

P-05-1010 An independent inquiry into the 2020 flooding in Rhondda Cynon Taf so that lessons are learned, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 21.09.20

An Independent Inquiry into the Floods in RCT 2020

Unprecedented. Devastating. Traumatizing.

Those are the three most often used words in relation to the floods that hit so many communities across RCT this year. And we weren't the only communities affected, with similar scenes being seen across the country.

All Councils affected have been overwhelmed, and it has been estimated that at least £500m more is needed in the next decade if Wales is to avoid significant flooding. The clean-up bill for RCT Council alone has been £80m this year.

Unfortunately, though for those communities affected, many of the questions they have remain unanswered seven months on, with some suffering further floods as recently as August. Every time there is now heavy rainfall, people are naturally anxious. Nothing done to date has alleviated their fears.

Whilst I understand from the response that there are a number of reports pending, I disagree that there shouldn't also be an independent inquiry as those reports are limited in scope. Also, there are no plans to bring all those report together to take a holistic overview across the region. I am therefore asking the committee to support this petition to be debated in the Senedd, as an important next step in seeking both answers and justice for the residents and businesses affected.

Why should there be an inquiry?

Limitations of Section 19 reports

The reports referenced in section 19 do not differentiate between a major incident of flooding and more localised flooding. I believe this to be inadequate in light of the severity of the flooding that occurred in RCT this year.

In effect, the act also asks Councils to investigate themselves as part of the process, something which is surprising given the important role Local Authorities also play in flood prevention.

Businesses and residents affected do not have any opportunity to input their own experiences as part of this process and submit evidence. Again, given the scale of what occurred, this means that all reports pending are limited in what they will reveal. Video footage and photographs would greatly help investigators to better understand what happened in each of the locations affected, as the reasons differ widely and include potential lack of maintenance of drains and flood defences, failed pumps, trees been cut from mountainsides and debris left in rivers and much much more. The only way we can plan to prevent flooding in the future is by understanding what happened. Only an independent inquiry will be able to achieve this, by taking a holistic overview of what took place and why, and also, if anything could have been

done differently that would have prevented homes and businesses from being affected to the extent they were.

Climate Emergency

In 2019, the Welsh Government declared a climate emergency. The Future Trends report, published in 2018, predicted that by 2030 the predicted potential impacts on Wales include flooding, coastal changes, drought, shortages of water, risks to health and wellbeing from high temperatures, and risks to nature.

An independent inquiry would help us understand the role the changes to the climate played in the flooding and determine what actions we need to take now – rather than in years to come – to save our climate. It would also help determine how we should best invest to prevent flooding. Locally in RCT, we are seeing the Council take some steps to try and prevent some further flooding but these are sticky plaster solutions rather than permanent ones. We need a plan that takes into account both the whole of RCT, and arguably the whole of Wales if we are serious in responding to the Climate Emergency.

Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015

We are fortunate to have in place in Wales the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act in Wales, meaning that all public bodies – including Local Authorities and Natural Resources Wales – must embed the act in all that they do. Obviously, the 2010 act does not take this into account, and therefore is focused on finding out what happened in a local area at a point in time rather than also being focused on future outcomes. An independent inquiry would need to apply the principles of the act to their work, making it a much more worthwhile and insightful process than simply a Section 19 report.

Impact on physical and mental health

An independent inquiry needs to include looking at the impact the floods have had on the health and wellbeing of residents affected, both children and adults. The Section 19 report looks at the material elements, eg, if pumps drained properly but it does not in any way look at the human side of the impact. As a local Councillor representing an area affected, I have seen with my own eyes the toll the floods have had on the physical and mental health of children and adults. There is a long-term impact that needs to be considered, and none of this is being looked into at present. Nor will this be addressed in the reports referenced in the Minister's response.

Impact to the local economy

Many of those affected had been costed out of insurance or did not have cover for flood damage. This has had a huge financial impact on them, and also means they are either not able to secure insurance for the future or are facing extremely high premiums. We must look at how we can support businesses and residents in these areas, so that if the worse happens again in the future, they are protected.

Many businesses that were flooded are also lacking confidence in the way the reasons for the floods are being addressed, and are now considering re-locating to an area where there is a lower risk of floods. Given the importance of businesses as employers, especially in an area such as the Treforest Industrial Estate, it would be a huge blow to an area that already has high unemployment and high dependency on food banks. This would further increase child poverty in the area.

Conclusion

It is a fact that under the Flood and Water Management 2010 Act there is a statutory duty on Rhondda Cynon Taf Council to produce a Section 19 Flood Investigation Report follow any incidences of flooding.

