

Review of project learning

Working together to adapt to a changing climate: flood and coast

FCERM Research & Development Programme
Research Report

Date: January 2023

FRS17192/1

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Published by:

Environment Agency
Horizon House, Deanery Road,
Bristol BS1 5AH

www.gov.uk/environment-agency

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Keywords:
Climate adaptation; community engagement; collaborative working; readiness; flooding; coastal erosion

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FRS17192

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This report is the result of research commissioned and funded by the Joint Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Research and Development Programme. The Joint Programme is jointly overseen by Defra, the Environment Agency, Natural Resources Wales and Welsh Government on behalf of all risk management authorities in England and Wales: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-management-research-and-development-programme>

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If you have any comments or questions about this report or the Environment Agency's other scientific work, please contact research@environment-agency.gov.uk.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone in Caterham/Old Coulsdon and Hemsby who participated in the project, in particular members of the steering/design groups who helped drive the work locally. We'd also like to thank our reviewers, whose feedback on our products was invaluable. Thanks to Helen Bovey and Kate Kipling, our project managers, for their role in reviewing and editing. We'd also like to acknowledge our practitioner community, who have provided us with knowledge and ideas during project webinars. Finally, thanks go to our project board, who have helped us work through issues and ensured the research remained relevant and connected throughout.

Executive summary

This report summarises learning about how authorities can work with communities on future planning and decision-making in situations where long-term flood and coastal erosion risk management is complex or contentious. It is based on findings from the research project 'Working together to adapt to a changing climate: flood and coast'.

This document revisits the 'engagement challenges' identified in the project evidence review, highlighting what has been learnt about them and how they can be addressed. For each of these challenges, this report:

- provides a brief **overview** of the nature of the challenge
- summarises some **overall conclusions** that our work on this project has generated
- offers a more detailed **discussion** of our findings from our work in the pilot locations and associated conversations with our local steering groups and with members of the project board

Engagement challenge 1: Readiness refers to the knowledge and capacities needed for decision-making processes. The project developed a readiness assessment tool to assess the state of readiness of individuals, partnerships and communities.

- Understanding 'readiness' can help to decide where and how to invest time, energy and resources.
- It is important to understand readiness of all stakeholders – via readiness assessments.
- Readiness assessment methods should be adapted to the context. The assessment can be carried out by individuals, groups or outsiders.
- Readiness assessment should be integrated into strategic planning.

Engagement challenge 2: Framing, language and communication - the way people talk about things influences how others understand issues and respond to engagement efforts.

- Framing needs careful consideration and explicit discussion early on.
- People with local knowledge can help to decide on the most appropriate language for engagement in particular contexts.
- Being open to discussing different ways in which a problem can be understood is more helpful than avoiding disagreement or challenge.

Engagement challenge 3: Climate change, emotions and mental health affect engagement with flooding and coastal erosion; they could be more explicitly factored into community engagement and adaptation planning.

- Climate change can be less of a concern than flooding/coastal erosion and other challenges (for example, housing, unemployment).

- Links between exposure to risk and emotional responses are not straightforward – not everyone is affected in the same way.
- There is a need to build capacities to have conversations about these issues.
- Working collaboratively with communities can help factor in mental health.

Engagement challenge 4: Place attachment, culture and identity – people's views of places and communities influence responses to flooding, coastal erosion and climate change.

- To develop a fuller understanding of a place and community, it is helpful to capture the different ways people relate to them.
- Understanding what people value can identify priorities and collaborations.
- Spatial planning attracts particularly strong emotions.
- There are benefits and drawbacks to bringing in 'outsider' facilitators.

Engagement challenge 5: Power, politics and conflict create challenges for collaboration.

- It is beneficial when stakeholders are 'inducted' so they have a good understanding of the flood and coastal erosion risk management system.
- Developing mutual understanding involves recognising the values and emotions that different people bring. There are difficult trade-offs to negotiate.
- It is worth considering how to build capacities for constructive conflict engagement among all stakeholders.
- Collaborative working can improve relationships and offer new perspectives.

Engagement challenge 6: Questions of scale - people and organisations work at very different geographic and time scales.

- Adaptation to climate change can feel like an unwelcome distraction from the urgency of minimising risk for those affected by flooding/coastal erosion.
- It is helpful to combine interventions with shorter and longer-term benefits where possible, but sometimes these are in tension.
- It is difficult to negotiate tensions from people working at different scales.
- Enabling stakeholders to understand each other's priorities, responsibilities and constraints can improve trust and communication.

An important overall theme is the value of stakeholders – authorities, partners and communities – working collaboratively, not just on the substance of flood/coastal interventions, but also on engagement strategies for a wider community. The benefits of collaborative working in this project have included improved relationships, better community representation and new ideas and ways of thinking. There is much potential for mutual learning, particularly when participants are prepared to engage honestly with each other's concerns, emotions, experiences and knowledge. This report shares some of this learning.

Introduction

About this report

This report summarises learning about how authorities can work with communities on future planning and decision-making in situations where long-term flood and coastal erosion risk management is complex or contentious. It is based on findings from the research project 'Working together to adapt to a changing climate: flood and coast'. This document revisits the 'engagement challenges' identified in the project evidence review, highlighting what has been learnt about them and how they can be addressed.

This report is aimed at anyone who is interested in knowing more about ways in which authorities, communities and partners can exchange views, build understanding, and plan together to help reduce flood and coastal erosion risk in the face of climate change predictions. It should be particularly useful for engagement staff in risk management authorities and third sector organisations. It may also be of interest to individuals and community groups interested in or concerned about future planning and decision-making on these issues in their local area or beyond.

The purpose of this report is to:

- highlight project findings on the challenges associated with working together on future flood/coastal erosion risks
- share reflections on how these challenges can be addressed, based on learning from the project pilot work

Where this report has come from

This report is a final product of the action research project 'Working together to adapt to a changing climate: flood and coast'. The project was funded by the Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Research and Development Programme (Environment Agency, Defra, Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales) and implemented by the research and engagement company Icarus.

The research is a response to concerns about the impacts of climate change and the likelihood of significantly higher levels of risk to communities due to increased flooding or coastal erosion. It aimed to explore how authorities can engage effectively with communities on these issues, particularly where options for addressing increased risk may be complex or contentious.

The project is providing evidence for the implementation of the new Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management (FCERM) Strategy for England. Findings from the evidence review are featured in the strategy, along with a measure to share learning from the project. The research also addresses aspirations to make people and places central to decision-making and increasing local resilience to climate change.

