

This paper present a short summary of the activities and progress made by the Easterton Flood Group since its inception in January 2009.

Background

Properties in Easterton High Street and adjacent roads have a long history of significant flooding.

Over the last 30 years these events have become more regular, culminating in a serious flood in December of 2008. This resulted in a number of residents not being able to return to their homes for more than seven months, whilst repair work to their properties was completed.

Following this event the Parish Council determined that a flood group, consisting of residents, should be established to try to bring together the Local Authorities, Environment Agency, Land Owners and others who may be able to assist in resolving the flooding threat to the village.

Subsequently the work of the group has been impacted upon by three changes in local administration, national policy and legislation in relation to flooding. Firstly, Wiltshire Council was established in April 2009, and has taken a lead responsibility for non main river flooding. Secondly the publication of the Pitt report, which sets out a series of recommendations to central government on the role and responsibilities of Local Government, the Environment Agency and others in dealing with future flood events and lastly the legislation presently before parliament which is a first step in clarifying the responsibilities of public and other bodies in dealing with flood events.

Flood Group Activities

The flood group has been able to establish good working relationships with the Environment Agency. The agency is responsible for overseeing the Main River section of Easterton Brook which runs alongside the High Street and terminates at Eastcot. Issues have been raised in relation to the maintenance by the EA contractors, of culverts and screens, which the EA are now more closely monitoring.

Discussions with land owners were instigated in conjunction with EA to try to amend some land management and farming practices that were potentially adding to the flooding problems in the village. The EA were able to bring together some of the land owners with support groups with a view to accessing grants from DEFRA to assist them in making the necessary changes in farming practice. This work is on going.

Following the establishment of Wiltshire Council good working relationships were again established at a local level. Commitments were received from Wiltshire Council that the necessary works will be put in place to improve the defences of properties in White Street which suffer from non main river flooding.

The Flood Group carried out a survey of the whole parish to determine the extent of flooding problems and also looked at the possible solutions which would significantly reduce the flood risk, particularly from the Main river section in the centre of the village.

The size of the problem becomes clear when the volumes of water involved are considered.

Approximately 2000 litres per second is trying to find a path along the High Street in times of flood.

To try to reduce these peak flows a flood detention reservoir is required upstream capable of storing between 6000 and 9000 cubic metres of flood water.

Where are we now

The Environment Agency have engaged consultants Black and Veach to carry out a scheme appraisal.

The scheme is subject to an economic analysis where the cost-benefit ratio must be at least one. The cost of the scheme includes not only the construction cost but also a capitalised sum which reflects the potential future maintenance cost. The frequency of flooding carries more weight than depth of flooding in determining the cost benefit ratio.

Information has been obtained from local residents to determine when there was significant rainfall and the relative amounts together with which properties have been known to flood. Black and Veach have carried out level surveys to enable them to model the effects on properties of different rainfall intensities and durations and also the affects of different volumes of water retention.

They are presently preparing a report for the Environment Agency which will determine whether a scheme can be recommended for funding.

The result of their work is awaited.

Next Steps

When the result of the scheme appraisal is known then the Environment Agency and Wiltshire Council will need to work together to determine how best to fund the construction of the necessary works and who will bear future maintenance costs. Wiltshire Council has confirmed its support for the scheme, however the costs involved have yet to be confirmed and the work in White Street has yet to be undertaken.

Wiltshire Council - Land Drainage & Flood Management

Wiltshire Council have established two Operational Flood Working Groups. What is known of the constitution of these groups appears unsatisfactory in their present format.

Recent communication with the chairman of the Northern Flood Working Group states:

- At our OFWG we are planning to allow a representative of each local FWG or Flood Warden to attend and raise issues that have not been settled using the Area Board route. This two way participation will be for the first hour only; thereafter they may stay but not participate in the meeting.

It has been the normal practice in the former Kennet Area, when dealing with important strategic services which require a consistent and effective dialogue between parish and lead authority to establish an officer group which will 'do' what is necessary whilst members, parish reps and other stakeholders form a strategic group. This ensures that there is a common strategic direction and that everyone and all points of view can be heard on a consistent basis.

Good communication is the foundation of good management and flood management is no exception, apart from which the present arrangements do not constitute best practice.

The OFWG protocol for engagement with Town and Parish Councils (agreement on this protocol was due last month) will be examined with interest. In the meantime we fail to see how the "Area Board route" can be used as an effective way to settle flooding issues which are the proper reserve of Highway & Land Drainage Engineers (in the apparent absence of an office dedicated to Land Drainage & Flood Protection).

Recommendations for the Devizes Area Board

a) That the Devizes Area Board supports Easterton Parish Council in strongly urging Wiltshire Council to enable the provision of a flood defence scheme in partnership with the Environment Agency for the protection of the Parish and to also undertake the necessary works to prevent non main river flooding.

b) That the Devizes Area Board recommends to Wiltshire Council that the constitution of the presently established flood working groups be amended. The intention being to ensure that officers are free to get on with what is necessary whilst strategic and operational issues are discussed and agreed on a partnership basis whereby all stakeholders feel that they can have an effective voice in land drainage and flood management and that they are not subjected to undue time constraints.

It is important that the various stages in the Land Drainage and Flood Management process are clearly understood. In the first instance Wiltshire Council needs to have a dialogue with its communities to ensure that all existing and potential flood threats are identified. The prioritisation and management of any mitigation to avoid flooding, and the development of a comprehensive strategy, needs to be developed jointly with those communities taking into account financial and technical constraints.

The delivery of solutions requires the engagement of partner organisations such as the EA and specialist land management NGOs. We wonder whether such a process can be delivered and managed by the OFWGs as presently established?

Chris Saunders
Chairman
Easterton Parish Council & the FWG