The role of civil society in extreme events through a narrative reflection of pathways and long-term relationships

Paul Cobbing, Ewan Waller and Lindsey McEwen

Abstract

This reflective commentary is a facilitated exchange between two retired professionals in community risk management for extreme weather events – in two different cultural contexts. Paul Cobbing (formerly CEO UK National Flood Forum) and Ewan Waller (Australian land, forest and bush fire manager and consultant with forty years' experience) share their insights gained through long-standing experience of working with and for communities. The facilitator is an academic researcher in community-based water risk management. Using case-study examples from their national contexts, they collectively reflect on the role of communities throughout the resilience cycle; the contribution of traditional lay knowledges and cultural practices in local resilience building; the harnessing of different knowledge flows; the importance of understanding communities; the values needed at intersections between communities with the professional world; the implications for the changing roles of risk management agencies; opportunities and blocks or impediments to collaboration; and what matters in the management of partnerships and in drawing strengths in crises. The three discussants conclude by highlighting seven important cross-cutting themes or principles needed in community-led approaches that give or return power to communities to shape the place in which they live, alongside others. These connect different types of local knowledge (indigenous, lay, experiential) for community-centred learning across settings.

1. Introduction

Lived experience is an important contributor in negotiating and supporting the role of civil society in extreme weather adaptation. CASCADE-NET highlights the different axes that need continual navigation in exploring relationships between communities and the state (McEwen et al.'s axis diagram, this special edition). Within this commentary, two professionals contribute their reflections on factors affecting the success of community-centred extreme weather risk management. Over the past 10 years, Paul Cobbing has been CEO of the UK's National Flood Forum (NFF), with a prior career in land management. NFF is an NGO that supports those affected by flooding. Now finished fulltime work, working on boards and consulting, Ewan Waller worked from 1974 onwards in forest and land management including emergency work in south-east Australia. Recently, they both came together to contribute their experiences at ESRC CASCADE-NET's conference in November 2020. In fact, Paul and Ewan first met while undertaking, as mature students, an MSc in Rural and Regional Resources Planning at Aberdeen University, Scotland in 1990/1. This course had a strong focus on sustainable development, with an international student group. This commentary draws on, and extends their

conference contributions, through a sequence of four, three-way meetings with facilitated dialogue around key themes. These included: the role of communities throughout the resilience cycle; the contribution of traditional lay knowledges and cultural practices in local resilience building; the harnessing of different knowledge flows; the importance of understanding communities; the values needed at intersections between communities with the professional world; the implications for the changing roles of risk management agencies; opportunities and blocks or impediments to collaboration; and what matters in the management of partnerships and in drawing strengths in crises.

The structure of the commentary brings together reflections from two different cultural contexts to explore commonalities. It starts with Ewan's reflections in context of indigenous knowledges in Australia at different stages in the disaster resilience cycle. It then moves on to Paul's reflections from community flood risk management in the UK.

2. Background:

This commentary has as its backdrop the national not-for-profit Landcare movement in Australia, established over 30 years ago. Box 1 shares the Landcare vision, narrative and guiding principles. Landcare Australia[1] "supports the landcare community with funding, capacity-building, on-ground projects, information, networking and promotion of landcare achievements", emphasing "co-operation to care for the land" (Hawke, 1989)[2] and volunteering. This initiative gives strong attention to community empowerment in care of place and land stewardship, and in combining the resilience of both ecosystems and communities.

Box 1: Australia's National vision for Landcare (Australian Framework for Landcare Reference Group, undated, p1)

Vision: all Australians will take responsibility for the way they live in the landscape to ensure a healthy environment that supports a sustainable future.

The Landcare approach includes:
• a locally-driven approach to local issues
• active participation and leadership by individuals, groups and networks
• appreciation of our natural environment and promotion of ecologically sustainable development
• respect for local knowledge
• integrated management systems - economic, social, cultural and environmental

Guiding principles:
• Self determination.
• Inclusive, collaborative — working in partnerships.
• Apolitical with bipartisan support.

