

Consider Dutch option to cut flood risk, suggests councillor

Changing weather patterns bringing more storms have forced West Lothian Council to draw up rules on issuing sandbags as the risk of flooding grows.

Councillors have now agreed where, and who, will qualify for sandbag protection. While there is no statutory duty to prevent flooding in properties, one councillor suggested we could all do our bit to improve flood resilience by following the Netherlands.

The Dutch introduced a competition last year called Tegelwippen “tile-flipping” where councils encouraged households to re-green their gardens and dig up paved areas to improve natural drainage.

Many Dutch councils now operate their own “Tegel taxis”-lorries which collect unwanted paving slabs.

Intense competition between communities has seen a re-greening of a land in which the lowest point is 22 ft below sea level.

As Councillor Pauline Stafford told the Local Democracy Reporting Service, the Dutch “know a thing or two about flooding”.

Councillor Stafford, the depute leader of the SNP group, who has lived in the Netherlands, suggested adopting the technique

as councillors heard about the new sandbag policy.

A report to the Executive highlighted how much of the recent flooding in areas such as Bathgate last October had been caused by storms which overwhelmed Victorian drainage systems.

The report, compiled by Chris Chalmers, a council flood risk engineer said: "In recent years there has been an increasing trend of exceptionally high intensity rainstorms. The magnitude of these is such that the capacity of drainage systems become quickly overwhelmed causing flooding of the surrounding area.

"Historic drainage systems do not have the capacity to cope with excessive rainfall events which inevitably causes them to surcharge, resulting in flooding."

It added: "Whilst run-off from heavy rainfall will eventually find its way into watercourses, a large contributor to flooding of properties is often surface water run-off from either cultivated or developed areas."

Councillor Stafford and Linlithgow councillors Pauline Orr and Sally Pattle had attended an event staged by the River Almond Action Group (RAAG) and West Lothian Climate Action Network (WLCAN) on Saturday.

She added: "We are facing a huge change in the way that water moves around. There was a lot of discussion about the issue of run-off and how much pressure it is putting on the historic drains system.

"We were chatting about a campaign that's running across the Netherlands called Tegelwippen where they are encouraging everybody to lift their grey infrastructure in their gardens to make their gardens more climate resistant. I think if we did that on a grand scale we would do our bit to prevent the need for sandbags as a last resort because we are going to see

more and more damage.

“I think we should all be lifting our slabs and planting up gardens.”

Councillor Pattle said: “That sounds amazing. Hooray for the Dutch.”

The flood risk report stressed that householders have primary responsibility to protect their homes during floods. The council’s primary responsibility is to protect against loss of life and also keep roads clear and protect public buildings.

The report highlighted: “The primary responsibility for avoiding or managing flood risk lies with land and property owners, certain public bodies [Scottish Water, SEPA] are expected to take a proactive role in managing and, where achievable, lowering overall flood risk.”

“The council has no statutory duty to prevent properties from flooding, but will help residents and communities, as resources allow in line with this policy.”

It detailed seven conditions which would need to be met for the council to release its stockpile of 3,000 sandbags.

These include:-

To prevent loss of life or injury.

Maintain emergency services access.

Secure road safety.

Protect facilities i.e. hospitals; emergency service facilities; publicly owned social care facilities.

Protect schools and other public buildings.

Protect council owned residential property in flood risk areas.

Protect business/commercial property.

Mr Chalmers added: "During a flood event, West Lothian Council will give priority to its statutory obligations. However, every effort will be made, where resources allow, to supply filled sandbags to properties that are at imminent risk of flooding.

"A sandbag stock will be maintained where possible and kept across depots for emergency use only. Sandbags will not be delivered in advance of a flood event.

"This 'first rapid response' to flooding emergencies is essentially a 'self-help' exercise where affected proprietors would be expected to put measures in place to protect themselves from flooding."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter