

Case Study

Flood-risk communications dialogue

A public dialogue to explore the messages about flood risk, and to develop innovative methods and techniques to help individuals and communities understand the risk of flooding in their area

Vital statistics

Commissioning body:

Environment Agency

Duration of process:

26 months: November 2013 –
December 2015

Total public participants involved:

95

Total stakeholders involved:

18 in Oversight Group

Total experts involved in events:

27

Cost of project:

£360,800 total

Sciencewise contribution = £140,000

The Environment Agency is responsible for ensuring that flood-risk communications are appropriate for a public audience, and to help develop and promote a better understanding of flood and coastal erosion risks. The Environment Agency was aware that maps showing surface water flooding risks needed updating and that other types of flood information were not meeting the needs of those who were in flood-risk areas. In 2013, the Environment Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) agreed that it was an appropriate time for a larger, more ambitious approach to working with members of the public to discuss how best to communicate the risks of flooding and encourage people to take action where possible. This dialogue project aimed to:

- *Explore risk perception and response in relation to flooding*
- *Generate practical materials and approaches to increase awareness and engagement*
- *Improve responses to flood risk.*

Policy maker view

“A real eye-opener using a dialogue. Answers from the public have been challenging [for the Environment Agency], but very useful.”

Environment Agency

Influence on policy and policy makers

The dialogue project included specific meetings and other activities to turn the results of the dialogue into action. As early as November 2014, the Environment Agency had taken on board many of the project messages and specific findings and produced mock-ups of flood-risk maps and communication materials (fliers, personal flood plans and so on).

Further actions started when the project ended in February 2015. These included work to improve website access and information, revising flood maps, linking the work to post-flood review recommendations, and flood awareness work by Natural Resources Wales. A plan to implement the outcomes from the dialogue project was also developed, which detailed extensive further planned actions.

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Background

Current UK flood-risk management legislation and related strategy includes a strong emphasis on involving communities and working in partnership to deliver actions and make decisions around flood risk. This includes principles contained in the National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy for England 2011, Defra's principles for flood and coastal resilience funding, and new statutory duties for lead local flood authorities within the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 and Flood Risk Regulations 2009. In addition, the Local Government Group's preliminary framework for local flood-risk strategies highlights the importance of effective communication to promote better community relations and awareness of flood-risk management issues.

The institutional and regulatory landscape for managing flood risks in the UK is complex, with several organisations involved including the Environment Agency, Natural Resources Wales, the Met Office, local authorities and local flood forums. Additionally, local and central government; the emergency services; the Environment Agency; and other agencies, insurers and individuals have responsibilities for preventing floods and dealing with the impacts during flood situations and in the aftermath. Previous projects have identified the continuing confusion in the minds of the public about who does what.

Considerable research has been done in the UK and internationally into public perception of flood risk and responses to flood warnings. However, less was known about the ways in which communications could increase awareness and promote action to prepare for flood risk in the absence of a flood event. There has also been limited work to engage 'at risk' communities in assessing the effectiveness of communications in promoting resilience.

This public dialogue project explored risk perception and response in relation to flooding. The aim was to generate practical outputs (messages, materials and approaches to the use of different media) designed to increase awareness, encourage engagement and improve responses to flood risk. The results of the dialogue project were intended to:

- Inform the way the Environment Agency presents its flood maps and the way it coordinates with other agencies over these methods of communication
- Provide a basis for agencies working with communities at risk of flooding to be more consistent and joined up in their communications and action.

In March 2015, four key communications teams from the Environment Agency identified immediate actions and the need to develop a core narrative for communications with the press and others. During the following months, further actions ranged from the very tangible for directly public-facing, flood-risk communication roles (within the Environment Agency, Natural Resources Wales, National Flood Forum) to more indirect impacts for those whose main role was to influence other agencies (such as the Cabinet Office, Defra, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the Welsh Government and the Flood Forecasting Centre). These stakeholders reported that they would be pushing core messages through their communications to others who communicate directly with the public, such as local authorities, flood forums and emergency service providers.

