine – Windyhall Branch and Screen Road Drains

Maghera – Coleraine Road

Ballyskeagh – River Lagan

Downpatrick – Quoile Barrier

Kilkeel – Kilkeel Harbour River (Slides shown to members)

Banbridge – Rifle Park Stream

Enniskillen – Killynure Lough Drain

5.3 Schemes Proposed to Commence Soon

Portrush – Tar Burn

Maghera – Fairhill Stream

Whitehead – Slaughtersford Water

Lisburn – Plantation Road

Newcastle – Burren River

Dromore – Mossvale Stream

Banbridge – Belmont Stream Phase 2

Newry Water Service

Magherafelt - Ballymoghlan

5.4 Schemes Undergoing Feasibility Study

Ballymoney – Johns Lane

Aldergrove – Airport Drain

Ballymoney – Ring Road

Lough Foyle Sea Defences

Limavady – River Roe

Bellaghy – Oldtown Extension Drain

Lower Bann River – Motorisation of Sluice Gates

Magherafelt – Highfield Road

Moneymore – Moneyhaw River

Dungannon – Park Lake 3

Enniskillen – Portora Barrage

Coleraine – Lodge Burn

Sea Defence Monitoring

Carrickfergus Study

Whiteabbey Study

Mallusk Study

East Belfast Study

During the course of his presentation Mr White highlighted some of the difficulties associated with assessing scheme costs and hence scheme viability. These included the impact of varying market forces on the cost of raw materials and unforeseen difficulties

associated with underground work, particularly in relation to ground conditions and underground services. He referred to the risk based approach which was applied to cost estimation and the relatively recently introduced concept of “optimism bias.”

Mr White also made reference to a difficulty that existed in relation to the recruitment of suitably qualified staff to take the work forward.

Mr White pointed out that, whilst these factors may on occasion hinder the progress of some proposed schemes, the Rivers Agency had recently received a commendation from the Department of Finance and Personnel following the conclusion of their evaluation of works completed by the Agency.

The Chairman thanked Mr White for his presentation and invited questions or comments.

Councillor McCambridge enquired about the scheme relating to the Lodge Burn in Coleraine and how this work would affect the Causeway Trust Hospital in Coleraine. She also asked if the proposed work at this location was intended to alleviate any form of flooding risk.

Mr White reassured Councillor McCambridge that the proposed work would not directly affect the hospital. Furthermore Mr White confirmed that the hospital had been built at a level that afforded the standard level of flood protection, and the work proposed on the burn was primarily to alleviate flooding downstream and to facilitate new development.

Councillor McHugh thanked Mr White for his presentation and expressed his concern at the recruitment difficulties being experienced by the Rivers Agency.

Councillor McHugh enquired about the work on the Killynure Drain in Enniskillen, and if this work had been complicated because the drain runs through lands allocated for new development. He asked if this would result in the costs of the works being increased as a result of any demands from the developers, eg additional car parking.

Mr White informed members that the ongoing works on the Killynure Drain remained at the very early stages of construction and that Planning Service advice had been taken at the planning stage of the scheme.

Councillor McHugh enquired about the availability of any further details relating to the feasibility study for the scheme at Portora.

Mr White confirmed that this scheme remained at the preliminary stages of development and would be presented to the Council in due course, at which time more details would be available.

Councillor Rainey referred to the staffing issue and asked what steps the Rivers Agency had taken to remedy this situation, or what initiatives were in place to encourage civil engineers to join the Agency.

Mr White informed members that this issue was complex with the Rivers Agency constrained by existing Northern Ireland Civil Service recruitment policies, further

exacerbated by the fact that the Agency could not match salaries currently offered by businesses within the private sector. One initiative that Mr White highlighted as an attempt to encourage younger civil engineers to join was the Rivers Agency's accredited training programme.

Mr Hagan commented that the Rivers Agency was highly active in attempting to recruit trainee civil engineers.

Councillor McHugh enquired as to the effect of the public sector review, if any, on this matter.

Mr Hagan responded that the disparity between salaries being offered in the public and private sectors, combined with the declining availability of suitable civil engineers, was the main cause of the difficulties.

Councillor Graham commented that the loss of skills required within specialised government agencies was an important issue that had to be addressed in order to avoid an increase in the use of external consultants at greater public expense. Councillor Graham then asked how much disparity existed in the salaries being offered by the public and private sectors.

Mr Hagan stated that accurate overall figures were not currently available but in some cases the disparity was known to be substantial. Mr Hagan also commented that whilst the Rivers Agency utilised external consultants and contractors for much of the work carried out, internal staff with the requisite expertise were required to supervise the work and ensure that required standards were met using the correct procedures. He stated that he was very happy with the staff he had working for the Agency who were conscientious and hard working; the only problem was the difficulty in filling vacant posts.

