

Local flood risk management: challenges and the way forward



In this briefing Ali Cotton, Halcrow Group Ltd and Dave Graham, Gloucestershire County Council present the challenges and future possibilities for local flood risk management in England and Wales.

Background

The implementation of the Flood Risk Regulations (2009) and the Flood and Water Management Act (2010) in England and Wales has placed local flood authorities (LLFA) at the core of delivering local flood risk management. It is evident that much progress has been achieved to date and, while significant challenges remain for LLFAs and risk management authorities, there is a large body of good practice emerging across England and Wales.

This briefing considers some of the challenges that will need to be addressed to ensure local flood risk management achieves its ultimate goal: to reduce both the likelihood and consequences of flooding to people and property. It also discusses how the LLFAs and the wider water industry are working collaboratively to overcome these obstacles and concludes with a reflection on the next steps and the future.

Challenging times

Three principal challenges are discussed here:

- how to improve understanding of local flood risk
- how to communicate risk and engage local communities and elected members
- how to take action to mitigate risk.

LLFAs, in partnership with other risk management authorities, need to establish a more comprehensive understanding of local flood risk. While understanding of fluvial and coastal flooding (and indeed coastal erosion) is well developed, there is significantly less understanding of local sources of flooding, most notably surface runoff

and groundwater. Preliminary flood risk assessments have provided the first step, and can assist LLFAs to develop a prioritised approach to improving their understanding of local flood risk further. More work will be needed to confirm flooding mechanisms and identify and assess potential options to mitigate the flood risk. There is much to be gained by adopting a “joined-up” approach to further work. Although legislation defines responsibilities for different sources of flooding, the reality on the ground is that flooding sources are inherently intertwined. This is clearly the case in a LLFA area such as Gloucestershire County Council, where fluvial flooding has a huge influence on surface water. This requires taking a strategic view of all sources of flooding, even at a local level, and not just those that are the specific responsibility of LLFAs under the Flood and Water Management Act. As LLFAs develop a greater understanding of flood risk to people and property, there is a challenge in how to communicate the risk to both elected members and local communities. Pro-active communication and engagement with elected members is critical to delivering senior support and ultimately successful local flood risk management. So LLFAs and other organisations should seek out and actively encourage elected members and local communities to be involved in developing understanding of local flood risk and seeking their input when identifying how risks can most effectively be managed. How and when to engage elected members and local communities is open to debate, but experience suggests early engagement is more likely to lead to “buy-in” to the final outcomes and provide a wider degree of choice to beneficiaries.

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The remaining challenge will be to take action on the ground to manage and reduce flood risk to local communities. Funding from central UK Government is, and will continue to be, limited and Defra's new "payment for outcomes" approach is seeking to tackle this issue head-on. The "payment for outcomes" approach presents not only a significant challenge, but also an opportunity to all involved in managing flood risk. Those working in and with local authorities will need to be smarter in how we approach funding for local flood risk management, considering alternative means of funding and integrating flood risk management with other drivers such as the Water Framework Directive and urban regeneration that can deliver multiple benefits. Casting the funding net as wide as possible increases opportunities for funding that, historically, have not been considered.

The role of local communities is vital here. A cultural shift is needed so that local communities develop a sense of responsibility for, and are more willing to participate in, local flood risk management. This could include:

- adopting personal resilience and resistance measures
- taking responsibility for actively managing ditches and watercourses (with appropriate training and guidance)
- raising funds from beneficiaries to contribute to flood defence scheme.

These will take time to achieve, but requires commitment, openness and building trust from all those involved.

Pulling in the same direction

All organisations need to pull in the same direction to overcome these challenges. The importance of local partnerships cannot be over-stated. A partnership approach is the most efficient way to co-ordinate local flood risk management activities. Strong local partnerships will enable effective, efficient and integrated flood risk management activities and also encourage co-ordinated

investments. Local flood risks can be complex in nature, so working in partnership is important to achieving a wide understanding of the risks, as well as integrated and efficient mitigation measures where multiple organisations are involved.

Nationally, Defra and the Environment Agency need to produce early and clear guidance and regulation to support implementation of the Flood and Water Management Act and the "payment for outcomes" approach. A careful balance needs to be struck between allowing LLFAs to develop their new leadership role, while also providing sufficient support and guidance.

There is significant benefit for groups of LLFAs to meet regularly to discuss their approach to local flood risk management and share good practice, all of which provide a greater confidence as LLFAs adopt their new roles and responsibilities.

Environment Agency area staff can play a vital role in bringing together groups of LLFAs. For example, in the Midlands the Environment Agency organise and host a series of regular networking events for LLFAs, and there are similar events being organised in the south-west and south-east.

The future

LLFAs have been given a significant new responsibility for delivering local flood risk management. In an era of budgetary constraints there will be challenges ahead and it is vital to be open about these with elected members and local communities. The response of LLFAs to these challenges will be critical, in conjunction with a positive "can do" approach.

Developing a more comprehensive understanding of all flood risk, and developing active and effective partnerships working and engaging other organisations, elected members and local communities will be important elements to the response. Equally, considering smarter ways to fund and deliver local flood risk management will be critical. Some elements are achievable in the short-term while others require cultural changes and will take time, energy and commitment to see through. All of these will be necessary to deliver successful local flood risk management, which will ultimately mean reducing flood risk to local communities.

References

The Flood Risk Regulations 2009 (No. 3042)

The Flood and Water Management Act 2010 (Commencement No. 3 and Transitional Provisions) Order 2011 (No. 694) (C. 25) Whole Instrument