

Flood & Coastal Risk Management

Capitalising on community interest

Capitalising on community interest to tackle flood risk management problems

While we were planning new flood protection projects for Carlisle, severe weather between 5 and 8 January 2005 caused a devastating flood in the city. It flooded 3,000 properties, injured 78 people, drowned two elderly women in their homes and left 250,000 people without electricity.

The response after the event by *Communities ReUnited* and ourselves included creating drop-in centres. The centres encouraged and supported the set-up of community groups, meetings with parish councils and business groups, and brought together individuals affected by the flood. We also redesigned our proposals for the construction of new and improved flood risk management measures. The new plans incorporated the rebuilding to a higher level of four kilometres of defences within the city, to protect it from flooding from the River Eden and the River Petteril, at a cost of £13 million. They also included the construction of 5.5 kilometres of mainly new defences in the city centre along the River Caldew, at a cost of £25 million.

The public and the media naturally asked questions about flood warnings, the performance of the existing flood risk management measures and what was going to be done to stop flooding in future. This renewed interest meant that subsequent exhibitions of the design of the proposed schemes were well-attended by local people.

Our project was overseen by a board including representatives from Carlisle City Council; Cumbria County Council;

United Utilities; Natural England; local landowners group; and our Regional Flood Defence Committee. This board wanted to make sure that communities understood the causes of the flood and that in the event of future floods they would know what to do. It achieved this by setting up local flood action groups for affected residents and businesses so they could share plans and progress.

It worked with local media to make sure people in Carlisle heard about plans and progress, and reconnected them with the River Caldew by improving the river's appearance and their ability to access it. A new safe dipping area has been created and new cycle paths are being explored.

A community-led project has also been set up to install arts and plaques along the new defences, commemorating the river's history, its importance to the city and its wildlife.

Working with the community has prompted people to take more direct action to protect themselves. For instance, the Low Crosby Flood Action Group has collected information in its village hall about who to contact after a flood and about which properties in its area are most vulnerable. There has been an

increase in take-up of the flood warning service by those at risk, from 49 per cent before the 2005 flood to 60 per cent in 2009. There is still work to be done, however, to persuade the remainder of the advantage in registering for this free service. More residents have invested in resilience measures for their own homes including flood boards, air brick covers and good quality double-glazed doors which provide better flood protection than sand bags.

Communities ReUnited

Communities ReUnited was a partnership between Carlisle City Council, Cumbria County Council and Carlisle Churches Flood Response Team.



Two local residents who were affected by the flood cut the first turfs for the new scheme

“As part of the 'business group' I am still involved with the Environment Agency. It's nice to have someone at the end of the line. It's super reassurance. It's so important to get the information through at a level you can understand. We're just looking forward to the Environment Agency finishing the scheme, hopefully in 2009.”

George Graham,
local businessman
and chair of the
Willowholme
Industrial Estate
business group

It provided practical and emotional support to flood survivors six days a week, and sometimes seven by:

- establishing contact with 'missing' flood victims
- providing an open city centre drop-in centre for advice, contact, and consultation
- creating targeted intervention programmes for appropriate groups and responding to existing and emerging needs

- providing communications, such as newsletters and advice days
- enhancing existing community-based drop-in, advice, contact and consultation centres.

It aimed to be a 'one-stop shop'. Many flood victims had expressed frustration at having to go from one office in town to another to resolve different issues. Communities ReUnited acted upon information given to it, only referring victims to another advice centre if absolutely necessary. Communities ReUnited wrote letters, made phone calls and visited many homes for site inspections.