Developing tools for readiness assessment: review of learning

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

FCERM Research & Development Programme

Research Report

Date: January 2023

FRS17192/4

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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

Executive summary

This report summarises learning from a project to develop and pilot a readiness assessment tool. The tool aims to assess the readiness of authorities, partnerships and communities to engage in conversations, planning and action for climate adaptation, particularly in relation to flood and coastal erosion risk management (FCERM). It was created as part of the research project 'Working together to adapt to a changing climate: flood and coast'. The report outlines design considerations – the choices made in developing the readiness assessment tool - and documents learning from a pilot readiness assessment exercise in a coastal location in Norfolk.

The report firstly discusses **why we decided to focus on developing tools for readiness assessment** in the project and provides an explanation of what readiness assessment means and entails.

We highlight and explain the **main choices in the process of developing a readiness assessment approach for Hemsby**. A local steering group comprising authorities, residents and other stakeholders worked collaboratively to develop criteria for determining levels of readiness, to select and design methods used for collecting information about readiness, and developed a strategy for implementation.

There is a substantial focus on **learning about the method and process from the pilot exercise**. The main learning points are that the readiness assessment:

- supported useful learning about Hemsby as a place and community, sometimes in ways that challenged existing perceptions among all stakeholders. This included the challenges it faces, the range of experiences and perspectives that exist among community members, and the nature and levels of readiness
- helped to build relationships, both between authorities and residents, and by connecting people not already involved with discussions about flooding and coastal erosion issues
- clarified again how and why 'frames' matter within engagement work, especially the ways in which language used in communications or within processes like the readiness assessment can impact on people
- encouraged a more systemic, holistic analysis of risks, challenges and opportunities within the local context, through encouraging people to think about the whole hazard system (all dimensions of water-related risk) and by sensibly connecting FCERM agendas (for example, identifying land for adaptation planning) to other issues/priorities for a community (affordable housing)
- can be a valuable first step, helping to create a more informed basis for engagement work, but that a collaborative approach can also help produce a better readiness assessment

Finally, there is a brief **overview of the set of tools we developed as part of the ongoing engagement with a wider community of practice** that was part of this project. This focused more closely on the readiness of practitioners and partnerships as well as a wider community.

The appendices include some initial learning from the development of a second readiness assessment tool for the Flood and Coastal Resilience Innovation (FCRI) programme. The decision to use a readiness assessment process in the FCRI programme followed directly from the experience in Hemsby, but the original method needed modifying considerably for a different audience and purpose. It is included here to highlight learning about both adapting and refining the method.

Introduction

About this report

This report summarises learning from a project to develop and pilot a readiness assessment tool. The tool aims to assess the readiness of authorities, partnerships and communities to engage in conversations, planning and action for climate adaptation, particularly in relation to flood and coastal erosion risk management (FCERM). It was created as part of the research project 'Working together to adapt to a changing climate: flood and coast'. The report outlines design considerations – the choices made in developing the readiness assessment tool – and documents learning from a pilot readiness assessment exercise in a coastal location in Norfolk.

The report is aimed at anyone who is interested how communities, authorities and other stakeholders can assess and build readiness to 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:

- give an understanding of what we did, how and why
- provide points to consider when conducting a readiness assessment
- help users adapt readiness assessment for their own purposes[1]

Where the 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

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[1] Nothing in this report implies (a) any additional duty on the Environment Agency, Defra, Welsh Government or Natural Resources Wales to engage with or consult authorities, partnerships, or wider communities or (b) any requirement for, or undertaking by, the Environment Agency, Defra, Welsh Government or Natural Resources Wales to carry out engagement or consultation in accordance with the methods in this report.

(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

Section one of this report discusses why we decided to focus on developing tools for readiness assessment in the project and provides an explanation of what readiness assessment means and entails.

Section two highlights and explains the main choices in the process of developing a readiness assessment approach for Hemsby with the local steering group.

The third section focuses on learning about the method and process of developing the readiness assessment from the pilot exercise. This will be particularly useful for anyone considering conducting their own readiness assessment.

Section four gives a brief overview of the set of tools we developed as part of the ongoing engagement with a wider community of practice that was part of this project. This focused more closely on the readiness of practitioners and partnerships as well as a wider community.

Appendix 1 contains a table used to support the analysis of community-level readiness in Hemsby. There are similar tables available in the accompanying readiness assessment tools and techniques document, for individual, partnership and community level readiness.

Appendix 2 considers learning from the development of a readiness assessment tool for the Flood and Coastal Resilience Innovation (FCRI) programme. The decision to use a readiness assessment process in the FCRI programme followed directly from the experience in Hemsby, but the original method needed modifying considerably for a different audience and purpose. It is included here to highlight learning about both adapting and refining the method.

1.   Why readiness assessment?

The idea that assessing 'readiness' could be an important first step in flood and coastal erosion risk management (FCERM) initiatives emerged as an important theme in the evidence review carried out in the initial phase of the 'Working Together to Adapt to a Changing Climate' project. 'Readiness' broadly refers to the knowledge, skills and capacities that are needed to enable collaborative FCERM decision-making, both among local communities and among practitioners engaged in this work. The evidence review identified several important aspects of 'readiness', based on work by the [New England Coastal Adaptation Project](#):

- collective literacy about environmental issues, including anticipated trajectories and impacts of climate change and the realistic assessment of mitigation efforts
- collective awareness of local risks and the need for adaptation
- opportunities to identify and work through emotional and/or psychological responses to difficult knowledge
- capacity for an informed appraisal of different options for adaptation and their implications for different stakeholder groups
- capacity to collaborate with others in decision-making for their community
- trust in adaptation planning processes and the decisions resulting from them

The research we reviewed suggested that many communities, authorities and partners are not yet ready to engage in complex planning processes for FCERM, especially where climate change is a contributing factor. People may not fully understand the implications of climate change for their place/community; they may not understand what is necessary or possible in terms of protection or adaptation; or there may be existing disagreements that make constructive debate and decision-making more challenging. Conversely, sometimes authorities underestimate the readiness of communities, for example, by failing to take sufficient account of local knowledge, existing expertise or bottom-up initiatives.

