

P-05-1010 An independent inquiry into the 2020 flooding in Rhondda Cynon Taf so that lessons are learned, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 02.01.21

2 January 2021

Re Petition Calling for an Independent Inquiry into the 2020 Floods in Rhondda Cynon Taf

It is now nearly a year since my community of Pontypridd, and its surrounding communities, suffered devastating floods. Whilst many residents have been able to move back home, and some businesses have been able to recover and re-open, this is not true for everyone. The after affects can still be seen with physical damage to infrastructure still evident in many areas, as well as the psychological trauma and financial hardship.

Over the Christmas period, Natural Resources Wales issued a number of flood alerts, and the anxiety this created was evident. Many people reported to me not being able to sleep, constantly watching the river with dread that they would again be flooded. They all believe it is just a matter of time before it happens again and have little faith that anything has been done that would reduce the risk to their homes and businesses. They all still support the need for an independent inquiry, and I received countless messages following the recent debate at the Senedd expressing outrage that the Welsh Government is denying this. These messages came from across RCT, not just my own ward of Pontypridd Town.

Personally, I was dismayed and disappointed by the Welsh Government's response during the debate on the petition, which took place on 9 December 2020. Given the scale of the damage, I am at a loss to understand why they themselves do not want such an inquiry to help inform future investment into flood prevention. In fact, my only regret is that the petition confined the inquiry into the floods just to my own local authority area. We should have one for each of the areas flooded and scrutinise all the flooding that took place in Wales in 2020.

In this response, I wish to focus on why there remains a need for an independent inquiry and why it is the only way we will secure justice for those affected and learn lessons for the future.

Limitations of the Statutory Reports

In response to the debate, the Minister stated: *“Local authorities have a legal duty to produce reports that investigate the causes of flooding and bring forward recommendations to further reduce risk, and these reports are public documents and are prepared by teams of highly skilled individuals. It seems from contributions from some Members that they don't have confidence in the professional integrity of those people who will prepare the report and don't have confidence in their own ability and that of communities to scrutinise their findings. But I don't share that view, and I have*

absolute confidence in the professionalism of local authority staff and their commitment to the safety and well-being of the communities they serve. And if Members have evidence that should cast doubt on that belief, then they have a responsibility to present it, but I've not heard any such evidence offered to date.

“All Members of this Senedd have a role in scrutinising those reports closely as soon as they're available and ensuring that the views and interests of their constituents are represented. And this Senedd has a role in ensuring that we do learn the lessons from those reports and apply them in national policy and local operational practice to keep Wales safe. I believe that the professionally prepared and legally required reports from local authorities will allow us to do that.”

In previous correspondence with the committee, I explained why I believe the Statutory Reports are limited in scope. **I did not question the integrity of those preparing the reports.** Rather, I questioned the limitations of what they were legally required to do and expressed concern that no one is bringing together all the evidence from all the different reports being produced to truly understand what happened, and why, and whether anything could have been done differently.

After all, flooding is a complex issue and happened for many different reasons in each area affected. There are a myriad of different organisations, businesses, landowners and individuals whose actions contribute to flooding. To understand what happened, you need to look at the complete picture and you need everyone to be working together if we are to manage floods effectively in the future.

At present, each individual organisation with a responsibility for flooding is looking at its own area of responsibility, trying to understand what happened. To date, no one has asked for the evidence of residents and businesses affected or asked for their input into plans.

In her response, the Minister also made the following point: *“Local elected Members in RCT have gone beyond this to produce their own report, as we heard from Mick Antoniow, who co-authored it with Alex Davies-Jones, the MP. The report makes it clear that residents see a number of specific areas for improvement and solutions that we can consider not only to reduce flood risk, but to help support wider well-being. Contributions of this kind are welcome and clearly show ways in which local residents can scrutinise the issues and put forward creative and constructive solutions that work for them. And I hope that other Members will consider how they can similarly support the communities to be more resilient to climate-related threats and more engaged with issues.”*

Whilst the local MS and MP have produced a report, many of their findings are not supported locally and it does not provide an accurate account of how people are feeling. A similar report was produced by Leanne Wood MS and the Plaid Cymru Councillor group and contains the evidence of residents and businesses, in their own words. But this is similarly limited, as it only provides a snapshot of what happened and why. An independent inquiry is the only way we can truly uncover what support

communities require in order to become more resilient. They cannot achieve this alone.

Natural Resources Wales

In October, NRW published a review and a series of reports in relation to the floods which uncovered some very serious issues, that should be considered by an Independent Inquiry. In their own words – *“The review also found also found our resources could not fully cope with the size of the task at hand for an event of this scale and significance.”*¹

Indeed, they themselves recognise the seriousness of the risk of greater flooding in the future because of climate change and state that a joined up approach is needed: *“But to truly learn the lessons from the February 2020 flood events, there needs to be a fundamental consideration of the choices that we all have to make on how the risks are managed and resourced.*

“Only by bringing together all levels of government, public bodies, businesses, communities, families and individuals to respond to this very real threat can we make Wales stronger in our adaptation to future floods. We at NRW are committed to doing just that.”