[1] https://landcareaustralia.org.au/ Landcare Australia | Our Story Landcare Australia

[2] https://landcareaustralia.org.au/about/the-landcare-story/

• Flexible, adaptable and innovative.
• Responsive to different needs and cultures.
• Clarity of purpose.

Landcare Victoria's work supports "landcare communities to achieve integrated sustainable agriculture and environmental outcomes"[3]. Ewan's commentary sits against this backdrop while Paul's approach has been informed by it. These Landcare principles can be seen within emerging land management practices in the UK, with changing roles of state and communities in risk management.

3. Ewan's reflections

Context

The ideal community response to an extreme event is a logical and orderly mature response. This is from the community overall and the majority of individuals within. However, extreme events invariably overwhelm even the best constructed and practiced preparation so the elusive search is to find processes that will attempt to manage the situation to at least save lives, and then stabilise and rebuild as soon as possible. I use the expression 'elusive' in describing how to strike a formula and pattern to prepare a community as each community and, of course, each individual, will react differently. Following are three case studies that outline working examples of preparing, during and after a major event. The case studies end with a reflection on what can be major obstacles to effective engagement.

Case studies

Preparing the community: Following repeated high intensity, large area (a number over a million hectares), highly destructive bushfires in south-eastern Australia, governments, land managers and fire agencies have searched for ways to effectively engage with the community and prepare individuals for repeated events.

There appeared to be two main obstacles to uptake. The first involves the practice of agencies turning up and talking to groups, handing out glossy brochures and asking families to prepare 'their fire plans'. Despite much nodding and good intentions, I suspect there was not a strong universal response. With 'spoon feeding' information without strong engagement of the senses and the spirit, the required response does not last. Secondly, there is a need to embed a deeper understanding of fire, what can be done in prevention, preparing and what prevails during a major fire event.

The forest fire management agency then trialled 'strategic conversations' where the agencies invited the community to talk on fire, then set up to facilitate discussion, with the agencies stepping back out of the discussion. The result was surprising - groups that previously feuded

[3] https://landcarevictoria.org.au/

started to talk, tell stories, ask questions to the fire warriors, ask about forest management, went on field trips and so forth. There is no doubt these communities now understood the fire problem and were far better prepared to act in a logical, orderly and mature way.

During an event: Analysis after the Boxing Day tsunami showed the Indonesian island of Simeulue off Sumatra only lost five lives while there were deaths in the tens of thousands in neighbouring islands. Researcher Stephen Sutton (Sutton et al., 2020) investigated and found that the island community had suffered under a tsunami around a hundred years earlier. The community response that developed was that the grandmothers sang lullabies to the children that carried the message - when the ground shakes and the waters recede, drop everything and run for the hills. This message was regularly repeated and even sang in songs at weddings.

While this is a quaint way to embed a message, it was proven to be highly effective. The deep cultural response overrides biases to downplay the impact of an event or the common reaction that it will not happen again or happen to me. By introducing it (this indigenous knowledge) to the young then reinforcing through life, the island community has a lifelong, deeply bedded response to what has proven to be a repeated threat to life.

Recovery: The recovery phase after a major destructive event is simply disheartening. It is by far the costliest aspect massively overshadowing prevention, preparedness and response to an event. As worrying is that events weaken the spirit and heart both within the community and individuals.

The Aboriginal response to the 2019 / 2020 Black Summer bushfires was immediate and reflective. It was based around - we must heal Country and in doing so, heal ourselves. It was a simple, powerful response. The heart and spirit went immediately to a place away from the horror and forensic search for who to blame. The message of healing gave direction and carried care and understanding.

How the Aboriginal community will heal Country and heal community is also reflective and passive. It will be done on Country, the quiet visit, to sit and talk, ask the Old People (those who have gone before) for guidance, reflect and take time and return and return again to Country and take strength from each visit.

There will be, of course, other recovery efforts happening but the feelings, the quiet reflection, the asking for help, help heal all.

Blockages to messaging on and after events: Where communities are affected by overlying issues, it can be difficult to prepare them for an event. An example is in south-eastern Australia where the ongoing concern of being ‘burnt out’ by a bushfire is ever present. The rural communities point out to successive governments and fire agencies that more must be done to prevent and respond to bushfires. This mainly means forest fuel management through burning which requires skill, the right conditions and is always risky so governments shy away from it.