The action research project included 3 phases:

1. a review of evidence on community engagement on climate adaptation (2018), to inform:
2. designing and implementing an innovative community engagement programme (2019 to 2021). Local communities and organisations were invited to apply to take part, and **2 pilot locations** were selected:
 - Caterham on the Hill and Old Coulsdon, Surrey and London Borough of Croydon - experiences surface water flooding
 - Hemsby, Norfolk – experiences coastal erosion and storm surges
3. bringing together, reflecting on and documenting learning and practice (2021 to 2022)

Co-design and collaboration were integral to the project. This included setting up steering groups in each pilot location made up of authorities and residents. The steering groups helped to develop and trial a local engagement programme. The project took an action research approach, documenting learning throughout and adapting the work programme accordingly. Two-way learning was also instigated through quarterly webinars with a group of almost 200 FCERM practitioners. A project board including representatives from the Environment Agency, Natural Resources Wales and local authorities helped to steer the project throughout.

It is worth noting that different participants had different levels of involvement and influence throughout the project. Icarus led the project implementation and wrote these reports. The use of 'we' refers to the authors unless otherwise specified.

There are a number of products from the project that reflect on the research findings and learning and provide detailed information about the tools developed and tested. These are available on the [project webpage](#).

Report structure

The initial project [evidence review](#) identified a number of challenges facing authorities and communities as they try to engage in planning for future scenarios around flooding, coastal erosion and climate change adaptation. We then worked with local groups in 2 communities to explore and pilot ways in which we might better understand and respond to these challenges. As suggested in the evidence review, we tried to do this in ways that would allow a range of people to contribute their understanding, knowledge and skills. This included professional expertise, knowledge of local circumstances and dynamics, and the knowledge and commitment that often arises from lived experience of flooding and/or coastal change.

The sections that follow revisit the engagement challenges that were identified in our evidence review and subsequently included in the National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy for England (2020):

1. Readiness
2. Framing, language and communication

3. Climate change, emotions and mental health
4. Place attachment, culture and identity
5. Power, politics and conflict

Plus, an additional challenge that emerged during the project:

6. Questions of scale

Each section includes an overview of the challenge, overall conclusions and discussion. They reflect on how our understanding has developed through the activities in this project. The report focuses on overall learning rather than the full detail of what we did and the more specific things we have learnt along the way.¹

¹ For further details, please refer to the other learning reports and tools and techniques documents that have come out of this project.

Challenge 1: Readiness

Overview

Our evidence review suggested a helpful first step in collaborative work on addressing flood risk and coastal change in a context of accelerating climate change. This is to analyse the extent to which all stakeholders (including authorities, communities and partners) have the knowledge and capacities needed for decision-making processes that take appropriate account of current risks and vulnerabilities, future trajectories, and the different perspectives of all those affected by the difficult decisions that might need to be made. It is worth noting here that the original impetus for the ‘Working together’ project was a need to understand more about how to work in places where long-term protection from flood or coastal erosion risk might not be feasible, and where other, often contentious, options might need to be considered, even when the risks themselves are some way in the future. So, while existing guidance on engagement, such as the Environment Agency’s Working With Others framework², does already include recommendations for understanding a context, our evidence review suggested that a more thorough analysis across more and different dimensions may be needed. This was especially the case where there are new, unfamiliar or more complex challenges, such as those associated with adaptation to climate change.

‘Readiness’ includes several important dimensions, including knowledge and understanding (relevant expertise, but also local knowledge and lived experience), the extent to which existing policies and processes take account of climate change projections, attitudes and emotions, a sense of agency, levels of trust and capacities to engage constructively in conflict and to collaborate.

Understanding ‘readiness’ would help the Environment Agency, Natural Resources Wales and others involved in flood and coastal erosion risk management (FCERM) (including local authorities, organisations and community groups that are working on these issues) to decide where and how to invest time, energy and resources. It would also ensure that engagement and other interventions reflect relevant expertise, local conditions, and the knowledge, skills and capacities that community members can offer. The working assumption (tested in our project) is that investing in this work upfront could ensure better, more appropriate decisions and, potentially, help to avoid conflict over issues or decisions that are likely to be contentious.

Readiness assessment, therefore, became a significant focus of this project. To develop this, we first looked at existing tools for assessing readiness, both in relation to climate

² The Working with Others framework is the Environment Agency’s approach to engagement with all stakeholders.

change in coastal contexts in the US (Suskind and Rumore, 2015) and in relation to other challenging community conversations (Plested and others, 2006; Combe, 2014). Drawing on these resources, we then worked with the local steering group in Hemsby to develop, test and refine our own tools. These included:

- a set of interview questions for authorities, organisations and communities (used in both Hemsby and Caterham and Old Coulsdon)
- a survey used to gather the perspectives of a wider community (used in Hemsby and later also in the neighbouring village of Winterton)
- methods and processes for analysing information and generating valid judgements about levels of readiness
- a set of tools and techniques for readiness assessment at individual, partnership and community levels

For a more detailed account of how these tools evolved and our learning from the process, please see 'Developing tools for readiness assessment: review of learning'. For advice on how to use readiness assessment at the individual, partnership and community level, refer to 'Readiness assessment: tools and techniques'.

We have also developed a custom set of readiness assessment tools for the Defra-funded [Flood and Coastal Resilience Innovation Programme](#), helping project partnerships to identify development needs early. This is a good example of how the pilot work carried out for this project has started to influence national policy and guidance for future work in this area.

Overall conclusions

- **It is important to understand readiness of all stakeholders.** Our work strongly suggested that questions about readiness need to be asked of all stakeholders, including practitioners who might lead on this work.
- While there are important dimensions of 'readiness' that are likely to be relevant across different settings and groups of people – for example, knowledge of relevant facts or the ability to engage with conflict constructively – **it is helpful to adapt readiness assessment methods to the needs of particular contexts.**
- **Asking individuals or groups to self-assess their readiness can help them to reflect on their skills, knowledge and assumptions and to identify areas for further development.** At the same time, self-assessment has limitations: our data showed that some people may overestimate their readiness, while others tend to underestimate their own experience or understanding.
- **In more complex and/or conflictual situations, readiness assessment is probably best carried out by impartial outsiders** who can reflect the range of perspectives and assumptions back to the relevant group of people. Experience of both social research and facilitation are particularly helpful in this respect.
- **Readiness assessment is not a stand-alone process but needs to be integrated into longer-term strategic planning.** Ideally, readiness assessment

would come early, at the beginning of a process trying to identify potential solutions for difficult adaptation challenges. However, our experience also suggests that it can be a helpful ‘troubleshooting’ step when projects or efforts at collaborative working run into difficulties or as a ‘pause point’ during a project’s development or implementation. Either way, it is important to think carefully about how the findings of readiness assessment will be fed into how the project progresses and its future ways of working.

