

science summary



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SCHO1005BJTD-E-P

Improving community and citizen engagement in flood risk management decision making, delivery and flood response Science Summary SC040033/SR3

A new review of community engagement in flood risk management shows that decision makers agree that technology alone cannot cope with increasing flood events and that communities need to be helped to accept a certain level of flood risk. This means that the Environment Agency needs to promote the development of social capital by proactively encouraging community and citizen engagement.

The aim of this research was to understand the relationship between community and citizen engagement and effectiveness and efficiency in flood risk management (FRM) decision making, delivery and flood response.

The study collated and reviewed relevant research and practice including general work on community participation and specific research on community participation and flood risk management. Interviews were also held with five distinct groups of decision makers: Environment Agency policy staff working in FRM; Environment Agency regional/operations FRM staff; Defra FRM policy staff and other government staff; academics/researchers working in FRM and community participation; and 'other practitioners' including a professional facilitator, a chairperson of a local community group, National Flood Forum (NFF) staff and local authority officers. The purpose was to explore attitudes, perceptions and beliefs regarding citizen and community engagement.

Almost every member of the Environment Agency/FRM operations staff expressed the need to work with communities before, during and after a flood event at a meaningful level and asked for these issues to be debated at the highest level within the Environment Agency. They felt that a good beginning has been made with the dissemination of the Building Trust with Communities (BTwC) toolkit. There was strong support for viewing public meetings as an aid to building social capital and for harnessing the initial

anger of those affected by a flood to contribute to positive change.

Environment Agency staff who have been involved with engaging local communities felt very positive about the possibilities, the process and outcomes. The examples also demonstrate the ease with which the Environment Agency can initiate and facilitate such projects, be partner to a joint project, or simply benefit from someone else's initiative.

Interviewees agreed that there is an urgent need for people to recognise the seriousness of the greater likelihood of flood risk, but much care needs to be taken as communicating risk can heighten anxieties and feelings of helplessness which in turn will increase the need to blame someone else (mostly the Environment Agency). There is also evidence that some 'at risk' communities are in a 'state of denial' and are choosing to ignore the warnings.

Most participants in this study expressed a need for further work. It was suggested that although there have been a number of good practice case studies they are mostly anecdotal and need to be properly analysed to extract the principles of their success. It has also been argued that it is equally important to examine adverse cases. The analysis, however, should not focus on individual action but should include the role of underlying systems and why they did not facilitate a more satisfactory outcome.

This summary relates to information from Science Project SC040033/SR3 reported in detail in the following output:

Science Report: SC040033/SR3

Title: Improving community and citizen engagement in flood risk management decision making, delivery and flood response

ISBN: 1844325156

December 2005

Report Product Code: SCHO1005BJTC-E-P

Internal Status: Regions

External Status: Public

Project manager: Paula Orr, Social Policy Advisor

Research Contractor:

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This project was funded by the Environment Agency's Science Group, which provides scientific knowledge, tools and techniques to enable us to protect and manage the environment as effectively as possible.

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