When the dialogue report was formally published in December 2015, the chair of the project Oversight Group in an Environment Agency blog summarised that the immediate impacts included plans to update Environment Agency mapping and flood information systems:

“We are already using them [the dialogue findings] to assist in our work with community groups, in the redesign of our new flood warnings system and our flood maps.... We’ve taken this feedback and used it in the redesign of our live flood warnings service, launched earlier this year. Now when you land on the page, you’re given an option to enter your postcode to search for warnings and river levels in your location. Although, the map is still available for those interested in the bigger picture. We’ve also taken on another recommendation by combining this information with advice on how to prepare for a flood.”

John Curtin, Director of Incident Management and Resilience, Environment Agency

At the same time, the Environment Agency published a summary of the dialogue project and a list of actions that included work on revising flood maps, feeding dialogue outputs into the Flood Reinsurance scheme (Flood Re) with insurance companies and finalising a film of the dialogue process. Future actions included 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 Environment Agency also confirmed that:

“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.”

On 11 January 2016, David Rooke, the Deputy Chief Executive of the Environment Agency, referred to the dialogue project in oral evidence given to the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee one-day hearing on the winter floods. He explained that the dialogue results continued to impact Environment Agency actions and said the project:

“Gave us really good feedback and evidence in terms of how we might improve the language we use in communicating risk. We will be using the findings from that research, which was quite recent, to improve the way we communicate.”

Key messages from the participants

The core messages to emerge from the workshops were:

- Don’t talk about risks – and particularly probabilities and return events. Focus on impacts and actions – as fire and rescue services do
- Maps are not always helpful
- There are differences in the journey of the ‘flood literate’ and ‘flood unaware’
- One size does not fit all – proliferation of different routes for conveying core messages will be needed, but all should keep the language simple, clear and precise
- The public remains very confused about who does what in an emergency and in ‘peace time’
- The public has limited awareness of Floodline or the responsibilities of individuals to protect their own property
- An increase in understanding can lead to individual action
- Peer to peer communications and trusted individuals are important in getting messages across
- First-hand experiences are very powerful.

“They seem obsessed about the probability of it flooding rather than saying if it happens this is what you should do. When people talk about fire they don’t go on about the risk. They just say “This is what you should do to stop it happening, but if it does happen this is what you do.”

Skegness participant

The initial set of workshops provided a lot of detailed feedback about a range of communication materials. Alongside comments on specific materials, some overriding **principles** emerged from this first round of workshops:

- Think about the needs of different audiences

“I never have signed up to the flood warning – I’m not on the computer and I thought that was the only way to get it. I live next door to someone who always knows – people knock on my door and let me know what’s happening.”

Oxford participant

- 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 really 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) about what local and national organisations are doing too (i.e. we are all in this together)
- Focus on making information local, with historical context.

“Information is percolated down through the various agencies – it starts at the national level and comes down to the local level. The local council should have an informed local committee, so someone would be the contact and they'd tell their immediate neighbours. I think we're all responsible for communicating risk.”

Newtown participant

- Don't just focus on the negative impacts of flooding – focus on what people can do about it.

These workshops also showed that there was a clear difference in the awareness and readiness to take action between those who had experienced recent or regular flooding and those who had not. Both groups had a tendency to fall outside the flood risk authorities' communication systems in different ways. Those who had experience of flooding – the 'flood literate' – tended to use Environment Agency and Met Office communications as useful tools, but relied heavily on their own experience, local knowledge and observation. Those who had not experienced flooding – the 'flood unaware' – tended not to see the relevance of flood communications to them.

