

Background and Context

Following three days of exceptionally heavy rain on already saturated ground, the River Ouse overtopped the flood defences and flooded substantial parts of Lewes.

613 residential and 207 business properties were flooded, along with 16 public buildings. 1000 people were displaced. 503 vehicles were damaged or destroyed and the total cost of the flooding was given as £88 million.

How the Topic was Handled

Community Engagement was largely organised through four groups, all of which had considerable overlap:

- Aftercare
- Voluntary Sector
- Finance and Flood Appeal
- ReNOVAte Project.

Lewes Flood Aftercare Group

A Lewes Flood Aftercare Group was created before the formal recovery process was initiated. Once the Lewes Flood Recovery Co-ordinating Group was set up, the Aftercare Group was established as one of its sub-groups. Its Terms of Reference were "To provide emotional support for the victims, including the 'responders', which includes volunteers and voluntary organisations. This will include liaising with the larger response organisations to verify whether their own support systems are adequate to deal with a situation of this scale."

Lewes District and Wealden Mind managed the aftercare service by acting as a one-stop-shop, with skilled support also being provided, as appropriate, by:

- South Downs Health NHS Trust
- Churches Together
- Seahaven & Lewes Victim Support
- Lewes Volunteer Bureau
- East Sussex Disability Association, and
- South Downs Council for Voluntary Services.

This sub-group formally met some 20 times, usually under the chairmanship of East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Social Services. It was felt to be a very effective part of the recovery effort, showing how quickly and effectively the voluntary sector can work together for a common cause.

Key points arising were:

- Umbrella group initiated by Social Services but made up from public and voluntary organisations.

- Funded by grants from Health Authority, Primary Care Group and Social Services for 6 months.
- Separate leaflets issued to community, later consolidated into Flood Bulletin.
- Helpline for two hours per day - later extended to evening and weekend mobile. 190 'cries for help', but tailed off dramatically after Christmas.
- People felt isolated when moving back to find no neighbours.
- Support offered to responders – little uptake.
- Weekend crèche held one week after the flood (17 children).
- Hasty identification of a new (Cliffe) bonfire site for November 5th and temporary lighting for crowd safety. One society had no display (NB - 'Bonfire' is a hugely significant event for Lewes).
- Christmas Party organised for children with graffiti wall (50+).
- Art workshops in schools organised.
- Community Flood Support Groups established to keep communities together. One met twice weekly for six weeks.
- Problem with Data Protection Act (Lewes DC Housing) in releasing details of those re-housed.
- 250+ people provided with emotional, social and/or practical support.
- Cost calculated at £34,563 for 15 weeks. 52% of time was volunteer.
- Handed over to ReNOVAte (see below) and normal support mechanisms.

Voluntary Sector

A specific sub-group was created to co-ordinate the voluntary sector activity, led by Lewes District and Wealden Mind and the Lewes Volunteer Bureau. The Terms of Reference were "To co-ordinate the response of voluntary organisations and individual volunteers, and offers of equipment, furniture etc., and ensure that they are efficiently and effectively utilised."

In practice, they soon found that the bulk of their activity fell into 'Aftercare' (see above), 'Flood Appeal' and later 'ReNOVAte' (see below) so this sub-group soon wound up.

Key points arising were:

- Huge response with many offers of help received from different quarters, but needs co-ordination, especially in immediate aftermath of disaster. (This may take the form of simply 'logging' offers of help).
- Cleaning, shopping, driving, caring for pets (47 volunteers gave 419 hours, through Volunteer Bureau).
- Plethora of different groups, sharing many members.
- Took over from Lewes DC the collation and utilisation of offers of help, donations, equipment, storage, etc.
- Provided the bulk of people for Aftercare and Flood Appeal, then ReNOVAte.
- Ran community transport schemes.

- Provided assistance with completion of insurance claims.
- Use of Bureau for telephones, photocopying etc.
- Helped to deliver (District Council produced) circular to identify properties affected and where residents went.

Finance and Flood Appeal

Finance and Flood appeal is described in more detail in the Financial Support to Individuals case study. This sub-group utilised a number of volunteers, either as trustees or as volunteer assessors.

ReNOVate Project

It had been identified early on that there was a need to identify a 'positive development' to come from the floods. This was discussed several times at the Co-ordinating Group meetings, but it was at the meeting of 15 November 2000 that one member raised the issue of using art groups to help people create something new and different when they were able to re-occupy their property. There was a feeling that the idea merited further development and a small working group was set up to investigate it further. This 'germ' developed into the ReNOVate project, the project team for which had its first formal meeting on 12 January 2001.

Key points arising were:

- Project to help restore homes and gardens in a more innovative way.
- Volunteers helping householders to redesign their properties (Woolworths, Council staff, American Express, Rotary Club, Roche Diagnostics and Connex all helped) or to simply clean up and restore flood trashed gardens.
- Questionnaire sought volunteers and show homes.
- Open Day at Lewes House (a District Council office) to promote scheme and encourage participation and sponsorship.
- Meetings for distribution of style boards suggesting designs for gardens.
- Unsuccessful attempt to get BBC to do a 'Groundforce'.
- 33 Action Days.
- 1000 volunteer hours.
- 68 completed gardens.
- 191 volunteers.
- We allocated projects suitable for the volunteer force and time available.
- We begged and borrowed materials and tools for works.
- The project provided a focus for some of the offers of help we received.

Lessons Identified

The response of the voluntary sector in Lewes was magnificent. It demonstrated that the statutory services alone are not sufficient and can easily be overwhelmed by the demands placed on them in a major emergency. The voluntary sector can ably fill many of the gaps. A project such as ReNOVate can provide a focus for voluntary effort.

Contacts for Further Information

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Additional Documents

- **[The Lewes flood of October 2000: A review of the recovery](#)** [External website]
- **[Review of the ReNOVate project](#)** [External website]