Until there is progress on the overriding and direct prevention issue, the community will show little interest in the government's push on enhancing co-benefits (biodiversity, pest control, river health and so forth).

A stronger example is in working with the Aboriginal community where acknowledgment of the dispossession of their land has not been adequately recognised, and this affects their reaction to many other aspects of life including reaction to serious events. Hopefully this will be worked through overtime with truth telling setting the foundation for progress.

The final example has been the slow acknowledgement of the recognition of, and impact of climate change. In Australia, the lack of a national policy on bushfire management has lagged as it obviously had to include and respond to the effects of climate change.

4. Paul's reflections

Context

My career started in environmental land management and for the first 20 years focussed on various projects, based on a passion for understanding the world that we live in and a concept that our role is to look after what we have got to the best of our ability. I was fortunate to visit the Landcare project in Victoria, Australia in 1993, at Ewan's invitation, where I was able to see for the first-time extreme land management challenges as they affected individuals and communities. It was striking how communities responded, or didn't, and how different approaches by agencies either supported collective action or prevented it. What is more, where people were actively involved in developing solutions in partnership with organisations, the results were often much better and more appropriate than if delivered by professionals alone.

Many years later, I took on the role of leading the National Flood Forum, a charity set up by flood risk communities in 2002, for flood risk communities. Three things were striking:

i) Flooding is not really an environmental issue. Flooding affects people, businesses and communities and that is the main reason we are interested in it. It can be devastating, with life changing and long-term consequences, both in a material sense, but more importantly in terms of wellbeing and life chances. The National Flood Forum was, and remains, the only national organisation in England and Wales that has a people centric approach to flooding. We worked with the Scottish Government and Scottish Environment Protection Agency to set up the Scottish Flood Forum. There is a lot of fantastic work that other organisations do, but each has its own unique perspective, as a government agency, a business, academia, etc. Our cultural contexts determine what we consider to be important and how each organisation operates.

ii) I discovered that my colleagues in the National Flood Forum had independently developed methods to support people who had flooded, or were at flood risk, which were very similar to what I had seen when visiting Victoria's Landcare initiative. What was

remarkable was how successful they were at bringing hope, as well as addressing the flood risk issues in peoples' lives in very practical ways. At the heart of the approach is collaboration between different interest groups, their communities and professional organisations, a partnership, but, as in Victoria, certain approaches worked, and others didn't.

iii) Working effectively with communities takes time and requires investment in creating the social infrastructure before you can begin to see the rewards. The sort of project deadlines that we are all used to are really counterproductive to generating community benefits. Equally, grant applications require the outputs and outcomes to be defined beforehand, when in reality these will emerge as part of the partnership working process. There are also social justice issues as most grant schemes require communities to bid for funds, i.e., those who already have the social capital to be able to put in a bid; the better off and those with time and skills available are far more likely to access grants.

