

Decision Report – Lead Executive Member Decision

Forward Plan Reference: FP/23/09/17

Decision Date – 5/3/2024

Key Decision – Yes

Confidential Information – no



Somerset Council new sandbag policy

Executive Member(s): Lead Member for Environment and Climate Change

Local Member(s) and Division: All

Lead Officer: Sean Papworth

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Summary / Background

1. Somerset Council's predecessor authorities had a range of approaches and policies regarding the provision of sandbags or gel bags to householders. Pending the development of a policy for the new Council, these arrangements remain in place and vary according to the location of the householder. This new policy aims to bring a clear and consistent approach across the whole of Somerset.
2. There is no statutory requirement on local authorities to provide sandbags or other flood protection equipment to householders. Responsibility to protect property from flooding rests with the property owner. Sandbags are not always the most effective mechanism to protect property and provision in a timely way in adverse weather conditions can be complex. Rather than maintain a capability for provision of sandbags as an emergency response, it is recommended that the Council promotes and supports residents and communities to plan and prepare for flooding.

Recommendations

3. The Executive Lead Member Environment and Climate Change agrees

- a) Somerset Council should not provide sandbags or equivalents to householders and businesses.
- b) Somerset Council should retain a strategic sandbag stockpile to protect its assets during emergency situations.
- c) Somerset Council should coordinate and deliver a robust communications programme to explain the changes to town, parish councils and residents regarding the provision of sandbags allowing communities to adjust their arrangements.

Reasons for recommendations

4. The Council should not provide sandbags as flood protection measures as it is the responsibility of the householder or business owner to protect their own property. In addition, due to significant areas of Somerset facing a high risk from flooding, a clear Council standpoint on sandbags should provide Somerset residents with clarity on their responsibilities when preparing for flood events. As mentioned above, the high occurrence of flood events in Somerset would lead to a high turnover and depletion of the Council's sandbag stock if it was decided that the Council should provide sandbags. This would be a difficult arrangement to sustain fiscally.
5. Sandbags are used in variable situations, in addition to the diversion of floodwater, including surrounding unexploded ordinance, damming reservoir breaches, and shoring up coastal locations. Therefore, it would be pertinent for the Council to retain a stockpile of sandbags for these types of situations to allow a swift and effective response, and to ensure there is no reputational damage to the Council stemming from these types of events.
6. The introduction of the new sandbag policy will require a communications campaign to residents, parish and town councils. This should provide advice and information and support communities to adjust their expectations and allow time for adequate preparedness activities for flooding events at a household and community level.

Other options considered

7. Three alternative decision options were considered in relation to the sandbag policy. The first was that Somerset Council should always provide sandbags to anyone who requests them in any situation. This was rejected for several reasons. Firstly, sandbags are not always an effective way of protecting

individual properties. Secondly, there is the difficulty of knowing when and where it will flood, particularly for surface water incidents. Thirdly, there is the costs of maintaining sufficient supplies of sandbags. As the Council would only hold a finite stock of sandbags, which would be diminished promptly if sandbags were distributed to any household or business who requested them in any situation, not just flood events. Fourthly there are safety and logistical challenges of distribution in adverse weather conditions.

8. The second option that Somerset Council will only provide sandbags in explicit situations where public safety and property are endangered was also rejected. This was due to issues relating to the delivery of sandbags to affected communities in a timely manner. In addition, if there were multiple large scale flood events, there would be no guarantee that sandbags would be able to be delivered to all the affected areas, due to a potential lack of awareness of exactly which communities would need sandbags and whether it was possible logistically and safely to deliver these at the time.
9. The third option considered was for the Council to provide a stock of bags and sand to Parish and Town councils for local use. This option was considered not feasible due to the Council's financial situation. However, the Council can provide advice and information to local communities and can signpost to examples of good practice and resilience grants. It is recognised that sandbags can be popular with residents, due to the perception that they are an effective flood management technique. However, if there is a significant flood risk to a property or community, sandbags will only provide a temporary and partial defence. Therefore, serious consideration should be given to more effective property level flood protection techniques such as flood barriers, sump pumps, or non-return valves, or community level flood protection structures such as ring banks, flood walls, barriers or natural flood defence measures.

Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan

10. This policy links to the Council Plan priority for a flourishing and resilient Somerset.
11. In terms of the Medium-Term Financial Plan, there is currently no budget for provision of sandbags so continuation of the existing policies would be an additional financial burden, should sandbags be required.

Financial and Risk Implications

12. There are not considered to be any negative financial implications associated with this decision.

Currently, the Council does not have a budget for emergency sandbag provision as this is not a statutory duty for the Council. Any expenditure would need to be found within existing budget allocations.