In this context, the evidence review concluded that it could be very helpful to understand the current state of 'readiness' within a place and among important stakeholders (both within the community and within authorities), especially in contexts where engagement is needed around challenging or contentious choices on the management of or adaptation to flood and/or coastal erosion issues. This led to the development of this readiness assessment tool based on the hypothesis that **learning more about readiness, especially at an early stage, could help to ensure that engagement and decision-making processes are matched to the level of readiness** in a given area. For example, 'low readiness' might mean that it is necessary to spend time improving knowledge and building capacity (for example, through education about adaptation options and trade-offs) before moving into planning and decision-making. Interventions that do not take account of levels of

readiness are more likely to encounter challenges, especially in the context of climate adaptation work where there are significant complexities and uncertainties.

The evidence review established a case for readiness assessment, but provided little practical advice about how to do this. One of the pilot projects provided an opportunity to both develop and test methods for assessing readiness and to explore our hypothesis about the need for and usefulness of readiness assessment.

2. Assessing readiness in Hemsby

Background

In its early meetings, the steering group in Hemsby decided that there was not good understanding of perspectives on and attitudes towards climate change and coastal adaptation in the local community, beyond the minority who were already involved in active groups. The group decided that it would be worthwhile to learn more about what the community knows and thinks before developing any concrete engagement strategies on future adaptation options. A decision was taken to carry out a readiness assessment exercise.

Designing the readiness assessment involved a number of conversations: what we wanted or needed to understand more about in relation to readiness (were the aspects of readiness named in the previous section the right ones?), how we would gather valid information about the state of readiness (what kinds of methods could we use to collect information), who would participate in the readiness assessment and how (how to ensure appropriate representation, while being manageable within time and resource constraints), and about how to process and use the information collected (how would the information be analysed? With whom would it be shared and when?). Further details on these points follow.

An important consideration within these conversations was about replicability: this was a research project where we were tasked with developing tools that could also be used by others outside of or after this project. Throughout, we therefore tried to find a balance between creating a method that was appropriate for the needs of Hemsby and developing an approach that could be used or easily adapted by others.

Methods

We took the decision to use 2 main methods for gathering information:

- **a community survey** - providing a broad snapshot of perspectives from a reasonably large sample

- **semi-structured interviews with leading stakeholders**[2] - providing more detail and depth but from fewer people

In practice, we carried out 2 sets of interviews prior to the survey, partly to help inform the design of the community survey, and then as a follow-up with a sample of survey participants. Further details are provided in section 2.5 (Developing interview and survey questions).

In early discussions within the steering group some alternative and more creative methods for gathering information about readiness were presented. This included walking interviews (where participants would be encouraged to walk around and talk about places of meaning) and photo visualisation (where participants would be asked to create photos or other visual prompts for discussion in interviews). The rationale for those methods connected to themes in the evidence review, particularly around the importance of place and the emotions associated with risks or changes to cherished but threatened places. Walking interviews and photo visualisation methods would have allowed participants to decide what was important about the place in which they lived or worked, for example, by choosing where to walk or what to photograph, making the process more participatory and engaging. They are relevant for developing insights into both the physical and social geography of a place, and can be beneficial for building personal relationships between researchers and participants and a more rounded, detailed idea of participants' perspectives.

The steering group decided that a photo visualisation project might be good to do as a piece of engagement work, but as it would require quite a lot of planning and time, it was not considered appropriate for this readiness assessment exercise; we wanted to collect information more quickly.

The arrival of the Covid pandemic and the first lockdown in March 2020 ruled out the possibility of using methods that involved face-to-face contact, including walking interviews. However, the survey and interviews could be conducted without this contact. The choices for information gathering were, in the end, largely pragmatic.

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[2] We also carried out a number of these interviews in our other pilot location, Caterham and Old Coulsdon (Surrey). This was a valuable exercise and fed into later refinements of the questions. In addition, the interviews provided very helpful insights into local dynamics and perspectives that fed into the development of a simulation tool. For more on this, see our separate report 'Developing a simulation: review of learning'

Dimensions of readiness

Both the survey and the interviews were intended to generate information that would help us make judgements about the nature and extent of readiness for engagement in constructive conversations about coastal and climate change in Hemsby. A first step, prior to developing the interview and survey instruments, was to clarify what readiness would entail and what broad questions we might ask around that. We initially specified 7 dimensions of readiness, to align with the full range of themes highlighted in the evidence review. This took us beyond the readiness dimensions identified in the original New England Coastal Adaptation Project (cited in section 1), particularly by paying more specific attention to the emotional and place-based aspects of climate adaptation. It also considered more explicitly issues of conflict.

A. **Climate sensitivity:** To what extent do existing policies, processes, initiatives and personal behaviours/decisions already take account of climate change projections?

B. **Knowledge:** What do leading stakeholders know about climate change and how it might affect flood/coastal erosion risks in the community/area? How much do people already know about possible options for adaptation and risk management?

C. **Attitudes and emotions:** What level of concern do people have about climate change and how this might affect their community/area? How strongly do they feel about where they live and the prospect of unwanted change? What emotions - potentially including anxiety, anger, grief and care - are likely to affect their willingness and/or capacity to be involved in climate adaptation planning?

D. **Sense of agency:** Do people have the knowledge, skills and capacities for participation in planning and decision-making? Do people feel empowered to make changes that would help in the management of risks? To what extent are resources – people, expertise, funding – available to support climate adaptation efforts?

E. **Trust:** To what extent do people trust that existing policies and processes will lead to appropriate and timely action?

F. **Conflict and disagreements:** What disagreements, divisions and/or conflicts exist in this place? What is the nature of these conflicts? How might they affect capacities for climate adaptation?

G. **Cooperation and leadership:** To what extent are relevant practitioners, leaders and community members providing visible leadership on climate change adaptation? To what extent are people ready and able to work together to find appropriate responses to climate-related risks?