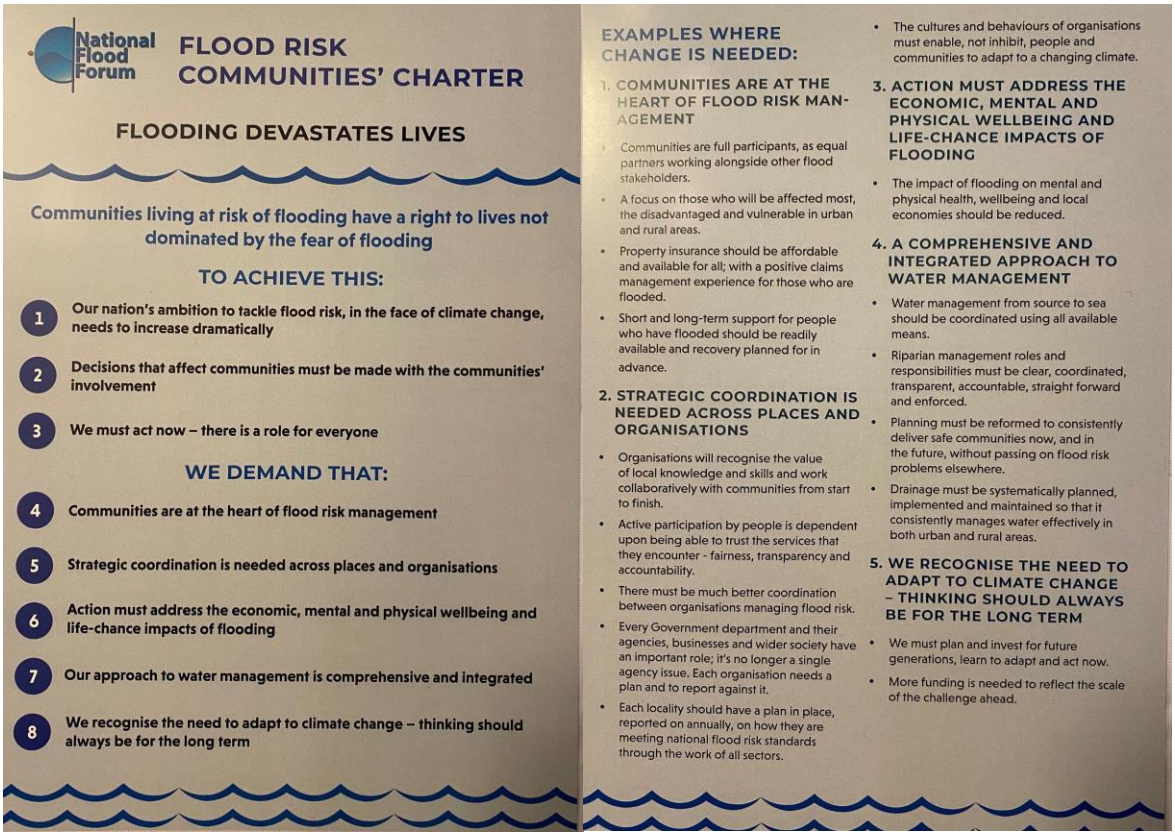
Flooding is all about people and place. The reason why we are interested in flooding is because it affects people, people with often the greatest vested interest in not being flooded but also with expert knowledge and skills about the place they live in. Place is important, because each and every place is different. Flooding is about the particular and flood risk management is all about finding the right combination of measures for that particular place.

It is striking that Flood Action Groups that work in partnership with their communities and with professional organisations are often really effective in bringing about change, showing real leadership in pulling organisations together and focusing attention on partnership approaches to solving key problems through both capital programmes and maintenance approaches. People's knowledge and memories about the place that they live in, and the skills that they bring can make a real difference. In addition, the very act of participating in this process can bring back some sense of the control that has been lost when someone's home is flooded. It can be cathartic as well. So, the real benefit of a skilled independent broker or facilitator is to enable all of this to happen, and at the same time address the issues that the various flood risk management authorities are charged with solving. The independent broker needs facilitation skills, flood risk management knowledge and access to the right networks to bring this all together.

Case studies

Flood Risk Communities' Charter: On 5th November 2019, the National Flood Forum's Flood Risk Communities' Charter (Figure 1) was launched in the Houses of Parliament in the UK, the product of two years' work by flood risk communities in face to face and virtual meetings from across the country. Fundamentally, it demands that communities should be actively involved where decisions are being made about their futures, not only because they have knowledge about past flooding and drainage in their area that no professional would ever have, not only because communities have skills and resources that can be useful, but also because people

that live in a community often have a greater vested interest than anyone else about the place that they live in. They will live with the consequences of the decisions and actions taken long after individuals in organisations have moved on to new jobs, projects and roles.