Nonetheless, as outlined above, that report will not necessarily take into account the many issues that the local communities have raised. It will mainly relate to technical matters and not the human issues relating to the personal effects on individuals, both adults and children in relation to their health and wellbeing following such devastating experiences. Hence the need for an independent inquiry.

The precedence for commissioning an Independent Investigation was made in the first National Assembly for Wales in 2000.

The Environment, Planning and Transport Committee under the Chairmanship of Richard Edwards AM commissioned an Independent report to LEARN any relevant lessons and INFORM future policy on waste disposal in Wales. This is known as the Purchon Report on the Nant Y Gwyddon Landfill Site dated 12th December 2001.¹

Like flooding there was a regulatory framework covering waste disposal but it did not stop that committee with the full support of Sue Essex AM - the then Government Minister who had portfolio responsibility - from supporting an independent Investigation to learn the lessons and drive forward policy in Wales

The terms of reference were set by the Committee in consultation with the Minister and used as headings to format the final published report. The infamous Tip was operating throughout the investigation but closed following the publication of a very damning report. Many agencies regulating the hazardous waste at a national and local level were held to account in the final report, as was RCT and its predecessor Council. The Environment Agency, Audit Commission, Wales Office and National Assembly also had questions to answer.

There is a striking comment highlighted in the report in relation to information being withheld by public bodies who relied on “commercial confidentiality “ to defend their position.

“When seeking to investigate matters of great public interest, where virtually all the business concerns public money and where the risks, financial, health and

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<https://senedd.wales/Committee%20Documents/Independent%20Investigation.%20Nantgywyddon%20Landfill%20Site.%20Investigator's%20Report-12122001-29740/3c1086e5000c772400005cdd0000000-English.pdf>

environmental, fall on the public, and its purse, lack of transparency is unsatisfactory”.

The report also says,

“ The procedure was entirely new and required a degree of innovation, tolerance, flexibility, patience and good will from all those involved “ and also “ The search for facts, relevant data and opinion is never easy and in the UK we are not used to non adversarial governance or inquiry procedures. The National Assembly for Wales has sought to conduct an entirely open investigation and I feel honoured to be part of that approach in the early days of the Assembly’s history. “

I hope that this brief reminder of the innovative way that the first Assembly, in its infancy some two decades ago, dealt with a very high profile environmental disaster in the Rhondda. I hope it will persuade the Petitions Committee to use all its influence to support this petition.

In addition, the following questions are ones that I hope the committee will consider when deciding to support a debate in the Senedd:

- 1) Will the reports listed by the Minister provide adequate answers so as to prevent flooding of this scale from occurring again?
- 2) Will the reports listed by the Minister provide adequate answers to inform a whole Wales plan and approach to flood prevention?
- 3) Will the reports listed by the Minister provide an insight into the impact the floods have had on both the physical and mental health of those affected?
- 4) Will the reports listed by the Minister give confidence to businesses based in the areas affected that they won't be flooded again, or will businesses relocate because of the uncertainty?

I am firmly of the view that the answer to each of the questions above is no and hope that you will give those affected the opportunity to have their say, and receive the answers they deserve about why the flooding occurred. This will help us better understand how to prevent flooding in the future, as far as is possible, and inform where investment is needed. It will also help inform how best to support the children, adults and businesses affected in a cohesive and joined up way.

Appendix A:

Evidence sent to me from affected residents and businesses, and why they believe an independent inquiry is essential.

"I've been left with bronchitis since the floods. I'm still on antibiotics and steroids I'm not well at all they wanted me to go into hospital yesterday but I said I can't because my son is gonna uni on Monday and I've got two other children. Now we are in lock down I'm not good with my mental health either"

"I honestly feel like this experience has pushed me to the brink. It's been one of the worst things I've ever experienced and still affects me every day in some way. Even filling in this survey and thinking back to it all I've cried. I had 6 weeks off work with stress, I can't sleep or relax when it's raining badly. I don't know if I'll ever be the same again, I've spoken to many neighbours who all agree it's like we have PTSD. The mental and emotional stress of the whole situation has absolutely shocked me, I've always regarded myself as a very strong person but this almost broke me. Waking up at 5am to the sound of running water and going downstairs to dirty water pouring in your house and looking out the window to see a literal river raging past your house and taking cars with it, with absolutely no warning at all, it makes me sick to my stomach thinking about it even now. How are we ever supposed to relax in our homes again when there's bad weather? We can't trust NRW or RCT for that matter. My sense of safety in my home has been robbed from me and my family. We've been moved into an unfurnished flat in a strange area and then we went into lockdown as well, we literally have a bed and a tv because we lost everything else and then with lockdown getting furniture was practically impossible. Then on top of all that stress we have the stress of trying to rebuild our houses and lives, deal with insurance companies who are basically soulless monsters in some cases, source 2 new cars. If I ever had to go through this again... well, I don't think I could. I'd be in a psychiatric hospital. They need to protect us before they take more of us and more from us than they already have, we can't survive another instance like this."