Mr McBride stated that within the Planning Service a similar problem was experienced with respect to salaries being offered; however Mr McBride also stated that this problem was not as severe and had not impacted on recruitment.

Councillor Graham proposed, seconded by Councillor Rainey, that the Drainage Council prepare a formal letter to highlight the concerns of the Council with respect to this important issue, to be forwarded to the relevant authorities.

The Chairman enquired about the progress made in finding a replacement for Mr Hamilton.

Mr Hagan advised that the Agency had experienced some difficulty, but were actively seeking a replacement to fill the vacancy.

The Chairman then confirmed that a formal letter would be prepared that expressed the concerns of the Drainage Council on this matter to be forwarded to the relevant authorities.

6. FLOODING REPORT

Mr McCrudden presented the flooding report advising Members that largely due to the relatively dry winter of 2004/05, the 12-month rainfall to the end of March 2005 was 90% and 100% of the standard level across most areas of Northern Ireland.

During the current year the Rivers Agency operational staff responded to 200 flooding incidents, an increase of 18% on the same period of 2004. These incidents resulted from localised thunder rainfall, and as such would have a minimal impact on the overall annual percentage rainfall.

Following an occurrence of localised severe rainfall on Sunday, 17th April 2005 flooding occurred in the Mourneview Park area of Newcastle. No watercourses were involved but the flooding exceeded the capacity of the local DRD Road and Water Services infrastructure putting 222 private dwellings at risk. However timely action by Rivers Agency and Roads Service operational staff, later joined by Water Service operational staff, prevented the houses being flooded. Large numbers of sandbags were deployed during the operation, including those stored locally at Donard Park.

On this occasion an inter-agency flood team was established with Water Service eventually taking the lead when the cause of the flooding became clear. Water Service has also undertaken the post flood investigation that is ongoing in the overall context of an area drainage study.

As this particular storm moved northeast on 17th April 2005 some flooding occurred at Mallusk as a result of a blockage in an undesignated watercourse. Unfortunately this incident happened so rapidly that a business premise was flooded before Agency staff could respond effectively.

To date the Agency's Customer Service Target of responding to 80% of flooding incidents within a 3-hour period has been exceeded with 100% responded to within the target time. This performance illustrates the Agency staff's consistently prompt reaction in conjunction with other services, thereby successfully minimising the extent of property damage in some instances.

As part of the Agency operations to minimise the risk of flooding, essential work of debris clearance from grilles, mostly located in urban areas, has continued throughout the year. To date achievement in this area of work has also well exceeded the Customer Service Target.

On a number of occasions throughout the year, inter-agency flood teams were established in response to flooding incidents. Agency staff played a significant role in co-ordinating a joint operational and media response, through which the effectiveness of the newly established Best Practice Guidelines was well demonstrated.

The Chairman thanked Mr McCrudden for his presentation of the flooding report and invited comments or questions.

Mr Hagan commented that major flooding events, whilst being regrettable, provided learning opportunities with the possibility to test agreed procedures and Agency policies.

He stated that the Inter-Agency Flood Liaison Group worked in conjunction with the Flood Steering Group, chaired by himself, to provide a protocol that detailed how the Water Service, the Roads Service, and the Rivers Agency liaised during major flooding events to ensure that the most effective response possible was provided.

Mr Hagan said that the Flood Liaison Group and the Flood Steering Group were developing a wider Northern Ireland flood protocol in order to strategically plan flooding response across the country. District Council representatives on the Drainage Council were strongly encouraged to support this plan.

Councillor McCambridge agreed that the proposal had merit and stated that co-operation with District Councils was required. She also commented that to date flooding response had improved, which was a positive development.

Councillor Graham referred to the recent flooding that had occurred in Yorkshire and enquired about our ability to draw up a map of potential flooding hotspots in Northern Ireland and prepare accordingly.

Mr Hagan confirmed that this work was carried out by the Rivers Agency where a suitable level of predictability existed. Mr Hagan verified that where flooding hotspots had been identified, and where proposed schemes were considered feasible, suitable flood defences had been put in place.

Councillor Graham asked if the resources were available so that a meeting could be facilitated to bring together all the bodies that would be mobilised in the event of a major flooding incident (including the police, emergency services, and army) so that the lead role could be assigned and co-ordinated plans designed.

Mr Hagan said that this work was being done to the best possible extent through the Flood Liaison Group and the Flood Steering Group.

Councillor McHugh stated that, as a major flooding incident posed a significant risk to people and property, councillors needed to be aware of the responsibilities of each Agency, so that response coordination could be accelerated and the risk minimised.