These were the reference points in developing an interview schedule and in designing the survey. With the latter, however, we realised that it was both necessary and useful to include some other areas of questioning around respondents' relationship to Hemsby and perceptions of needs and priorities for its future. This was partly to engage respondents early in the survey around wider community issues that might matter to them, before moving onto the specifics of

readiness and climate change. It was also to generate broader understanding of relationship to place (another theme in the evidence review), and to help us understand how important coastal erosion and climate change issues were in relation to other local priorities.

It is worth noting here that in the course of piloting the readiness assessment, we dropped the specific dimension on cooperation and leadership, bringing those aspects into questions about trust and conflict. It had become clear there was some overlap between these elements. Combining them simplified the readiness assessment tool. The version in the final readiness assessment tool therefore has 6 dimensions only.

Scoring readiness

Having developed the dimensions of readiness, we next needed a basis for making judgements about the level or state of readiness: how would we distinguish between higher or lower levels of readiness across the 6 dimensions? This was an important consideration for the design of interview and survey questions (so they would generate relevant, focused and useable information), and in relation to the goal of replicability: we wanted to generate information that could be processed relatively easily and in a way that would enable some clear judgements about readiness.

Our solution was to design a scoring system. As can be seen in Figure 2.1 and in Appendix 1, the scoring table contains 5 categorisations, from 'no readiness' through to 'high readiness'. For each dimension of readiness (for example, knowledge and understanding) we wrote a description of what each level would look like.

The advantage of this approach is that it provides an easy way to communicate what we mean by readiness at different levels. In turn, this supports higher consistency in analysis/interpretation if different people are involved in processing information or are discussing the results. In practice, we found that this approach was useful for providing a clear way of articulating different levels of readiness.

	No readiness	Low readiness	Uneven readiness	Developing readiness	Advanced readiness
Knowledge and understanding of risks and vulnerabilities **How well do** leading **stakeholders understand flood and/or coastal erosion risks facing the area and how climate change might affect these risks?**	Leading stakeholders have no meaningful knowledge or understanding	Leading stakeholders have limited and/or confused knowledge or understanding	Some stakeholders are well-informed, but the majority indicate a partial or fragmented knowledge	Most leading stakeholders have significant knowledge and understanding	All major stakeholders have significant knowledge and understanding

Figure 2.1: Scoring table for the knowledge and understanding dimension of readiness

Developing interview and survey questions

Questions for the semi-structured interviews were directly related to the 6 dimensions of readiness and to the scoring system. Two points are worth noting.

Firstly, because we were interviewing stakeholders – either practitioners involved in FCERM or those who were very active in community responses – we wanted to explore 2 things:

- how they saw their own level of readiness
- how they assessed the readiness of those they might be working or interacting with

This meant that we asked 2 versions of each question to gather these different perspectives from each interviewee.

Secondly, reflecting the intention to generate responses that could be analysed quite quickly, we developed questions that required respondents to rate their own/others' knowledge, skills, agency on a scale from one to five.

For example:

- On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate your level of understanding about climate change and its potential impacts on [place]?

- On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the level of concern in the community about climate change and its potential impacts on the community/area?

The 1 to 5 scale corresponds with the 5 criteria in the scoring table (no readiness to advanced readiness), so each answer provided a quick way to record basic information about a respondent's level of or perception of readiness. However, since participants were also asked to elaborate on and explain their responses, the interviews also generated detailed qualitative information.

The community survey similarly covered questions that were directly related to assessing readiness, but it also included prompts designed to gather residents' perspectives on Hemsby as a place, on their experience of the local community and on concerns not directly related to climate change adaptation. Some of these questions had preformulated answer options for respondents to choose between, while others were open ended, allowing free comment. In addition, the survey gathered basic demographic data to help subsequent analysis, including an indication of where respondents lived in relation to areas at risk of coastal erosion and/or flooding.

We had learnt from the interviews that respondents didn't always find it easy to score their readiness on a numeric scale, so we developed more specific descriptions in the survey to make it easier for respondents to select an answer. For example:

14. How would you rate your level of understanding about the potential effects of a changing climate on x?

☐   I don't know anything

☐   I understand a little

☐   I understand a fair amount, but I'm aware of gaps in my knowledge

☐   I'm quite well informed

☐   I'm an expert

16. How would you rate your level of concern about the effects of climate change on coastal erosion and/or flooding in Hemsby?

☐   I don't worry about it at all

☐   It's a minor concern

☐   I sometimes feel anxious and worried, but it's not my top concern

☐   I quite often feel anxious and worried

☐ It's having a noticeable impact on my mental health

Please explain why you have given this answer.

As we discuss in more detail later, the design of this survey involved carefully considering language and framing, particularly around the broader frame of climate change adaptation versus the narrower, more focused frame of coastal erosion. Involving local people in the steering group was particularly helpful in formulating questions and understanding how specific words or formulations might be interpreted by respondents. One consideration was how to deal with people who might not accept the premise that climate change is happening and influencing local futures despite accepting that coastal erosion is an issue. Respondents were filtered according to whether or not they acknowledged the reality of climate change and then routed either via the main set of questions (in practice, the vast majority of respondents) or a narrower set of questions on coastal erosion.

It is also worth noting here that there was some collaboration on the survey with the local Neighbourhood Planning Steering Group. In the course of designing the survey, our project steering group learned that the Neighbourhood Planning Steering Group was also planning to launch a community survey at a similar time, with some similar objectives. It seemed sensible to explore whether to merge the surveys in full, or otherwise find ways to ensure our work was not in competition. In the end, we decided that, as we were piloting a new readiness assessment approach, we needed to stick to what we had planned around the dimensions of readiness. However, working with the Neighbourhood Planning Steering Group, we added 2 questions that were relevant for the neighbourhood planning process and agreed to share the findings of our survey. In turn, the group agreed to help publicise and distribute the survey.

Sampling and survey distribution

The initial set of interviews were based on contacts identified through the early stages of the project, for example, stakeholders who had attended the first workshop organised by Icarus when the project launched, and through recommendations. This involved a mix of people with different perspectives, including practitioners from different parts of the system for managing flood and coastal risk and community stakeholders in Hemsby. We also asked survey respondents to indicate if they would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview. Out of those who did, we looked for a range of perspectives based on different factors – age, gender, residential location – and where responses suggested experiences or perspectives that would add new angles to our evolving understanding of Hemsby and the challenges it faces.