- The readiness assessment ultimately suggested that **groundwork with certain stakeholders – to build knowledge and trust – might be a precondition for successful engagement around longer-term challenges**. Collaborative working between stakeholders can help build readiness.

Discussion

The project provided confirmation of the need for and value of readiness assessment, as well as adding some further nuances to our understanding of what this process might involve or be used for.

The reflective conversations we had towards the end of this project within the project team, with Environment Agency staff, with the project board³ and with the steering/design groups in our pilot locations suggest that consciously thinking about readiness, including the readiness of FCERM and engagement practitioners, has been ‘a step change’ and a departure from common practice and assumptions. Quite often, funded projects are under pressure to define solutions at the outset, to get started quickly, and to achieve tangible results, discouraging the slower, more patient and more open-ended work of understanding a place and its people. The concept of readiness assessment can ‘contribute to the idea that it’s a journey’ (when working with places and communities), and to the recognition that in places that are facing difficult realities, engagement strategies need to be long term. Spending more time on assessing readiness and engagement planning may also require a shift in the focus of funding opportunities and associated decision-making.

The project encouraged a recognition that ‘there are (or might be) uneven levels of knowledge’, prompting questions on ‘who has the knowledge, who needs the knowledge, and how can we build knowledge when it’s needed?’ When it comes to understanding the potential impacts of climate change and the complexities of long-term adaptation in

³ Throughout the project, regular project board meetings included Environment Agency staff responsible for the project, members of the Icarus team, representatives from the 2 pilot locations, and other people with relevant expertise and experience who had been recruited for the project board. For the final evaluation, we carried out separate sessions with Environment Agency staff, the Icarus team, project board members and the steering groups in the pilot locations.

particular places, there is a need to take a closer look at the assumptions that different groups are bringing to the table, and to test these against the best available evidence.

During practitioner webinars⁴ and conversations with project participants, several people working in community engagement commented that testing their own assumptions and the extent to which they themselves are 'ready' for this work could help to get engagement processes off to a better start. In Hemsby, practitioners acknowledged that the readiness assessment process had brought to light a wider range of perspectives within the community than they had been aware of, and that it had challenged some pre-existing assumptions about levels of interest in and knowledge about climate change. We cannot know what difference a more nuanced understanding might have made to earlier engagement efforts, but it did highlight a need to engage beyond the 'already engaged', and to involve a more diverse range of people and perspectives.

Encouraging practitioners and communities to have explicit and honest conversations about readiness, if done well, can also be a helpful way of fostering a culture of mutual understanding and support, transparency, and more inclusive governance. This can increase people's confidence in acknowledging uncertainties, rather than feeling the need to rely solely on technical expertise. It can also enable more conscious recognition of where and how different forms of knowledge can helpfully contribute to shared engagement.

The project highlighted that both authorities and communities, are struggling to engage honestly and thoughtfully with the realities of climate change and the demands it is likely to place on communities and societies. For example, Environment Agency staff told us that these conversations are still at an early stage even among practitioners. Similarly, references to the increasing recognition that it may not be possible to protect all places from future impacts in the evidence review for this project (and in the National FCERM Strategy) generated strong emotions among some people affected by flooding or coastal change who read these reports. Against this background, intentional efforts to build readiness to engage with difficult realities are clearly needed. Readiness assessment might reveal a need for knowledge exchange, training, engagement and upskilling among both authorities and communities. This was the case in Hemsby, where the readiness assessment ultimately suggested that groundwork with certain stakeholders to build mutual understanding and trust might be a precondition for successful collaboration around longer-term challenges. It is important to acknowledge that this might have significant resource implications, and that, where possible, plans for engagement and collaboration need to allow time and resources to enable effective communication and knowledge exchange.

⁴ Held quarterly with a group of almost 200 practitioners from risk management authorities and other organisations.

In relation to funding, there are also questions about whether tendering and application processes are implicitly biased towards risk management authorities that are more 'ready' than others. It is worth considering whether places and communities that are vulnerable to, but less ready to, engage with these challenges, potentially because they are facing structural disadvantage and/or competing priorities, may be missing out on much-needed funding, and whether there might be a need to allocate funding more consciously to building readiness.

Depending on the context, readiness assessment can fit into a process of formulating and refining proposals for particular funded projects (for example, in the Flood and Coastal Resilience Innovation Programme, where it fed into outline business cases), into reviewing governance arrangements (in the Flood and Coastal Resilience Innovation Programme and the current work on readiness assessment for the Adaptation Pathways Project), into the design of future stakeholder engagement strategies (as in Hemsby and also in the 2 projects mentioned earlier), or into identifying and addressing staff development needs (for instance, among teams of FCERM practitioners). The questions asked and the methodologies used can be adapted to these different contexts.

Another common theme in our reflections was the need for a clear and consistent national discourse on climate change and adaptation that would better support the work of practitioners on the ground. As observed in the initial evidence review, national political discourse can send contradictory messages, acknowledging the climate crisis, but not providing leadership on the changes that science says will be needed. There is still mismatch between the increasingly worrying predictions that are emerging from climate science and the pull towards business as usual and protecting current ways of life.

To some extent, a nervousness about attempts to shift expectations is understandable. For example, public statements that it won't be possible to offer universal protection from flooding or coastal erosion can generate anxiety, anger and frustration. Navigating this terrain is genuinely difficult, and it is important to be aware of the emotional and the political dimensions of readiness. And yet, avoiding these conversations shrinks the window in which sensible, no-regrets actions⁵ might be taken.

Our conclusion is that readiness assessment can be helpful in preparing different stakeholders for climate change adaptation work, particularly when followed up with intentional efforts to address issues raised. Both the simulation we developed for Caterham and other contexts that experience surface water flooding and the scenario planning process for Hemsby are tools that, if used well, can enhance the readiness of practitioners, residents and other stakeholders. Readiness can be achieved by opening up

⁵ Actions which are cost-effective now and under a range of future climate scenarios and do not involve trade-offs with other policy areas.

a discussion about difficult issues, communicating relevant knowledge in accessible ways, and increasing understanding of the emotional dimensions of this work.

