



postnote

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FLOODFORUM.NET - AN ONLINE DISCUSSION

During January and February 2002, POST commissioned an online discussion (floodforum.net) examining the causes, consequences and communication of flooding. Flooding in the UK puts at risk up to five million people and causes damage estimated at around £800million each year¹. A number of possible causes of flooding are suggested: building on floodplains, alterations to river channels, changes in rainfall patterns and changes in agricultural and land management practice. Climate change is also predicted to increase flooding risk.

This briefing updates a previous note (*Managing Flooding* POSTnote 169, December 2001) by summarising the outcome floodforum.net, and outlines the Government's current consultation on the arrangements for funding flood and coastal defence.

Floodforum.net

Floodforum.net was launched on Monday 21 January and ran online for four weeks until Sunday 17 February 2002. The aim of the forum was to bring together people involved in and affected by inland flooding to stimulate discussion of the causes, consequences and communication issues associated with inland flooding in the UK, and to inform Parliamentary debate on this topic.

Floodforum.net was publicised through direct mailings, local media coverage, emails, web links and word of mouth. During the process², 532 individuals registered and logged in to the discussion, including 3 MPs. Of the total, 157 participants posted messages, many in response to other participants' messages. In total 571 messages were posted. Participants included representatives from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Environment Agency,

insurance industry, emergency planning association and many other professional bodies. But the majority of the participants were those who live in high flood risk areas and have had personal experience of flooding. Some participants also brought some overseas experience.

A summary report of floodforum.net is available from POST. The discussion was broken down into three key strands, with additional topics added by participants:

- causes and alleviation of flooding
- consequences of flooding
- communicating flood risk

Causes and alleviation of flooding

Causes of flooding

Participants discussed the many different factors that they perceived to cause flooding in their areas including natural weather patterns, building on floodplains, poor flood management, and lack of expertise. Participants viewed the main causes of flooding as:

- development leading to increase of water run-off, such as building on floodplains, increasing run-off from developed areas and roads, elimination of hedges and ditches, poor planning decisions, and inadequate funding
- impediment to water flow – e.g. through a lack of maintenance works to maintain capacity, such as regular dredging, clearing watercourses, blocked culverts, inadequate drains and sewers, etc.
- failure to take a whole catchment approach – e.g. by improving flood defences upstream which has a knock-on effect downstream. While concerned over their own local needs, many participants agreed that local solutions should be seen in the wider context of a more strategic approach to flooding

- lack of expertise – e.g. a lack of general and local engineering knowledge, and an insufficient number of qualified engineers to work on flood protection
- absence of flood defence schemes
- natural weather events and climate change

Planning and design of flood alleviation schemes

This was one key area that participants felt needed improvement. Participants discussed the possible flood alleviation technologies but beyond a purely technical discussion of the merits of particular engineering approaches, participants felt that a number of problems remained in how flood alleviation schemes are planned and designed. Responses fell into six main categories:

- failures of the planning system – e.g. delays, inadequate funding, inefficient grant application processes, and inadequate staff resources
- lack of long-term planning
- failures of the local planning system – e.g. lack of qualifications of local councillors, ignoring planning guidance, and lack of accountability of local planning authorities for the consequences of their decisions
- ignoring local voices
- failure by developers to fund flood defences
- lack of flood-proofing existing buildings

Consequences of flooding

In the course of the discussion participants stressed that the main victims of flooding were householders. Participants expressed their concerns about the misery and hardship people experience during flooding, and in many cases, the adverse effects take weeks and even months to overcome. They pointed out that consequences could encompass financial losses and personal trauma (see box opposite).

Effects of flooding on wider community

Some participants also expressed their opinions regarding impact of flooding on wider communities in flood prone areas. These included:

- the idea of a 'hierarchy of affectedness' – e.g. “- who was worst off? Those who were directly affected over those who were merely inconvenienced. Those who suffered damage to business and personal property over those who only experienced loss at one place”
- the loss of community facilities after flooding
- disruption to transport links
- the cost of flooding to society as a whole

Effects of flooding on health and well-being

When discussing health effects three particular hazards were identified, i.e. dangers from fast-flowing waters, contamination from pathogens and the long-term health effect of mould. In addition, it was felt that the public might not be aware of health risks caused by flooding. Some thought that local authorities were not often competent in this area, and were ignorant of the hazards.

