

Policy and Resources Committee

21/07/21

Outside Body Report – Upper Medway Internal Drainage Board

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| Outside Body | Upper Medway Internal Drainage Board |
| Councillor(s) represented on the Outside Body | Councillor John Perry Councillor Paul Harper |
| Report Author | Councillor John Perry |
| Date of Outside Body Meeting Attended | 29/06/21 |

Purpose of the Outside Body:

The Upper Medway Internal Drainage Board's prime responsibility is to manage and support the complex drainage systems in the area under its control.

The heavy rainfall over the past few years has been a major contributory factor to the increase in flooding, both surface water and fluvial, in areas not previously affected.

One of the Board's most important roles is to ensure that local landowners exercise their riparian rights to clear ditches, streams and watercourses. This enables the drainage systems to work as effectively and efficiently as possible. As a Board Member I have been out with the teams identifying areas that need improving.

Update:

A copy of the Board Agenda has been enclosed at Appendix 1. As you can see it was quite long but in reality, only two items generated any discussion; these were item 9 New Office Update and item 19 Board Amalgamation.

Agenda Item 9: New Office

Both Cllr Harper and I had raised concerns about this matter. The proposal is to move the Board's offices to Sittingbourne where the Upper and Lower Boards would be together. This would involve moving out and selling Albion Place in Maidstone. And it seemed that a decision had already been made to auction the property, which did not go down too well with some Members as there did appear to have been any prior consultation.

Sharing an office with the Lower Medway Board does make some administrative sense but the choice of Sittingbourne is not ideal and the office accommodation chosen seems too large. Unfortunately, we appear to have been subject to a diktat from the Lower Board who basically presented us with a fait accompli i.e. join us or make other arrangements.

Both Cllr Harper and I had already argued that more due diligence needed to be undertaken but when the final vote was taken this time round only three of us voted against the proposal to move to Sittingbourne.

Agenda Item 19: Board Amalgamation

This item also generated a lot of discussion. In principle it seemed to be a good idea to merge the two bodies. And while the work had different emphasises; the Upper Board was dominated by fluvial issues and drainage whereas the Lower Board's work was affected by the Thames and the need for large pumping stations, their work was inter-related and there could be economies of scale and scope in merging the two bodies. However, there is one issue that might prevent this happening and this concerned the precept.

As matters currently stand each body levies its own precept and the Lower Board's precept is higher as a result of the nature of its work, especially the need to invest in and maintain large pumping stations. The Lower Board has laid down a requirement that if the Boards were to merge there must only be a single precept. Clearly there could be operational savings and the Clerk to the Board argued strongly in favour of a merger, but even with these savings the precept would likely be higher for the existing Members of the Upper Board like ourselves. This would in effect be a subsidy to the Lower Board, which is probably why they are arguing for a single precept. And their reasoning that two precepts would be too complicated was not convincing.

Members agreed that the Chairman and Vice-Chairman should meet with the Lower Board to try to resolve these differences.