Challenge 2: Framing, language and communication

Overview

Framing was the second challenge identified in the evidence review. Framing is the way people and/or organisations talk about flooding, coastal erosion and climate change, which influences how others understand issues or how they respond to engagement efforts. While terminology or words used might feel clear and straightforward to some, to others they might have problematic connotations or reflect assumptions that are not shared, or that are not understood in the same way. Our review of relevant research suggested several examples of terminology that may resonate differently with different people, including 'risk' and 'risk management', 'vulnerability', 'adaptation', 'conflict', and 'climate change' itself. This project explored how the terms we use to describe the challenges and possibilities involved in 'working together to adapt to a changing climate' reflect and generate assumptions, ways of working, possibilities and constraints.

Frame analysis raises questions for how authorities and communities might communicate with each other more clearly and with greater sensitivity for how people and relationships can be affected by contentious language.

Overall conclusions

- **It is clear that framing needs careful consideration and explicit discussion. Ideally, this should happen early on**, but it could also be helpful when it becomes apparent that there are misunderstandings or conflicts about important ideas.
- The same terminology can be interpreted very differently in different places and/or by people from different personal or professional backgrounds. **There is a real benefit in involving people with detailed local knowledge in discussions about which language is likely to open up or close down engagement in particular contexts.**
- Recognising the importance of framing, however, could exacerbate a nervousness that stems from the desire to 'get the message right' prior to engagement. Our experience suggests that this can stand in the way of more honest, shared reflection, and that **'sharing the problem' and being open to discussing different ways in which 'the problem' can be understood and defined is more helpful than attempting to avoid disagreement or challenge.**

Discussion

Our experiences of working and reflecting with authorities, communities and partners on this project confirm that framing needs more careful consideration. Even the framing of this

project – ‘working together to adapt to a changing climate’ – contains potential for misunderstanding and conflict. For example:

- ‘Working together’ can be read as an attempt by the Environment Agency to put greater responsibility on local communities, a shift that is not necessarily welcome.
- ‘Adaptation’ has been used and received as a shorthand for ‘not getting a scheme of defences’ and/or, in coastal contexts, as managed realignment. There are important questions being asked about what kinds of change are inevitable and therefore will need to be adapted to, and which ones can and should (still) be avoided.
- ‘A changing climate’ still generates defensive/denialist reactions in some people, including in communities that are already experiencing some of the consequences.

Similar points apply to the language of ‘engagement’ – what meanings does this have for different people and organisations, what expectations does it generate, and what feelings does it evoke? At the end of this project, one of our learning points is that it would have been helpful to spend more time making visible and sharing some of this language and associated assumptions and emotions early in the process. This might have helped to avoid some misunderstandings about the nature and intentions of this work.

In Hemsby, for example, some sections of the community thought that the project might undermine local efforts to secure hard defences. This wasn’t the intention, but because the project was trying to establish the need to consider longer-term adaptation challenges, as well as or alongside shorter-term interventions, there was potential for this misinterpretation. This links back to the observations and questions regarding readiness assessment, especially in terms of bringing to the surface ideas, assumptions and expectations, and areas of divergence/convergence among stakeholders, so that these can be an explicit focus of engagement.

Our learning from this project also suggests that when it comes to framing, a close understanding of local dynamics and discourses is very important. In both of our pilot locations, the local steering groups contributed valuable insights into how different terms resonate locally. These insights helped to shape and refine the scenario, options and roles we developed for the simulation in Caterham and the community survey and scenario planning in Hemsby. These approaches also allowed for critical discussion about different assumptions and the meanings attached to specific words or claims, and about the different ‘frames’ that shaped participants’ thinking.

Paying conscious attention to framing may, however, have an unintended consequence. It risks exacerbating a tendency on the part of organisations to want to ‘get the message right’ before engaging with residents and other stakeholders. Our experiences on this project suggest that the nervousness that goes with this is often counterproductive, and that it can tempt practitioners to hide behind technical descriptors. When there are different interpretations of problems and potential solutions, it is important to open up rather than close down space for engagement.

Discussions reflecting on learning from the project moved towards the recognition that the courage to have open conversations is more important than 'getting it right'. This implies a move away from assumptions and towards questions about what particular terms mean and evoke for different people. It means avoiding institutional terminology and using more everyday language to communicate clearly. It involves 'sharing the problem' and being open to discussing different ways in which 'the problem' can be understood and defined.

The simulation we developed in Caterham offers one way of putting different understandings on the table for discussion.⁶ The simulation is deliberately designed to deepen understanding of how different perspectives make sense within the life stories and experiences of particular people. It also intends to offer some counterpoints to tendencies on the part of both practitioners and residents to frame each other in ways that make genuine engagement more difficult, for example, as 'persistent complainants', 'troublemakers', 'bureaucrats' or '(only) representatives of faceless institutions'. Simulations can also offer a lower-stakes opportunity to practice 'how honest we can be', and, in this way, might contribute to some of the shifts in relationships and ways of working that are needed.

Overall, our learning suggests that more open and (self)critical explorations of the ways in which different people frame the challenges of climate adaptation and each other may be an important step towards 'working together' in more honest and effective ways.

⁶ Simulations, of course, are not the only way to do this. Other methods and processes can achieve this too – the crucial point here is that it is important to find ways of addressing different understanding openly and fairly.

Challenge 3: Climate change, emotions and mental health

Overview

It is increasingly recognised that flooding, coastal erosion and climate change, including both changes that are already visible and those yet to come, can have profound impacts on emotions and mental health. Our evidence review found that this emotional dimension is likely to affect engagement processes in various ways, even when it is not explicitly voiced. Similarly, emotional and mental health challenges can lead to avoiding engagement or avoiding particularly difficult topics or questions. Clearly, this dimension is closely intertwined with the earlier discussions of readiness and framing (and with the discussions of place attachment and power and politics to follow).

The evidence review raised questions of how the emotional dimensions of engagement with flooding, coastal erosion and climate change impacts might be more explicitly factored into community engagement and adaptation planning.

The evidence review also recognised that this might not be easy for practitioners working in this field. They too might be struggling with difficult emotions in response to knowledge of climate change and/or with the emotions provoked by engaging in the challenging and often conflictual work of adaptation.

Negative mental health impacts are further exacerbated by a sense of powerlessness - a perceived or actual inability to influence decision-making processes or outcomes. This is likely to affect some people more than others, and it is important to think about what might be done to enable more meaningful and effective engagement.