Councillor Nicholl stressed the importance of working in coordination with District Councils, and pointed out that Ballymena Borough Council had a sub-committee specifically for emergency planning.

Councillor McCambridge queried the role of Planning Service in matters relating to flooding.

Mr McBride confirmed that the Planning Service were continuously in contact with the Rivers Agency regarding these matters at the planning stage.

Mr Hagan indicated that the working relationship between the Rivers Agency and the Planning Service had been commended by other parts of the United Kingdom.

At this point Councillor Nicholl left the meeting.

7. PRESENTATION – BURREN RIVER SCHEME

Mr Mehaffey gave a detailed presentation to members on the proposed flood defence scheme for the Burren River in Newcastle.

The Chairman thanked Mr Mehaffey for his presentation and invited questions or comments.

Mr Crawford stressed the importance of the Shimna River to local fisheries due to the population of sea trout, a species bordering on being endangered. He also emphasised the significance of the Burren River to local breeding grounds and the potential damage that could be done by such a scheme. He commended Mr Mehaffey and Rivers Agency for the wide-ranging consultations that had taken place regarding the scheme and the efforts that had been made to minimise the risk of damage. Mr Crawford acknowledged that the scheme could not be avoided, and hoped that the fisheries could come through unscathed.

Mr Mehaffey agreed that the scheme was unavoidable and verified that all possible steps had been taken to ensure that disruption to the fisheries and local breeding grounds would be minimised.

Mr Crawford thanked Mr Mehaffey for having facilitated regular meetings with angling associations and other interested parties.

Mr Mehaffey confirmed that such meetings had been constructive and would continue.

Mr Mairs enquired about the cost of the scheme and whether it was a one off capital cost or included the cost of maintenance.

Mr Mehaffey verified that the cost was a one off capital expenditure with minor maintenance costs.

Mr Mairs asked if the scheme would release land suitable for development.

Mr Mehaffey advised that much of the floodplain was already developed, and that as the scheme would alleviate the flooding problem approximately 5 hectares of private land would be released for potential development.

8. SCHEMES RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE

MW3107 Burren River, Newcastle.

Based on the presentation given by Mr Mehaffey and on the proposal of Mr Mairs, seconded by Mr Cummings, the Council agreed to the proposed scheme.

Councillor Graham enquired about the comparability of the cost of this scheme to other schemes of similar size carried out by the Rivers Agency.

Mr White responded that this scheme was comparable given the increases in costs of necessary construction materials.

9. PRESENTATION AND SITE VISIT – BALLYSKEAGH, RIVER LAGAN SCHEME

Mr Mehaffey gave a presentation to members on the flood alleviation scheme at Ballyskeagh that detailed the background of the scheme and work completed. The presentation was followed up by a site visit for all members to view the work carried out.

When the meeting recommenced the Chairman thanked Mr Mehaffey for his presentation and the site visit, which was welcomed by all members. Comments and question were then invited.

Mr Mairs and Mr Crawford both commented on the usefulness of the site visit and how it allowed members to see the actual work being done along with the consequential benefits.

Councillor Gillespie commended the Agency for the quality of the work he had seen and the overall tidiness of the site. He suggested it would be useful to better publicise such a scheme as an example to protest groups of the considerations taken by the Rivers Agency of environmental concerns when carrying out works.

Mr Cummings and Councillor McHugh both seconded Councillor Gillespie's comments.

Councillor McCambridge praised the Rivers Agency for its good environmental record with respect to works carried out.

10. CORRESPONDENCE RECEIVED SINCE LAST MEETING

The Secretary referred members to the copies of correspondence provided in their folders:

10.1 Letter dated 22nd March 2005 from the Secretary advising members of the publication of the second and final consultation document on the Review of Public Administration (RPA).

Mr Cummings asked how the Rivers Agency and Drainage Council would be affected by the RPA.

Mr Hagan advised that the RPA was unlikely to have any major impact on the Rivers Agency or the Drainage Council.

10.2 Response dated 12th May 2005 to enquiry from Councillor Pat Ramsey MLA of 3rd March 2005 regarding erosion of Burdennet River at Donemana Cricket Club.

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

11.1 Public Appointments to the Drainage Council for Northern Ireland

The Secretary advised members that a letter would soon be issued to all District Councils inviting them to nominate candidates to serve on the Drainage Council for the

2005 – 2009 term. Members were also advised that a public notice in the press inviting applications to the Drainage Council would accompany this letter.

11.2 Members Folders

The Secretary brought members attention to the following forms in their folders: -

- Enquiry form;
- Travel Expenses form.

11.3 Next Meeting

The Secretary informed members of the next meeting on Wednesday 28 September 2005.

Members will be notified of the venue in the normal way.

11.4 The Chairman confirmed there was no other business to be discussed and thanked members for having attended.