In early discussions about the survey and its distribution, we considered whether to target everyone or a selected sample within Hemsby. A selected sample is usually

necessary when surveying large populations, to make it more manageable and also to ensure the sample is representative of the targeted population. For the purpose of this project – and due to the resource and time constraints we were operating with – we decided to make the survey available to the whole community, and to use some biographical questions to determine who had responded, taking that information into account when analysing the responses. Wider distribution also gave us the best chance of a good number of responses.

The steering group decided to use a mixture of methods to promote the survey. Printed A5 flyers were hand-delivered to every household in the village, with a link to the survey online and an option to ask for a paper copy. Flyers and paper copies of the survey were also available from the local Post Office. Information about the survey was circulated via email and social media. To incentivise participation, respondents were offered the chance to enter a prize draw, with a set of shopping vouchers offered as the prize.

206 people completed the survey in full (just under 10% of households, based on the 2011 census information). While this is below what is considered a good response rate in most research, it could be considered respectable in the circumstances: it was quite likely that fewer people completed the survey due to its timing during the summer season (launching the survey was delayed by Covid-19), and as the country was opening up after the first lockdown. Nevertheless, it generated useful additional data that complemented the initial interviews we had carried out with stakeholders.

Data analysis

We used a mixture of approaches to analyse the data collected. SmartSurvey (the electronic survey tool we used) includes features for collating and representing responses, enabling some very quick insights into the more quantitative, scored elements of the data. For example, survey responses regarding levels of understanding of the potential impacts of climate change on the local area looked like this:
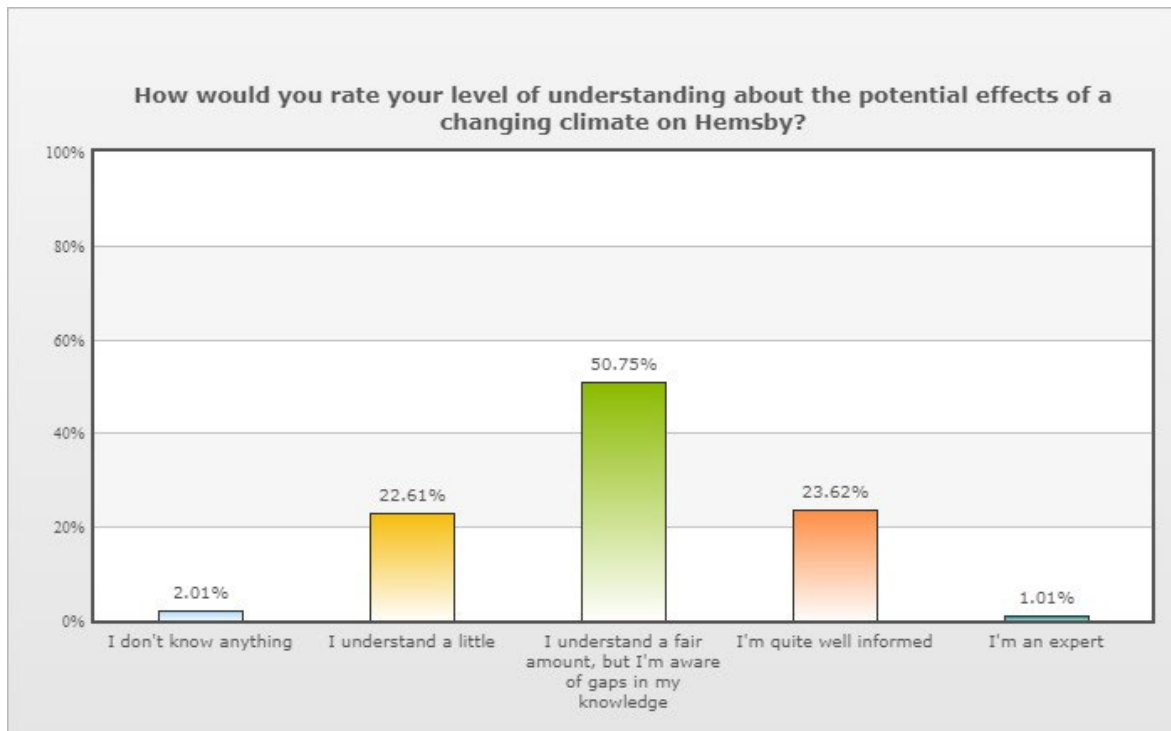
Figure 2.2: Responses to the Hemsby community survey question on level of understanding about effects of climate change on Hemsby

SmartSurvey also enables some simple cross-referencing of data. For example, we could examine whether there were any correlations between a person's age or gender and, say, their level of knowledge about climate change, or between area of residence in the village and levels of concern about flooding and coastal erosion risks. Because we were interested in using the data to understand readiness, we related the information directly to the dimensions of readiness in the scoring table (Appendix 1). With Figure 2.2, for example, this showed that community-level readiness in the dimension of 'knowledge and understanding' is uneven, meaning some stakeholders are well-informed, but the majority indicate a partial or fragmented knowledge. This score is also represented in Figure 2.3.

No readiness	Low readiness	Uneven readiness	Developing readiness	Advanced readiness
Stakeholders have no meaningful knowledge or understanding.	Stakeholders have limited and/or confused knowledge or understanding.	Some stakeholders are well-informed, but the majority indicate a partial or fragmented knowledge.	Most stakeholders have significant knowledge and understanding.	All major stakeholders have significant knowledge and understanding.

Figure 2.3: Example from Hemsby of scoring uneven readiness for the knowledge and understanding dimension of the readiness assessment

Analysing the responses to the open-ended free-text questions in the survey and the longer interview transcripts required a different approach. SmartSurvey does not have advanced tools for qualitative analysis. As researchers, we would normally use specialist software like NVivo to carry out what is called 'thematic analysis'. That involves looking for significant and recurring themes within a text and applying labels or tags (called codes) to text fragments. For example, if a number of respondents make a comment about the hard sea defences, those can be coded with a label like 'hard defences'. The researcher can then examine the frequency of those references – how many respondents commented on that issue – and also carry out further detailed analysis within that subsection of text to understand what kinds of positions and views were being expressed in relation to it (support for hard defences, opposition, or other views), whether there was agreement or disagreement between respondents, and so on.