Priorities when dealing with the effects of flooding

Participants identified the following priorities:

- providing adequate technical guidance on restoration
- dealing with health and safety of people affected

Personal accounts of the effects of flooding

The following are quotations from floodforum.net from people recounting their own experiences of flooding:

“There is no way it is possible to describe the effects of this on a family. We lost photographs, a collection of postcards etc, and most of our furniture...” Sandra Francis

“The whole guts of my house was removed (kitchen, skirting and bathroom) we moved back in June of last year. We had to live on takeaways for 6 months, as I only had buildings cover and not contents, my kitchen was completed New Years Eve 2001. Apart from the stress, I can't believe we are still waiting for confirmation about who is responsible for our drains, so work can start to resolve the problem that caused all of this. We live in fear of it happening again.” Julie Heather

“The 2000 flood was the worst, but after 15 months of camping upstairs, living with builders, and making a £30,000+ insurance claim, we are getting back to normal.” Cherry Bradshaw

“The ground floor of the mill has been flooded several times in recent years. All the tenants who have experienced that felt they could not return after the clean-up. Worst is the filth and silt; damage to furniture, belongings. We thought we had hacked that by putting possessions onto a table or bed, but the Oct 2000 flood topped the table and bed. The flood has devastating effect on structure, the electric and toilet system. The rubbish, silt and sewerage affects the area around property as well.” M. Hucker

“My house was within a few mm of being flooded in 2000 and we were evacuated. My lasting memories of the water are its smell and noise, which cannot be appreciated from TV pictures. Actually seeing the force of nature is quite awesome.” Catherine Chism

- providing appropriate financial mechanisms
- raising public awareness
- putting in place contingency plans
- taking community based actions
- establish a central control agency
- taking account of local knowledge in flood alleviation

Division of responsibility

Participants highlighted their concerns regarding the division of responsibility for flood protection and management and the consequences of this division. For example:

- the lack of a single body responsible for all areas of flood management leads to confusion and questions over accountability
- uncertainty over the specific role of each of the different bodies that held responsibility for flood management
- blurred divisions cause unnecessary bureaucracy
- responsibility should be transferred to one single body. Some thought this should be the Environment Agency, others suggested a new body independent of the Agency. Other participants felt that a new body was not the solution to current flood defence problems.

Emergency services

There were concerns also about the division of responsibilities in flood emergencies, in particular:

- lack of funding meant that flood responses were of poor quality
- emergency response teams need the tools and skills necessary to protect people and themselves
- public education is important in helping people to protect themselves.

Communicating flood risk

The provision of clear, accessible information for assessing flood risk and for flood warnings was a major area of interest for participants. Many of the participants had direct experience of using the range of flood warning devices currently available to differing degrees of satisfaction. Contributions fell into four main categories:

- the merits of different methods of calculating flood risk – e.g. a number of participants felt the current method of measurement was too crude
- the mapping of flood risk areas is not being specific enough, which could lead to some properties being unnecessarily branded as high flood risk
- flood warning systems are not as effective as they could be – e.g. there is some confusion among those at risk about flood warning codes, and the warnings do not always reach those they are intended to help
- flood warnings could provide more precise information about the likely timing and final level of the flood peak. This, participants noted, would be of direct help in taking practical measures to protect belongings during a flood.

Media coverage

The role of media coverage in communicating flood risk and informing the public of steps they can take in flood protection was seen as a vital service by the participants. However many participants criticised the way information was communicated through the media, e.g.:

- the media often overstates the risks and effects
- conflicting or erroneous information was also often put out to the public by the media.

Other issues raised during floodforum.net

Insuring property in flood risk areas

A major concern among participants living in flood risk areas centred around the difficulties involved in insuring their property and possessions. These can be summarised as follows:

- rejection by insurance companies due to the high risk of flooding in their area
- rapidly increasing insurance premiums or policy excess limits
- a knock-on effect on the value of property, as people are reluctant to move to uninsurable properties
- flood protection measures had little impact on the willingness of insurance companies to cover high-risk areas. Some also recounted experiences of how their insurance companies had refused to allow the repairs and refurbishment of properties to lead to an increase in the resilience of the property against floodwater damage
- the need for good advice and guidance from insurers regarding preventative methods and a continuing dialogue between home-owners, bodies with

responsibility for flood protection and management and insurance companies to ensure a up-to-date and relevant assessment of flood risk is used when calculating premiums.

A participant from the Association of British Insurers outlined the position of the insurance industry when assessing whether to insure high flood risk areas and highlighted the industry's hope that the Government will increase funding for flood protection measures.

Flood tax

During the course of the discussion, the Government launched its consultation on the flood and coastal defence funding review (see later). There was some media coverage of this, focussing on reports that the Government was considering introducing new 'flood taxes' for flood risk areas to cover the cost of flood defence. It was suggested that householders in these areas would pay a one off tax and house builders wanting to develop properties on floodplains may face a similar charge. The flood tax proposals sparked a lively exchange among some floodforum participants, e.g.:

- flood victims being unfairly singled out for increased taxation
- how the proposed flood tax would be administered
- how the funds raised would be distributed
- the need for alternative funding methods but rejecting the concept of a tax on the 'victim'
- some participants expressed their conditional support for a flood tax.

Flood protection aids

Participants felt that the cost of flood protection aids prohibited many individuals from being able to take steps to protect their homes. Contributors representing local flood support groups raised the issue of including flood protection aids in grant schemes. It was felt by many participants that if individuals were given greater support to protect their own property through simple flood protection aids (flood doors etc.) the overall burden of flooding could be reduced.