The dialogue activities

The objectives of this public dialogue project were to:

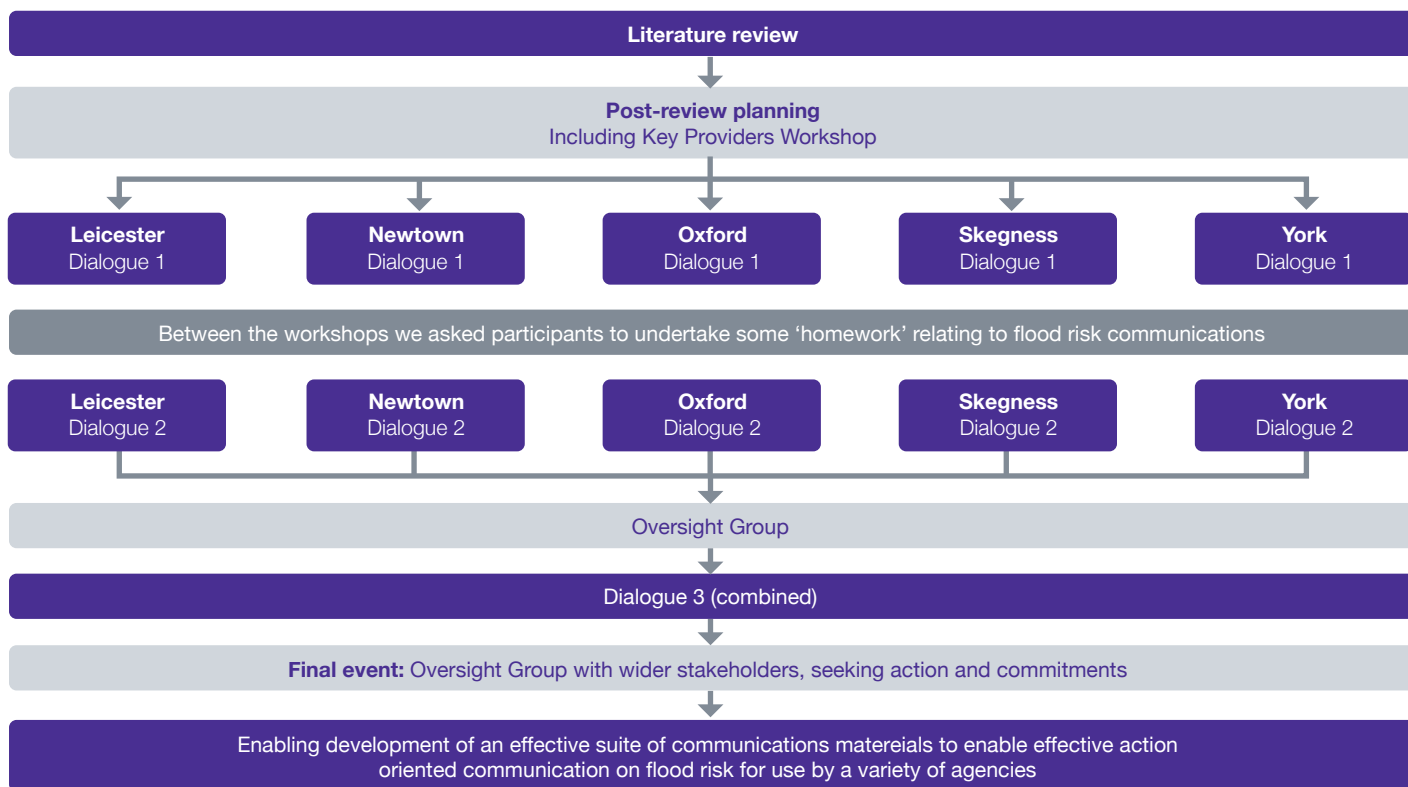
1. Review the current issues surrounding flood-risk communications and lessons learnt from other countries or disciplines
2. Co-create, with members of the public, ways of helping individuals and communities better understand flood risk, link risk to appropriate action and feel empowered to take action
3. Help agencies adopt a consistent approach to conveying risk and likelihood, enabling them to join up their subsequent activities
4. Produce recommendations from members of the public and stakeholders on resources that are likely to result in positive changes to how people think and act in response to flood risk.

An Oversight Group was set up prior to the detailed design of the dialogue project and the appointment of contractors. The Group comprised 18 members from the following stakeholder organisations: Environment Agency; Met Office; Hampshire County Council; Red Cross; Public Health England; Cambridge University; Welsh Government; Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS); Lancaster University; Defra; Northumbria University; National Flood Forum; the Cabinet Office; a local authority councillor; DCLG; and Natural Resources Wales.