Most people using the readiness assessment tool probably won't have access to specialist software like NVivo and may not have experience of qualitative data analysis. For most of the survey and interview material, therefore, we did a simplified, more manual version of the same process. We imported the open-text responses into a Word document, organised by question, and then highlighted text using different colours relating to specific themes. This was feasible because the amount of data was manageable, and it seemed to be an approach that is easier to repeat. This does mean that the analysis was less systematic and thorough as it might be in an academic research project, but again, the readiness assessment is designed so that it can be carried out by non-researchers.

3. Learning from developing and piloting readiness assessment in Hemsby

Readiness assessment supported useful learning

In combination, survey responses and interviews generated a rich set of data and have been very helpful in deepening and extending our understanding of Hemsby as a place and community, the challenges it faces, and the range of experiences and perspectives that exist among community members.

Overall, the results suggested considerable variation in the readiness of respondents in relation to the various dimensions of readiness. That variation challenged or corrected some assumptions we encountered during the project, including within the steering group. For example, at the start of the project a viewpoint was expressed a number of times that only those living near to the coastline were really concerned about coastal erosion. The data suggested that levels of concern did not correlate neatly in this way, finding more concern than expected among people living further inland, and variable concern among those with greater proximity to erosion risks. This shows that it is important to keep an open mind about the stories people have in and about their place. It is likely that the reality is complex.

The readiness assessment exercise helped us to understand more about what people prioritise in or for their community, putting the real and significant concern about coastal erosion into a broader context. This has implications for engagement practice, in terms of finding ways to connect with what matters to people, even if this isn't directly or obviously about FCERM.

As well as this variation in responses, we found there is significant common ground in the form of high levels of attachment to Hemsby as a place and community and strong commitment to its long-term future. This means that, despite differences in perspective and priority, most people feel they have a stake in the village and whatever decisions are made about it. That is a good starting point for engagement.

We concluded that there are meaningful openings for discussion around future challenges and possibilities involving the wider community, but that thought needs to be given to doing this in a way that:

- engages a variety of concerns and priorities (not just coastal erosion)
- takes into account likely climate change scenarios
- where possible/appropriate, enables more holistic and long-term problem-solving (see discussion of holistic, systemic understanding on page 25)

The survey and interview responses also suggested a need to support community members, risk management authority practitioners and partners in developing their knowledge and understanding (in relation to environmental risks, approaches to climate adaptation and flood/coastal risk management, and linked social issues) and in constructively working through areas of disagreement or conflict. As noted earlier, this work would include communities and authorities. There might be different 'readiness' needs among these different groups, but there is value in recognising that everyone involved in FCERM work may have things to learn.

Readiness assessment can build relationships

The interviews we carried out served more than one purpose: they generated some rich data and helped us discover which questions worked and which ones needed refining, but they also helped build personal connections and interest in the project. Due to the pandemic, interviews were carried out over the phone/internet. This had advantages – they were easier to arrange at different times and at a suitable location for participants, easier to record (compared with meeting in public spaces) – and disadvantages (less personal, more difficult to establish rapport). While carrying out one-to-one interviews is quite a time-intensive process, in our experience, dedicating some time and resources to having in-depth conversations with residents, other relevant stakeholders such as business owners and practitioners to gather their perspectives and insights is very helpful in developing a deeper understanding of a place/community and its characteristics and challenges. Several participants commented that they found it helpful to reflect on their own experiences, perceptions and assumptions.

Framing matters

All research involves framing issues and questions, and these obviously influence what data is collected and how that data might be interpreted. The process of designing a readiness assessment survey generated considerable discussion about the formulation of questions, the overall invitation/description of the survey, and the use/design of open versus closed questions. Members of the steering group made two important points in these discussions: that people might not complete a survey if it was framed around climate change (only), and that people might be more likely to complete the survey if it was framed around coastal erosion. There were dilemmas here: we wanted to achieve a good return rate and to ensure that data was closely related to our project focus and aims. However, we were aware that an overly specific and/or narrow framing might discourage completion except by those already interested (especially in coastal erosion), or that it might condition responses in a way that makes the data less useful.

We cannot know the extent to which reference to climate change influenced overall rates of completion, but we do know that people with varying levels of knowledge and concern about it did complete the survey, and many expressed an interest in learning more. That suggests it was worth trying out a community survey which did explicitly mention climate change, and perhaps that the caution around this was not warranted. It could also be possible that the collaboration with the Neighbourhood Planning Steering Group encouraged wider participation, not just because of the support it gave to distribution and promotion, but because it helped to connect our survey to other initiatives and conversations taking place in the community. Experience shows that it takes a lot of work to get people to engage and participate, so collaboration with existing networks and organisations can be beneficial.

We also cannot know the extent to which references to coastal erosion/flooding influenced completion rates, but it does seem possible that those who are already active around coastal erosion issues will have been motivated to complete the survey and to ensure that certain perspectives were strongly represented. This has to be taken into account in our interpretation of responses, especially given the ways in which the survey was promoted (social media sharing among like-minded people). At the same time, the variation in perspectives overall, despite a possible bias in the data, suggests that the survey did connect more widely and, therefore, that the framing/messaging worked.

A random sampling process might have given us a more reliable representation of community views, but there were challenges and costs in implementing this. Arguably, there has been other value in promoting this initiative to the whole community, because it serves to raise awareness even if people don't complete the survey.

Support for more holistic and systemic understanding of issues

Dr Anne Siders (specialist in climate adaptation) talks of the need to "think about the whole hazard system" and about the "whole social system".[3] This is because risks associated with climate change are often connected, because those risks have various social dimensions, and because managing environmental risks without attention to social issues can create new problems (and vice versa).

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[3] See: Anne Siders (2020) Strategic and Managed Retreat: Adaptation to Climate Change.

