

Case Study – Community Flood Warden Scheme

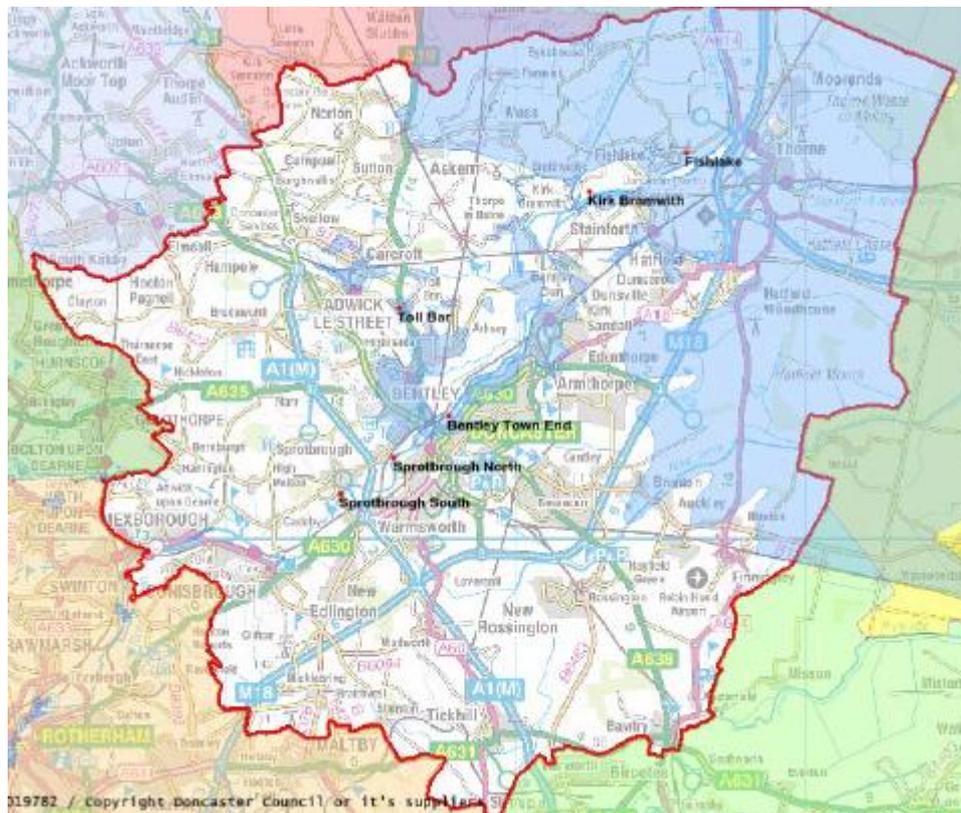
Background

The 2007 Floods devastated pockets of the Borough and the development of the Flood Wardens scheme came from residents' desire for the extent of it not to be repeated and from lessons learned from its aftermath. Its impact was widespread:

- 48 areas of Doncaster were affected;
- 3,286 homes were flooded, with 2275 suffering major damage;
- 283 businesses were directly affected.

At an autumn 2007 event convened to learn the lessons from the floods (attended by a mixture of residents, businesses, media and staff) a number of conclusions became apparent:

- People felt both helpless and disempowered by the events that befell them;
- However, this was matched by a clear lack of public knowledge about flood risk which affected speed and quality of response;
- Additionally, public agencies needed to adapt how it approached Flood risk management, particularly in utilising the knowledge and location of local residents to instigate better communication in both the planning of flood risk mitigation and in developing 'earlier warnings' to speed up response.



The development of local Community Flood Wardens was seen as crucial in addressing these concerns. Five 'high-risk of flooding' areas Bentley Town End, Fishlake, Kirk Bramwith, Sprotborough South, Sprotborough North and Toll Bar have a number of flood wardens in place as at September 2011. By developing local residents to perform this function, supported by the Environment Agency and a range of local partner organisations (Doncaster Council, South Yorkshire Police, South Yorkshire Fire & Rescue to name but a few):

- Local residents have an active voice in any Flood Planning work;
- Residents and public bodies work together through Planning to direct public resources to address flood mitigation issues, using both local knowledge and technical expertise;
- By training wardens to 'watch' a section of river and report on its condition and establishing formal lines of communication (e.g. a direct line to the Environment Agency Flood Incident Room), earlier warnings of potential flooding can be given;
- Wardens play a central role in further educating other local residents & businesses on risk levels, activation & communication arrangements and so on.

