

Wildfires and Community Emergency Planning

Notes on the meeting held at Edwardstone Parish Hall on 18th April 2023

Present: Phil Baker (Chair) Edwardstone PC, Roland Cheeseman, Groton PC, Paul Clarke, Edwardstone PC, Simon Frost, Milden Parish Meeting, Freddie Gulliver, Suffolk County Council Emergency Planning Officer, Stephen Morley, Milden landowner, Theresa Munson, Boxford PC, Piers Roberts, Groton PC, David Taylor, Great Waldinfield PC, Tristan Wood, Edwardstone PC.

Background and introduction

The Chair outlined the background to the meeting, referring to concerns arising from the wildfire on the Groton / Edwardstone boundary in summer 2022. He said that the purpose of the meeting was to hear from Freddie Gulliver about Community Emergency Plans, and consider whether they would be applicable to a wildfire situation. Also to consider the role of Parish Councils (1) in informing local communities about prevention of wildfires and what to do if one occurred, and (2) in supporting the emergency services.

Community Emergency Plans (CEPs)

Freddie Gulliver, Community Emergency Planning Officer at Suffolk County Council, outline his role and that of the Emergency Planning Team in advising PCs in the preparation of Emergency Plans. He stressed that each parish would have its own specific risks, assets and resources, and that the plan, once completed, would be owned by the parish or parishes concerned. Neighbouring parishes could choose to collaborate in developing a joint plan.

Local authorities had a statutory duty to provide a safe rest centre, to which people could be moved in an emergency where evacuation was necessary, but this could take time to establish. In these circumstances, it would be useful to have a local rest centre identified within the Parish CEP, to which local residents could be moved temporarily while longer term arrangements were made. The point was made that many people would prefer to stay with friends or relatives than in a hotel, and a local rest centre would be useful in providing somewhere safe from which to make this kind of arrangement. A rest centre also provided a base for registering people in order to make sure all those affected were accounted for. The Emergency Planning team were able to provide training on setting up and running a rest centre.

Activation of CEP could be triggered by locally named individuals, the emergency services or the Emergency Planning Team, but Freddie stressed that actions carried out under the CEP would only be covered by SCC's insurance if they had requested the CEP be put into practice. PCs should check their public liability insurance to see whether it covered them for this kind of activity. If so, they would be able to action a CEP locally if necessary and then inform the Emergency Planning Team.

Stephen Morley, who farmed in Milden, said that local farmers would always be ready to help their neighbours and the emergency services in the event of a local wildfire. He mentioned South Suffolk Farmwatch Group, a WhatsApp group that enabled farmers to communicate with each other quickly in an emergency.

Freddie said that his team had prepared a short guide to developing a CEP, which he would circulate after the meeting, and that he would be happy to work with parishes wanting to create their individual or joint plans. He said further information was also available on the new Suffolk Resilience Forum website (see *Resources* below).

Role of PCs in supporting the emergency services

Phil Baker had spoken to Ian Mallet, Risk and Resilience Manager at Suffolk Fire and Rescue, and he had said that the existence of local CEPs would be helpful in a wildfire situation. He had offered to send a representative of the Fire and Rescue Service to a future meeting of PCs to talk about how CEPs could support the emergency services. A checklist on wildfires produced by the National Fire Chiefs Council was tabled, giving the kind of local information that the Fire and Rescue Service would normally gather in advance to help them tackle a wildfire.

Role of PCs in providing information to their local communities

There was general agreement that PCs should have a role in informing their local communities about (1) avoiding wildfires, and (2) what to do if a wildfire happens. This could be via, for example, small local meetings or by seasonal adverts in the Box River News. Care would need to be taken to use reputable sources for reliable information, which would not lay PCs open to legal action, should their advice be followed with negative consequences.

Next steps

It was agreed that the PC representatives present at the meeting would report back to their respective Parish Councils and ask them to decide

1. whether they wanted to develop a Community Emergency Plan,
2. whether they wanted to do this individually or jointly with one or more other PCs,
3. whether they wanted to develop information on wildfires for their local community (individually or jointly).

The outcomes would be fed back to Phil Baker at Edwardstone PC.

Resources

Suffolk Resilience Forum: <https://suffolkprepared.co.uk/>

Suffolk Fire and Rescue Fire Safety leaflets: <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/suffolk-fire-and-rescue-service/fire-safety-in-the-home/fire-safety-information-leaflets>

British Red Cross guidance on wildfires: <https://www.redcross.org.uk/get-help/prepare-for-emergencies/heatwaves-uk/wildfires>