The need to test and accredit flood protection products to ensure their effectiveness and quality was highlighted. A small number of participants suggested that flood protection equipment and building supplies for reconstruction should be VAT zero-rated.

Priorities identified in floodforum.net

Towards the end of the discussion, participants were asked to identify their priorities for action to ensure effective flood management. Suggestions included:

- make decision-makers accountable
- establish one body responsible for flood management
- emergency services should co-operate in all types of flooding – i.e. river, coastal and sewer flooding
- set minimum standards of protection for public safety
- review the cost-benefit and funding formula
- investigate insurance problems, e.g. restoration of properties to improve resilience to future flooding
- provide sustainable urban drainage

- map, audit and maintain ordinary water courses
- take account of flood preparedness, operations during flooding, and post-flood reconstruction and review.

The Government's funding review

In February 2002, the Government launched a consultation^{3,4,5} stemming from a review of flood and coastal defence funding. The review was commissioned to make the funding mechanisms and institutional arrangements for flood and coastal defence more effective, fair and efficient.

The review was conducted by a Steering Group, comprising DEFRA, HM Treasury, the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions, the National Assembly for Wales and the Environment Agency. It focussed on "*whether the sources of funds should and could be redistributed so that more responsibility for funding would fall on those directly benefiting from the expenditure.*" Also, the review examined how clear the means are for identifying spending priorities in flood and coastal defence.

The Steering Group's recommendations are summarised in the box opposite. The consultation (which runs until 17 May) seeks views on issues raised by the Steering Group's recommendations, covering:

- funding options
- achieving flood and coastal defence objectives
- institutional arrangements and funding mechanisms
- short-term streamlining proposals.

Overview

Since the floods of Autumn 2000, there have been a number of high-level reviews of flood management. These, together with POST's floodforum.net internet discussion, have indicated strongly that many consider the current levels of funding to be inadequate to maintain current standards of defence in many areas and that this is likely to worsen given any climate change. The Government is now consulting on the funding and institutional arrangements for flood defence.

The consultation tackles many of the key issues arising from floodforum. In particular the level of funding, the institutional arrangements and the planning of flood defence schemes. Other issues are not included, such as ensuring adequate flood warnings, insurance cover and helping to improve household resilience to flooding.

Whatever the level and mechanisms of funding, spending must be targeted appropriately, taking best account of economic, social and environmental concerns and involving the public in planning and decision-making. Also flood warnings need to be ensure that people can make practical use of the information provided. At the same time, people at risk from flooding need to recognise that floods cannot be prevented but they can take actions themselves in advance of and during floods to help protect life and property. Thus, many argue for more effort in preparing for flooding and in assisting recovery after a flood.

The flood and coastal defence funding review – recommendations of the Review Steering Group

Funding

The Steering Group concluded that the burden of financing defences is rationally and fairly distributed, and so Exchequer funding should continue to be the primary source of existing flood and coastal defence funding. The Group felt, however, that new sources for additional funding were possible, such as a flood plain levy, local levies and a development 'connection' charge.

The Group recommended that planning guidance be monitored and concluded that a government underwritten insurance scheme on subsidised insurance in 'at risk' areas is not appropriate. It recommended deferral of further consideration of a statutory development charge, and rejection of a surface water drainage charge.

Investment priorities

Among other conclusions, the Group found that priorities for investment and maintenance are sustainable and coherent. As such, the Group concluded that it is not necessary to replace the operating authorities' present permissive powers with a statutory obligation to carry out flood and coastal defence activities. The Group recommended continued reliance on the existing strategic framework including use of High Level Targets to monitor Government policy.

Administrative arrangements

The group found that administrative arrangements fit well with funding mechanisms but that the current institutional arrangements are complex, leading to inconsistency in flood defence activities across the country. The Group advised that these should be based basis on a regional model.

Short-term changes

While radical changes to the institutional and funding arrangements could require primary legislation, there is scope for short term changes to be introduced more quickly. As such, the Group recommended consultation on:

- the Agency having responsibility for all watercourses presenting a significant flood risk
- removal of the second tier of Flood Defence Committees
- combining and consolidating capital grant and revenue support grant allocations to the Agency.

Endnotes

- 1 DEFRA, 2001. *National Appraisal of Assets at Risk from Flooding and Coastal Erosion. Final Report*
- 2 Hansard Society (2002). *Floodforum.net. Summary Report.*
- 3 DEFRA and National Assembly for Wales (2002). *The Flood and Coastal Defence Funding Review. Consultation Document.*
- 4 DEFRA (2001). *The Flood and Coastal Defence Funding Review Report to Ministers by the Review Steering Group, December.*
- 5 DEFRA (2001) *The Flood and Coastal Defence Funding Review. A report produced by Oxford Economic Research Associates, August.*

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