Overall conclusions

- **Our work confirmed that experiences of flooding and/or coastal erosion have a strong emotional dimension that can include significant and lasting mental health impacts.**
- **For many people – authorities, communities and partners - climate change still feels less connected to their lives or work than flooding, coastal erosion, or other challenges that affect them and that also have emotional and mental health impacts** (for example, poor housing and unemployment). Nevertheless, there is also a sense of anxiety about future uncertainties linked to climate change.
- **The links between exposure to risk and emotional responses are not straightforward – not everyone is affected in the same way, even when people live through the same events or are exposed to similar risks.** It is often more helpful to explore the emotional impacts of flooding, coastal erosion and climate

change explicitly with both authorities and communities than to make assumptions about what these will be.

- **There is a need to build individual and collective capacities to have conversations about issues that are emotionally unsettling, and to engage with mental health impacts.** This is true for both authorities and communities. Mental health first aid training is one option.
- The contributions and insights of the local steering groups in this project played a significant part in keeping the question of emotions and mental health firmly on the table. **There is clear value in working collaboratively with community stakeholders to recognise and factor in the emotional and mental health dimensions of flooding, coastal erosion and climate change.**

Discussion

In both of our pilot locations, it is clear that lived experiences of flooding and/or coastal erosion affect people in significant and serious ways; for some, this includes symptoms of post-traumatic stress and ongoing anxiety about a repetition of these incidents. This is particularly acute for people who feel ‘trapped’, for example, because they are unable to move on from a home that is in a vulnerable location. For others, difficult emotions arise when considering the anticipated impacts of climate change and the prospect of future change.

Alongside these observations, however, our research for this project suggests a nuanced picture. The links between exposure to risk and emotional responses are not straightforward, and not everyone experiences the same mental health impacts from the same events. For example, the data collected for the readiness assessment in Hemsby showed that there wasn’t a neat correlation between exposure to flood/coastal erosion risks and levels of concern or anxiety. This is a complex field.

It is also important to recognise that concerns about environmental issues may sit alongside other priorities and sources of anxiety. For example, our readiness assessment survey in Hemsby suggested that worries about the lack of appropriate and affordable housing or employment prospects are understandably more at the forefront of some people’s minds. This can also be true for risk management authorities. It is important to recognise how experiences of flooding, coastal change and other climate impacts do and will intersect with other dimensions of people’s lives, particularly in relation to inequality and disadvantage.

Our discussions have also confirmed that the questions and emotions that arise in relation both to flooding, coastal change and climate adaptation, and to inequality and injustice are challenging for practitioners in this field. For many, there is a sense of uncertainty about how to have these conversations, a hesitancy about opening up discussion of more drastic changes that may be needed, and a lack of confidence about how to engage with the emotional and mental health impacts these can trigger. This is particularly acute when authorities are unable to offer solutions. Clearly, this also raises issues related to staff wellbeing and appropriate support.

At the end of this project, we are asking ourselves whether we have been sufficiently courageous in our own engagement with the emotional dimensions of the project. As one participant in our debriefing sessions said, 'we are still not talking about climate change'. That doesn't mean that we avoided the topic altogether, it was clearly referenced in all our project materials. Rather, the comment is a reflection on the difficulty (common to all climate communication) of meeting people where they are and bringing them into conversations about unprecedented, often unsettling challenges without causing anxiety or disengagement. The perceived absence of a consistent, clear national discourse, once again, was considered an obstacle here. One further learning point might be that this is still a relatively new area of work and we have more to learn about how to prepare people for unfamiliar changes.

Nevertheless, an awareness of the emotional dimensions of this work has helped to shape the engagement tools we have developed for this project in tangible ways. Our version of readiness assessment explicitly explores emotions and mental health as one of the dimensions of readiness and puts them on the table for conscious consideration.

The simulation developed in Caterham to explore the challenges of surface water flooding incorporates difficult experiences and their emotional and mental health impacts within the role descriptions. It invites participants to cultivate empathy for how these might shape the perspectives of different people, including both residents/community stakeholders and practitioners. The inclusion of this dimension helps to create space for more explicit discussions in the debrief.

The scenario exercise exploring longer term coastal erosion impacts in Hemsby created an opportunity to explore some of the more 'catastrophic' and emotive potential future scenarios. Because it was clearly a hypothetical exercise – creating stories about possible rather than actual future pathways – and because the number of participants was quite limited, it seemed possible to create a safe enough space to acknowledge and talk about some potentially uncomfortable issues.

Throughout the project, the contributions and insights of the local design/steering groups played a significant part in keeping the question of emotions and mental health firmly on the table. As with discussions of framing, this confirms the value of working collaboratively with community stakeholders when designing and using tools for wider engagement.

The conversations we held to draw together learning and reflections on this project also touched on training and professional development that may be helpful to staff and volunteers working 'on the front lines' of flooding, coastal erosion and climate adaptation. This includes some understanding of trauma, post-traumatic stress and anxiety. One approach (and one that is already being used in some settings) is mental health first aid

training⁷, which aims to encourage a culture of greater mental health literacy, confidence and mutual support.

In addition to specific training, it would also help FCERM and engagement practitioners to have a greater sense of being supported by their organisations and by higher-level authorities, including national government, in having more courageous conversations. This implies wider cultural and political shifts away from avoidance and risk management and towards greater honesty about the scale of the changes we are collectively facing and the difficult decisions this will involve.

⁷ Mental health first aid is an approach to training people from a wide range of personal and professional backgrounds to offer initial mental health support to others and to signpost them to other sources of help if needed. It began in Australia in 2000 and has spread to many other countries since. In England, accredited training is offered by [MHFA England](#), and in Wales by [MHFA Wales](#).

Challenge 4: Place attachment, culture and identity

Overview

In the evidence review, place attachment emerged as an important lens for understanding some of the challenges of flood and coastal erosion risk management and climate adaptation in particular places and communities. Place attachment refers to the emotional connections people have to the places and communities in which they live, work or play. In many ways, it is a positive resource, encouraging care, engagement and stewardship. However, place attachment can also make it harder to cope with potentially far-reaching and unwelcome change. In practice, emotions related to place are typically complicated and uneven across a community. Understanding this better is helpful in encouraging engagement and collaboration.