National Flood Forum

FLOOD RISK COMMUNITIES' CHARTER

FLOODING DEVASTATES LIVES

Communities living at risk of flooding have a right to lives not dominated by the fear of flooding

TO ACHIEVE THIS:

1. Our nation's ambition to tackle flood risk, in the face of climate change, needs to increase dramatically
2. Decisions that affect communities must be made with the communities' involvement
3. We must act now – there is a role for everyone

WE DEMAND THAT:

4. Communities are at the heart of flood risk management
5. Strategic coordination is needed across places and organisations
6. Action must address the economic, mental and physical wellbeing and life-chance impacts of flooding
7. Our approach to water management is comprehensive and integrated
8. We recognise the need to adapt to climate change – thinking should always be for the long term

EXAMPLES WHERE CHANGE IS NEEDED:

1. COMMUNITIES ARE AT THE HEART OF FLOOD RISK MANAGEMENT

- Communities are full participants, as equal partners working alongside other flood stakeholders.
- A focus on those who will be affected most, the disadvantaged and vulnerable in urban and rural areas.
- Property insurance should be affordable and available for all; with a positive claims management experience for those who are flooded.
- Short and long-term support for people who have flooded should be readily available and recovery planned for in advance.

2. STRATEGIC COORDINATION IS NEEDED ACROSS PLACES AND ORGANISATIONS

- Organisations will recognise the value of local knowledge and skills and work collaboratively with communities from start to finish.
- Active participation by people is dependent upon being able to trust the services that they encounter - fairness, transparency and accountability.
- There must be much better coordination between organisations managing flood risk.
- Every Government department and their agencies, businesses and wider society have an important role; it's no longer a single agency issue. Each organisation needs a plan and to report against it.
- Each locality should have a plan in place, reported on annually, on how they are meeting national flood risk standards through the work of all sectors.
- The cultures and behaviours of organisations must enable, not inhibit, people and communities to adapt to a changing climate.

3. ACTION MUST ADDRESS THE ECONOMIC, MENTAL AND PHYSICAL WELLBEING AND LIFE-CHANCE IMPACTS OF FLOODING

- The impact of flooding on mental and physical health, wellbeing and local economies should be reduced.

4. A COMPREHENSIVE AND INTEGRATED APPROACH TO WATER MANAGEMENT

- Water management from source to sea should be coordinated using all available means.
- Riparian management roles and responsibilities must be clear, coordinated, transparent, accountable, straight forward and enforced.
- Planning must be reformed to consistently deliver safe communities now, and in the future, without passing on flood risk problems elsewhere.
- Drainage must be systematically planned, implemented and maintained so that it consistently manages water effectively in both urban and rural areas.

5. WE RECOGNISE THE NEED TO ADAPT TO CLIMATE CHANGE – THINKING SHOULD ALWAYS BE FOR THE LONG TERM

- We must plan and invest for future generations, learn to adapt and act now.
- More funding is needed to reflect the scale of the challenge ahead.

Figure 1: Flood Risk Communities' Charter. The Charter is owned by NFF and was created by NFF through many facilitated discussions with Flood Action Groups.

Being listened to: The Flood Risk Communities' Charter emerged as a result of many years of frustration in communities right across the country. It has become clear that underlying the many different practical issues that people face are questions of being listened to, equity in partnership working, social justice, accountability, transparency and democratic input. These governance issues, plus access to resources, fundamentally determine outcomes.

Central to individual and community concerns everywhere is that their voices, knowledge and evidence are not heard and when they are heard, they are not listened to. This applies particularly to the planning and development system in England, but also to many other aspects of flood risk management, riparian management, insurance, post incident recovery, etc. There are many reasons for this, but the result is that people are designed out of systems, leading to poor decisions, social justice issues and increased flood risk, or at the very least missed opportunities for better projects, added value or multiple benefits. These are also missed

opportunities for people who have flooded to participate in decisions about the place they live in and regain some sense of control over their lives.

Where we do see Flood Action Groups and other interest groups working effectively with communities and partners, it is often because there are wilful individuals in organisations who understand the benefits of working with communities and have sufficient control to be able to enable it in their area of work.

Gathering evidence: One of many underlying problems is the difficulty for communities to suddenly gather and present evidence, such as when a planning application for development is submitted. Communities at that point are already on the back foot and have little time to organise and collect information. The hard work to collect information on drainage, for example, can take years and at the critical moment people may be away on holiday, etc.