Further the review states:

“But no one single solution can solve the problem, and Wales will need a combination of all these measures in order to help communities become more resilient. With that comes the need for further investment in our human resources too. We will need more expert and skilled staff to deal with these complex issues because the resource need is greater in scale and longer in duration than that which we have at our disposal now.

“Delivering key improvements to the service will require adequate support in both funding and resources and those discussions will continue with the Welsh Government. It is roughly estimated that 60-70 additional members of staff are needed over the long term to sustain the overall service and to address the actions set out in our flood review. Additional resources will also be required to address the recommendations made to reduce flood risk as set out in the land management review.

“But to truly learn the lessons from the February 2020 flood events, there needs to be a fundamental consideration of the choices that governments, decision-makers and society have on how the risks can be managed.”

¹ <https://naturalresources.wales/about-us/news-and-events/statements/february-2020-floods-in-wales-our-response/?lang=en>

The Minister herself expressed support for this, stating during the debate: *“Their (NRW’s) conclusion was not that the report should be the end of the conversation, but very explicitly that the conversation must continue, continuing to learn the lessons of the devastating flooding in February and consider more broadly how, as a society, we prepare for the changing climate and its impact on our communities in Wales, and that’s a conclusion with which I firmly agree and I hope that the Senedd would also endorse.”*

What better way to achieve this than via an independent inquiry?

There are some crucial questions an inquiry should consider, that have become evident through the NRW report:

- Did lack of investment in NRW from Welsh Government contribute to the floods?
- Had they previously expressed to Welsh Government the need for 60-70 additional staff members, and additional resources, in order to be able to undertake their work adequately?
- How are Welsh Government responding to the review?
- Has Welsh Government funding into flood prevention been adequate?

Conclusion

To conclude, I wish to remind the Petitions Committee of the previous paper submitted which outlined why an Independent Inquiry is essential.² These all remain valid reasons, and again, I’d like to ask the Committee to reflect on the questions I asked then:

1) Will the reports provide adequate answers so as to prevent flooding of this scale from occurring again? To expand on this - how will the individual agencies Section 19 reports provide adequate information about the areas that fall between the remit of individual organisations? To give one example - the suspected causes of pluvial flooding in one area in the Rhondda Valley was a combination of failure of maintenance of a culvert on private land, watercourses running across National Rail land which flooded a highway, pouring water into a natural dip in a village where a combination of local authority drainage system and a 50 year old Welsh Water infrastructure in pumping stations failed to divert the water as it should. It is doubtful that any individual agency’s Section 19 reporting would adequately address the multi stakeholder nature of such a situation. Without an inquiry that considers the interplay between all stakeholders – forming conclusions that will lead to successful measures and recommendations for future will be impossible.

2) Will the reports provide adequate answers to inform a whole Wales plan and approach to flood prevention?

² <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s105130/21.09.20%20Correspondence%20-%20Petitioner%20to%20the%20Committee.pdf>

3) Will the reports provide an insight into the impact the floods have had on both the physical and mental health of those affected? Further, will the reporting mechanisms that are in place ensure a full analysis of the support services offered to individuals whose health was compromised and outline lessons to be learned to develop our understanding of need and plan for future interventions in this field.

4) Will the reports give confidence to businesses based in the areas affected that every possible measure that could reduce the risk of future flooding has been taken by all stakeholders and agencies. or will businesses relocate because of the uncertainty?

The answer to all four questions remains no, and I ask the committee for their support once again in securing justice for residents and businesses. Serious questions must be answered if we are to truly learn lessons for the future.

Appendix A: Response from a Local Councillor to the debate

Cllr Shelley Rees-Owen, Pentre Ward

Please see the article below dated 23rd Dec. Yvonne and her husband are supporting our calls for an independent inquiry. She is more than happy to be interviewed by an inquiry.

<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/local-news/residents-who-suffered-flooding-rct-19428167>

I was contacted by a different resident of Lewis St, Pentre a month ago. They were renting a house and lost all downstairs contents. They were rehoused to Cwmparc and moved back into Lewis st in October after the landlord had finished the repairs . Her anxiety is affecting her life and she is expecting a baby soon. She says that she “is living in fear and everytime it rains I am in bits”. She is trying to negotiate a way out of their tenant agreement in order to move out of the street.

Another resident who lived in Plesant st, Pentre at the time of the flood has been rehoused (along with her children) and will never return to Plesant st. She lost all the downstairs belongings and everynight at bedtime her and the children carry their belongings upstairs in case of flooding during the night. They carry lamps, the Hoover, the television etc upstairs and bring them down in the morning.

She doesn't qualify for a flood gate that a local charity are distributing as they are giving them to the flooded properties rather than families. The council will not issue sandbags as a precaution for her as her new home hasn't been flooded.

The resident has no faith in organisations investigating themselves following the NRW report and will won't sleep properly until they discover how and why the floods happened.

An Independent inquiry would go a long way to regain and repair public trust in the organisations involved. The general perception is that the Council and WG have something to hide by their constant refusal to support an inquiry.

Work is already underway in Pentre on the culverts and drains but without understanding how and why the properties were flooded as they were residents will never feel safe again in their own homes.