"I'm disabled the help we received we zero we had to do all the work ourselves."

"I feel extremely let down by authorities, we have been forgotten about and no one wants to own up to their part in what has happened. The council think that by giving some money it will go away and welsh water/natural resources won't take won't accept liability, and I as the innocent party am now paying the price, I have had no help off anyone because I've had insurance which is unfair as I've done the correct thing. I have lived in Treforest for nearly 12 years and loved it up until that night, I no longer wish to live in the area if no one can help prevent this from happening again but will not be able to sell now and am stuck there."

“Our eldest daughter (20) has been diagnosed with PTSD as a result of the flood. She is on medication, receiving counselling and although she tried, she has been unable to return to work and as a result has had to leave her post with BT. Her wellbeing is very much our focus. We cannot believe that we have never had that much rain before, there must be a more rational explanation. Someone is responsible, we are desperately worried that this may happen again. We need reassurance that steps will be taken to prevent another disaster. Anxiety levels are high every time it rains.”

“In some respects The lack of support from the local authorities as far as they are concerned we have insurance so that’s our problem bare in mind many insurance companies have got out paying out or underpaying. The lack of any report, any sign of prevention, even just answering our questions or having a meeting. I have to reassure my wife and young children it won’t happen again and I honestly can not tell them that it won’t. Also I would really want to know why major funding campaigns were set up separately rather jointly as we are all RCT and we were all affected.”

“We needed advice on what to do to the house (in absence of insurance company guidance). This advice was very difficult to get despite contacting RCT many times. They responded once our local councillor expedited our request. We are now very anxious each time it rains. We need answers to whether this was a natural event or whether there is blame. If there is blame, then we will hopefully rest easier during future rain storms as we would live in hope that lessons would have been learnt.”

“We had a lot of presence from council, dwr cymru and NRW etc in Treforest immediately following the flood. Almost 6 months on much of the discussion seems to focus further up the valley and Treforest residents and effect in Treforest (not Pontypridd Town or Pentre) is largely forgotten. We would like to safeguard our house by moving entrance ways to the property to higher ground, is funding or can funding be made available to strengthen personal flood defenses.”

“It was very traumatic when it happened - it has caused my mental health to worsen and I live in fear that when I am able to move back that it will happen again. Where I am living now I feel isolated and alone -trying to cope one day at a time to stop myself from feeling suicidal And depending on people to chat with on phone Especially past few months due to COVID not able to visit my elderly parents or friends and family.”

“I would like to know what happened that night. It wasn’t just the rain it was something much more significant that morning on the 16th February. We are devastated and will always live that nightmare. Also Financially it’s devastated me bringing up two children of GCSE ages on my own.”

“The stress and financial effects of having my business closed due to flooding has affected me greatly I have never had time of work before but haven't worked now for four and a half months and I'm one of the lucky ones that had the builders in straight away regardless of covid.”

“Yeah since being in the floods I haven’t long come off medication because I had newmonia and chest infection several hospital visits and tests and they said it was because I was up to my waist in water now I’ve been left with bronchitis for rest of my life”

“I also lost my car in the flood. It’s been a Very stressful time. I am a single person. I am now living with my parents In a small 1 1/2 bedroom house. I am still going to work. The whole experience has been horrific and very upsetting.”

“Because of covid Prehaps the council could have helped with priority supplies of plaster etc that would have helped immensely. I am extremely worried about the increase and availability of insurance for next year.”

“it has been an horrific time for myself and family. We have had to move out while repairs are taking place as the house was unlivable. It will be 6 months in total before we will be able to return”

“It has tipped our life’s upside down, our 3 children’s houses were effected too, to see that much water and devastation in our house has been horrendous and it’s hasn’t helped with Covid 19”

“We are concerned about the impact on resale of our home (We has planned to sell this year) as well as insurance premiums and of course the impact of future floods on our home and our lives”

“It’s destroyed our lives, the difficulty with the insurance is unbelievable, 5 months on and nothing done at property, they are looking to knock down 7&8 Rhyd-Yr-Helyg and rebuild”

“Just that I think it could have been prevented and someone has messed up some where and we need answers, my dads last months should have been in his own home not in a Temp house”

“There was no help we was left to fight the floods ourselves with our neighbors .if wasn’t for my neighbours helping me I would have been in more mess”

“The level of response for Trefforest was less than anywhere else, they had council employees cleaning the park before helping with peoples houses!!!”