Summary

Doncaster's Community Flood Warden Scheme is a particularly effective example of how work between national and local government and local residents can significantly benefit local communities.

The scheme is a partnership between local community members, Doncaster Council and the Environment Agency that came out of the floods that affected communities next to the Don and Ea Beck rivers in 2007. It has helped to develop a number of community volunteers to be the 'eyes and ears' of their local community in both planning for an effective flood response and providing early warning to local residents, the Council and the Environment Agency should their area be at risk of flooding.

Five flood warden groups are in existence in Doncaster – four in communities along the River Don and one on the River Ea Beck. The flood wardens in each area have:

- Developed voluntary plans with Doncaster Council, the Environment Agency, South Yorkshire Police and other key agencies to enhance the readiness of their community in responding to the potential impact of flooding;
- Used the basis of these plans to instigate physical improvements such as installation of gauge boards for residents to check river levels, and identifying repairs to flood defence walls and significant repairs to flood defence banks.
- Developed their understanding of local watercourses and can provide detailed local knowledge to instigate 'early warnings' to the Environment Agency, thus dramatically improving any response time to potential flooding.

As a result, flood risk within the Borough has reduced, communities are now better prepared than ever to respond and confidence & trust between all agencies involved has significantly improved. The success of the scheme has also increased public demand for warden schemes to be introduced in other communities ensuring that there is joined up community to

community alerting along the route of the rivers which should further protect the Borough in future years.

Who was involved?

- **Doncaster County Council** (Rosalind McDonagh)
- **Working Group?** - CC members and Cat 1 responders - implemented the project
- **Environment Agency**
- **Community Leaders**
- **South Yorkshire Police**
- **Local Residents**

What were the Outcomes?

By working with flood agencies the community flood wardens have identified and enabled the following physical flood mitigation improvements for their communities:

- New water level flood gauges in place;
- Correction to flows of land drainage ditches;
- Repairs to flood defence walls;
- Repairs to flood defence banks;
- Establishment of flood store and initial response equipment;
- Increase knowledge of flood risk in communities;
- Established groups as a focal point for community empowerment, knowledge and response;
- Established community response plans and grab packs;
- Established community alerting cascade mechanisms.

The community flood wardens have also developed a high level of knowledge of why their communities flood as a result of involving flood agencies in their meetings and taking flood agencies on walks in their localities to point out areas of concern.

This improved knowledge includes developing a detailed understanding of how the rivers and flood defence mechanisms work both in their communities and across Doncaster, understanding how the land drainage and pumping mechanisms work, and developing knowledge of how to access current information on the Weather Warning Services provided by the Met Office and Environment Agency electronically.

The community flood wardens have used this knowledge and their experience to comment on Planning Policy and priority of repairs to flood defences.

The community flood wardens are a visible presence in their communities and are keen to share their knowledge and response plans with residents. The community flood wardens also use their expertise to link their work with existing community initiatives such as Tenants and Residents associations, and area regeneration initiatives.

The effectiveness of the five Warden Groups across the Borough was also recently tested by 'Exercise Watermark', developed by the Government in response to the Pitt Review. This exercise found that:

- Those involved had greater confidence that flood mitigation and planning would work more effectively than it has previously;
- Wardens were clear as to their responsibilities;
- Formal emergency command ('Silver') worked extremely well, as highlighted within the Post-Exercise report.

Key Learning Points

The success of the scheme is the culmination of many years of hard work and continues to develop as the trust, confidence and knowledge of those involved increases. There are 3 key learning points from the past four years:

- **LISTEN TO WHAT COMMUNITIES HAVE TO OFFER.** As this case study will demonstrate, it was only through a frank opening dialogue and a real commitment from public agencies to listen that swift, effective progress has been made. By formally recognising local skills within communities, public agencies can then add 'value' to discussions and decision-making.
- **KEEP YOUR PROMISES.** Public confidence with Doncaster Council and other public agencies was low after the 2007 floods, hence public agencies could not afford to make promises it could not keep to our residents. Any public assurances or commitments have been both realistic and achievable, contributing greatly to improved public confidence with public agencies in mitigating flood risk.
- **JOINT WORKING IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS.** This scheme has been a genuine partnership between all concerned and has only flourished by effectively utilising the local knowledge and passion of volunteers with the technical expertise and access to further support of those in public agencies. Open, honest and regular communication for each of the five areas has allowed this to happen.

