



Joining Up: Stockbridge pathfinder

Between 2001 and 2004, a research consortium headed by the consultancy Shared Practice undertook a major research study, 'Joining Up', to clarify the nature and extent of the social dimension of the Environment Agency's work. The Stockbridge pathfinder was one of four case studies developed as part of this research.

The case study was developed around the community affected by floods in Stockbridge, Keithley (West Yorkshire) in October 2000 and focuses on three social aspects of flood risk management:

- It describes the inter-agency response to the floods and discusses the lessons on flood after-care to be learned.
- The project team worked with the Stockbridge Neighbourhood Development Group (NDG) to explore how flood awareness and preparedness could be developed with other communities living along the Rivers Aire and Calder.
- The initial engagement between the researcher, the Stockbridge NDG and other community groups raised a series of questions about wider stakeholder engagement in strategic flood risk management, some of which were explored in this study.

The research produced six main findings.

1. *Quality of aftercare.* The quality of the inter-agency response to the October 2000 floods was critical to the effective psychological and social recovery of the flood-affected community. It enabled the development of positive and ongoing relationships between the Stockbridge NDG and key agencies including the Environment Agency.
2. *Development of 'whole catchment' thinking.* Many stakeholders pointed to the need to understand the causes of flooding across the whole catchment rather than only focusing on their own locality. This includes the need to understand the ways in which water finds its way into rivers and the increasing

risks of flooding outside, as well as within, functional flood plains. This suggests a growing 'whole catchment consciousness' – within flood-affected communities as well as in local authorities, other agencies and the many networks that connect them. Flooding is a growing priority for a number of local authorities along the Aire catchment, as well as for the Yorkshire and Humberside regional assembly.

3. *The need for systemic solutions.* The growing awareness of the systemic causes of flooding needs to be matched by systemic solutions. Thinking in terms of a 'flood risk hierarchy' of solutions highlights the need to design solutions that start 'upstream' and address the key role of farming and land use. Systemic thinking also highlights the many links between factors affecting flooding and those affecting water quality. The Water Framework Directive provides an important opportunity to promote whole catchment thinking and tackle these issues in a joined-up way.
4. *Social networks and 'bridging capital'.* The flood-affected communities and agencies that took part in this research are keen to contribute to catchment-wide solutions addressing both flooding and water-quality issues. At the moment, though, many of the networks between these communities, agencies and others are restricted to local authority boundaries. There is a growing recognition that systemic, catchment-wide solutions at the natural and technical (engineering) levels need to be matched by catchment-wide institutional approaches. This will require the further development and interconnection of the existing networks within and beyond local authority boundaries, with much more attention given to the development of 'bridging social capital' between these new networks and relationships.
5. *The role of the Environment Agency.* Within all of this, the role of the Environment Agency is important, as it is in the unique position of being able to take a whole-catchment perspective across the full range of water functions and uses. Major

drivers are already pushing for a catchment-wide approach, including: climate change modelling, development of more strategic catchment flood management plans, and the Water Framework Directive, with its emphasis on integrated planning at river basin district level. Because of its unique position, the role of the Environment Agency should be one of leadership, working closely with stakeholders to develop catchment-wide solutions based on catchment-wide analysis. But to do this, the Environment Agency will need to take the lead in developing the necessary 'bridging social capital', thereby linking existing and embryonic local stakeholder networks.

6. *Flooding and regeneration* The Environment Agency needs to find the right focus around which to link stakeholder networks. Regeneration and the amenity value of water and rivers could act as an incentive for stakeholders to come together. This would help to frame the negatives of flooding and flood risk management in a more positive way, while supporting the argument for making connections between water quantity and quality wherever possible.

Together with the other Joining Up pathfinders, this study has played a valuable role in helping to shape the Environment Agency's social policy (http://146.213.80.51/icontent/DocDir14/22_04.doc), its position statement on tackling environmental inequalities (<http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/ourviews/857240/?version=1&lang=e>), an internal report on the Environment Agency's role in communities (2004), and further studies on working with stakeholders in the development of Catchment Flood Management Plans (<http://publications.environment-agency.gov.uk/pdf/SCHO0905BJQT-e-e.pdf>)

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