“How it’s turned out lives upside down. Petrified when we have bad weather. Kids asking are we going to flood again. Living in fear.”

“Haven’t cleaned up the roads and pavement after the flood and haven’t collected the sand bags from Trehafod all over the pavement”

“We lost our pet. Our dog was downstairs. Our children are traumatised knowing she suffered and drowned. We want answers”

“It was one of the worst experiences ever which is still going on.. mentally, physically and emotionally draining.”

"We took the brunt of the water because we were directly in its path we have left our home structurally unsafe"

"Just the devastation it caused to the community and the community spirit shown by everyone was superb"

"my car was written off. I am £600 out of pocket from car hire charges because it was a natural event"

"We are still in temporary accomadation that one night has kept us from our home and neighbours"

"I just hope nobody else goes through it,my wife was in tears,all of our family photos are gone."

"I never want to experience this again abd I am scared to return to my home when it's finished"

"The lack of sympathy that was shown by the council left us for 3 days with nothing"

"I have lots to say, including being insured is irrelevant. We are not in our home."

"It's been the worst experience ever and would never want to go through it again."

"I live on my own and I was petrified as it was on the fourth step of my stairs. No warnings. Middle of the night. Rescued by boat the officers were brilliant!"

"Felt like we were on our own watching all our treasures going down the drain"

"It's just heart breaking and mentally put strain on our family."

"Was not alerted quickly and not enough time to move possessions"

"Council did nothing till it was too late."

"Not enough support no am or mp in sight"

"It's really bad and stops your life"

"I have mental health issues since the floods. Please help me."

"If I may share my experience briefly - my business is located within Rizla House (the former Rizla factory building) in one of the units to the rear, north facing side. We look out to the substation which separates us from what is known as Power Station Hill i.e. Tonteg Road. We were therefore in the 'firing line' when the flood water came and had around 14 inches of water inside our unit which resulted in a great deal of the equipment stored there being affected and around three months of work to save the vast majority of it! I remember watching the aerial images of the river rising and seeing the path that the flood water took. I noted that the river breached its bank at the rear of the small industrial estate at the other side of Power Station Hill, known as Taf Business Centre. This breach was adjacent to the old transport cafe at the rear of the site. In the days following, I did a little recce of the area and observed that contractors had been at work in that exact area on the river bank"

installing perimeter fencing. Now, I cannot prove that they did anything to compromise the bank there, but it did seem at the time that there were less trees there and that the bank was perhaps a little lower compared to images found on Google Street View from a couple of years prior. Regardless, of any issues of liability, it is clear to me that this section of the river bank needs building up in the same way as has been done further along Tonteg Road - opposite the Hutchings Vauxhall and other car dealerships. At no point did the flood water breach the built-up embankment there. Thank you once again and here's hoping that answers are found and something can be done to protect residents and businesses from such catastrophic events in future”

“While our area of Hawthorn was not actually flooded, it was a ‘close’ call. Mentally it caused myself (even while with family in NZ) and neighbours, many hours of worry watching the water ‘lap’ at the very top of the flood bank, near us!!

It still does worry me personally, as of course this could/will re-occur??I would support an Independent enquiry because -

a. Worst flooding in my living memory and I am 70 years old

b. Overall COST financially of the floods to the tax payer AND the negative impact this has on our RCT area. Seeing photos of the town centre under several feet of water.

c. The impact mentally, physically and financially to residents and businesses on the area. Again, on a negative note many businesses may be considering relocating? These businesses need to know things will not be ‘brushed under the carpet’. We want them to be convinced and confident to remain in RCT.

d. No political bias. A party majority, would likely result in actual or perceived bias!

e. Independence infers fairness, truth, facts AND no ‘bulls..t

f. ‘Scotch’ rumours replace them with facts

g. Result in recommendations which can be audited and properly action planned/supervised.

h. If needed, not only genuinely learn from any errors but also, bring people/organisations to account.”

“We are at 10, Lewis St Pentre and we were flooded in February and high water levels in June.....

The trees were removed from the mountain in Pentre and when we had rain the brash washed into the culvert blocking it so the water overflowed into the lower streets of Pentre

We had been renovating for a year and we were moving in in 3 weeks time, then got flooded so we're unable to move in until the end of May.

We were not insured as the house was classed as empty so not able to insure an empty property

WE ARE LIVING IN FEAR OF MORE FLOODING EVERY TIME IT RAINS!!!”