Overall conclusions

- **In both of our pilot locations, people relate to the places and communities they live in in a range of different ways.** Sometimes, the same things – the seasonal nature of tourism, for instance - evoke different emotions. Sometimes, similar emotions – a sense of belonging, for example – are linked to different places or groups within a village or town. Similarly, experiences of flooding or coastal erosion can both strengthen and weaken positive connections to a place. **To develop a fuller understanding of a place and community, it is helpful to capture and engage with these connections.**
- **Understanding what people particularly value about their place and community, and conversely what they are particularly concerned about, can help to identify priorities and opportunities for collaboration.** Joining up local initiatives and groups on topics like flood risk management, ecological restoration and neighbourhood planning helps in considering the place as a whole and addressing multiple different priorities.
- **In both locations, we found that spatial planning and development attracts particularly strong emotions, often, but not always, linked to concerns about flooding and/or coastal change management.** Importantly, those emotions include a sense of frustration at how difficult it can be for local people to influence decisions that shape the future of the places in which they live. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that planning decisions often generate competing preferences – **often, there is no one ‘community view’.**
- **This project also raised some important questions about the benefits and drawbacks of bringing in researchers and facilitators who do not already know a place well.** There is not simple answer here: our relative distance and independence generated both challenges and opportunities.

Discussion

In both of our pilot locations, it has been worth exploring the meanings and emotions associated with place and the effect they have on the potential for engagement with flooding, coastal change and/or climate adaptation. Caterham/Old Coulsdon and Hemsby are quite different places, with some very different challenges as well as some that overlap. It has been important to get to know each of them better. Working with local steering groups was very helpful in this, as were the interviews we carried out with a number of people in both locations. Unfortunately, there have been unforeseen limitations too. From March 2020 onwards, the Covid pandemic meant that we were no longer able to travel to either place in person. In this situation, we were able to stay connected with the working groups, but it became harder to reach out to others in each community or to have a visible presence in our pilot locations.

Among the questions we asked interviewees and – in Hemsby, survey respondents - were prompts about what they particularly appreciated about their places. These generated a mix of responses as well as some common themes, confirming the importance of recognising multiple perspectives and emotions within any community.

In Caterham and Old Coulsdon, one of the challenges of wider community engagement around flooding and climate adaptation is that experiences of flooding have been concentrated in particular locations and disproportionately affected some residents. Unlike in some places that experience regular flooding, flooding in Caterham and Old Coulsdon does not seem to be a significant dimension of the wider population's sense of place. As well as these challenges for wider engagement, our conversations with a range of residents also suggested some possibilities. For example, many people value the relatively easy access to the natural environment, and this is potentially something to build on, for instance in encouraging approaches to natural flood management that might also enhance local green spaces. We built connections with existing local groups who were engaged in conversations and action around climate change, the protection and development of local green spaces, and other initiatives that were motivated by the desire to make Caterham and Old Coulsdon as good as they can be. The simulation included designing different roles that could be involved in flood risk and climate change conversations. We consciously built these different motivations into the roles in the hope of stimulating conversations around potential synergies and collaborations.

Hemsby has a sense of identity as a coastal place, but the meanings and significance of this vary for different groups of people within the community. While for some, it is the main reason they live, work or have second homes there, for others it is only one of the features of the village, and not necessarily the most important one. This comes out in the varied ways respondents to the community survey relate to the beach, with some visiting daily, and others visiting only very rarely. Hemsby's seaside location lends it a very seasonal character, with busy and quiet times, and people expressed different experiences of this. Some explicitly value the seasonality, while for others it is challenging, for example, because opportunities for paid work and rental housing fluctuate. Hemsby's small scale also means that many people have a sense of a local community, in ways both positive

and more problematic. Joining up with the local neighbourhood planning group on the community survey helped widen its focus on the place as a whole. Collaborations like this could help build a more inclusive future vision of local places.

An issue that generates strong feelings in both pilot locations is spatial planning and development. As well as worries about the pressures this might put on existing infrastructure, there is a sense that many planning decisions are out of the control of local residents. It is important to recognise, however, that in both locations there are conflicting positions on controversial planning decisions, not all equally vocal and visible. In some cases, these are related to different visions for the future of each place.

In both locations, some people are more invested in place and community than others. This can be explained by a number of factors, including whether or not the place was consciously chosen, the memories it holds, the length of time people have spent there, whether they live, work and/or enjoy free time there, and how closely it is linked to their personal history or identity.

In working with any community on issues of climate adaptation, it is also worth considering the benefits and drawbacks of insider/outsider dynamics. In both pilot locations, there have been some advantages in bringing an outside perspective, as some people valued independent research and facilitation. On the other hand, our relative distance from the places made it harder to have a good feel for local dynamics, and the limited duration of this project has made it more difficult to embed this work long term. Perhaps this also raises some interesting questions about the ways in which place attachment may work for FCERM and/or engagement practitioners. Does it make a difference whether or not they also consider themselves residents of the places in which they work? What additional challenges might this create? What benefits does it bring? People in our steering groups who were residents as well as FCERM practitioners and/or elected representatives experienced and negotiated these tensions in different ways.

Overall, the characteristics of particular places and the relationships people have to those are clearly relevant to consider in climate adaptation and community engagement. This demands a nuanced approach that takes some time and resources, but that also clearly overlaps with all of the other themes considered here.

Challenge 5: Power, politics and conflict

Overview

When it comes to risk management and climate adaptation, there is clear potential for conflict. Different people and organisations may disagree on how problems are framed (also see challenge 2 [Framing, language and communication](#)), whose knowledge counts, and how and by whom decisions are made. Within this field, some have greater power, influence and access to resources than others.

All of this makes 'working together to adapt to a changing climate' complex and challenging, even when people and organisations are committed to the idea of collaboration. It can be difficult to create a genuine sense of collaboration when some stakeholders have access to financial resources and others do not, when some people are there as individuals and others represent organisations or wider constituencies, when some are volunteering their time, while others are paid.

