



Public dialogues on flood risk communication

Project Summary SC120010/S

Nearly one in six properties in England is at risk of flooding. However, many people at serious risk of being affected by flooding are not aware of the extent of that risk. Many are also not aware of what they can do to reduce the effects of flooding, if it does occur.

A major public dialogue project on flood risk communication, funded by the Environment Agency and Sciencewise, has investigated what type of communications will improve public understanding of flood risk and encourage people to take action. This has been done in partnership with Defra, the Met Office, the Cabinet Office, Public Health England, the Flood Forecasting Centre and the National Flood Forum.

The dialogue with members of the public considered:

- the meaning of messages about flood risk, including the link between understanding the risk and taking action
- innovative methods and techniques to help individuals and communities understand their risk of flooding

Working with project partners, the research contractors designed a multi-stage dialogue process. Important elements of this included:

- carrying out a literature review focusing on public understanding of, and engagement with, flood risk
- developing a workshop structure and materials, informed by the literature review and stakeholder input
- organising workshops involving 95 members of the public at five locations (Leicester, Newtown, Oxford, Skegness and York) with a mid-week evening introductory session followed by a full day Saturday session (Stage One)
- holding a final combined workshop involving 28 participants from across all five locations to seek responses and actions as a result of the Stage 1 outputs (Stage Two)

The workshop locations were chosen to represent a mix of places that had relatively recent experience of flooding (Oxford and York) and those that were at high risk of flooding but with less recent experience (Leicester

and Newtown). Skegness was originally chosen as a coastal location that had not experienced flooding, but a recent tidal surge meant that people in the area had a heightened awareness of flood risk.

The range of types of flood risk communications discussed at the Stage One workshops produced many comments and suggestions from participants, giving clear messages to providers about existing flood risk maps and ideas for communication around flood risk.

The following key principles for flood risk communication emerged from these workshops.

- Think about the needs of different audiences.
- Don't assume a little bit of information will scare people – telling the truth about risk and impacts is more likely to lead to action.
- Stop talking about probability and risk in mathematical language as it means very little to a lot of people.
- Be very clear with people on what is happening before, during and after a flood, and what actions they should take.
- If you are asking people to take individual actions, tell them in the same communication what local/national organisations are doing too – that is, we're all in this together.
- Focus on making information local, with historical context.
- Don't just focus on the negative impacts of flooding – focus on what people can do about it.

The workshops also highlighted the difference in awareness and readiness to take action between those who have experienced recent or regular flooding ('flood literate') and those who have not ('flood unaware').

The Stage Two workshop provided an opportunity for attendees from the first round of workshops to meet again with specialists in flood risk communication to test ideas and discuss dilemmas. The topics covered included: prototypes for new flood maps; examples of videos and printed materials; the health impacts of flooding; what a future flood warning service might look

like; and the possibility of including flood information with insurance renewal letters.

Finally, the Oversight Group and other key stakeholders met to discuss the dialogue outputs and to consider future actions as a result. The meeting reviewed the outputs, with a focus on:

- awareness and preparedness
- roles and responsibilities
- flood risk data
- weather and flood warnings
- communities and vulnerable people
- insurance and property level protection

The review produced lists of current actions (things that have already happened or were in the process of happening) and future actions that would or could happen as a result of the dialogue outputs. Current actions included: work on revising flood maps; feeding dialogue outputs into the Flood Re process; and finalising a film of the dialogue process. Future actions include: producing a simple document clarifying roles and responsibilities before, during and after a flood; working to better link flood maps and warnings; and producing new communication documents based on feedback from the dialogue.

The results of this project will inform the way in which the Environment Agency presents its maps of flood risk and the way it coordinates with other agencies over these kinds of communications. The results will also help all agencies working with communities at risk of flooding to be more consistent and joined up in their communications and action.

This summary relates to information from project SC120010, reported in detail in the following output(s):

Report: SC120010/R1

Title: Public dialogues on flood risk communication: final report

Report: SC120010/R2

Title: Public dialogues on flood risk communication: evaluation report

Report: SC120010/R3

Title: Public dialogues on flood risk communication: literature review

Report: SC120010/R4

Title: Public dialogues on flood risk communication: appendices

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