One approach that is emerging is for communities to gather and present their own flood-related evidence, gathered over time. This requires significant social capital, but has been done, through the production of online GIS evidence bases, such as by the Pang Valley Flood Forum (Figure 2)

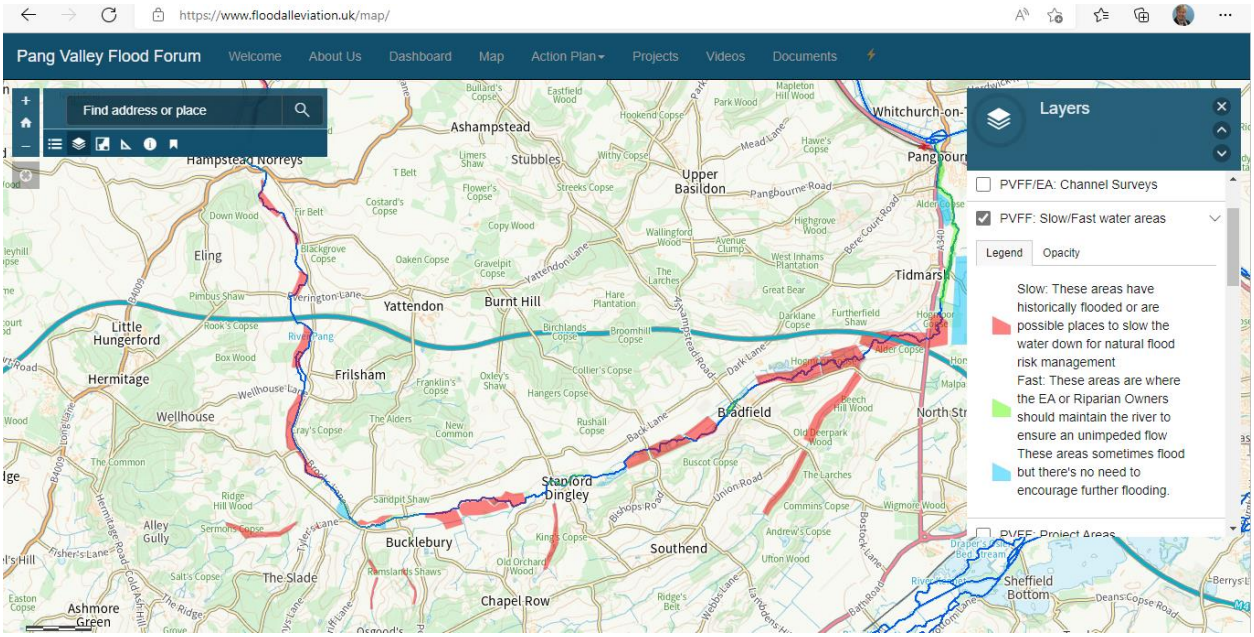


Figure 2: *Local information (here the layer showing flow and fast water areas) mapped online on the Pang Valley Flood Forum web portal (see https://www.floodalleviation.uk/map/). All data is open source. This makes it a viable proposition for communities to develop this sort of approach, but it is right on the edge of the skills knowledge that most communities currently have*.

Other examples, such as in Kent, are beginning to emerge where there is no IT specialist available, using open-source data overlain with data collected by the community on previous flooding, drainage networks and potential projects, using all sorts of data from many sources.

Lots of detail is possible - ownership and contact details, photographs and videos and drone flights of floods, datasets of recorded data, real-time information on water levels, mapping drainage (often forgotten), etc. The benefit is that evidence can be built up over time. It is public. People can't say that it isn't there. It can be challenged and used to challenge.

This is not the answer of course. There are likely to be other tools, perhaps better ones. Policy change is required, as well to provide the right infrastructure. Organisations have to accept that community information is valid. That requires culture change and changes to individual behaviour. Nor does it happen without resources, particularly in areas which are disadvantaged.

Networks: People who have flooded frequently struggle to find solutions to their flood risk problems. To begin with, they often don't have a full understanding of flood risk, the particular issues in their area, what is planned, roles and responsibilities, who the risk management authorities are and how to contact them, etc. The solutions often lie beyond individual control and no one organisation will be responsible for all of it. Individuals are left to either fight the system on their own or to build a collective approach.