The survey and interview data provided some support for this view. For example, we saw how decisions on housing and development are connected to the management of surface water flooding, to the development of options for managing coastal erosion, as well as to various (sometimes competing) social agendas (affordable housing, economic growth, tourism). Thinking about the whole hazard system (all dimensions of water-related risk) and about related social issues could be important for ensuring that planning and decision-making creates multiple benefits where possible and/or avoids unintended consequences.

Connecting FCERM agendas to other issues/priorities, in sensible ways, could also help to engage more people in a community and ensure the representation of a wider range of views within planning and decision-making. The local steering group played an important role in this in Hemsby. This inclusive approach could help avoid some engagement challenges, for example, when only certain voices, perspectives and conflicts achieve prominence or influence. The possibility of joining up with or supporting the neighbourhood planning process could be relevant in this respect. At the same time, there are obvious reasons why FCERM practitioners will need to engage communities around very specific flooding/erosion issues or decisions, due to their organisational remit, for example. Broadening the scope of planning and decision-making could be cumbersome, too complicated or take an organisation beyond its remit.

This seems like a useful area for further reflection. We would suggest, though, that a readiness assessment process – or similar processes that generate understanding of broader community interests and perspectives – could help in making judgements about when engagement should be more focused on a particular topic or when it is more valuable to connect it to other, wider issues.

Timing

Based on this first extensive trial, we would suggest that a well-designed readiness assessment can generate valuable insights, both for 'outsiders' who have been tasked with working with a community and for stakeholders who want to situate their own understandings and perspectives in relation to those of others within their community.

This raises an interesting question about the timing of readiness assessment in a larger engagement process[4]:

- On the one hand, a process of this nature could be a very helpful first step, perhaps even prior to beginning any detailed work. Among other things, we have found that a survey that invites responses from across the community can be an effective way of finding people with an interest in getting involved, including those who may not yet be 'known' by relevant authorities or local groups. Similarly, beginning with a readiness assessment process would help to generate some initial insights into actual or potential conflicts that could feed into engagement design from the start (for example, by making sure that any local partnerships or working groups include people with a range of perspectives and positions, and that they are designed to build trust and capacities for constructive conflict engagement).
- On the other hand, getting to the stage where the survey was designed, agreed and ready to be published in itself was a process of collaboration with members of the steering group and benefitted from their knowledge of the place and community. A generic version of the survey has now been created for use in other communities, with modifications as appropriate.

On reflection, and building on the resources and learning developed for this project, we might suggest something like the following for places and communities in the early stages of an engagement process:

1. An initial set of interviews with known local stakeholders to get a sense of their assessment of readiness (their own and the wider community's), of the range of perspectives and potential conflicts.

2. Stakeholder workshop to share and discuss initial findings.

3. Constituting a project working group/partnership, with deliberate attention to including a range of perspectives and positions across authorities, partners and communities. This group would then conduct further detailed engagement planning and could also get involved in the design and implementation of subsequent engagement activities.

4. Taking the outcomes of steps 1 and 2 into account, refining and then publishing a wider survey with input from the project working group/partnership. This could include an invitation for follow-up interviews and an opportunity to get more involved.

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[4] Also see the project learning report (section 1) for detail on how readiness assessment could fit into wider organisational and community processes.

Replicability and when to adapt tools

In designing the readiness assessment, our aim was to create a tool that could be used in a range of settings. Overall, there is clearly potential to do this. It is important to note, however, that the analysis of the data generated and the writing of a report that drew out important findings and recommendations has been relatively time-intensive. For people with less experience of analysing and summarising a significant volume of data, this might be even more of a challenge.

A helpful next step might be to consider ways of adapting and/or simplifying the process to make it easier to repeat. It is likely, though, that there are some real trade-offs between simplicity of use and the complexity and richness of the insights that could potentially emerge from such a process. In practice, there may be both a need and real value in modifying questions or the dimensions of readiness according to each specific context, to ensure that the most useful, relevant information is gathered. Certainly, we found that in subsequent iterations of the readiness assessment tool (described in Appendix 3), the overall approach/framework was very useful as a foundation, but there was a need to develop new dimensions and questions for the specific needs of the project.

4. Tools for risk management authorities

Following its use in Hemsby, the readiness assessment was adapted for dissemination to Environment Agency staff and other FCERM practitioners, via a series of webinars held in the autumn/winter of 2020.

The initial readiness assessment had been primarily focused on individual (including practitioners and community members) and community-level readiness. Reflecting learning from this project about the importance of effective partnerships (and also in accordance with the lessons generated by a separate FCERM Joint Programme commissioned project that has explored governance[5]), we added the partnership level as an explicit additional focus.

This includes direction on how it might be used for self-assessment, for documenting and testing assumptions about partnerships and communities, and for use in workshops and/or interviews and surveys. Appendix 2 gives an overview of the different questions that it is designed to ask, and of how they might be answered.

During the webinars, our introduction to the tools generated interesting conversations among participants and seemed to resonate with their experiences of partnership work and stakeholder/community engagement on flooding and climate adaptation. This confirms our suggestion that putting these questions explicitly on the agenda can enhance understanding of what practitioners, partnerships, stakeholders and communities bring to any project focused on 'working together to adapt to a changing climate', and help to identify gaps and areas for further development.

You can access the full tool in the separate document: 'Readiness assessment: tools and techniques'.

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[5] [Understanding effective flood and coastal erosion risk governance in England and Wales](#)

Conclusion

Overall, our learning from developing and trialling the readiness assessment tool confirms the finding in our initial evidence review that readiness assessment can be an important first step in preparing practitioners, partnerships, stakeholders and communities for engaging in the challenging process of climate adaptation in the area of flood and coastal erosion risk management. Our engagement with Environment Agency and risk management authority staff from different areas of work also suggests that its relevance goes beyond FCERM, as has already started to happen (see Appendix 3 for example).

Readiness assessment is one way of surfacing questions and issues that benefit from early consideration. Doing this via an explicit and deliberate process can help in avoiding and/or tackling common challenges and obstacles, and in being more strategic about the timing and phasing of important interventions.