Next Steps

Although the Community Flood Warden Scheme in Doncaster has developed extremely well, they believe there is room for improvement:

- **EXTENDING THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY FLOOD WARDENS.** As a recognised and credible community resource the community flood wardens are also a valuable support to emergency response for events other than flooding in their communities and have well established and effective mechanisms in place for the urgent dissemination of community risk information such as high winds, large fires etc, currently this is done informally, but is equally as effective. Consideration should be

given to what other type of community response is roles are an agreeable fit with the community flood warden and should be recognised in planning arrangements.

- **DEVELOPING A STRONGER ROLE FOR MEMBERS.** The Community Flood Warden groups would benefit from sharing their work with Ward Members and Parish Councils more. This would ensure they receive further support from community leaders and further embed understanding of their role, knowledge resulting in increased coordination of community response activities.
- **THE CREATION OF MORE FLOOD WARDEN GROUPS.** Although our geographical coverage of flood risk areas through the scheme is reasonable, there is more work to do in establishing further communities at risk of flooding and enabling communities to pass on alerts from one community to community along the river route. Areas that are currently being targeted are Adwick-le-Street and Kirk Sandall.
- **WORK MORE EFFECTIVELY WITH AGENCIES ACROSS OUR GEOGRAPHICAL BORDERS.** The linking of community groups along the river route should be extended to those communities which are sited on the same watercourse that extend outside of Doncaster. This would involve working with Local Authorities such as Sheffield, Rotherham and Wakefield.

It is imperative that we continue to effectively support existing community warden groups and enhance the programme where required; all of our next steps will have this purpose in mind:

- We will work on 'what could have been done better', including working with the Adwick and Kirk Sandall community to encourage individuals to come forward;
- A further physical improvements will be delivered at River Ea Beck to address public concerns relating to the integrity of barrier bankings;

We will also continue to share our good practice with colleagues, residents and staff regionally and nationally and regularly test it to ensure it remains fit for use in future months and years.

Further information

A number of obstacles have been overcome to establish the position we have today:

- **Public resistance & fear as a result of the 2007 Floods.** Public confidence in the response to the floods was low and scepticism from residents and businesses initially greeted the five Warden Schemes. This has been overcome through a commitment to listen, not over-promising on what could be achieved and determination from the staff and residents involved proving that joint working has significant benefits from each location.
- **Having an emergency base close to flood risk areas.** Previous responses to flooding have been hampered by the lack of a store close to key areas to co-ordinate community response. A self contained store has now been set up in area of Toll Bar that will not flood using SYCF funding that both wardens and emergency services can use as a meeting and information point to co-ordinate activity. The store is located in the heart of the using a site provided by a local business. The Community Flood Wardens have ensured that the store holds essential equipment needed to establish a

quick and effective and empowered community response point such as road closure signs, wind up radios, wind up torches, flood maps and response plans all of which can be used by both the community and the emergency services.

- **Internal resistance.** One development that met internal resistance within the Council was allowing community flood wardens to be able to close roads during times of flooding. Following negotiation, a protocol is now in place that sets out when this 'power' can be applied and the steps that need to be followed. This new way of working demonstrates the level of trust and understanding that now exists between community flood wardens and Council Departments. After the floods of 2007 It was quickly recognised by the community flood wardens that the in order to prevent the risks associated with flooding to passing motorists and prevent bow waves being sent into homes adjacent to the main road that road closures need to put in place urgently and safely. The agreement now in place enables the lead community flood wardens in Toll Bar to action road closures in agreement with Doncaster Council Highways and the protocol. This is something which would not have been possible in 2007 and caused increased anxiety and disempowerment for the community.

Contact details

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YOU could be a

FLOOD WARDEN

Helping YOUR community



Community Flood Warden Group

- Prepare your community
- Keep neighbours informed
- Work with your Neighbourhood Team
- Monitor local river levels, working with the Environment Agency

Join your local Flood Warden Group

Contact your local Neighbourhood Team

01302 736000

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