Flood Action Groups are community interest groups set up to work with their community and the relevant risk management authorities to reduce flood risk and improve resilience. They work proactively and in partnership to identify and agree the issues, and then address them over time. This requires the group to be well organised and to be ready to engage with agencies and their community. In turn, investment is required to build the group and then the partnership up front, before tackling the flood risk issues. Risk management authorities often wish to get on with asking communities to implement solutions from the outset but have to hold back until the group is in place and the community's priorities are understood. Otherwise, the community will interpret the intention as simply one of dumping responsibilities on to them, as frequently happens. For the approach to be sustainable, roles and responsibilities of all parties need to be understood (including their limitations), communities regarded as equitable partners and contributions valued.

There are now well over 300 community led Flood Action Groups set up on this model in England and Wales, with the number growing quite rapidly. These need to be distinguished from groups set up by a risk management authority to deliver a solution for that organisation. They are also different from individuals or groups of volunteers that are recruited to undertake specific tasks, such as checking for culvert blockages or clearing vegetation.

Some of the results can be impressive. In Shifnal, in Shropshire, for example, an investment of 81 hours by the NFF, that could be costed at £350/per day at commercial rates (£28,350) generated £354,950 of voluntary activity, (using National Heritage Lottery Fund criteria) saved £460,000 of public grant on a Property Flood Resilience scheme (Figure 3). It also led to a much better understanding of the local flood risk and the partnership of Flood Action Group, professional organisations and the community are developing more appropriate solutions over a 6-year period. The important points are that it is community led and is taking time. Six years is way beyond most project lifetimes for benefits to start accruing.

