

Speech from Cllr Nick Ireland regarding how the Council is addressing the impacts of the recent flooding in the short, medium and long term.

Over the past several weeks, Dorset has faced some of the most persistent and disruptive flooding we have seen in many years. Groundwater levels have reached historic highs, and repeated rainfall has placed real strain on our communities, our roads, and our infrastructure. Our residents have dealt with flooded routes, damage to homes and businesses, and some very difficult daily conditions.

From the very start of these events, our council teams have been working around the clock. Crews have been out day and night - clearing drains and watercourses where it's safe to do so, putting out road signs and barriers, and coordinating closely with partners including the Environment Agency and our town and parish councils to reduce risk wherever possible. I want to express my sincere thanks to every member of staff involved.

Now I want to move on to talk about how the council will respond to the flooding risk in future over the short, medium and longer term.

In the short term, our priority is to repair the damage these storms have inflicted on the highway network. Flooding and high groundwater have led to a surge in potholes and surface failures across Dorset. We have already taken decisive steps to address this: at Full Council, members approved measures that make up to an additional £5.25 million available for urgent repair work and flood-related impacts. This includes a £5 million capital flood-resilience fund to target known hotspots and repair storm-damaged sections, as well as £250,000 for a dedicated gully-cleaning crew to keep water moving during heavy rainfall.

Work has already started to repair roads and will continue over the coming months. We are tackling the worst-hit locations first, and we will get our rural road network back into a decent state. My thanks to residents for reporting issues in their area – please continue to do this.

Looking medium to long term, it's clear Dorset needs to adapt to a future where episodes like this are no longer rare occurrences. Extreme weather that used to be considered "once in a century" is happening far more frequently. That is why we began developing Dorset's Climate Adaptation Strategy last year, working with a citizens' panel to involve our residents from the start. This work provides a structured, evidence-based plan for how we should strengthen our infrastructure, protect our communities, and build long-term resilience across the county. This strategy will come forward to members for approval later this year.

We also announced at Full Council on 10 February that we will launch formal Section 19 flood investigations to examine the recent flooding events, reviewing the roles and responsibilities of all agencies involved. Officers have done further work and are

proposing we have a county-wide strategic investigation, as well as a number of site-specific investigations, all with the aim of identifying meaningful, longer-term solutions, rather than just reactive interventions. A paper will come to Cabinet in May with detailed proposals for this programme of investigations. This work is technical and will take time, but it will inform our long-term approach to future flood mitigation. Understanding where flood water comes from, and how we can prevent it in future, can be surprisingly complicated. It's not just about cleaning drains. The water has to be able to go somewhere and when rivers are overflowing and the ground is completely saturated, finding somewhere for the water to go can be a difficult engineering challenge.

Nevertheless, I am committed that together we will repair the damage, strengthen our defences, and ensure Dorset is better prepared for the future. Thank you for listening.