Overall conclusions

- **Given the complexity of FCERM and climate adaptation, it is important to consider how both authorities and communities can be 'inducted'** so they have a good understanding of where and how different people within the system can and can't influence things. This links back to the discussion of 'readiness' earlier.
- As observed, **developing mutual understanding also involves recognising the values and emotions that different people** – including both affected community members and practitioners who may be struggling with competing demands and pressures - **bring to this work.**
- **There are some genuinely difficult trade-offs to negotiate in this work.** Often, it is more helpful to name these explicitly and to work through them together than to wish them away.
- **These trade-offs include tensions between different values that are important to collaboration and engagement,** for example, a desire for continuity and building relationships of trust versus demands for openness and inclusion. Here too, it would be helpful to name and consider these carefully.
- It is worth considering what might be done to **build capacities for constructive conflict engagement** among all stakeholders. This links back to the theme of readiness.
- **Creating spaces for stakeholders to work collaboratively, with the support of independent facilitators, can improve relationships and encourage different perspectives.**

Discussion

The processes and conversations we have been engaged in for this project confirm the challenges involved in negotiating dynamics of power, politics and conflict. For example, our initial workshops in both pilot locations brought out a sense of the complexity of flood risk/coastal erosion management systems, and of how difficult it can be for authorities and communities to understand the responsibilities, constraints and competing pressures they each live and work under. Lack of clarity about who can and who can't influence what can generate frustration, distrust and a mismatch in expectations.

The interviews and conversations we had with a range of people in both locations were helpful in developing a more sophisticated understanding of this. It became apparent that the perceptions people have of each other's power and ability to make change happen do not always align with the real pressures they are working under. For example, while planners in local authorities can find themselves in the frontlines of conflicts over land use and new developments, their decisions are often constrained by national legislation that may not be well aligned with local concerns. Similarly, staff at the Environment Agency or Natural Resources Wales have to work within frameworks that may be contested at local levels but that cannot easily be changed.

The community survey in Hemsby also confirmed that many residents do not have a clear understanding of who is responsible for coastal and flood management and where decisions are being made. This links back to the question of readiness – what do people need to understand about the complex systems of FCERM in order to engage constructively?

We would suggest that the understanding that is needed includes an awareness of difficult trade-offs. Clearly, there are trade-offs within FCERM and climate adaptation, for example, between shorter and longer-term decisions and between the relative needs of different locations. In addition, however, there are also difficult trade-offs between a range of social needs and political priorities, particularly within the context of constrained funding. Some people working within flood or coastal risk management have talked to us about their frustration that decisions about protection seem to vary significantly between different locations⁸ – something that can make their work more difficult as residents understandably compare interventions elsewhere with what is being offered to them. Similarly, there was a perception that the relative lack of public political leadership in relation to climate adaptation at a national level makes it harder to engage with difficult realities at local levels.

⁸ Although it is worth noting that all applications for FCERM capital defence schemes are subject to the same funding criteria.

From the perspectives of residents and other stakeholders, other factors can contribute to a sense of alienation and powerlessness: for example, a mismatch between rhetoric and actual practice; and a lack of transparency about how and why decisions are made. This can add to the stress of living with risk and uncertainty. Unfortunately, the constraints and pressures that practitioners face can make it more difficult for them to be honest and transparent with the stakeholders and communities they work with. This nervousness is understandable but often unhelpful, not least because it can feed distrust and adversarial dynamics.

In addition to these general patterns, this project also confirmed that sometimes, the micropolitics of how particular people interact with each other can have a significant impact on local dynamics. This is often not visible to outsiders, but it can affect and complicate engagement processes.

Our learning from this project suggests that more intentional and courageous engagement with how power, politics and conflict are experienced by different people within complex systems would be helpful in fostering mutual understanding and the capacity for collaboration. Sometimes, actual or potential conflicts need to be explicitly named. The tools we have developed intend to help with this are as follows:

- Readiness assessment can help to put actual or potential conflicts on the agenda for explicit consideration, ideally at an early stage or alternatively as a trouble-shooting tool when dynamics have become difficult.
- The simulation is designed to put competing priorities, trade-offs and the constraints that different actors face on the table, and encourages participants to understand these from different perspectives. It also gives participants experience of a facilitated deliberative process. Followed by a good debrief, simulations can generate valuable learning that can be taken back into the real-life situation.

In the end, much depends on how confident people involved in collaborative projects feel about acknowledging and engaging with the trade-offs and conflicts that are likely to arise in complex decision-making processes. Developing these capacities and the structures and processes that would enable them to be used might be one of the most helpful ways of supporting intentions of 'working together to adapt to a changing climate'. In many ways, these conclusions point back to the discussion of 'readiness' earlier in this report.

As also noted earlier, it can be helpful if this is supported by independent facilitators. Some of the participants in our local steering groups commented that having facilitators/researchers who were independent from any particular agenda or organisation helped improve working relationships and encouraged them to explore new perspectives and ideas.

In this context, it is also worth noting the additional challenges that can arise when there are high turnovers of practitioners and/or community stakeholders involved in efforts at collaboration. In these situations, it is important to manage any handovers carefully and to offer appropriate inductions to people who are newly joining partnerships or working groups. Conversely, low turnover can become problematic too, particularly when not all

stakeholders feel represented and when important perspectives are missing from the discussion. This, too, involves trade-offs and a need to balance continuity, trust and relationships with considerations of inclusion, openness, fairness and equity.

Challenge 6: Questions of scale

Overview

This project has also drawn our attention to the significance of understanding scale in this context. In the complex field of FCERM and climate adaptation, individuals and organisations operate at any scale from the home/immediate neighbourhood to national policy-making.

Different people and organisations work at very different scales:

- **Geographically:** One person's neighbourhood can be a very small part of someone else's patch/area of responsibility. Often, this also means that people who are thinking and working at different scales draw on different kinds of knowledge, for example, detailed local knowledge versus expert knowledge that is less closely tied to particular places.
- **In relation to time:** Different organisations and individuals work on different timescales. Not everyone has the same sense of urgency. This can apply both in relation to immediate problems (for example, this year's flood/coastal erosion risks) and with longer-term adaptation challenges (for example, the need for measures that might help a place or community to adapt to climate change projections by 2050).

This raises the question of how all stakeholders might develop a greater collective understanding of the scales at which different people and organisations think and work, and of the difference this makes to their thinking, actions or decisions. It also requires an appreciation of the wider trends that shape what happens both in society and in the natural environment, and where there are and are not opportunities for influence.

Overall conclusions

- In both pilot locations, **there are people who have been directly affected by flooding and/or who are facing short-term damage from coastal erosion, and who understandably express a great sense of urgency about finding ways to minimise their exposure to risk.** In some cases, their struggle to be heard and to make a difference already has quite a long history and has cost them considerable time and energy.
- **Against this background, adaptation to longer-term climate change projections can feel to some like an unwelcome distraction from the here and now.**
- **While it is obviously helpful to combine interventions with shorter and longer-term benefits where possible, sometimes these are genuinely in tension,** for example, when a short-term intervention that is inadequate for longer-term adaptation takes up limited resources.

