

After the floods

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Following last winter's floods in the north of England, have the concerns of communities been properly addressed asks Paul Cobbing?

The winter floods of 2015-2016 in the north of England were devastating for many people and communities, as indeed the floods in almost every year since 2000 have been.

In the wake of the most recent deluges, a number of inquiries were set up both nationally and locally, including the National Flood Resilience Review, Catchment Flood Partnerships in Cumbria and Yorkshire, and commissions in Calderdale and York. Many of these have now reported or will do so shortly.

In light of these findings, it is timely to ask where we are and the immediate prospects for affected communities as another winter comes round. Is enough being done in the short term, and what is the level of ambition to tackle flooding in future? What has changed, and what more do we need to do?

Flood risk management

There is a huge amount of work under way on the part of many organisations to improve flood risk management. Unlike previous years, there is a distinctly catchment-based approach, managing water from where rain falls all the way to the sea. There is also a growing interest in natural flood risk management, to delay and speed up flow through a catchment and reduce the peaks of water that often cause flooding.

Nevertheless, many communities feel disappointed and frustrated that more has not been done to deal with the problem before the coming winter, when they might have to go through the whole trauma again. They often feel that everyone else is being heard but that they struggle to get their own concerns recognised and, in particular, addressed.

What is our level of ambition for residual flood risk, especially as this is likely to increase as the climate changes, and what is our target? Currently it is very unclear from both personal and policy perspectives – partly because we misunderstand the term ‘a one-in-100-year flood event’, which has a 1% probability of occurring in a place in any given year.

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We consistently underestimate the risks, as the floods of the last few years have shown. While individual appetites for risk may vary, our society needs to plan for the future based on a cautious and adaptive approach.

Catchment-based flood risk management is a welcome development, but it still often seems to be simply a useful vehicle for people's preferred solutions, whether these are civil engineering, river management, property resilience, sustainable drainage systems, natural flood risk management or maintenance.

There are places that flooded last winter and would have done so whatever measures were in place, but we can reduce the number of smaller events that affect people using a combination of approaches including planning, regeneration, social service provision, public health and education, among others.

Insurance and development

Flooded or at-risk communities typically have two other major areas of concern: insurance and development. The UK government and industry insurance scheme Flood Re is now providing better access to affordable insurance for households at high risk of flooding, and we now need to tackle small business insurance and claims management. We also need to consider how Flood Re and other insurance provision can help reduce the impact of flooding on people's lives.

In terms of development, how do we know that buildings being constructed today will create communities that are safe now and in 30 years' time? We do not – and the little evidence available is highly partial and incomplete. This is a huge hole in the system. People need to feel that safe communities are being created – our feedback is that many certainly do not feel this way at the moment.

Property resilience, especially property-level protection, is sometimes described as the wild west, with cowboy contractors indistinguishable from those who are legitimate. The trade needs to be properly regulated and systematised, with accreditation and certification for those who undertake flood risk assessments for properties. This is a matter of urgency if we are to avoid people being at the mercy of unscrupulous tradespeople after every flood.

While the local and regional inquiries and initiatives ought to give us some answers, a core question remains: how much of a priority is flooding for each organisation?

What leadership needs to be demonstrated in each area, and by whom? How do we coordinate action much more effectively? Finally, of critical importance, is understanding how people and communities can help participate in and shape flood risk management in their area.

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Further information

- Related competencies include [Sustainability](#)
- This feature is taken from the RICS *Building surveying* journal (December 2016/January 2017)