

Dear Minister,

Suffolk County Council Flood Recovery Work

I write to you with regard to the ongoing impacts of Storm Babet on the County of Suffolk.

Since the catastrophic events of last October, the County Council has worked in close partnership with District Councils, the Environment Agency Anglian Water, and Internal Drainage Boards to support local communities with access to government recovery grants and begin the process of investigating the cause(s) and identifying options to reduce future flood risk.

The storm saw up to 100mm of rain fall over large areas of the county from Thursday 19 into Friday 20 October 2024, resulting in more than a month's worth of average October rainfall in just 24 hours. This is the most widespread flooding event to impact the county for more than 50 years. Over 900 properties were initially reported to have been subjected to internal flooding from rivers and surface water, with many more likely to have been impacted but not reported.

To compound matters, following the October event, we saw successive months with very high rainfall, often over 200% of the average for the month – among the wettest winter conditions the County has ever experienced. The very saturated ground and consistent high levels in watercourses and aquifers, meant that for the whole winter even relatively minor rainfall events resulted in additional flooding to farmland, roads and properties.

As part of the recovery work, the County Council is investing £1m in the resources required to investigate, prepare and publish the required Section 19 reports, providing communities with the information required to help mitigate future flood risk. Over 100 of these investigations are required due to Storm Babet – which include 49 locations with 5+ properties flooded and at least 50 incidents of repeated flooding of individual properties. This compares to a total of 3-4 investigations undertaken by the County Council in a normal year.

Our Highways teams have also worked all year round to cleanse and repair drainage to help lower the risk of flooding on the highway. This work continues at pace since Storm Babet and has seen 111,373 gulleys cleaned in that time, together with more than 3500 emergency call outs for flooding related incidents – an unprecedented number. Furthermore, irreversible damage to our fragile road network caused from washout, scour and pump failures following the surface water surges has resulted in over £1.25m of investment being required to undertake structural repairs so we can remove temporary traffic management and reopen closed roads.

In recognition of the challenges our transport network faces with heavy rainfall, Suffolk County Council has already invested an extra £10 million into funding projects to address long-standing drainage issues over a 3-year period. This complements £2 million a year invested in drainage repairs and improvements funded from the Department for Transport maintenance grant.

In addition to this, the County Council has this week pledged its intention to allocate a further £1.5m at its Cabinet Meeting in November, to be used to deal directly with the short-term recommendations that have begun to flow from the published Section 19 reports.

However, our communities are quite rightly asking whether these commitments are enough to mitigate the risk of them experiencing the catastrophic flooding of last October again. Our initial assessments suggest that the real cost of this much needed flood prevention could well exceed a further £20m, funding that the County Council simply cannot afford.

While we recognise that the Regional Flood and Coastal Committees oversee existing government funding to support flood risk projects, the majority of the intervention work identified by the County Council's reports, is unlikely to meet current funding criteria. This is due to the dispersed nature of the flooding in a rural county, which affects small numbers of properties in many different locations. We therefore call upon Government to recognise the unique circumstances that Suffolk find ourselves in as the worst effected county from Storm Babet and would ask you to support us financially with the required recovery work to protect our residents in future.

Yours sincerely,

Matthew Hicks