- 13.

Please enter risk description
Reputational risk. Perception that the Council is removing a service that has been provided in some area.
Mitigation will require a comprehensive communications and engagement programme to decision, the reasons behind it and the options for residents and communities.

Legal Implications

14. There are not considered to be any legal implications associated with this decision.

HR Implications

15. There are not considered to be any HR implications associated with this decision.

Other Implications:

Equalities Implications

16. The Somerset Council Equalities Manager has advised that an equalities impact assessment is not required for this policy. The previous policies that provided sandbags to households did not always include support for residents who were

unable to physically position the heavy bags. Also, previous policies could not guarantee delivery of sandbags in difficult or dangerous travelling conditions and the uncertainty and delays had the potential to cause anxiety for residents. This new policy should remove the uncertainty and the council will encourage community-based solutions which will be better placed to support vulnerable residents.

Community Safety Implications

17. There are not considered to be any community safety implications associated with this decision.

Climate Change and Sustainability Implications

18. There are some minor positive climate change and sustainability implications associated with this decision. This is mainly around the reduction in waste generated from used sandbags. Traditional sandbags are single use items and used are classed as contaminated items and need to be disposed of appropriately. Some gel bags can be used more than once but will also end up as contaminated waste.
19. It is intended that the introduction of the new policy will be supported by a robust communications programme that will encourage residents and communities to consider their local flood risk and to investigate household and community level flood protection measures. It is hoped that this will lead to more resilient and adaptable communities in the longer term.

Health and Safety Implications

20. The existing policies for provision of sandbags do include a potential health and safety risk for staff who might be asked to distribute sandbags in adverse weather conditions. Changing the policy will remove this risk to staff.
21. The Council currently provides information, guidance, and signposting to residents about how to understand their flood risk and how to plan and prepare for flooding and how to stay safe in flooding situations. This information is available on the Council's website and is shared with residents and

communities through the work of the Council's Flood and Coastal Team, the Civil Contingencies Unit and some of the Somerset Rivers Authority projects.

Health and Wellbeing Implications

22. It is considered that this policy will have a slight positive impact on health and wellbeing. This is because sandbags are not an effective or sustainable method of flood protection at a household level. The impact of the policy should be to encourage residents at risk of flooding to investigate and implement more effective property level flood protection measures. The implementation of effective flood protection measures (e.g. flood barriers on doorways etc) may lead to decreased likelihood of property flooding with the consequence decrease in the physical and emotional impacts on affected residents.

Social Value

23. The Council has several services that work with communities to promote self-help and resilience. The Flood and Coastal Team, Civil Contingencies Unit and Somerset Rivers Authority Community Engagement Team provide advice and information to communities about preparing for flooding. It is intended that the change to sandbag policy will be supported by a communications programme that is aimed to build community capacity and to encourage residents to play an active role in their local community, for example by volunteering to be Flood Wardens or to developing a community flood plan.

Scrutiny comments / recommendations:

24. Chair of Climate Scrutiny has been consulted and advised that the policy did not need to go to the Scrutiny Committee. However, a members briefing was held in late January 2024 to ensure all members had the opportunity to ask any questions they had relating to the detail and implementation of the new policy.

Background

25. There is no statutory duty for Councils to provide sandbags to the public or to private organisations. Prior to the Local Government Reform process, the former district areas differed in terms of provision, distribution and eligibility.

This is no longer in line with the current Council's vision. The Council Executive in March 2023 agreed the need for a new consistent policy. Given the occurrence of three flooding-related major incidents in 2023, there is public interest in flood protection measures. Therefore, it would be advisable for this new policy to be implemented prior to the winter season. In addition, flooding is a high risk of significant areas in Somerset, therefore clarity on householder responsibility relating to sandbags and flood events should be a priority.

Background Papers

26. None.

Appendices

None.

Assurance checklist

	Officer Name	Date Completed
Legal & Governance Implications	David Clark	21/11/2023
Communications	Peter Elliott	20/11/2023
Finance & Procurement	Nicola Hix	13/12/2023
Workforce	Alyn Jones	23/11/2023
Asset Management	Oliver Woodhams	20/11/2023
Executive Director	Mickey Green	12/12/2023
Strategy & Performance	Alyn Jones	23/11/2023
Executive Lead Member	Cllr Dixie Darch	21/11/2023
Consulted:		
Local Division Members	N/A	
Opposition Spokesperson	Cllr Steve Ashton	20/11/2023
Scrutiny Chair	Cllr Martin Dimery	8/9/2023