The specific design and focus of readiness assessment need to be tailored to context and purpose. The different versions and examples introduced in this learning document (including Appendix 3) convey a sense of what this can look like. As suggested in the main text, a helpful next step might be to consider other ways of adapting and/or simplifying the process to make it easier to replicate. There could also be further exploration of the ideal conditions to start readiness assessment. This could include looking at the existing state of relationships between partners and stakeholders, the kinds of issues an area is dealing with, and the stage authorities are at in considering options.

In the area of FCERM and climate adaptation in the UK, readiness assessment is in its early stage and will likely continue to evolve. Having adapted and trialled readiness assessment in the Flood and Coastal Resilience Innovation Programme, it has since been used for the Adaptation Pathways Programme. A project is also underway to trial readiness assessment in the Environment Agency's FCERM capital programme.

We hope that sharing this work in progress is helpful, and that it might inspire others to explore how readiness assessment might contribute to their own understanding of the challenges and possibilities that exist in the many contexts that will be tackling FCERM and climate adaptation now and into the future.

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.

Closed questions – A question with pre-determined response options.

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.

Open questions – A question that requires a descriptive answer.

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.

Qualitative data – Written responses that give insights into respondents' reasons, thoughts, opinions or motivations.

Quantitative data – Numerical data or data that can be transformed into usable statistics.

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.

Appendix 1: Table to support the analysis of community-level readiness in Hemsby

	No readiness	Low readiness	Uneven readiness	Developing readiness	Advanced readiness
Climate sensitivity To what extent are existing policies or processes for managing flood and/or coastal erosion risks already climate sensitive?	Policies or processes for managing flood and/or coastal erosion risks are not at all informed by or responsive to climate change science and scenarios.	Policies or processes for managing flood and/or coastal erosion risks have a minimal awareness of or response to climate change science and scenarios.	Some policies or processes for managing flood and/or coastal erosion risks are taking climate change science and scenarios into account, but most are not.	There is a clear intention to embed climate change science and scenarios seriously into policies or processes for managing flood and/or coastal erosion risks, with good evidence of progress.	Climate change science and scenarios are already embedded in critical policies or processes for managing flood and/or coastal erosion risks; climate sensitivity is normal.
Knowledge and understanding of risks and vulnerabilities **How well do key stakeholders understand flood and/or coastal erosion risks facing the area and how climate change might affect these risks?**	Key stakeholders have no meaningful knowledge or understanding.	Key stakeholders have limited and/or confused knowledge or understanding.	Some stakeholders are well-informed, but the majority indicate a partial or fragmented knowledge.	Most key stakeholders have significant knowledge and understanding.	All major stakeholders have significant knowledge and understanding.

Attitudes and emotions **What level of concern do key stakeholders have about flood and coastal erosion risks, and about how climate change might affect those in the future?** **How might emotions - potentially including anxiety, anger, grief and attachment to place and community - bear on their willingness and/or capacity to be involved in resilience building?**	Flooding, coastal erosion and/or climate change are not recognised as issues of concern or are the focus of active denial/resistance. There are few expressions of anxiety or responsibility for action.	Flooding, coastal erosion and/or climate change are hardly recognised as issues of concern. There are no expressions of anxiety and/or responsibility for action.	Flooding, coastal erosion and/or climate change are recognised as issues of concern for some stakeholders, but not yet as a top priority. There are emerging expressions of anxiety and/or calls for action.	Flooding, coastal erosion and/or climate change are widely recognised as issues of concern and priority. There are clear expressions of anxiety and/or calls for action.	Flooding, coastal erosion and/or climate change are widely recognised as issues of concern. People are expressing and processing related emotions, and this is generating mutual support.
Sense of agency '**Do people have the knowledge, skills, capacities and resources they need to participate in resilience activities?** **Do people feel empowered to make changes that would help in the management of risks?**	People do not yet have the skills or resources for engagement with resilience activities.	Few people have the skills or resources for engagement with resilience activities.	Some people have the skills or resources for engagement with resilience activities, but most do not.	Many people have the skills or resources for engagement with resilience activities.	Most people have the skills or resources to engage constructively with resilience activities, and many are already doing so.

Conflict and disagreement **What disagreements, divisions, inequalities and/or conflicts exist in this place? What is the nature of these conflicts? How might they affect capacities for climate adaptation? How might they affect levels of resilience and vulnerability for different groups?**	There are significant conflicts and/or divisions within the community that make it difficult for stakeholders to cooperate on building resilience.	There are conflicts and/or divisions that make effective cooperation difficult.	There is some recognition of conflict/disagreement, and a willingness on the part of some people to work through this, but others are acting in ways that exacerbate or sustain conflict.	There is either limited conflict, disagreement or division, or most people are willing and able to tackle conflict/disagreement/ division constructively.	Major conflicts, disagreements and inequalities have been tackled, and most people have the capacity to respond constructively to any future conflicts or disagreements.
Cooperation and leadership **To what extent are relevant practitioners, leaders and community members providing visible leadership on climate change adaptation and resilience building? Are people ready to collaborate effectively?**	There is no meaningful cooperation and/or leadership.	There is little cooperation and/or leadership.	There is emerging cooperation and/or leadership, with scope for further development.	There is promising cooperation and/or leadership among key stakeholders, and this is currently gaining momentum.	There is significant cooperation and/or leadership, and a track record of effective partnership working involving the majority of key stakeholders.

Please note: Similar tables are also included in 'Readiness assessment: tools and techniques', at individual, partnership and community levels.

Appendix 2: Using readiness assessment for the Flood and Coastal Resilience Innovation Programme

Rationale

Overall, our learning in the 'Working together to adapt to a changing climate' project suggested that readiness assessment can be helpful in supporting self-reflection, partnership development and community engagement. On the basis of this, we were asked to develop a readiness assessment process for the 25 partnerships selected to take part in the Environment Agency/Defra-funded Flood and Coastal Resilience Innovation Programme between 2021 and 2027. In addition to our learning from the 'Working together' project, this version also draws on the findings from a separate project that has explored FCERM governance.[6]

The readiness assessment process for this programme was designed to support an initial development phase and led by a team of engagement consultants.

This version of readiness assessment is intended as a first foundational step in the process of partnership formation/consolidation and refinement of project plans towards an outline business case (OBC).