Working with the Oversight Group, the project team designed a multistage dialogue process including three stages of stakeholder input and reflection either side of a three-stage public dialogue process across five locations.

Key elements of the dialogue process are illustrated in the figure below and included:

- Conducting a literature review and a mapping exercise on the crucial issues of current flood risk communication, drawing together evidence from published sources and new interviews
- Holding a design and development workshop for key stakeholders in February 2014, which discussed the findings from the review and mapping exercise, agreed the critical points in the current system that needed to be strengthened and identified specific areas for the dialogue to discuss. The workshop conclusions fed into the detailed planning for the dialogue process including the appropriate selection of public participants
- Organising public workshops that were held in two stages in each of five locations between May and October 2014. They involved a midweek evening introductory session, followed by a full day on the Saturday. Locations were chosen for geographical diversity and to represent a mix of locations where people had experience of flooding in their homes (Oxford and York) and those where participants had no experience of flooding in their homes, but were at high risk of flooding (Leicester and Newtown). Skegness was originally chosen as somewhere that had not experienced flooding, but a recent tidal surge – although not leading to any direct impact on homes – meant that participants in this area had a heightened awareness of flood risk compared with those in Leicester and Newtown. Members of the public were recruited to be broadly representative of each of the five locations. Between 12 and 24 public participants attended each workshop (a total of 89 participants across these workshops), plus between four and seven specialists at each event to provide additional information. The results of these workshops were considered by an Oversight Group meeting in October 2014, which agreed the plans for a reconvened workshop
- Holding a reconvened workshop in Birmingham in November 2014. This event brought together 28 public participants (between four and six from each of the five earlier locations) with representatives from Public Health England, the Red Cross, the National Flood Forum and the Environment Agency. This workshop was designed to produce more concrete recommendations to take forward
- Organising a final Oversight Group workshop in February 2015 that reviewed the final report and developed an initial action plan, which was further developed by the Environment Agency and delivery team
- Launching a web portal (<http://floodriskdialogue.org>) just before the first public event. The site was designed to complement the dialogue workshops by facilitating information sharing and acting as a resource for project partners, dialogue participants and the general public
- Developing a detailed dissemination plan. The results of the dialogue were presented to audiences including the Environment Agency's operational and executive teams, Oversight Group member organisations (Defra, Cabinet Office, DCLG and so on), and some international audiences such as the Flemish Environment Agency and international conferences.



What worked especially well

The key lessons for the future on what worked well include:

- A well-managed Oversight Group with the right people at the right levels broadened the project's impacts. Membership of the Group was at a sufficiently senior level to act as good conduits for taking project messages into their organisations. Setting up an Oversight Group early gave the group time to cohere, and to think through objectives, ideal outcomes and key questions they had for the public before commissioning external delivery contractors
- The workshops with the public were well structured and delivered in a warm, stimulating atmosphere. The facilitation and project management team was excellent, independent, fair, maintained focus and was sensitive to participants' distressing real experience of flooding. The team's experience of the topic and working with the Environment Agency were important in shaping the design of the dialogue and giving Oversight Group members confidence
- The scale, spread of locations and audiences (those without flood experience and the 'flood literate') left policy makers feeling they had heard from broad publics including the 'hardest to reach'
- Some 30 specialists from the Environment Agency and local authorities participated in the dialogue sessions. All specialists found the events very useful in providing new insights, reinforcing anecdotal evidence or experience, and building local relationships
- The reconvened event demonstrated how outputs from round one of the dialogue were already being used, which impressed participants and led to very high levels of trust in the usefulness of the process.

What worked less well

- Recruitment with very specific sampling requirements (postcodes and experience) or in locations unfamiliar to the recruiters takes longer, which needs to be reflected in project planning
- A large Oversight Group over a long project can pose real challenges in terms of management, coordination and maintaining continuity. However, it can also lead to wider project impacts if the right individuals can take the messages back into their own organisations.

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Reports

Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise on www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/public-communication-and-engagement-on-risk/