- **Similarly, it can be difficult to negotiate the tensions that can arise when people work at different geographic scales.**
- **Developments at higher or larger scales will often have a larger influence on more local, smaller scales.** Ultimately, the nature of politics, of policy and funding regimes, or the speed and severity of climate change influences to a greater extent what happens or is possible at a local level than vice versa.
- **There are no easy answers to these challenges.** Our experience suggests that **it is helpful to name issues like those identified earlier and to open up honest conversations about them.** Enabling stakeholders to have a better understanding of each other's priorities, responsibilities and constraints can create a basis for trust and improved communication.

Discussion

From the early stages of this project, it became clear that among the multiple stakeholders we were working with, there were differences in relation to both the geographic scales and the timescales that they were thinking and working with.

Issues of flooding and coastal erosion are experienced most starkly at the local level, in neighbourhoods and communities that are directly affected. This is also where emotions and mental health impacts are strongest, and for some people, this becomes a strong motivating force, potentially over many years. From this perspective, it can feel like it takes a long time for authorities to work out and implement solutions.

At the other end, risk management authorities often have very large areas of responsibility. While this gives them a strategic overview, it can also make it more difficult to give detailed attention to the challenges facing particular neighbourhoods. The way large organisations work also has implications for time in relation to planning processes, funding regimes and implementation, for example. To complicate the picture further, other stakeholders – different levels of government from parish councils to the national level – may work on timescales linked to electoral cycles.

Sometimes, it is difficult to negotiate the tensions that can arise when people work at different geographic scales. For example, funding formulas designed to ensure that decisions in different contexts are made according to the same criteria can feel frustrating to at-risk householders or businesses who are affected not just in emergency situations, but also in the form of ongoing anxiety.

Climate change poses some important and complex additional questions in relation to timescales, particularly for coastal locations: What interventions make sense both now and with regard to medium and longer-term projections? When are different proposals in tension, and when are they complementary? What trade-offs are we prepared to make?

There are no easy answers to these challenges. Once again, the project has highlighted that it is helpful to name issues like those identified earlier and to open up honest

conversations about them. As with some of the other challenges considered, opportunities for stakeholders to have a better understanding of each other's priorities, responsibilities and constraints can create a basis for trust and improved communication.

Out of all the work we did, the **scenario planning exercise** was perhaps the most effective in highlighting issues relating to scale. It explicitly introduced the question of how different timescales and potential pathways might bear on decision-making and encouraged a more sophisticated understanding of system dynamics and interactions. This has some similarities with adaptation pathways approaches, which are gaining currency in responding to climate adaptation⁹.

In considering what might be the main factors influencing the nature and development of flood and coastal erosion risk in Hemsby, attention naturally focused on trends far beyond the local context of Hemsby itself: climate change, sea level rise, national politics, policy and funding frameworks. Local and regional scales were also very important, of course, but there was a necessary recognition of the nested or hierarchical nature of things. Environmental trends at a global scale will have a significant influence on the nature and level of risks to communities. National policy and discourse set the context for the work that risk management authorities and others do.

The scenario exercise was also quite effective in linking short and longer-term issues, for example, through tracing the future impacts or limitations of decisions taken now such as building hard defences, or by exploring the potential consequences of inaction at different points in time. This has the potential to move the conversation away from short versus long-term, or local versus regional, towards a more informed, objective discussion of risks, options and possibilities.

⁹ See for example: Allison, R. and others (2021) Literature review on an adaptive approach to flood and coastal risk management.

Conclusion

This report has drawn together learning from the 'Working together' project by revisiting and reflecting on the challenges identified in the initial evidence review. The intention has not been to provide conclusive answers, but to share some thoughts on how these challenges could be addressed, based on learning from the project pilot work. We are sure that as climate adaptation in England, Wales and elsewhere gathers pace, further insights and ways of working will emerge. In many ways, this remains work in progress and an opportunity for learning, which is important to keep on the agenda.

We were able to explore some engagement challenges in more depth than others during the project. Readiness became a particular focus during the pilot area work and was the challenge which we made the most progress addressing. The other 5 challenges emerged throughout the course of our pilot area work, but we spent less time directly addressing them. Future research could examine how these play out in different contexts and offer further insights into how they can be incorporated into engagement practice.

This project has shown that there is real value in authorities, communities and partners working in more collaborative ways, not just on the substance of FCERM interventions, but also on engagement strategies for a wider community. There is much potential for mutual learning, particularly when participants are prepared to engage honestly with each other's concerns, emotions, experiences and knowledge. The benefits of collaborative working with independent facilitation in this project have included improved relationships, better community representation and new ideas and ways of thinking.

The tools we have developed during this project in collaboration with our steering groups in the pilot locations of Caterham/Old Coulsdon and Hemsby are designed to encourage engagement with the questions and challenges we have discussed here. For more detail on why and how they were developed, on our learning from designing and trialling them, and on how to use them, please look at our separate reports and tools and techniques documents.

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Glossary

Adaptation to flooding and coastal change – Anticipating appropriate action to prevent or minimise the likelihood and consequences of flooding and coastal change, both now and in the future.

Adaptation pathways – Ways to develop a long-term climate adaptation plan for a place, often to the end of the century or beyond.

Authority – An organisation with official responsibility for a particular area of activity. This particularly includes government organisations.

Climate adaptation – Changing lifestyles, economy, infrastructure and local places to make us more resilient to the future consequences of climate change.

Community – Residents, businesses and groups living or based in a particular area.

Flood and coastal resilience – The capacity of people and places to plan for, better protect, respond to, and recover from flooding and coastal change.

Framing – A way of structuring or presenting a problem or an issue.

Partners – Individuals, groups and organisations that help to carry out a particular area of activity. This includes private and third sector organisations.

Practitioners – Individuals working within authorities.

Readiness – How prepared people, communities and organisations are, in this context, to engage in conversations about and planning for the long-term response to increasing flood and coastal erosion risks due to climate change.

Readiness assessment – A tool for measuring how prepared you/your organisation and local stakeholders are for engaging in conversations, planning and action for climate adaptation in particular areas.

Risk management authority (RMA) – Organisations that are responsible for managing the risk of flooding and coastal erosion. This includes public and private sector organisations.

Stakeholder – Any individual, group or organisation that believes they could be affected by, interested in or could affect or influence the project or issue.

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