Its core purposes are to:

- encourage early and honest reflection within partnerships about where they are at and where there is scope and need for further development in their project proposals
- help partnerships get more quickly to the point where they are set up to work together effectively as a partnership and with external stakeholders to carry out the project, especially in cases where partnerships do not yet have established systems and structures for working together
- work through important questions about where stakeholder and community engagement will be needed and possible both during the OBC phase and during

the project more generally, so that project decisions and implementation are more inclusive and effective.

Themes

To match these core purposes, this version of readiness assessment focuses on 4 main themes, each with subthemes.

Theme 1: Partnership and governance

Capacity and resources

What capacities and resources are available or needed, and how will these be effectively used in project development and implementation?

Membership and representation

Which stakeholders and organisations are represented within the partnership? Are there any gaps that need filling?

Accountability and transparency

What mechanisms exist or are needed to ensure that there is transparency and accountability in decision-making and management of the programme of work?

Coordination and collaboration

How will different members work together? How will roles and responsibilities be defined and managed and what will enable collective ownership?

Theme 2: Maturity of project proposals

Knowledge gaps and research needs

How comprehensive is the analysis underpinning the proposal submitted by the partnership? What additional research and data will be needed?

Learning, innovation and evaluation

What potential for innovation and learning has been identified so far? How might your partnership foster learning culture?

Theme 3: Readiness of external stakeholders and communities

Stakeholder knowledge

What do external stakeholders know and understand about flood and coastal erosion risks and options to build resilience? To what extent have the current proposals drawn this knowledge?

Stakeholder capacity

Do external stakeholders have the capacity to participate effectively in this project and the confidence that participation will be worthwhile?

Relationships between stakeholders

What do relationships between different stakeholders look like, and how might these affect the potential for conflict and collaboration?

Impacts on stakeholders

How are different external stakeholder groups likely to be affected by existing risks and/or other project proposals? Is there a need to consider such imports more carefully?

Theme 4: Engagement

Engagement needs

Who needs to be engaged at different stages of the project to strengthen proposals, pre-empt conflict and/or maximise the potential for resilience building?

Engagement opportunities and challenges

What existing or potential opportunities are there to support engagement, and what challenges might make engagement difficult? Are plans in place to maximise opportunities and tackle challenges?

Resources and capacity to support effective engagement

Does the partnership have, or can it access, sufficient capacity and resources to support effective engagement for this project? What gaps are there, and how might they be closed?

Approach

The readiness assessment approach for this programme was designed to support early and broad conversations within partnerships, with support from an engagement practitioner.

It consisted of the following main steps, across 4 to 5 months:

1. A detailed survey

A detailed electronic survey, designed to collect insights from different members of the partnership. Like the Hemsby community survey, this spells out a range of potential responses for each dimension of readiness. It also includes space for participants to add additional comments or explain their responses. Responses are anonymous to encourage honest reflection, including potentially on any conflicts that may hamper a partnership's workings.

For example, questions for the subtheme of 'collaboration and coordination' are shown here in Figure 3.1.

	Low readiness	Medium readiness	High readiness
To what extent have there been initiatives to build and sustain good inter-personal/ institutional relationships, understanding and trust within the partnership?	The development of inter-personal/institutional relationships, understanding and trust within the partnership is at a very early stage.	Some efforts have been made to build inter-personal/institutional relationships, understanding and trust within the partnership, but this is an area for further work.	Significant efforts have been made to build and sustain good inter-personal/institutional relationships, understanding and trust within the partnership.
To what extent are roles and responsibilities clearly defined and understood within the partnership?	Roles and responsibilities of partnership members have still to be defined in any detail.	Some roles and responsibilities of partnership members are clear, but there is need/scope to refine and communicate this within the partnership.	All members of the partnership have confident understanding of the definition of roles and distribution of responsibilities.
To what extent have structures and systems been established to facilitate coordination and communication within the partnership?	Structures and systems to facilitate coordination and communication have yet to be established.	Appropriate structures and systems for coordination and communication exist, but need to be reviewed and adapted for the specific purpose of this programme.	Effective structures and systems are already in place to support effective collaboration and achievement of partnership goals.
To what extent is effective leadership established to enable the partnership to meet its goals?	Forms and approaches to leadership within the partnership have yet to be defined.	Leadership roles have been defined; however, the effectiveness of this role is constrained by other factors/certain barriers that need to be overcome.	Leadership role(s) are clearly assigned and highly effective in terms of enabling the partnership to meet its goals.

Figure 3.1: Example of readiness scoring matrix for questions on collaboration and coordination

2. An initial facilitated workshop

This first workshop, led by experienced facilitators for each project team, provides an opportunity to reflect together on the main findings of the survey and to carry out early prioritisation and action planning.

3. A phase of work to support further discussion and development

Picking up on priorities identified in initial workshops, this phase is flexible and responsive to each project's needs. For most project partnerships, issues of governance and stakeholder/community engagement emerged as important priorities for further consideration. The readiness assessment process seems to have brought these to the fore earlier than they might otherwise have been considered in depth.

4. A report that summarises learning

All project partnerships have been asked to keep a record of the readiness assessment process and of the main actions/learning points generated. This is particularly important since the projects will run over 6 years and new staff/partners may come on board at various points throughout this process.

Evaluation

Risk and Policy Analysts (RPA), an independent consultancy, carried out a formal evaluation of the readiness assessment process for the programme. Results showed that 91% of project partners surveyed said they found the readiness assessment was helpful.

Positive impacts included helping to identify risks and potential issues, ensuring everyone had the same level of understanding of the project, and providing a basis for challenging and addressing governance issues. Benefits were seen under all 4 themes, but particularly for partnerships and governance. Many of the partnerships are in the early stages of formation, so this emerged as something they needed to think carefully about. The role of the external facilitator was also appreciated. Where negative issues were raised, these were often due to external factors such as lack of resources and capacity, rather than the readiness assessment process itself.

Carrying out a readiness assessment in the early stages of the programme has proved helpful in identifying action plans that will increase the projects' readiness to succeed in often very complex long-term projects.

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