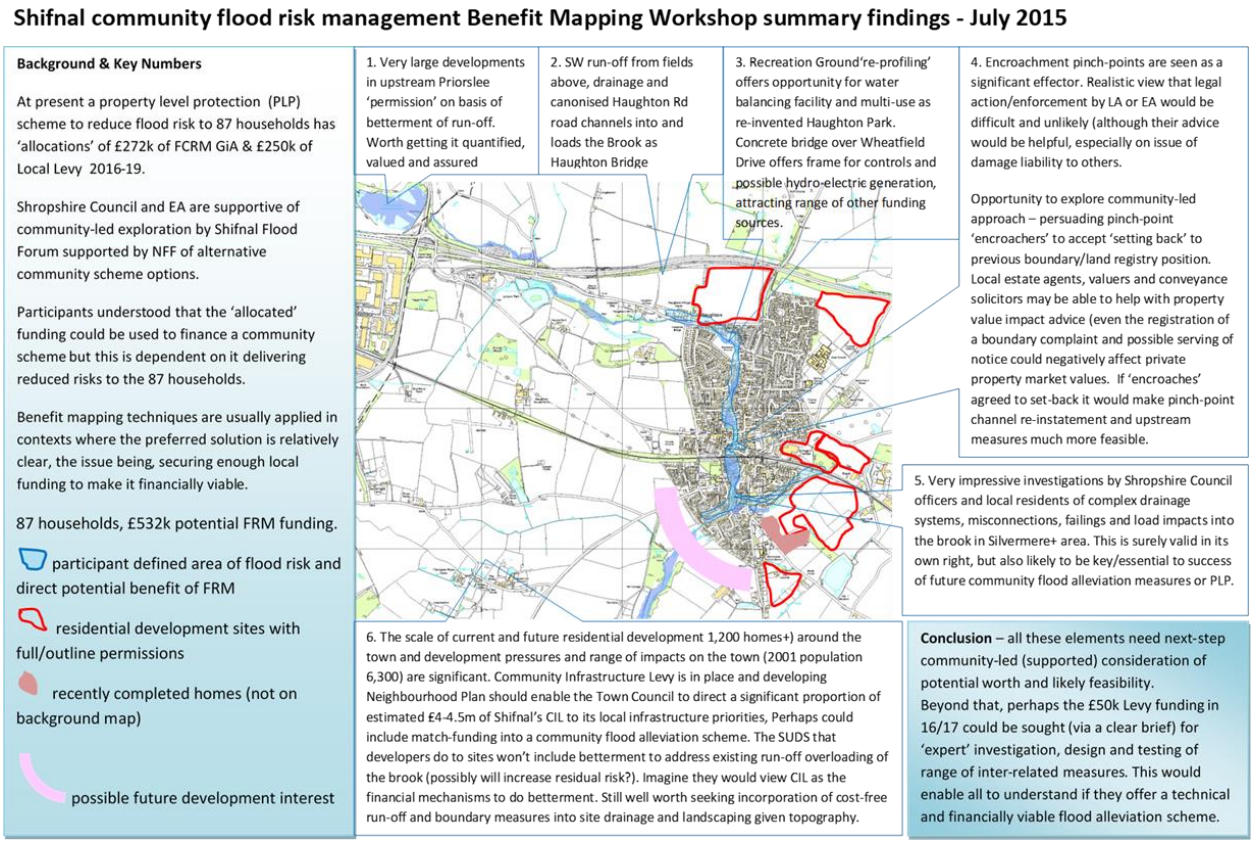


Figure 3: Benefits of community flood risk management - the example of Shifnal, UK. National Flood Forum organised the work that went into developing these findings with the active participation and ownership of Shifnal Flood Partnership Group.

This is difficult enough in areas of high social capital, areas that are relatively well off where there are people with time and skills available. In poorer or disadvantaged areas, this approach can be harder and take longer. The group may need ongoing support, or different ways of working with the community may be required. Organisations may have a succession of staff fulfilling a role, with priorities that change and resources that fluctuate.

Very recently, we have seen the development of networks of community led groups that can share experiences and take a more collective, strategic approach to working with risk management agencies and other organisations. There is a parallel here with the Landcare model in Victoria where groups of groups developed over time. The interesting point is that they are all different, emerging individually and with different models. It will be interesting to see how they develop.

5. Collective reflection on themes and principles

Our collective reflection highlights seven important cross-cutting themes or principles in community-led approaches that give or return power to communities to shape the place in which

they live, alongside others. These connect different types of local knowledge (indigenous, lay, experiential) for community-centred learning across settings.

a) The need to change the roles, culture and ways of working of statutory agencies in Disaster Risk Management (DRM). A key skill is that of 'stepping back' and listening to what comes out of a community-led process.
b) Address community concern for direct risk prevention before promotion of systemic co-benefits - in working with at risk communities.
c) Recognition of the importance of valuing local and indigenous knowledge of the land and communities as a key evidence base for local DRM. This is built, communicated and shared in different ways, such as storytelling or community mapping – and can draw on both traditional and new methods, and their social networks.
d) Embracing the restorative power of local cultural practices (beyond the individual) within communities affected by extreme weather events.
e) Awareness of the interconnectedness of place - over both scale and time. There are obstacles to improvement. Policies, or the lack of them, are needed to allow the nesting of actions. Cultural and organisational attitudes can get in the way of making progress. Past history can impact on relationships now.
f) Requirement for changes in risk governance. This poses questions about how the state can organise itself to promote the culture and practice of community-led/ centred/ based DRM. Democratic processes locally and nationally tend to be very limited. DRM sits within this context.
g) The importance of negotiation skills together with different levels of knowledge from all parties to deliver this. There has got to be a real willingness to tackle the issues, and an emotional intelligence on all sides to make this happen. There are always conflicting priorities and potential lack of consensus. Good leadership is needed to navigate a path through this.

This distillation emphasises the continuing relevance of Landcare principles (now rolled out over 20 countries), and the value of lived professional experience in navigating the connections between these principles and local risk management practice. It also highlights the importance of on-going inter-cultural exchange about 'what works' in community-led disaster risk management for climate resilience.

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Biographies:

Paul Cobbing has led and developed the National Flood Forum over the last 10 years to provide flood communities with independent, unbiased, and persistent support whilst championing their needs with Ministers, senior government officials, risk management authorities and the insurance industry.

Ewan Waller is a proven land, forest and bush fire manager and consultant with forty years' experience from the field to executive level. His recent work has included advising state governments, their agencies and companies across Australia on strategic and practical approaches to reduce the risk from bush fires. This guiding work has delivered significant change to critical programs to protect assets. Specialities: strategic management, forest, park, crown land and coastal management, land use planning, conservation and protection of natural values, catchment management, personnel coaching, building organisational capability and capacity, leadership development.

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