

Community and public participation: risk communication and improving decision making in flood and coastal defence

Technical Summary: FD2007

Joint Defra / EA Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management R&D programme

Background to R&D project

The major floods of Easter 1998 and Autumn 2000 have resulted in an increased level of concern over flood risks. This concern is related not only to the impacts upon those who have had the misfortune to be flooded but also to wider issues such as the allocation of resources to flood and coastal defences, the role of local planning authorities in limiting development in flood areas, and the impact of climate change upon flood risks. In response to these and other concerns, Defra and the Environment Agency (the Agency) are funding research to explore some of the related social and policy issues. Further work is now required to explore how best to involve stakeholders not only in understanding flood risk and associated issues but also in decision-making.

This study was undertaken by Scott Wilson, with assistance from Risk & Policy Analysts Ltd and others, in order to “review the effectiveness of consultation and communication procedures and practices used in flood and coastal defence in England and Wales and, from this, to put forward suggestions for best practice methodologies to enable the public and stakeholder groups to better appreciate flood and coastal defence issues.”

The Technical Report documents the first stage and includes recommendations on improving risk communication and proposals for a second phase of work, to develop guidance on public participation and conflict resolution in flood and coastal defence decision-making. This second phase has wider relevance to a range of activities, including implementation of the Water Framework Directive, and has not been pursued within the joint Defra / EA Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management R&D programme.

Results of R&D project

This project investigated 12 case studies, of either fluvial flooding or coastal flooding and erosion, throughout England. Four of the case studies were undertaken in detail including interviews with officials and focus groups with members of the community. The remaining eight were undertaken using a postal questionnaire survey only. This approach allowed both an in depth analysis of the complexity of the issues, as well as some breadth to ensure that all variables were covered. The results of the case study were augmented with a literature review and two national round tables of invited national experts and flood action group members.



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The results were summarised as follows:

- it is risk perception not risk understanding which is the major barrier to communication;
- the public can not be treated as one target group as in reality they are made up of many different groups with different perceptions;
- the established definition of risk was not well received -it was suggested that a range of methods of expressing probability should be used;
- the principle behind the Indicative Flood Plain Maps (IFM) was thought to be correct. However, the lack of detail and perceived inaccuracy undermined their value;
- evidence from the case studies suggests that the public believe that the risk of flooding is increasing. The reasons that are cited are mainly man made;
- the risk message is diluted due to the presence of local rumours, mistrust of officials and scepticism of their competence;
- the public found that there was an inconsistency between the warnings they received from Floodline and the Automated Voice Messaging System (AVM). This reflected a wider perception that there was a lack of coordination both within and between key bodies with responsibility in flood and coastal defence;
- the way the public perceives risk is influenced by the factors that worry them. This research suggests that different members of the public are worried by a variety of factors;
- more effective public participation in schemes and plans can help build trust and understanding within the community which in turn helps communicate risk more effectively, and
- there is often significant expertise in the local community that is not fully utilised.

R&D Outputs and their Use

This report is primarily intended to inform Defra and Environment Agency flood and coastal erosion risk management staff. The findings represent the view of the contractor and are not necessarily endorsed by either Defra or the Environment Agency.

This R&D Technical Summary relates to R&D Project FD2007 and the following R&D output:

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Research Contractor: Scott Wilson Kirkpatrick & Co Ltd, 71 Victoria Street, London SW1H 0SW

Project Manager: Jonathan McCue Birchwood Science Park, Warrington Road, Risley, Warrington, WA3 6AT.
jonathan.mccue@atkinsglobal.com

The above outputs may be downloaded from the Defra/EA R&D Programme website

(<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environ/fcd/research>), there is a search tool located on the project information and publications page. Copies are held by all EA Regional Information Centres, contact the Environment Agency's National Customer Contact Centre by emailing enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk or by telephoning 08708 506506.



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Defra Flood Management, Ergon house,
Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2AL
Tel: 020 7238 6000
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